

Other side

The Editor of this series, anxious for
 outspoken inquiry on these great topics,
 from which true philosophy will never
 shrink, counsels the reader to study
 along with these pages the Essay "On
 Matter, Force, and Atheism", by the
 Theo^s J. P. Kirkman M. A.

Let us be sure of our definitions. If we agree
 to call God the sum of the forces at work in
the universe, what cause of quarrel has
 the religionist against us?

Our difference is only about the Divine
 Nature, which we hold to be a legitimate
 subject of investigation.

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ON RESPONSIBILITY.

BY THE LATE

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EDINBURGH.



PUBLISHED BY THOMAS SCOTT,
NO. 11, THE TERRACE, FARQUHAR ROAD,
UPPER NORWOOD, LONDON, S.E.

Price Threepence.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

PHYSICS DEPARTMENT



PHYSICS DEPARTMENT

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

1900

ON RESPONSIBILITY.

THE doctrine of Responsibility is one that holds a most important place in all systems of morals, and is a mighty means of influence in all systems of religion. I purpose this evening to sift the idea as well as I am able, and to separate the truth from the error mixed up with it. Nothing is more common than to hear discussions about the extent to which we are responsible for this thing or that, and nothing more terrific sometimes than the manner in which the consequences of our responsibility to God is urged from the pulpit; and yet, it is seldom the disputants and declaimers pause to ask themselves, or others, what the meaning of the word is, and in what sense we are, or can be responsible to God and man. And yet the clear and precise definition of a word is the first and essential step towards the satisfactory and conclusive discussion of the subject which it involves. Let us ask ourselves, therefore, what it is we mean by the word responsibility. I need scarcely say, that literally and etymologically the word means to promise, pledge oneself, or answer in return. It is out of this latter meaning it has acquired its moral use. He who is responsible has to answer in return to the questions put to him concerning his conduct. It is generally employed as a synonym for accountable; he who is responsible, is accountable for his actions; *i.e.*, must give an account of them, explain them, justify them, be examined about them, by the authority to which he is amenable. Properly speak-

ing, the word denotes one able to respond, answer, or give an account ; but it is also used to denote one who is under the necessity or obligation of responding or answering. The use of this word in application to our human relations is plain and simple enough. We are responsible to the government under which we live for the manner in which we obey its laws—*i.e.*, we are compelled, when called upon, to answer inquiries as to that obedience, to give an account of ourselves, and explain and justify our actions. In like manner, the employed are responsible to their employers, servants to their masters and mistresses, for the manner in which they have done the work they have engaged to do : they must answer and give an account of themselves when called upon to answer and give an account. And in like manner, children up to a certain age are responsible to their parents, and all kinds of dependents to those upon whom they depend. In all these cases, you will observe there is involved the idea of a superior power capable of insisting upon the answer, the account being rendered, and of inflicting some penal consequences, if, when rendered, it be not satisfactory. The government, by its superior power, can force its subjects to give an account of their doings, and punish them for any infraction of the law, they discover when the account is rendered ; parents in like manner can force their children to give an account, and so in the other relations referred to, though these, for the most part in the present day, can only inflict their punishments through the medium of the government. In former times, as we know, there was a much more general power of inflicting summary punishments possessed by private individuals than now. The lords of the soil were often the rulers and judges within their own territories, and although they were nominally responsible to the sovereign for their doings, the responsibility was very light in reality, and practically they were all but absolute. Masters, too, in the towns had great power over their apprentices and workmen, and

the system of responsibility generally was in every respect more rigorous. Now, so long as God is regarded as a being like unto ourselves, and his government is likened to earthly governments, it is natural to transfer all these notions connected with responsibility to our relations to him; and, accordingly, we are said to be responsible to God in the same way as we are responsible to the government under which we live, or as our children are responsible to us. Only then, it is not merely for one particular class of actions that we are responsible, but for every one, each moment of our lives; and God being omniscient, there can be no possible escape or mistake through the defect of evidence or the want of personal knowledge. And this responsibility is generally considered, I think, to have reference to a future day of judgment. God is acknowledged, indeed, to administer some corrections and punishments in the present life; but, for the most part, our account will have to be given in at the last great assize, when, in a manner more or less formal, and more or less after the style of our law courts, every action we have done, and every word we have spoken, will be examined and inquired into; we shall have to explain and account for each one, and shall be judged according to our answers. So that the idea of our moral responsibility resolves itself into this necessity of undergoing the judgment of God, and of liability to reward or punishment according to the character of our conduct. This idea of responsibility, however, is now, I believe, generally limited by two conditions, which again, seem to be suggested by the analogies of our responsibilities to men.

First of all, it is said, knowledge is essential to this responsibility, and that it would be altogether unjust, and so impossible, for God to make a man answerable for an action concerning which he did not know, or could not know, whether it was good or bad. More often, perhaps, it is the possibility of knowledge than

the actual possession of it which is insisted on. If knowledge of good and evil be within one's reach, and one does not use the means to acquire that knowledge, we are held to be equally responsible for the action done in this voluntary ignorance as if it were done in the full possession of the knowledge. This distinction, however, is only considered of much importance with regard to questions of religious life. Men living within the reach of the means of grace—that is, having a church or chapel near to them, Bibles to be bought at the Society's depots, and ministers to be consulted—if they neglect these means, are equally guilty for neglecting the Gospel, as though they used the means, knew the truth, and yet rejected it. They have not the knowledge indeed, but they have the means of knowledge, which they neglect.

But whilst it is thought important to note this distinction for the sake of the positive institution of Christianity, it is scarcely necessary in the case of morals. For it is held that the moral law is written upon the heart of all men alike, there is an instinctive perception of what is right and what is wrong, and so the necessary knowledge is common to all, whether civilised or uncivilised, Christian or heathen. And being so, all are equally responsible to God. These instincts may indeed be obscured by the degraded condition into which men have fallen; but still, there they are, and if consulted and yielded to, would lead to the perfect knowledge of the will of God. All are thus brought within the sphere of responsibility, so far as this condition of knowledge is concerned, and every one will have to give an account of himself to God.

The second condition recognised amongst most moral philosophers as essential to responsibility is freedom of choice or will, as it used to be termed. It is said it would be perfectly unjust, and therefore impossible, for the righteous God to hold a man responsible and to punish him for what he could not help, and did not

freely choose of himself. And, therefore, all who are responsible must be perfectly free to choose or reject the actions for which they are responsible. That we are so free, our own consciousness, it is said, clearly testifies. We all feel that if we had chosen, we could have refrained from any particular action, and that no power could have compelled us to commit it against our will. There has always been, however, considerable difference between these theologians and philosophers concerning the precise nature of this freedom, and as to where it begins, and where it ends. One class insists that all that is necessary to it is, that we are able to do as we choose, without, *i.e.*, regarding what it is which causes us to choose this rather than that. Whilst the other class contends that, besides this power of doing as we choose, it is absolutely necessary to perfect freedom, and so to moral responsibility, that the choice itself be free—that we possess in ourselves a self-determining power, capable of originating the choice which should be made independently of, and unbiassed by, all motives or anything of that kind. It would be beside my purpose to-night to enter upon this controversy, but I must say that, if I occupied the standpoint of these controversialists, and held their views of God's government, and of responsibility, I should be compelled in sentiment to side with the latter class. For nothing could be more monstrously wicked than to suppose God had created men subject to a law of causation, which determines absolutely whether they choose this action or not, and yet that he is angry with them when they do not choose what he wishes, and punishes them for it in the pains of an eternal hell. It would be in vain to tell me that I am free to do what I choose, if I am under a law which compels me to choose this or that. The law and he who made and sustains the law, are responsible for the result, and if any one ought to be punished for the results of the law's operation, surely it is that law maker!

It was the perception of this which led the late Sir William Hamilton to accept the doctrine of the absolute freedom of the will, although it appeared to him contradictory to facts. And nothing can be more astounding, and seem more revolting, than when the pure and devout Jonathan Edwards, having in the most logical piece of reasoning that ever was composed in this world, proved the doctrine of necessity, that is, that the will is subject to law, and so that our choice is determined by certain conditions, without any notice or reason assigned, excepting what arises out of his religious feelings, plunges into the assumption that we are responsible, and so that all which is necessary to responsibility is freedom to do as we choose. Both these parties, however, are alike agreed upon the responsibility, and equally contend for it under the same form.

But upon what evidence is belief in this form of responsibility made to rest? Of course, mere scripturalists quote texts of Scripture, but the more thoughtful endeavour to place it upon a wider basis. They perceive that, if true, it must be a doctrine accessible and patent to all antecedently to and independently of any supernatural revelation. Accordingly, the basis upon which this belief is almost universally made to rest, is that of an asserted universal, uneradicable, instinctive conviction, feeling or persuasion, that we are responsible. Every man, it is said, however evil or depraved he may be, feels and knows within himself that he is accountable to God for his actions, and that they will bring him reward or punishment according as they are good or bad.

And these universal convictions, persuasions, or instincts must be accepted as representing truth, and the doctrines they deliver to us, must be therefore believed; of course, if there be a universal persuasion or conviction of anything, that persuasion or conviction *must* be trusted. For the very universality of the persuasion

implies that it is trusted, whilst the want of trust upon the part of any would prove that it is not universal. It is here, therefore, I join issue, and refuse to accept the doctrine of responsibility as it is thus set forth. I deny that there is a universal conviction that we are responsible in the sense alleged. I myself have no such conviction, and I meet with others that have none. The conviction is false, founded upon a misinterpretation of the real facts of our human nature.

The whole form which this doctrine is made to assume, is evolved out of that most mischievous conception of God to which I have so often an occasion to allude. I mean the conception which makes him such a one as ourselves, and our relations to him similar to our relations to one another. Directly you fall back upon the fact that we have no right or pretence to set forth God under such a conception, and that we know nothing of him, but what he does, and through the various forces of the universe, all that ground upon which the common notions of responsibility rest, at once disappears, and you are left to examine the facts of life, and reconstruct the doctrine for yourselves. I will not now occupy the time by showing the downright barbarism of likening the judgment of God to the judgment exercised in our law courts, with its assessors, its witnesses and attendant officers, in the persons of good and bad angels; because the more enlightened of even the strictly orthodox have given up such representations: but equally false and equally without justification are the notions to which the most enlightened amongst the orthodox cling, when they still represent God's judgment after the similitude of a parent sitting in judgment on the actions of his child, and as maintaining somewhat similar forms, at least so far as the questioning and answering between the infinite and the finite spirit are concerned. All such representations are purely gratuitous, and in the present case the employing of them, even as mere figures of speech, tends

to obscure instead of helping to illustrate the subject. Rejecting all such methods, then, and falling back upon the simple facts, what do we find presented for our consideration? We find that every action of both our inner and outer life has attached to it certain consequences; produces, *i.e.*, certain effects; these effects leading to our wellbeing and happiness according to the character of the action; and that this effect has wrought itself more or less distinctly into the conviction of mankind, and constitutes whatever of truth there is in the doctrine of responsibility. So that in the popular doctrine, I discern two elements, a true and a false one. The true element is this conviction, that every man reaps the consequences of whatever he does. The false element is that heap of fanciful notions which represent these consequences as wrought out by God after the manner in which parents or earthly governments inflict the penalties of their violated laws.

The only evidence for this false element consists in the fancies of man. The evidence for that true element lies in facts open to the observation of every one. We are responsible in the sense, that an action committed is not done with—it produces certain effects; and these effects tend to promote our happiness or misery according to the character of the action; and this responsibility every one may discern for himself. When the subject is put upon this ground, you will see that it at once does away with those subtle distinctions and conditions, and those metaphysical discussions which I have before pointed out as accompanying the popular doctrine. For, in the first place, we do not find as a matter of fact, that the consequences of actions depend upon our knowledge of their moral character. Neither knowledge nor the power of obtaining knowledge, influences the effects they produce. The consequence follows inevitably whether the action be looked upon as good or bad. When a number of men combine amongst themselves against others in order to secure their own per-

sonal interest, as, *e.g.*, masters against their workmen, or workmen against their masters, the action, of course, is either morally good or bad. But whether the combiners look upon it in this respect correctly or not, the effects of the combination are precisely the same, so far as it affects the interests of those performing it. So, when people act unkindly to themselves, under whatever light they look upon the act, the consequences inevitably follow. They may call the untruth a courteous compliance with the world, a necessary yielding to social opinion, a prudent consideration of one's personal interests, or by any other mild name, and may believe it is nothing worse than the name implies; but the effects of the untruth are not disturbed or interrupted by their blindness, they follow sharp, and sure, and inevitable. I do not mean by this, that the action wrongly done against one's convictions or knowledge, does not produce consequences which the same action done in ignorance would not give rise to.

But those consequences are apart from the action itself, they are due to the additional element of knowledge brought into the account. And, indeed, the best way of stating the fact would be, that all actions are conditions and antecedents of certain fixed consequents or effects which depend upon the character of the the actions; when, to an action wrong in itself, is added the knowledge that it is wrong, certain other consequents are introduced besides those which simply follow from the wrong action, consequents which arise out of the fact that the action is known to be wrong. And the same additional consequences follow although the action be right in itself, if the agent suppose it to be wrong. "He that doubteth is punished if he eat," (to quote an old saying), even though the eating be perfectly right. He is punished in the injury done to his moral nature by acting against, or not in accordance with, his convictions.

But this you will see is quite a distinct thing from

the popular doctrine which makes responsibility depend upon our knowledge. Whether we know the wrongness of an action or not, facts show, that a wrong action produces immediate evil, as a good action produces good. And then this limitation of our notion of responsibility to what we observe in facts, entirely supersedes the discussion of that other question about necessity or freedom of the will. Be the will free or not, let us be able to understand even the conception of such freedom or not, the facts remain the same, that good actions produce good, evil actions evil. In fact, we entirely change our ground of observation, and view the whole subject under entirely new aspects, immediately we thus remove it from the region of metaphysical or semi-metaphysical speculation, and limit ourselves to the actual knowledge we possess through experience. Then, this doctrine of responsibility becomes merely the expression of certain observed phenomena occurring in our daily life, the declaration of certain connections between actions and their results. We do not, therefore, look forward to a future retribution in which these actions shall bring upon us consequences which are now suspended and delayed; but we find an instant and a prompt result which begins its development immediately the action is done. We do not answer for what we have done as detected school-boys do under the rod of their master, or as detected pickpockets do before the bench of magistrates, but we answer in and through the effects which immediately follow the action for which the answer is given.

And if you have taken in my meaning in its fullness, you will see that the area of our responsibility under this view is greatly extended beyond that which is comprehended by the popular doctrine. Responsibility under the popular doctrine is merely extended to actions which concern our moral and religious life. Responsibility as interpreted by facts, comprehends the whole sphere of our existence.

Every action of the most trivial character leads to some consequence or the other, produces some effect or the other, and for it we therefore are as truly responsible as for the most solemn and the most momentous. All actions which produce effects on our wellbeing and happiness, constitute a part of our responsibility, and there is not an action we perform in our inner or outer life, but what tends to do this. But then, again, this does not mean that all actions affect our wellbeing and happiness in the same degree. Experience shows that they do not. There are some of so trivial a nature that it requires the keenest eye to detect the consequences which follow them. Others, again, are so momentous and marked, that their effects have been recognised from the most early times. Some produce their results instantaneously and unmistakably, others arrive at them in an apparently roundabout way, and through the least expected media.

But the great thing is to know, that there is not one, whether we are observant of it or not, but what contributes to make up or diminish the sum which constitutes human happiness. And you will observe, it is the reflex consequences of actions to which I am now specially referring. For every action almost has this twofold action—it goes forth and affects the external world, and it returns, as it were, upon the person, the mind and body, we may say, of him who does it, and affects his next moment's state and condition. You utter a truth—the utterance has communicated something to him who heard it, and has awakened a new order and chain of thoughts and feelings in his mind; but the utterance has also affected the train of your thoughts—the motives which influenced the utterance have given strength or weakness to your moral character, and have brought peace or sorrow to your mind. You utter by word or act a falsehood—the utterance misleads and betrays him who has received it; but it tells still more upon yourself; it degrades your moral

nature, it weakens your power of goodness, and leaves you a prey to the repetition of the vice. And there is even more than this ; for, in the constitution of nature it comes about that the falsehood uttered generally comes home again to the conviction of him who utters it, bringing shame and confusion before his fellow-men. So subtle are the workings of the mind, so close, intimate, and minute are the bonds of society, so much are all men one, that the truth or falsehood you utter, and the good or evil you do, however much they may seem to be separated from you, and to go travelling about in the midst of society, somehow or the other, constantly come home again, bringing you good or evil, joy or vexation, according to their respective natures. Just what the fable tells us happened to Jonah, when, to avoid shame and disgrace, he fled from his duty, constantly in life happens to all men ; and what there is said to have been done by an absurd miracle, is done by God's constituted laws in nature,—that is, the very wrong-doing is made to bring about the particular vexation and sorrow, to avoid which the wrong was done. Jonah, to avoid shame, took ship to go to Tarshish. His taking to the ship, brought him, it is said, into shame. And you need not believe this tale in order to be convinced that that principle is widely true. Open your eyes upon life, refer even to the experience of your own life, and you will find the principle abundantly confirmed. You must flee from life itself if you would escape these and the other consequences of all your doings.

Now, the doctrine of responsibility as thus expounded, will enable us to solve many questions of a practical character which have much perplexed those who hold the popular doctrine. I will only mention two. The one is that which often has been agitated, but which, I remember, in quite my youth, attracted great attention and discussion in Scotland and elsewhere, in consequence of what was said by Lord Brougham in a

speech he delivered as Lord Rector of Glasgow University. I mean the question of responsibility for one's belief. Lord Brougham, in a very startling antithetical style, had answered this question decidedly in the negative; and, of course, had roused against him the whole tribe of theologians and metaphysicians.

When one looks at the question from the popular ground, all wonder that Lord Brougham should have taken the negative side ceases. We know upon how many accidental consequences the formation of belief depends. Had we been all born in some parts of India, at this hour we should have all been believers in Brahma. Had we been born in Spain, we should have been professed Roman Catholics.

When you come to minuter differences, you find them constantly determined by consequences over which men have no control,—birth, education, and a thousand evident influences. And then we know what a vast difference natural capacities, temperaments, and the balance of the faculties make in the result. Who, then, viewing these and other such things, can believe that the beneficent father will reward a man eternally in heaven, or punish him eternally in hell, in consequence of his belief? In that sense surely, no man would maintain the affirmative of the dogma. But when we have abandoned that ground of pure fancies, and theological speculation, and betake ourselves to facts, what do we find? We find that a man's real beliefs—not his merely professed beliefs, but what he has thought out, or at all events what he holds as real, living convictions, do produce certain effects on his thoughts and feelings, consequences follow that otherwise would not exist. The Hindoo belief, *e.g.*, in the metempsychosis, influences their food, which again influences their physical condition and temperament. The Roman Catholic belief in transubstantiation produces certain feelings when they receive the Host in the sacrament; and their belief in the power of the priest to pronounce

absolution in connection with the sacrament of confession, tends very much to keep Roman Catholic servants honest. The Anglican belief in baptismal regeneration has a powerful effect upon the feelings of mothers if their children happen to die without baptism.

The belief that God is only known through his works, has a powerful influence in producing reverence for, and the study of, those works. In all these instances, then, we see responsibility for one's beliefs presented before us in facts. But then it is a responsibility altogether unlike that which Lord Brougham justly declaimed against ; it is a responsibility which consists merely in the connection of the thoughts with the feelings and actions to which they give rise.

The other question this simple view of the matter helps us to solve, is that which relates to the age at which children become responsible. I have heard that most warmly debated under the popular notions of responsibility. And I have known mothers who have lost children when about six or seven years of age, become inconsolable under the fear that the children were old enough to be responsible, and had gone to hell because they had not personally accepted Christianity. And the mothers were quite right, under those notions ; for, on the one hand, it must always be a doubtful, problematical thing, when a child knows enough to be responsible, whilst, on the other hand, the asserted consequences of that responsibility are most terrible. But the question is determined immediately you recognise the simple doctrine of facts ; for then you clearly see a child's responsibility begins the moment it is born. For then it begins actions which have consequences attached to them affecting its wellbeing and happiness. It takes its food, and that nourishes its body ; it stretches its limbs, and that develops its muscles ; it utters cries, and that promotes the growth of its lungs ; it looks around upon the room, and that trains the eye to judge of distances and forms. Every action has some definite

consequence flowing from it, and therefore every action constitutes responsibility. As it grows up, it begins to think, to speak, and act. The speech and action truthfully represent the thought and feeling within it or they do not; the consequences attached immediately follow. It is sent to school, and is idle or industrious, a waster of time or studious; fixed consequences follow the one course or the other without fail.

The certainty of these consequences is what constitutes the responsibility. You cannot deny it, because you cannot deny them. There they are. If the child be idle and neglect his lessons, the most amiable temper in the world will not save him from being an unmitigated dunce.

I hope, then, all understand what I mean by responsibility—it is the simple fact, that every action of mind and body produces a definite effect upon our wellbeing and happiness according to its character. And to my mind, there is something much more serious and solemn in this, than in that old fly-blown doctrine of the popular theologies. That responsibility sits lightly upon men now-a-days, because they cannot really believe in it. It is absolutely incredible that God should doom men to eternal perdition for actions over which they have little or no control. It is absolutely incredible, and purely barbarous, to believe that he would doom them to *eternal* perdition for anything. But we see that he has set to actions fixed results which inevitably follow, and when an action is good, it produces good, and when evil it produces sorrow. True it is, this sorrow is disciplinal and intended to educate and lead into a wiser course—to bring the wrongdoer to right doing. But not the less it is sorrow whilst it lasts, and that we all seek to avoid. And some actions bring a very deep sorrow, shame, and degradation to our whole nature. Only by well-doing can we be sure of happiness and good.

Ought we not then to begird ourselves to search out

what is right? to watch diligently and faithfully the tendencies of actions? to bring ourselves into conformity with all the laws of our being established by God, both moral and physical, mental and bodily? Surely it is not wise when the laws of life are so fixed and certain, to remain ignorant of, or to neglect them! Let us, then, my brothers and sisters, all become more earnest students of God's ways of dealing with us, and more obedient to his laws, and then shall we regard the fact of our responsibility, not as a subject of superstitious terror, but as it is in fact, a help to our well-being and our greatest blessing.

