or thousands of times more frequently than "responsibility." Today, however, "responsibility" competes with "justice" in popular discourse, even if most of the scholarly literature on responsibility is restricted to specialized uses.

As indicated earlier, responsibility has been chosen as an entry point for discussing contemporary morality. It is a term implied as the basis for much of Western history. But it is a term whose explicit use is mostly in the twentieth century. The question that remains open toward the end of this century is whether its repetitive use is evidence of its effectiveness to get at contemporary issues or whether it is being wielded as an opaque instrument to avoid doing much about those issues. The following chapters articulate a use of responsibility that is based on history, etymology, logic, contemporary discussion, and practical need. Only when the grammar of responsibility is laid out can we judge if it is a theoretically consistent and practically effective category.

Chapter 3

Fundamental Distinctions

The historical outline of the previous chapter situates responsibility in the paradoxical position that it occupies today. Its rise to the top was at the expense of a severing from its roots. On one side, responsibility can be a catch-all term for describing a generally good person; on the other side, most writing on responsibility quickly gets to technical and very specific issues. Nothing seems more widely agreed upon than the necessity of having responsibility; almost as wide an agreement exists that we are currently lacking it. Those who are confident that they are responsible people look for ways to get the other people to take responsibility.

If I am correct that our present grammar of responsibility is inadequate, is there any hope of changing the situation? Were it a matter of inventing a meaning that does not now exist or of reestablishing conditions of several centuries ago, the project would be doomed. Fortunately, the meaning of a term does not simply disappear; its etymology, as J. L. Austin says, nearly always trails behind it. One can realistically argue for a retrieval of latent meaning, for highlighting one meaning over another. The richest meaning of responsibility is not necessarily the one that brings the heaviest burden. It is rather one that is based on defensible distinctions from a historical point of view and one that illuminates in new ways our moral language.

There is often a groping after the distinctions that are introduced in this chapter. Many people sense that the terms that are now used in moral discussion cannot break us out of our dilemmas. Responsibility is one of the most frequently invoked terms in such dilemmas. But usually the question of responsibility gets reduced to computerlike logic: x or y is responsible for a; x is or is not responsible for b; if x is responsible for c, x goes to jail.
Many people get frustrated at this absorption of responsibility into a legal calculus. They sense that some deeper meaning is hidden in the word. However, writing on responsibility that goes further quickly gets into the technical language of philosophical or professional specialties. For example, discussions about the responsibility of the physician are heavy on medical talk and not very probing about the nature of responsibility. These necessary inquiries into specialized areas are not ultimately fruitful unless they are connected at the base to a rich meaning of responsibility itself.

Most books that announce their intention to explore responsibility quickly make clear, often on the first page, that their interest is “moral responsibility.” This distinction is understandable, even indispensable. However, one would think that the line between moral and nonmoral responsibility would draw attention. Can we understand moral responsibility without its relation to responsibility as a whole? But moral responsibility is most often isolated as a topic on its own so that the other element or elements in the set are unclear.

For example, in the introduction to Perspectives on Moral Responsibility, the editors immediately distinguish moral and causal responsibility. But lest the reader assume that causal is logically equivalent to nonmoral, a footnote adds: “It should be noted that the term ‘responsibility’ admits of a variety of uses in addition to causal and moral responsibility. For example, it is used to refer to legal responsibility, corporate responsibility, role responsibility. . . . In this introduction we restrict our attention to the issues surrounding moral responsibility.” I find this clarification bewildering. Moral responsibility is assumed to be a special case of responsibility in a grab bag of things called “responsibilities.”

The furthest extreme in this fragmenting of responsibility is a book with the startling title Freedom without Responsibility. One must credit the author Bruce Waller with a novel thesis; he wishes to get rid of responsibility without damaging freedom. But he is not, it turns out, opposed to all responsibility. Indeed, “there are ‘responsible’ persons who have substantial ‘responsibilities’ and who have been placed in such positions of ‘responsibility’ because they are self-controlled, deliberate, trustworthy. But all of that is a matter of role responsibility and must not be confused with moral responsibility.”

It is apparent that Waller is quite fond of the word responsibility; he accepts “role responsibility” but not moral responsibility. Even there, he accepts one “sort” of moral responsibility. A person is “moral-act responsible” but not “moral-judgment responsible.” What starts out in the title as a rejection of responsibility is really a book about the unfair blaming of people and the uselessness of punishment. I tend to agree with much of what he says on these practical matters. But he has created a thicket of definitions that do nothing but obscure the intelligibility of the term responsible. Even for the purpose of rejecting moral responsibility, one has to have a fairly simple and logically coherent meaning for responsibility.

For exploring the fundamental meaning of “responsible” that funds a variety of uses, this chapter has four interrelated sections: (1) the continuity of meaning between human and nonhuman; (2) the continuity between is and ought; (3) the distinction between responsible to and responsible for; (4) the distinction within responsibility of right and duty. Each point builds on the previous ones without ever moving far from the root of “responsible”: to listen and to answer. The English word goes back through the French répondre to the Latin respondeo. The German Verantwortlich parallels the etymology of the English word “answer.” In European languages generally the image is the same: an address having been made, there is a return or answer.

Humans and Nonhumans

Are others than humans responsible? The natural inclination is to say “obviously not,” assuming that the question means “moral responsibility.” And, of course, by the usual definitions, only human actions can be morally responsible. However, the fact that not all human actions are morally responsible suggests that there might be something worth exploring here. Do humans share some nonmoral responsibility with the nonhuman world? The relation between moral and nonmoral responsibility within human life might be illuminated by asking about responsibility in the nonhuman world.

A responsible being is one that responds, or more precisely, is capable of response. How far does that characteristic extend? There is no obvious line beyond which response is totally out of the question. According to modern physics, the smallest particles of the universe cannot be exactly located because they respond to our pressing the search. Where to draw a useful line depends on how far we wish to
extend a metaphor taken from human life. The full meaning we have of responding to a call addressed to a self comes from human experience. To what other beings can we attribute something like that without creating anthropomorphic fantasies that prevent us seeing what is before our eyes?

The question I would insist, is not whether to extend the experience of "capable of response" beyond the human, but how far. All of human speech has some anthropomorphic bias; it is after all human. We compare nonhuman and human, and decide that some particular words appropriately apply to some beings and not to others. Some experiences cannot be attributed to things because those things are too far removed from the experience; no consistent grammar of use is possible. Wittgenstein uses the example of a machine having a toothache. We know before examining any claims that a machine does not have toothaches; we simply do not talk that way. But can we talk about a piece of wood responding to the expert touch of a carpenter or a violinist? The wood is capable of responding in different ways; the expert draws forth a better response than someone who has no feel for wood.

Some people will not be persuaded that responsible should be extended that far. But even with a highly restrictive use of the term, does anyone doubt that a dog or a dolphin is "capable of response"? True, we do not hold dogs morally accountable for their actions, though that has been done in the past and we come rather close at times. We do assume that they can, and should, respond to training. We work with patterns of behavior and see the animal's behavior in a larger context of interpretation. Should responsible be limited to mammals, to sentient animals, to organisms?

Mary Midgley in Beast and Man is one of the few authors who notices the breadth in the use of the word response. She does so in the form of a complaint that "response" is a misleading term. She notes that response can be used for the highly sensitive answering of a conscious being and also for activities that are entirely mechanical. Her point in voicing this complaint is that the ambiguity can lead people to take the animal's responsive behavior as mechanical. Her theme is that "beasts" are more like humans than machines, and they deserve our respect. Mary Midgley's book was in fact one of the major contributors to the gaining of respect for animals. But is it possible that this respect (with appropriate gradations) should extend beyond the "beast."

Should not respect be extended to all living creatures, and could not the term response be appropriately used beyond both "man and beast"?

I would agree with Midgley's objection to the use of response and responsible as qualities of the mechanical world. When human beings build something, their responsibility may be carried out through the machine's activity. When we say, as we occasionally do, that the bridge is responsible for carrying thirty tons, it is usually clear that we are talking about how the bridge has been humanly designed. But sometimes this kind of use is the basis of confusion and argument. A report on suicide in 1995 carries the statement that "guns are largely, if not entirely, responsible for the dramatic increase in suicide rates for the nation's youths." The authors had a point to make, but they misstate their case. The cliche that "guns don't kill, people do" needs a more precise rejoinder than saying guns are responsible for the increase of suicide. Responsibility needs assigning to the gun makers, gun sellers, politicians, NRA officials, and others.

More difficult to decide is whether respond/response should be used of mountains, oceans, deserts, trees, wind, rivers, and other powerful elements of nature. They are not living beings, though they are integral to the cycle of life. Much of literature, not to mention spiritual traditions, would be tongue-tied unless these elements were allowed some response.

With living beings, a consistent logic and grammar of responsibility clearly becomes feasible. Response is not a peripheral note to the notion of living. There is a within to the living being that interacts with an environment. Even minute living beings are respondents and contribute to the pattern of living beings. Speaking of the indispensable place of insects, the director of the Xerces society has said: "The world is going to go without golden lemurs and without any of a number of orchids, but invertebrates are responsible for all the ecosystem processes."

Is it a legitimate use of the term to say that insects are responsible for the ecosystem? Clearly insects are lacking in some of the elements that are present in human responsibility. Just as clearly, there is something more at issue than in the case of the bridge being responsible for carrying a certain weight. However one explains the design of the ecosystem, insects do carry a heavy burden of responsibility for the
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functioning of human as well as nonhuman life. They respond according to the ways they are acted upon; when conditions change, they are capable of response in new patterns.

One reason why humans may resist attributing responsibleness to insects is that they go about their business without necessarily responding to us. If insects are threatened by human intervention, they will indeed respond in whatever self-protecting ways they can. But in the main, the insect world goes its own way, apparently oblivious of human hopes and fears, human plans for shaping up the world. It is not just that we feel our dignity has been slighted; rather we are unsure of how to interpret response/responsible if we are not part of it.

Moving in this direction toward the fullest meaning of responsibility, we can ask whether there are living beings that speak and listen in ways closely analogous to human speaking and listening. Do trees talk to people? Do people’s plants do better when spoken to? These questions can be dismissed as silly if no play is allowed for the meanings of speak and listen. In 1974, the United States Supreme Court ruled that “trees have standing”; that is, a suit could be brought before the court in which trees are the claimants.11 Of course, the trees (not unlike most of us) need a lawyer to be their spokesperson. Nonetheless, the court is willing to listen to trees, as well as cases of endangered species.

When Victor Frankl interviewed a survivor of the death camps, he asked her what had kept her going. She replied that it was a tree that she could see from her cell and she spoke with the tree. Frankl asked what the tree said. She answered: “It said to me, ‘I am here—I am here—I am life, eternal life.’”12 Did the tree really speak? The fact that one has not heard a tree speak is not proof that trees do not do so. One has to listen, to be attuned in ways that we may not be accustomed. Sometimes dire experiences, such as those of the woman in the death camp, can change our attentiveness. Or at the other extreme, the exhilarating and majestic experience of being among trees a thousand years in age can resuscitate the meaning of listening and speaking. Those who respect the forest are challenged by the wilderness discover that trees are responsive beings.13

One aspect of Martin Buber’s I and Thou that has often been misunderstood is that his 1-Thou word is not exclusively a human to human relation. He explicitly refers to a human relation to trees in which the pattern of address and response is present. A tree, in Buber’s vocabulary, can be turned into an “it” when the human I sees the tree as nothing but lumber or wood pulp. A living tree deserves appreciative attention as one capable of revealing the mysteries of life and death.14

One of the most intriguing passages in I and Thou is Buber’s description of his cat. He seems to credit the cat with some of the deepest revelations of life: “No other event has made me so deeply aware of the evanescent actuality in all relationships to other beings.”15 When we get to the sphere of domestic animals, we are unmistakably dealing with beings who are capable of response to our human speech, even while connecting us to primal forces we can only glimpse. Buber’s choice of the cat is an appropriate one for exemplifying this link. Cats are the most popular domestic animal in this country. Children learn about responsibility in interaction with cats and dogs, as much as by any experience.

One also learns differences in animal responses. As T.S. Eliot’s now-famous poem about cats dramatized, “you should address a cat, but always keep in mind that he resents familiarity.”16 As one saying has it, “when you call a dog, the dog comes; when you call a cat, the cat says leave a message and I’ll get back to you.” Some people do not much like this independence of the cat. Should not these cared-for animals respond with more alacrity to our wishes? Cats do not follow easily, whether behind human or cat. In The Tribe of Tiger, Elizabeth Marshall Thomas writes that “kittens follow their mothers, to be sure, but cats make their own plans and decisions, each individual taking full responsibility for himself or herself with no one else to show the way.”17 Such passages in Thomas’s books on cats and dogs are criticized for excessive anthropomorphism, but she always accords respect to the animal’s autonomous existence. Thus, to her question of what do dogs really want, her answer is: each other.18

There is something else worth noticing about the human interaction with dogs, cats, horses, chimps, and other animals that people come to have affection for. The person expresses care for a particular animal by providing food, shelter, and even conversation. The animal responds with signals of appreciation, such as purring or a wagging tail. That in turn evokes further caring by the human partner. Why does a human “owner” come to feel responsible for this dog or that bird? In large part because the particular animal has exhibited its own responsibility, that is, its ability to respond to the care of this human being. By most stan-
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dards of logic, this process seems either unfair or utterly haphazard. A stray animal shows up at the door, and the human being comes to feel responsible for this animal but not for a million other strays.

This process of growing into responsibility, or at least feeling responsible, is not confined to human treatment of a nonhuman animal. The person–dog or person–horse relation prefigures some of what goes on between humans. With human to animal relations one can see the beginnings of reciprocity pertaining to response. The animal’s ability to respond does not reach equality with the human. But the interaction, reciprocal action to whatever degree, generates the experience of being responsible. We become responsible over a period of time by finding a response in another being that in turn evokes a response in us. Given the time required and the complexity of the movement, those to whom we can feel responsible are few in number. And without some feelings being involved, responsibility will not survive on the basis of rational calculation.

In human relations we would like to have some guarantee that those few whom we feel intimately related to are worth our time and effort. Choosing a marriage partner or a close friend ought to have more direction and logic than adopting a stray cat. Nonetheless, in human affairs we are confronted with people, starting with family members and extending to chance encounters, who are part of a narrow circle to whom we feel responsible. We may sometimes try to shake off the feeling and convince ourselves that responsibility toward a drug-addicted brother or a cheating business partner is not different from responsibility toward five billion other people. But if a bond of reciprocal response has developed over the years then, though I may not have chosen these people, nonetheless fate, luck, randomness, or divine providence keeps the meaning of my responsibility rooted in these people.

The movement from insect to human world seems to involve both a more generalized capacity to respond and a narrower focus of response. As humans come to conceive of moral responsibility, it is important they do not forget the simple, bodily feeling out of which this moral stance emerges. We are morally responsible because we can first feel our bodily response to a world of particulars outside of our own bodies. We become morally responsible as we guide our physical and emotional responses to things we need, animals we care for, humans we love. At some point along a continuum, we draw a line to distinguish the realm called “moral” responsibility. That realm is understandably what most interests us, but it will not be intelligible if it is severed from its nonmoral roots.

Is and Ought

This second point, the continuity between what is and what ought to be, has been prepared for by the first point. To be responsible is a term that can both describe the way the world is and also indicate how we should act. This range of meaning is not based on confusion, let alone equivocation. “Responsible” is simply one of those words that we need, and in fact do use, to indicate continuity between our statements of what is and what ought to be. There is a line drawn through responsibility to distinguish (not separate) is and ought. That line is never entirely clear-cut and is not stationary in an individual’s life.

A human being is the responsible being, or the most responsible of all the animals. A one-day-old baby is, in this sense, responsible. We are now acutely aware of the importance of the infant (even the fetus) as a response-able being. An environment of people and things evokes responses in infants and young children. This environment has relevance to the individual’s later sense of (moral) responsibility. We do not attribute moral responsibility to the child until he or she has developed powers of deliberation and choice. Before that age, the child is responsible but not morally responsible.

Responsible in the second or moral sense means being held accountable for good or bad behavior. When we say that people should act responsibly, we are demanding that they fulfill obligations, obey the law, and otherwise be good people. Of course, in the first sense, people are always acting responsibly, however ethical or unethical their behavior. The moral demand of responsibility, therefore, is not to acquire something that is missing but to somehow change the direction of what is already present. A person who fails to act in ways accepted as ethical is called “irresponsible.” Thus, we have the paradox: Only a responsible being can be irresponsible.

It is important to note how clearly this distinction is built into the term. The difference between nonresponsible and irresponsible is neither haphazard nor a unique case. A similar clear distinction is made with other important terms. For example, we carefully distinguish
between nonrational and irrational, the second word connoting psychological if not moral failure. An irrational person has lost control of his or her life; irrational acts are prone to violence and self-destruction. There are innumerable nonrational beings that do not have the power to reason. Only a rational being can be irrational.

Similarly, "professional" is a term applied to people, work, or behavior. What does not fit the category is called nonprofessional. The laborer, the amateur, the layperson are terms indicating nonprofessional status. When the term "unprofessional" is used in reference to work or behavior, it always signals a lapse, a breach of ethical conduct. Once again the paradox: Only a professional can act unprofessionally.

When "responsible" is a description of what it is, its opposite is "nonresponsible." When "responsible" is a demand to act in an ethically proper way, its opposite is "irresponsible." It is incorrect to say of a small child that it is irresponsible; but it is proper and necessary to say that the small child is (morally) nonresponsible.

By examining the whole range of responsibility, I have extended the term beyond the human adult to include the child, and beyond the human world to (at least) our next of animal kin. That context should act as a reminder that even when a human adult is called responsible, the term can still mean "capable of response" as well as meaning a requirement to act in an ethically proper way. A human adult is responsible; and a human adult should be responsible.

The advantage in having this term is that ethical advice to others or ethical striving by ourselves can be undertaken with the modest aim of improving what is there. Indeed, so long as people are not acting irresponsibly, they are probably more responsible than is recognized. The disadvantage is that responsibility is exposed to being a banal term that comes in for routine praise. Urging that we act responsibly is neither helpful nor courageous if that is what everybody does every day. Unless both the continuity of is and ought and also the distinction between them is recognized, then calls for responsibility take us nowhere.

My claim that "responsibility" can cover what is and what ought to be is in conflict with a cherished maxim of modern ethics, namely, that one cannot derive an ought from an is. That maxim may be true, but it assumes that there is a realm of statements that describe the world in morally neutral terms. When ethical issues are subsequently raised, it is assumed that they have to be stated as prescriptions of how the world ought to be instead of how it in fact is. Thus, the dilemma of "is versus ought" is also stated as "fact versus value," and "description versus prescription."

Instead of trying to "derive" the second element from the first in these pairs, I have begun with a term that can and is used to unite (while distinguishing) statements of what is and what ought to be. If the "is versus ought" dilemma of modern ethics is to be coped with, other terms have to complement "responsible" in tracing the continuity of is and ought. Nevertheless, even the existence of one term can show that an absolute division between a world of fact and a wish list called "values" is a recent invention that has been assumed without proof.

For overcoming this division, the language of "fact and value" will never work. The two terms have been defined in modern times to be opposites with no bridge between them. A fact is simply there, a neutral datum that confronts the mind. A value is something to be willed or chosen; it is what persons cherish or stand for. As modern science turned the world into a collection of facts, one form of resistance in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was to posit a realm of values untouchable by impersonal science. These days it is common to see "responsibility" designated as a value. That is a disastrous tendency. Of course, responsibility is not a fact, either. It simply has no place in a world divided between fact and value.

A more interesting, even if ultimately unsatisfactory, language to explore is "description versus prescription." There is at least a little give in this language. Presumably the prescription, if not derived from description, is expected to flow from what has been described. Speakers and writers, nevertheless, assume that these two are separate worlds. Authors repeatedly write: My job is to describe, not to prescribe.

The defense seldom works. Although an author may clearly state that the book is intended as description not prescription, readers and reviewers regularly take something else from the book. One place this inevitably happens is in writing on "human development." Authors are rightfully wary of claiming to have universal theories of human development after interviewing a few dozen or a few hundred people.

Gail Sheehy's popular book Passages is intended to be description not prescription. Neither enthusiastic readers nor skeptical reviewers took the book's contents that way. Starting with the word "develop-
ment," the language is not descriptive—at least in the sense of objective fact reported by neutral observer. "Development" for at least two centuries has accumulated a meaning of how things should go. Each time a developmental stage is given a catchy title the author’s feelings are revealed. Even if one were to do nothing but report the raw data of interviews, the choice of material and the arrangement of the data would involve the author’s evaluative judgment.  

As another example, take what is in one way the ultimate theory of human development: Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s stages of dying. The author wishes to describe not prescribe. However, millions of readers became convinced on reading the book that the five stages are the way people should die. And there is ample evidence in the text itself that the author thinks that, with sufficient time and a good counselor, the dying person should reach acceptance.

Kübler-Ross was trying to find out how people were dying and how better they might be served at this stage of life. She did not wish to say how people must die, but she also did not study dying patients as scientific objects. She talked to the patients, listened at length, wrote down and shaped what they had to say, and discerned a pattern that she named with emotion-laden words (denial, anger, bargain, depression, acceptance). Neither the language of description nor that of prescription is adequate for her study.

Consider the most obvious case, if not the origin, of the language of description versus prescription: medical practice. If I have an ailment, I go to a physician. With the tools of modern medicine, the physician establishes the facts of my case. He or she writes a prescription which the pharmacist fills. If all goes well, the medicine cures the problem. The prescription is what is written before, that is, what supplies the solution. If the description can be done with objective, even numerical, standards the description is all the better.

I realize that the above is something of a caricature, but it is not too far from the way the medical profession was at its most arrogant. The "doctor" became the expert who knew what was wrong and knew what to prescribe for a cure. These days physicians are more likely to listen to their patients, try to explain things so that the patient will work along with the physician on whatever therapy is used in the attempt to heal. That is, description/prescription does not even hold well today in medicine.

Consider an alternative metaphor from another profession: the law.

If I am accused of a crime, I will hire a lawyer. We subsequently talk at length. He or she becomes my advocate in court. What is said and how it is said are crucial to convincing the jury. If one route does not work, another can be tried. If the advocacy is successful, the result is not a cure for all my problems, but I am allowed to get on with my life. In this metaphor, each statement has to be factually not false, but it is always someone’s rendering of reality in emotionally freighted words. The process is one of advocating that one way of naming reality is closer to the truth than any other available way.

In my examples above of developmental theories, Gail Sheehy or Elisabeth Kübler-Ross would have been in a stronger position by saying: I have listened to people; I have shaped an argument from their words to advocate a position I believe in. I am sure my theory of stages is not false. My way of naming stages is pointing in the right direction, although each key term has some connotations I do not subscribe to. Kübler-Ross could have said of her most important term “acceptance”: I use this term both to describe what people do throughout life (they accept it every day); I also use the term to indicate where people should end life, with a fullness of accepting that can embrace denial or anger or other emotions that I have not named.

In writing on human development or in other areas where an ethical dimension is unavoidable, every choice of language involves advocacy. A “factual description” can exist in numbers; but once language is used, someone has to decide which words are best to get close to the truth. When language is carefully advocated, the speaker is aware of the range of connotations that could be playing in the listener’s (juror’s) mind. The speaker tries to exclude what may mislead, but not by trying to reduce words to algebraic definitions. The ambiguity of the old, rich words is precisely what the speaker plays upon to evoke deeper levels of human truth.

In this book “responsible” is my choice. I make no claim that it is merely descriptive—in the sense of an objective fact obvious to any reasonable person. I advocate the term as theoretically revealing and practically useful. This choice involves my advocating that Martin Buber or H. Richard Niebuhr is closer to the truth of the matter than is Descartes, Locke, or Kant. Whether the reader will agree with the choice is likely to depend on whether “responsible” can be presented as both comprehensive and consistent. A grammar of its use is intended to show just that. By being able to include statements of what
is and what ought to be, “responsible” opens out on a rich conversation about the moral life.

Responsibility To and Responsible For

The previous two points establish the basis for the most important distinction within responsible: to and for. As I recounted in the previous chapter on the history of the term, “responsible to” was the usual way of using the term until the latter part of the nineteenth century. Then, “responsible for,” which had played a secondary role, took over to the near exclusion of “responsible to.” I do not argue that we should go back a century or more, but the question of “responsible to” never went away and cannot go away. The failure to notice that “responsible to” is a question at all vitiates much of the writing on responsibility.

Hans Jonas’s The Imperative of Responsibility is one of the most detailed studies of the use of “responsibility.” Jonas says that there are “two widely differing senses of responsibility”: (1) accountability for one’s deeds and (2) responsibility for particular objects. Although this is a distinction within the use of “responsible for,” Jonas is oblivious of the far more basic distinction of responsible to and responsible for; this distinction, among other things, would explain the link between his two senses of responsible.26 Only in a few spots where he is referring to the future does Jonas use, without comment, “responsible to.”

In pursuing the meaning of this distinction of to and for, one should note a quirk of the English language that blurs this point. “Responsible” is often followed by “to” but in cases where that word is part of an infinitive. The meaning is still responsible for. If someone says “it is his responsibility to act,” that is equivalent to “he is responsible for acting.” When an infinitive is used after “responsible,” the question of to whom and to what is not being addressed. However, I suspect that at some level of consciousness the issue is present, and the use of infinitives after “responsible” has the effect of seeming to deal with this unresolved question.

The one place today where a conscious use of this distinction is regularly employed is in bureaucratic organizations. For many people the question “to whom are you responsible?” has a clear answer: my supervisor in the next office up the pyramid. In ordinary circumstances, this reply is sufficient to justify the actions of secretaries, sol-
friend, or to a patient in therapy as observing and respecting what the soul
presents, I won’t try to take things away, in the name of health.”
Moore’s use of “responsible to” here is deliberate; “responsible for”
would violate his meaning. Respecting what one discovers in being
responsible to oneself is the basis for respecting others—both people
and things. “Responsibility to” is without preordained limits; situated
at the center of the human heart, it is open to the grandeur of the
universe. The result of this openness is what Moore calls a “soul ecology:
a responsibility to things of the world based on appreciation and related-
ness rather than on abstract principle.”

Other human beings do play a special role in the calling to be
responsible. Being responsible to oneself is possible only within the
presence of responsive people who provide the calm security required
for quiet listening. Kenneth Eble in A Perfect Education writes that
“good teachers are almost infinitely responsive. Boys and girls become
good students for teachers who provide for the first time, a response to
what they feel most deeply.”

Responsibility to everything is, therefore, embodied in response to
ourselves in a context of intersubjective exchange. From here a dis-
criminating intelligence has to decide which incoming information is
worth attending to. We can listen or we can shut our ears; we can listen
with more or with less of ourselves.

Perhaps to allay some suspicion here, the question should be explicit-
lly raised: Does the very existence of the question I am asking, “to
whom and to what am I responsible,” imply a religious answer? Undeni-
able, the idea of responsibility arose in the religious context of a
divine day of judgment. The modern world has struggled to sever the
term from this religious origin while not only retaining but heighten-
ing the sense of responsibility. Can that be done? Does the project self-
destruct without a religious answer for “to whom am I responsible”? I
would say that a religious attitude of some kind is implied, though the
imagery and the institutions that grew up around divine judgment are
not necessarily implied.

The nineteenth century went about the business of methodically
trying to replace religion, asking who or what, instead of God, we
could be responsible to. The twentieth century tried to eliminate the
question of responsible to, but ironically we are now awash in new
religious movements. I am trying to make the question explicit in a
context that gives us more choice of answer than deciding either that

“God is back in charge” or else that “we are in charge, responsible to
no one.”

In John Stuart Mill’s On Liberty, the author’s first use of “respon-
sible” refers to the European liberalism of his time, which believed that
it had solved the problem of to whom the rulers of the nation are
responsible. Since the rulers, the people, and the nation are now seen
as one, “the nation did not need to be protected against its own will.
There was no fear of its tyrannizing over itself. Let the rulers be effec-
tually responsible to it, promptly removable by it, and it could afford
to trust with power of which it could itself dictate the use to be
made.” Mill was suspicious of (the rulers of) the nation being respon-
sible to (the people of) the nation, of “it” being responsible only to
itself. There was too neat a symmetry in the arrangement that hid the
clash of competing interests. Taking his cue in part from the United
States, Mill insisted on the need for guarantees of liberty so that people
would be free to pursue happiness. Neither the nation, nor society, nor
humanity was ready to be the recipient of religious devotion and
unconditional trust. Implied in that skepticism is an appeal to some-
ting greater than nation, society, or humanity, whether the “it” is
named.

There will probably always be disagreement over how to character-
ize the object of religious devotion, but it is perhaps possible to charac-
terize a religious attitude as one responsible to everyone and
everything. One of the classic attempts to describe this attitude was
written by William James at the end of the nineteenth century. He is
commenting on an exchange between two writers, Margaret Fuller
and Thomas Carlyle. Fuller had said “I accept the universe”; Carlyle
had sarcastically replied “Gad, she’d better.” James gets underneath
this exchange with his reflection: “At bottom the whole concern of
both morality and religion is with the manner of our acceptance of the
universe. Do we accept it only in part and grudgingly or heartily and
altogether? . . . If we accept the whole, shall we do so as if stunned into
submission— as Carlyle would have us—’Gad we’d better’—or shall
we do so with enthusiastic assent?”

When we turn from “responsible to” to “responsible for,” we find
the phrase everywhere. In what follows, I wish to situate its meaning
in relation to “responsible to.” When this context is missing, as it usu-
ally is, then there is a strong impetus to expand the area for which one
is responsible. That is, if someone says “I am responsible only for
myself,” the statement almost inevitably draws rebuke as too narrow a view of responsible. Indeed, the statement by itself is too narrow, but the remedy is not to expand what we are responsible for. The proper route is to complement what one is responsible for with what one is responsible to.

As the context of “responsible to” comes into play, then “responsible for” can be focused more narrowly. The statement “I am responsible only for myself,” instead of accepting too little for which one is responsible, actually claims too much. At any particular time, I am responsible for specific actions of my life. Through the course of a lifetime of development I become more responsible for the character of that life. However, no one can say without qualification: I am responsible for myself.

Consider this exchange in the much-praised book Habits of the Heart. The interviewer is Steven Tipton; the woman interviewed is a psychotherapist.

Q. So what are you responsible for?
   A. I am responsible for my own acts and what I do.
Q. Does that mean you’re not responsible for others, too?
   A. No.
Q. Are you your sister’s keeper?
   A. No.
Q. Your brother’s keeper?
   A. No.
Q. Are you responsible for your husband?
   A. I’m not. He makes his own decisions. He is his own person. He acts his own acts. I can agree with them or disagree with them. If I ever find them nauseous enough, I have the responsibility to leave and not deal with it anymore.
Q. What about your children?
   A. I—I would say that I have a legal responsibility for them, but in a sense I think they are responsible for their own acts.32

The hecturing tone of this interview indicates that the interviewer cannot believe what he is hearing. Elsewhere in the book he says of this woman that she “is caught in some of the contradictions her belief implies. She is responsible for herself but she has no reliable way to connect her own fulfillment to that of other people.”33 However, nothing in the book’s description of this woman indicates that she “has no reliable way to connect her own fulfillment to that of other people.”

She is a hard-working wife and mother, involved in community affairs. Perhaps it is the interviewer who is confused about how to formulate the question of responsibility. The woman may be answering a different question—the question actually being asked—than the question the interviewer is trying to ask but does not know how.

The woman gets it about right: she is responsible for her acts (not as Tipton paraphrases her answer “responsible for herself”). She does not substitute her responsibility for other adults, each of whom is responsible for himself or herself. She makes an appropriate exception for her children; the parent has a legal and moral responsibility for some of the child’s acts. (The issue of children will be explored in chapter 7.) The repetition of the interviewer’s term “keeper” is an appeal to the Bible, the assumption being that the Bible says I should be my brother’s keeper. But in the Bible, God does not deign to answer the murderer Cain, who asks “Am I my brother’s keeper?” If God had, he might have said: I did not ask you to be his keeper but to be his brother. Brothers are neither for keeping nor for killing.

If the interviewer had asked the question “Are you responsible to your husband, brother, sister, children,” I am certain the woman’s answers would have been yes. And an interesting conversation might have ensued. The woman is a psychotherapist and presumably knows about listening to people. She lives a life not of isolated privacy but of responsiveness which sweeps wide. It is the breadth of that “responsible to” which allows her to say with precision and clarity: I am responsible for my acts. As a psychotherapist she could probably have gone on to say more precisely what acts she is responsible for and some acts over which she may not have control.

Far from being typical of a selfish-sounding generation, this woman is unusual for resisting the grandiose rhetoric that so often accompanies talk of responsibility. As a figure of speech in a literary work, the expansion of “responsible for” may be understandable. When Dimitri in Brothers Karamazov says “we are all responsible for all…. I go for all because someone must go for all,” the reader is exhilarated by the grand gesture.34 But when a philosopher is reflecting on the scope of “responsible for,” the proper restriction needs to be stated. As Bonhoeffer notes: “There can, therefore, never be an absolute responsibility, a responsibility which is not essentially limited by the responsibility of the other man.”35

When Eugene Levinas says we are “responsible for all who are not
Fundamental Distinctions

Hitler," one is likely to think his provocative exclusion of Hitler is the problem, whereas it is his saying that I am "at every moment responsible for the others, the hostage of others. I can be responsible for that which I did not do and take upon myself a distress which is not mine." Levinas's blanket responsibility for everyone would exhaust the individual trying to accomplish it, and it is disrespectful of the freedom of others.

Two relevant points are raised by this quotation from Levinas. He rightly says "I can be responsible for that which I did not do." I am responsible for what I do; however, that includes acts of omission. If there is clearly a reason why I should do something and I fail to act, I am responsible for the act of not acting. If I am leaving a party with a friend who is drunk and I make no effort to stop him from driving his car, I become partly responsible for the accident that follows. The culpable action is an omission of action.

As a political example, take the case of the 1982 slaughter at El Mozote in El Salvador, a disgraceful episode in recent United States history. Especially disgraceful is the fact that there were eyewitness accounts and newspaper reports, but it took eleven years for the United States government to acknowledge its complicity in the massacre carried out by the army. Even then, Thomas Enders, who had been Assistant Secretary of State for Latin American Affairs, defended himself by saying: "I did not deny the killing... I have responsibility for not having been able to confirm it." His not confirming is indeed what he is responsible for, though he says disingenuously that he was not "able to confirm it." What he means is that he sent two men to find out but they never got there. After that, the main effort seems to have been to impugn the reputation of the New York Times reporter on the scene.

The second relevant point about Levinas's philosophy is that it is profoundly affected by the Holocaust. Any ethical distinction should be tested against the Holocaust. The distinction between responsible to and responsible for does not detract from the reality of the Holocaust. I think it would be serviceable in trying to examine the Holocaust.

The point I wish to emphasize at present is that Levinas seems at times to be referring to other people who cannot be responsible for themselves. That happens, of course, in less extreme cases than the Holocaust. I can become responsible for an adult human being when that person cannot be responsible for his or her own actions. In most cases, that is a temporary condition but there are also permanent situations. An illness such as Alzheimer's disease may totally disable a person, although it is important to recognize any ability to respond for oneself that a disabled person retains. Responsibility for another becomes complete in cases of permanent and irreversible coma.

In both temporary and permanent incapacity, who should step in to be responsible is not always clear. Generally, we assume that a family member or a close friend becomes responsible. When that is not feasible, a professional person or a judge may have to be responsible for someone's well-being. It can also be the case that pure chance puts me in the position of being responsible for the safety or health of someone. If I find someone unconscious on the street, I am responsible for that person, or more exactly, I am responsible for my actions, which temporarily substitute for the actions of the unconscious person. A court will not usually hold me responsible if I walk by, and urban experience today can seem to make that acceptable. But ethically I am responsible for doing something, if only to dial 911.

Children are the other main exception to the principle of not being responsible for other human beings. I have reserved that discussion until chapter 7. Animals are somewhere between responsible adults and irresponsible things. I can be responsible for an animal's welfare in specific ways, but animals ought to be allowed their own activity. The animal's desire to establish a rhythm of eating, sleeping, and going off on its own should at least get a respectful hearing. As for things, human beings are responsible for that which cannot speak for itself. Sometimes that means speaking for a particular mountain, river, or forest range. At other times it means acting for the general good of the environment.

In short, we are generally not responsible for other people; we are responsible for things. Very often in writing on responsibility the assumption is exactly the opposite, that we are responsible for people but not for things. In the Steven Tipton interview above, he asks about husband, sister, brother, and children. He never got to the things. If he had asked the woman whether she was responsible for the flowers in her front yard, he would have gotten the yes he was so intent on getting.

"Responsibility for a thing" is a shorthand phrase that needs the context of "responsible to." Hans Jonas writes that there are two dif-
different senses of responsible: for one’s acts and for things. These two should be held together in the phrase “responsible for my acts in their relation to things.” If I am responsible for things (and sometimes by exception, people), it is because, having listened to them, my actions respect their degree of autonomy. For things, my acts are a substitute for choices they cannot exercise. For people, my acts substitute for specific acts that another person is not in a position to do.

Jonas writes that “the captain is master of the ship and its passengers, and bears responsibility for them.” Not quite. The captain bears responsibility for his actions that guarantee the passengers’ safety; that is not the same as saying the captain is responsible for the passengers (what they eat, who they sleep with, how they dress). I would not go on a boat that had a captain who thinks he is responsible for me. The distinction is important because Jonas uses this example to claim that the statesman is likewise responsible for the people over whom he has power. I certainly do not want a politician thinking he is responsible for me; I want a politician who, responsible to the best interests of the people, is responsible for his or her own actions.

Beyond saying that a president or a mayor is not responsible for me, I am saying that I am not responsible for me. I am responsible for some of my acts. This distinction makes a difference when I am urged to “take responsibility for your life.” It is not there for the taking; much about my life is outside my control. Some people are so swamped by the idea of “being responsible for their life” that they never get as far as taking the first step in the right direction. Other people feel supremely confident they are responsible for their life, their future, their fate, their destiny. One sharp pain in the chest can prove them wrong.

Rights and Duties

The previous three sections in this chapter set the basis for effectively relating responsibility to right and duty. In recent decades, this question has been muddied by the development of a cliché: what is wrong with the country is that we need to have responsibilities as well as rights. We do indeed need both rights and responsibility, but they are not the same kind of thing. Responsibility is not really a “thing” at all; it is a process within which things called “rights” emerge. What needs pairing with rights are duties or obligations.

In December, 1994, when President Clinton looked for a program to counter the Republican landslide in November, he came up with a set of benefits grandly named “The Middle Class Bill of Rights.” When the president returned to the theme in his January State of the Union Address, he noted parenthetically that it should be called “The Middle Class Bill of Rights—and Responsibilities.” That addition would seem to signal a drastic change in the proposal, but no change was apparent. Nor did any commentator question the addition of the word “responsibilities.” Politicians know that today when you say “rights,” the proper form is to add “responsibilities.” No one will object and nothing effectively changes beyond the more palatable rhetoric.

It is three decades since the American Bar Association established a section on “Individual Rights.” While the section was still under proposal, its name was changed by adding the term “responsibilities.” One person who has been a member of the section since its beginning complains that it has done little throughout its history except to deal with rights. Perhaps the author of this complaint should consider whether the well-intentioned phrasing of the title was flawed from the beginning, that rights plus responsibilities always seems to equal rights.

A group of writers called “communitarians” has been especially vocal on the topic of responsibility. The group published a platform and continues to publish a stimulating journal, The Responsive Community. The platform that the group published is headed: The Responsive Communitarian Platform: Rights and Responsibilities. Amata Ezioni, the most prominent member of the group, explains: “We aim for a judicious mix of self-interest, self-expression, and commitment to the commons—of rights and responsibilities, of I and we.”

While I am in favor of responsibility, I think it is a losing battle to try to win by addition. Neither historically nor logically does responsibility fit there; worse still, that position prevents responsibility from playing the important role of being the ground of both rights and duties. The preamble to “The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen” in 1789 says its “purpose is to serve as a constant reminder to the members of the body social, not only of their rights but of their duties.” That is the straightforward language that is still most helpful when the concept of right is explored: one person’s right can be another person’s duty or obligation. A society that talks about rights
without at the same time talking about duties is creating a logical and practical mess.

Why in much of contemporary discussion is the term “duty” replaced by “responsibility”? Is this just a twentieth-century translation of a nineteenth-century word? To an extent the answer is yes, but this substitution gives to the term responsibility a burden it cannot bear. “Responsibilities,” as things we take, is not given any intelligible connection to the process of human life. However, “responsibility” seems to have a softer, more acceptable sound than “duty,” with its prim and strict Victorian overtones. So, responsibility as a general idea is embraced instead; it is, after all, in part of its meaning, what we are.

The first moment of responsibility is being responsible to. It is not a thing I possess but a process within which the “I” is formed. Religious traditions moved from that gift of life to duties or obligations entailed by the gift. At the top of the list is thanksgiving. That and other duties (obeying one’s parents, caring for the earth, telling the truth) are connoted by the term “religion.” Mosaic law was said to have six-hundred and thirteen commandments, but they could be subsumed under three, two, or even just one commandment. Religion consisted of duties in response to God.

No religious group produced a bill of rights. The assumption seems to have been that one must trust that God will do right by us. “Even if he slay me, I will trust him,” says the beleaguered Job. Religious people were somewhat naive in this attitude of trust. God may be trustworthy; but organizations, which are unavoidable for any religious group, might very well need stipulations that limit the power of officials.

At the beginning of modern political theory, that is what a right meant; “rights,” said Justice Holmes, “mark the limits of interference with individual freedom.” A person’s rights are most clearly stated in negative terms: not to be killed, not to be tortured, not to be prevented from speaking. The United States Constitution would not have been ratified except for the addition of a Bill of Rights, a series of severe restrictions on the government’s power.

During the last two centuries the idea of rights has tended to move from protections to “entitlements.” A person reading the Bill of Rights today might be disappointed; it does not state all the good things I am entitled to. The United Nations Universal Declaration of Rights is oriented more positively. It begins with the rights not to be killed and not to be tortured, but it eventually gets to rights to education, to a good wage, to health care, and so forth. For the last half-century, no one has argued that these latter rights are not good things. The nagging question has been how do such rights exist without someone enforcing them; if those are rights, there must be obligations entailed by somebody or some organizations.

As right has moved from “a very frail attempt to set at least some limits to abuse and cruelty” to being the series of good things everyone is entitled to, it has nearly banished any other ethical currency. Especially in the United States of America, we have almost no other way to formulate ethical issues except in the language of rights. Understandably, every group of people who have suffered in any way demand their rights; unfortunately, one group’s rights quickly conflict with another group’s rights. And, without any other language to mediate the conflict, the result is either paralysis of government or violence.

The most obvious and painful example of this conflict is abortion, as it has been argued in the United States. The controversy is so strident because both sides use the same language of rights and cannot give any ground. In her helpful book Abortion and Divorce in Western Law, Mary Ann Glendon demonstrates that there are other ways to deal with abortion. She writes that in the United States abortion is thought of as a conflict of rights, the right to life of the fetus versus a woman’s right to privacy. “The two seemingly irrevocably opposed positions are actually locked within the same intellectual framework, a framework that appears rigid and impoverished when viewed from a comparative perspective.”

Given the historical record of the United States as a place insistent on rights, it may seem hopeless to think of changing things. I do not expect there will be a fundamental change. The United States considers it a glorious tradition that it champions human rights. And indeed there remain many places on earth where some powerful outside force should demand an end to killing and torture. The United States will probably continue to play the part of outside critic. But for its own survival, as well as for its role as preacher, some qualifications in the meaning of rights and some appreciation of other approaches are urgently needed. The formula “not just rights but responsibilities” fails to accomplish either of these needs.

What has to be worked at is an integral linking of right and obligation within a larger ethical discourse. And the ethical itself needs to be
situated in a world where talk is about beauty, joy, pleasure, hopes, dreams, sorrow, mourning, rebirth. The United States is a very moralistic and litigious society. The threat of suing for one’s rights is never far below the surface in disagreements. When these rights are brought up, duties should be too. However, we could also look for ways to speak in which neither rights nor duties govern the conversation.

We will continue to need the protection of rights, such as life, liberty, and—in Jefferson’s phrase—the pursuit of happiness. The government can only promise to allow the pursuit, not guarantee the happiness. The government should not unduly interfere in how an individual pursues happiness, but the government has to protect that space by seeing that individuals or groups do not violate the basic rights. John Stuart Mill, the apostle of liberty, could still speak of “things which wherever it is obviously a man’s duty to do he may rightfully be made responsible to society for not doing.”56 Those duties, Mill says, are “assignable obligations” on the part of another. Thus, for Mill both the rights and the duties are “responsible to society.” I have expressed some doubt that society can be the ultimate reference for “responsible to.” Nonetheless, both rights and duties depend on the experience of being responsible to someone or something.

I do not propose to take out the word “society” and replace it with another term. For the present, no single term will do. Responding to is at the heart of life: the range of its objects includes elements that are more particular than society, as well as realities greater than society. The ecological movement may eventually help us to recover our relation to a reality immeasurably greater than the human.

Instead of urging people to accept their responsibilities, we would do better to try to develop their capacity for response. People who are responsive—to beauty in nature, to care for family and friends, to the intellectual excitement of learning, to the satisfaction of artistic work—will generally accept that they have some duties or obligations. They are responsible for their actions as law-abiding citizens. Such people do not generally feel the constraint of law. Instead the law can function educationally by encouraging or discouraging behavior. The law guides “individual choices as to behavior by presenting them with reasons for exercising choice in the direction of obedience but leaving them to choose.”57 That would be a new legal framework for responsible people, for those who can listen to guidance, make up their own minds and act without coercion.

This chapter addresses the question What is personal responsibility? The addition of the adjective “personal” is something of a puzzle; all responsibility would seem situated in the person. Nonetheless, when responsibility is being urged on people, they are usually told to take personal responsibility. Is that in contrast to “impersonal”? Or is the adjective redundant and simply added for emphasis?

One possibility is that personal responsibility is used in contrast to some kind of collective responsibility. The insistence on the personal is in contrast to the government or other organizations having the responsibility. This meaning often does seem to be the case. The adjective “personal” is often a code word in such things as a proposal to cut welfare benefits.

A term that is related to personal is “individual.” But both in etymology and ordinary usage, individual has some different connotations. In the first chapter I said that responsibility is a bridge over five divisions, one of which is the opposition of individual versus collective. The contrast in that language is between one unit and many units. “Individual” means what is not divided, what is the ultimate unit in a measuring of people or things.

For addressing the rift between the individual and the collective, the discussion of this chapter has to be joined to the following chapter. There is a problem on both sides of the individual/collective divide; each half requires extensive surgery. Because one cannot say everything at once, the discussion of this chapter could be misread as affirming a private, individualistic (rather than personal) responsibility.

My first step in trying to avoid such a misreading is to use personal rather than individual as the basis of this chapter. I have admitted that “personal” is sometimes just a throwaway term, unthinkingly used to