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Revolutionizing Responsibility: Intersecting Feminist Perspectives

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Revolutionizing Responsibility: Intersecting Feminist Perspectives

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1. Introduction

This special issue convenes philosophers from various intersections of feminist theory to analyze, critique, and transform the practice and analysis of moral responsibility.¹ While philosophers have historically been interested in conceptual analysis, feminism is and has always been committed to political resistance and revolutionary change. Therefore, feminists will seek not only to interpret the world of responsibility but also to change it. A common theme in this volume is the need for transformative change in the “moral ecology of responsibility”: the conditions that define, discipline, and “scaffold” responsibility. This is a departure from earlier theories that attempted to preserve the core of responsibility as we know it. Such theories missed responsibility’s embeddedness in structurally unjust conditions—conditions that impose double binds and punishments on oppressed groups. One of responsibility’s main functions, on feminist scrutiny, is to preserve systems of oppression such as heteropatriarchy, colonialism, and ableism. Responsibility, in other words, tends to operate as a disciplinary apparatus in the experiences of oppressed people. When activists resist oppression, responsibility is there to “put them in their place.” The omission of this critical perspective on the policing role of responsibility can be seen as a form of epistemic oppression.

This introduction will weave the featured articles into a comprehensive overview and critique of dominant discourses on responsibility. It will ask three questions: how did we get here, where are we going, and how can we get to our destination? First, I will offer a brief genealogy of moral responsibility, focusing on the shift from metaphysical concerns to social concerns to, as of late, a more political orientation. I call these transitions *the social turn* and *the political turn*. Then, I will outline three features of the political turn as they appear in this issue: ableist, colonial, and heteropatriarchal patterns of responsibility-holding. These critiques explore the systematic use of responsibility to blame, patronize, vilify, control, silence, dispossess, gaslight, and otherwise punish or control members of oppressed groups, while at the

¹ I will use the terms “practice of responsibility,” “moral ecology of responsibility,” and “world of responsibility” interchangeably to denote the social circumstances and systems that influence (support, scaffold, discipline, control) the exercise and attribution of moral responsibility. The “practice of responsibility,” in short, is the system in which we hold others and ourselves responsible for moral wrongs, rights, virtues, vices, and other moral conduct.

same time projecting a mystique of innocence and benevolence onto the privileged. Finally, I will offer some transformative solutions to these injustices, such as conceptually reengineering responsibility, committing to persistent struggle against the odds, refusing to accept the flimsy excuses of oppressors, and foregrounding the critical testimony of oppressed people.

All authors cited in this introduction appear in this issue except for P. F. Strawson and Harry Frankfurt, who serve as foils to the critical approach. I have organized the papers by theme in an effort to construct a coherent narrative about responsibility's past, present, and potential future.

2. The Social Turn

Like all social practices, responsibility has a history shaped by specific sociopolitical circumstances, which can be excavated with genealogical analysis. A pressing question for contemporary philosophers is, Why has responsibility theory been divorced from revolutionary politics for so long? Why has it been so politically conservative and resistant to change?

Historically, philosophers were, as Shelley Tremain (2024, 2) puts it, "preoccupied with debates about freedom and determinism in the context of individual agency," in abstraction from the politics of power and domination. If responsibility depends on free will, and free will is a question of indeterminism (i.e., freedom from the past and the laws of nature), then politics drops out of the picture. "Control" sufficient for responsibility becomes a question of freedom from prior causes rather than one of freedom from oppression. Whereas feminists have traditionally understood control as a political relation (e.g., patriarchy as a gendered system of control), indeterminists defined it as a metaphysical state of affairs, above and impervious to the social (i.e., control as freedom from determinism). The metaphysics of responsibility, then, is orthogonal to feminist theory, which is concerned with the politics of liberation and equality.

The tide began to turn in 1962 when Strawson published "Freedom and Resentment," which rebuked metaphysical arguments as "over-intellectualize[d]" abstractions that divorced responsibility from "the general structure or web of human attitudes and feelings" within which we hold each other responsible (1962, 208). This marked what Jules Holroyd refers to as the "social turn" in responsibility theory, shifting the focus from the metaphysics of free will to the ethics of interpersonal relationships. Yet Strawson's social account of responsibility remained stubbornly insulated from revolutionary politics. As Holroyd explains, Strawson admitted that "some aspects of our practices may demonstrate . . . a 'seamy side,' which might make us 'rightly mistrustful' of the relationships and attitudes that he takes as fundamental to our responsibility practices"; but "these troubling manifestations, Strawson submits, are 'a factor of comparatively minor importance,'" and should not make us

question the fundamentals of our interpersonal relationships (Holroyd 2024, 3; quoting Strawson 1962]. And yet the “seamy side” of responsibility, including the structural injustices that Strawson neglected, “in fact have greater significance than Strawson was willing to countenance” (Holroyd, 3). Asymmetrical power relations may, in fact, justify *a great deal* of mistrust, particularly toward political elites who benefit from structural injustices. While Strawson drew attention to the interpersonal, then, he was too sanguine, too *idealistic*, about how interpersonal practices are structured, as well as how they relate to political inequality, if at all.

Tellingly, Strawson never wrote about the explosive political activism spreading across the US, the UK, and elsewhere throughout the 1960s, wherein activists sought to reverse the currents of responsibility, holding oppressors responsible for structural injustices while seizing responsibility for their own liberation. Strawson did not seem to notice (or care) that these revolutionary currents are part of interpersonal life—that is, to paraphrase second-wave feminists, that “the interpersonal is political.” From a feminist perspective, Strawson could be charged with reifying the classic private/public distinction that separates the “loving” sphere of the private from the messy world of politics, thereby depoliticizing the domestic. Where are the political dimensions—often violent—in Strawson’s picture of interpersonal life? Feminists from Strawson’s own era were arguing that no sphere is immune from the violence of imperialism and that private arrangements are often more imperialistic than public ones due to a lack of public and theoretical scrutiny (e.g., the widespread acceptance of marital rape). It is this political critique that is missing from Strawson’s optimistic impression of interpersonal practices.

Around the same time, Frankfurt was writing about the social dimensions of responsibility from the same politically detached standpoint. One of his most famous papers concerned whether addicts are responsible agents or moral patients (Frankfurt 1971). This began a long-standing debate about whether addiction should be viewed through the lens of (involuntary) disease or (willful) deviance. Are addicts pitiable or punishable, apt for hospitalization or incarceration? T. Virgil Murthy (2024, 19) underscores that this dichotomy creates a double bind for addicts (insane or criminal?) and engenders a “carceral-clinical seesaw” designed to segregate addicts from so-called civil society. The theoretical question of addict responsibility serves to obscure the reality of addict oppression.

Post-Strawsonians continue to marginalize the role of the political in the practice of responsibility. Holroyd notes that “conventionalist” Strawsonians tend to assume that we can learn about what it truly means to be responsible by studying our conventional responsibility practices, which are supposed to be relatively smooth and “seamless.” Any glitches in the system are of “minor importance,” and therefore any “recalibrations” should be relatively “conservative” (Holroyd, 17). In other words, we’re pretty good at attributing responsibility, and we should continue building on the

received wisdom. This view from above erases structural injustices in the system of responsibility, leaving no room for critiques of heteropatriarchy, colonialism, ableism, and other systemic inequalities. By the same token, conventionalism depicts revolutionary politics as unseemly, disproportionate, and unreasonable (Why disrupt a system that's working well?), which in turn justifies ongoing carceral violence and epistemic oppression.

As Tremain puts it, the dominant discourse on responsibility exemplifies philosophy's broader culture of ableist "structural gaslighting," which "obscures the political character . . . of the apparatus of disability" (14–15) and conceals "eugenic violence" (8), among other injustices. Gorman (2024, 7) similarly describes conventionalism as part of a culture of "pervasive epistemic injustice" that marginalizes neurodivergent people. Shyam Ranganathan, Shelbi Nahwilet Meissner, and Andrew Frederick Smith identify the conventional approach as part of a colonial tradition that racializes, excludes, and discredits non-Western philosophies, including decolonial theories of responsibility. Katherine Villa, Katie Peters, Marianna Leventi, Ross Patrizio, Penelope Haulotte, and Jill B. Delston explain how conventionalism also epistemically oppresses girls, women, and gender minorities. A common theme of this volume is the gaslighting of oppressed groups via conventional narratives of responsibility that discredit, discount, and overwrite their testimony.

3. The Political Turn

This volume marks a political turn in responsibility theory, moving from the (merely) social to the (overtly) political, consistent with the aims and assumptions of revolutionary feminism(s). It emphasizes that moral responsibility is situated, enforced, and disciplined in asymmetrical social conditions, in which some people have more power and privilege than others. Hence, responsibility has an inescapable political dimension. The papers that follow can be categorized into three overarching themes: (1) ableism and addict oppression, (2) colonialism, and (3) heteropatriarchy. These divisions are artificial in that there are myriad intersections between each oppression, which will be discussed in the included papers, but each author tends to focus on a specific locus of oppression, drawing on personal and cultural insights. Collectively, these critiques illuminate responsibility's relationship to overlapping injustices.

3.A. Ableism

One of the most enduring legacies of the Strawsonian tradition is the notion that responsibility is a capacity of neurotypical adults. That is, nonneurotypicality (or cognitive disability) is a marker of impaired responsibility. This so-called commonsense intuition is reflected in Strawson's argument that "people who are 'neurotic,' 'warped or deranged,' 'schizophrenic,' 'compulsive,' 'insane,' or 'delusional'

are not members of the moral community, that is, should not be regarded as moral agents who participate in the relationships that characterize responsibility practices” (Tremain, 5; citing Strawson 1962). A wide variety of nonneurotypicals, then, should be excluded from the “general structure . . . of human attitudes and emotions” (Strawson 1962, 208) and relegated to a situation that Strawson himself described as one of unbearable “human isolation” (1962, 197)—a situation that is very close to what many nonneurotypical people in fact endure as a result of ableism, which deprives disabled people of social support. Tremain (7) argues that Strawson’s description of nonneurotypicality contributes to the “naturalization and materialization” of disability as a “universally disadvantageous personal characteristic,” rather than a “social, value-laden, and contingent state of affairs.” (Put simply, Strawson endorsed the medical model, which equates disability with impairment and tragedy). This pathologizing lens, furthermore, contributes to a broader context of ableist oppression, including discrimination against disabled people and their critical standpoints in the profession. The Strawsonian orthodoxy, and the prevalence of the medical model in general, may help to explain why disabled people are severely underrepresented in professional philosophy, especially at the upper ranks. (If disabled people are regarded as presumptively nonresponsible, they will not be seen as the best candidates for the job).

August Gorman (2) affirms that the Strawsonian tradition has left an ableist legacy. Even today, philosophers tend to “assume that there is such a thing as a ‘normal’ or ‘ideal’ agent with a standard set of capacities and assume that variations are forms of defective agency.” In responsibility theory, the standard assumption is that nonneurotypicality indicates nonresponsibility. Although there is no consensus on precisely which neurological differences “impair” responsibility, there is general agreement that nonresponsible people lack neurotypical abilities, and this deficit makes them proper objects of pity, sympathy, treatment, and social training. When nonneurotypicals break the rules, neurotypicals don’t blame them—they feel bad for them, and they may even offer them “help” in the form of therapy and reeducation.

This neuronormative paradigm falls short in many ways. First, it assumes that neuronormative rules are universally binding and in the best interests of everyone; therefore, when nonneurotypical people break the rules, they must be morally impaired or deviant. There is no option to interpret nonneurotypical behavior as a form of self-expression, survival, resistance, or civil disobedience. Second, this paradigm assumes that nonneurotypicality is nothing more or less than impairment, as per the medical model. This schema “flatten[s] the way we perceive [the] complex landscape” of neurodiversity, eliminating the “messy complexity of agential diversity” that exists in real life (Gorman, 6). Third, the paradigmatic assumption that disabled people deserve sympathy, pity, and treatment may seem like a humane response, but it is, in fact, “horribly patronizing” and “dehumanizing” (Gorman, 11). Offering to

“scaffold” and “responsibilize” neurodivergent people into a more neuronormative way of life affirms neurotypical supremacy and entitlement. It sends the message that nonneurotypical people need to be cured, fixed, and trained. One could flip the script and ask, How can we scaffold poor neurotypicals into a better understanding of their own privilege? How can we help them cultivate a more open-minded, humble, and creative perspective on neurological difference?

Jules Holroyd and Hannah McHugh point out that ableist praise is just as harmful as ableist blame, if not more so. Celebrating disabled people as “heroes” and “inspirational figures” can “express low expectations for disabled lives” and “entrench stereotypes of disabled people as ‘helpless, hopeless, nonfunctioning and noncontributing members of society’” (Holroyd, 9; quoting Evan Kemp Jr.). These so-called compliments interpret disability through a medical lens, leading to ontological flattening, elitism, and paternalism. Similarly, praising someone for “bravely” overcoming an illness entrenches “oppressive ableist wellness norms,” which signal that recovery is both a moral imperative and a personal responsibility (Holroyd, 11). Chronically ill people are, on this assumption, chronic failures. These insights reveal that praise can easily be weaponized against disabled people, although philosophers tend to assume that it is relatively benign. As McHugh (2024, 1) points out, “Philosophers have too often assumed that praise does not require justification in the way that blame might, as it is ostensibly a nonharmful and nonpunitive practice.” What could be wrong with giving someone too much praise? As this collection shows, the harm is the perpetuation of stereotypical double binds, like the inspirational “supercrip” who triumphs over disability, in contrast to the “sadcrip” who fails to overcome. *Contra* the conventional assumption, praise does not reliably track “moral qualities or moral regard,” but instead tends to express “stereotype-informed expectations” that enforce and entrench ableism (Holroyd, 10, 8).

Murthy explores how oppressive double binds are also imposed on addicts. Post-Frankfurtians tend to view addiction through two opposing lenses: disease or choice. On the “disease model,” addicts are pitiable victims of ego-dystonic urges, whereas on the “choice model,” addicts are agents of destruction, wrecking families, negligently and willfully shattering lives. Either way, addicts are menaces to society who should be disciplined and controlled for the sake of responsible, law-abiding citizens. Disease modelists tend to favor hospitalization—the “humane” and “sympathetic” response—whereas choice modelists lean toward incarceration—the “tough but fair” response. Murthy (4) says that this “is a distinction without a difference,” since rehabilitation and imprisonment are simply two sides of the same coin: addict segregation. In fact, many states allow addicts to be “civilly committed to rehabilitation programs *in prisons*,” where they are subject to carceral abuse (Murthy, 19). While disease modelists may have good intentions, they disregard the rehabilitation-industrial complex’s pivotal role in Western imperialism. Historically, so-

called rehabilitative institutions, like state schools, residential schools, and mental hospitals, were far more abusive than many prisons, and today, “rehabilitation” is one of the main justifications for mass incarceration and family separation. The rhetoric of “caring rehabilitation” flies in the face of generations of rehabilitative violence.

This gap between theory and reality is unsurprising given that the literature on addiction is controlled by nonaddicts who have no first-hand experience with addiction-management systems. To nonaddict theorists, addiction is either an object of intellectual curiosity or a problem to be solved (by nonaddicts), not a lived experience, social position, or identity. It is either a disease or a choice, not a condition of subjugation. The disease/choice dichotomy erases the political reality of addiction as a situation of oppression, struggle, and liberation. Rarely do philosophers write about the plight of addicts as victims of carceral violence, economic exploitation, sterilization, family separation, and other forms of oppression. Nor do they typically investigate the intersections between addiction, ableism, racism, and other injustices, which make certain social groups especially susceptible to addict oppression. In general, the politics of addict oppression are missing from scholarly accounts of addict responsibility, indebted to Frankfurt’s abstract case studies of “willing” and “unwilling” addicts.

Murthy is pessimistic about the possibility of revolutionizing responsibility. If responsibility is part of a system of “reactive attitudes,” as Strawson believed, then it is politically inert. Kind thoughts and well-meaning prayers do not change the world—political uprisings do. Addict allies tend to agree that we should be kinder to addicts, but kindness alone will not improve addicts’ material circumstances. “The attitude of a prison guard can make the difference between a happy and an unhappy prisoner. But I do not want addicts to be happy prisoners. I want us to be free” (Murthy, 17). The philosophical preoccupation with internal states has distracted from the urgency of political oppression and the responsibility to change the material reality.

3.B. Colonialism

Another lasting effect of Strawsonian conventionalism is cultural imperialism. Ranganathan explains how Western philosophy defines everything outside of its remit as nonphilosophy. A salient example is the classification of South Asian philosophy, including Ranganathan’s specialization of Yoga philosophy, as “religion” or “spirituality,” in contrast to the West’s “secular” tradition—a tradition (allegedly) based on logic and reason rather than faith and intuition. On this taxonomy, Plato’s disquisitions on God and the afterlife are part of Western secularism, whereas Īśvarakṛṣṇa’s naturalistic cosmology belongs to religious Hinduism. Likewise, Bentham’s hedonism is “secular,” but Buddha’s call to alleviate suffering is “religious.”

This dichotomy automatically relegates South Asian theories of responsibility to the category of “religion”—that is, not philosophy, not logical, and not reason-

based. Hence, philosophers can learn nothing about (secular) responsibility from (“Hindu”) South Asian philosophy. The religification of South Asian philosophy is simultaneously a form of racialization that “others” South Asians. This helps to explain why South Asian accounts of responsibility are, as far as I know, completely absent from the literature on responsibility, except when they are appropriated and sanitized by Western thinkers. For instance, John Stuart Mill, who worked for the British East India Company, seemingly incorporated ideas from South Asian philosophy into his utilitarian theory but omitted the origins of these ideas along with their most radical aspects (Ranganathan 2024, 9–10). One of these omitted ideas is the notion that responsibility is not restricted to a specific species, let alone a specific rank of that species (privileged Europeans), but is widely shared across the web of life. Somewhat ironically, the trenchant anthropocentrism of Western philosophy has become an article of faith, something more akin to religious dogma than evidence-based belief. And this uncritical anthropocentrism lends itself to other hierarchies—ableism, ageism, racism, cissexism, and so on.

Meissner and Smith, too, rebuke the settler-colonial belief that responsibility is a property of human beings exclusively, and a property of *individual* human beings rather than collectives. In Indigenous environmental feminisms, responsibility is a function of “extended more-than-human kinship arrangements” comprised of “organizations of humans, other-than-human beings, spiritual and abiotic entities, and landscapes” (Meissner and Smith 2024, 10, 13). As such, climate change is a leading colonial threat to (relational) responsibility in that it destroys these “life-enhancing and life-affirming networks” that support responsibility (14). Yet colonial scripts deny this connection by presenting climate change as an emergent, unprecedented threat rather than an ongoing colonial process that has displaced Indigenous communities from their lands and subjected them to generations of insecurity and instability.

As Meissner and Smith (1) put it, the “default climate crisis motif,” to which most philosophers subscribe, depicts climate change as “unprecedented, demanding urgent action to avert apocalyptic conditions that will limit or even erase the future of all humankind.” This motif portrays climate change “in terms of emerging threats to colonizers,” rather than as a form of “intensified colonialism,” with a long, violent history, “dating back to the arrival of Columbus” (Meissner and Smith, 8, 9, 10; quoting Kyle P. Whyte).

Such historical revisionism perpetuates the mystique of “settler innocent” in a variety of ways. It “mask[s] the role of colonial power in the very creation and perpetuation of climate crisis,” absolving settlers of guilt; it “conceals that whiteness as a racial designation embodies entitlement to pillage,” giving settlers permission to continue pillaging; it frames “climate change [as] the great equalizer,” allowing settlers “to wipe the moral slate clean, to abdicate any responsibility for climate injustice” (Meissner and Smith, 9–10). These narratives both excuse colonizers of

blame for past climate injustices, and absolve them of the responsibility to change their way of life in the future.

These decolonial critiques show that in colonial societies, blame and praise function as “tools of the master’s house,” used to scaffold white supremacy and imperialism. Colonizers are absolved of blame for past and present climate injustices that continue to damage kinship responsibility networks. Racialized minorities are blamed for “taking risks” like participating in a protest or simply existing in white-dominant spaces (see Leventi). Meanwhile, whiteness is used as a shield to deflect blame. White settlers can depend on stereotypes of settler innocence and purity to protect their way of life. White women can invoke the stereotype of “white feminine innocence” to evade responsibility for racism. “White women’s tears” are a powerful bulwark against blame and liability, though they reinforce the patriarchal script that white women are in need of white male protection, especially against Black male “predators” (see Peters). Colonial conceptions of responsibility, risk, blame, and liability all weigh in favor of white supremacy.

3.C. Heteropatriarchy

The Strawsonian orthodoxy has also contributed to a heteropatriarchal slant in moral philosophy. If the rules of responsibility are relatively fair and seamless, then we should expect people to follow them. In heteropatriarchal contexts, this expectation punishes women and gender minorities. Feminist and trans activists are blamed for “unruly” behavior, while self-effacing and submissive behavior in the same groups is praised and scaffolded. This is because one of responsibility’s main functions in heteropatriarchal contexts is to police sex/gender roles.

This is exemplified in the gendered division of emotional labor. Villa (2024, 3) notes that in patriarchal societies, women are seen as natural “givers,” responsible for managing “men’s emotions by upholding conditions favorable to their subjective well-being, sometimes at the expense of their own.” Women who violate the “giving” script are blamed and punished. Misogynistic patterns of responsibility also have a “responsibiliz[ing]” effect. They seek to “scaffold” and enforce women’s responsibility for managing men’s emotions and submitting to patriarchal roles. By the same token, these patterns discourage men from developing “emotional intelligence” and self-regulation. When women take on patriarchal responsibilities, they participate in their own oppression, but when they refuse these responsibilities, they face misogynistic harassment and aggression. One of the disciplinary functions of patriarchal responsibility is to enforce a hierarchy of sex/gender relations, shifting the burden of emotional labor onto women.

Notably, misogynistic scripts differ for different women. “Many black women adopt the defensive stereotype of the ‘strongblackwoman’ or ‘bullet-proof diva,’” which creates a heightened burden of emotional self-control (Hawley Fogg-Davis;

quoted in Villa 2024, 6). (White women's tears are more socially acceptable). Trans women, too, are expected to tolerate more harassment than cisgender women on balance. The mechanics of patriarchal "responsibilization" will differ from one woman to the next, but in each case, they aim to discipline and police the target's emotions.

While misogynistic societies burden some women with extra responsibilities, they allow others to escape responsibility altogether. A striking example of this dynamic is the rhetoric around white women's participation in far-right extremist groups. Peters (2024, 2) notes that "in the United States, White women have historically been excused from responsibility for many things that women (and men) of color are often held to higher standards for." This includes far-right women's participation in extremist movements. The press will sometimes downplay a white woman's paramilitary extremism by describing her as "the girlfriend" of a male white supremacist, even if she is a leading figure in the movement in her own right. This exculpating narrative is supported by the stereotype of white femininity as "innocent" and "childlike"—scripts that do not apply equally to racialized and queer women. Cisgender white women can and often do recruit these scripts to deflect blame and liability for racist transgressions, even when doing so reinforces the narrative that women need and benefit from "White male paternalism" (Peters 2024, 13). Far-right women, nonetheless, are willing to trade their own liberation for the right to be racist.

Patriarchal scripts also excuse (especially privileged) men of responsibility for patriarchal oppression. Patrizio (2024, 2) notes that men's responsibility for patriarchal violence is shifted onto women through victim-blaming scripts such as, "Don't walk home alone, and, if you must, keep your keys between your knuckles." Leventi (2024, 2) corroborates that "victims of sexual assault are often questioned about their choice of clothing during the assault" and are held responsible for other so-called unjustified risks. Today, many people accept that "unfriendly men," such as "rapists and enablers," bear responsibility for patriarchal rape culture, but there is less certainty over whether "friendly men," "the kinds of people who openly denounce rape culture, and even congregate in their free time to discuss the perils of toxic masculinity" (Patrizio, 2), share in this responsibility. Patrizio argues that friendly men *do* participate in the responsibility for patriarchal violence, "through and in virtue of [their] social role" as men (17), where "man" designates a specific role in a gender hierarchy. This argument helps to vindicate the increasingly popular sentiment that "men, as a matter of fact, are well positioned, socially and politically, to do something more than mere performative gestures against the culture of rape. That is . . . men enjoy a social position that renders them capable of meaningful change in this domain and are thereby responsible for doing so" (Patrizio, 11). Being a "friendly man," then, is not sufficient to discharge the responsibility to address the culture of patriarchal violence. Nor can any individual man fulfil this responsibility, since no individual can

change society. Men must collectively change the social meaning of the term “man” and its role in the gender matrix.

This will be difficult, however, because patriarchal societies (and their responsibility practices) punish people for violating dominant “schemes of mandatory sexed and/or gendered positions,” as Haulotte (2024, 5) puts it. Within the cispaternal gender matrix, trans people are expected to “meet others’ preconceptions of cis-womanhood [and manhood]” (5). Those who do not “successfully” assimilate into a designated sex/gender role are subject to a range of punishments, “from ‘clocking,’ to exclusion, to sexual assault, rape, and murder,” because their “very existence” poses a threat to “a core matrix of cisgender society” (14). These punishments signal that to refuse gender assimilation is to be responsible for a core moral violation, a crime against civil society.

While nonbinary people are obvious targets of cissexism, “even binary trans people are destined to be ‘pretenders’ in the case that they do not socially ‘pass’ as their gender identification, or ‘deceivers’ if they do” (Haulotte, 14). That is, all trans people, no matter how “binary,” are doomed to be subjugated to alienating cisgender norms and perpetually blamed for noncompliance with them. This is part of a system of cisnormative double binds: “Where cisgender society has recognized trans people in history, it has interpreted them primarily as criminals to be punished and secondarily as medical curiosities to be examined” (14). Whether trans people are “willful criminals” or “involuntary dysphoric patients,” they are framed as a problem to be solved by cisgender authorities. By the same stroke, trans people are denied the right to claim responsibility for anti-cisnormative resistance due to a cisnormative vocabulary that translates “resistance” into “deviancy” and “alienation” into “pathology.” Haulotte notes that “alienation from cisgender forms of life,” unlike “gender dysphoria,” is an affective basis for political mobilization and resistance, and thus a source of collective responsibility for trans liberation. But cisgender scripts deny trans people the right to claim responsibility as activists.

These critiques collectively show that the Strawsonian orthodoxy has overlooked the pivotal role that responsibility has played as a disciplinary apparatus in the experiences of oppressed people. Oppressive responsibility practices send members of disenfranchised groups to prisons and psychiatric hospitals against their wills. They reward complacency and obedience to authority while punishing unruliness and resistance. They individualize and decontextualize responsibility, funneling responsibility for structural injustice away from oppressors and onto the oppressed. This critical standpoint is missing from the dominant discourses on responsibility, which come from the elite ranks of the ivory tower. If the literature has negated the problem of structural injustice in the moral ecology of responsibility, then it lacks the resources to offer a solution or path forward. What *would* a solution to

oppressive responsibility practices look like? While there is no simple answer, the critiques in this volume offer a patchwork of suggestions and strategies.

4. Reclaiming Responsibility: Solutions to Oppression

Whereas Strawsonian conventionalists aim to preserve the core of our conventional moral practices, the papers in this issue do the opposite. They call for revolutionary change and transformational justice. But they are not overly optimistic about the prospect of change. Rather, the authors herein tend to emphasize both the urgent need for radical change and the revolutionary pessimism that comes from generations of political struggle with no end in sight.

Tremain and Gorman show that responsibility theory has been detached from the revolutionary politics of critical disability theory for far too long. The medical conception of disability that prevails in the literature is ontologically, conceptually, and ethically inadequate. To rectify this shortcoming, Tremain (23) calls for “a conceptual revolution with respect to how philosophers understand the metaphysics of disability and how they research, write, and teach about the elements claimed to constitute the ontology and ontological status of disability.” Philosophers, she believes, should adopt a more politicized, genealogical, and antifoundationalist approach to disability. Gorman (1) similarly calls on philosophers to engage with the politics of neurodiversity and attempt “to radically reconceptualize the way we handle human difference in a wide range of domains.” Murthy doesn’t trust nonaddict philosophers to handle the topic of addiction and merely asks them to stop writing about addict responsibility as an abstract case study.

Ranganathan, Meissner, and Smith seek to decolonize moral philosophy by challenging the conventional view of responsibility as the exclusive prerogative and dominion of white settlers. The settler framework excludes and racializes most of the living beings on the planet, marking them as property with economic value rather than kin with intersecting rights and responsibilities. Meissner and Smith emphasize that decolonial change will not come easily: “It would be naïve to expect or even hope for a sustained, broad-based geopolitical initiative on behalf of relational repair to emerge anytime soon” (19). For settlers, envisioning decolonization “may be akin to visualizing their own death,” (19) something too painful to countenance. Therefore, optimism about radical change would be naïve, and yet “the struggle itself has meaning” (20).

Haulotte (17) echoes that “there is a kind of hopelessness associated with being transgender,” in the sense that trans people cannot assimilate seamlessly into cispaternal society even if they try their hardest, since the cisgender matrix is designed to exclude their very existence. But Haulotte believes that this hopelessness “is revolutionary,” because it positions trans people as eternal resisters. “What trans people share with one another and with those who love them is a certain kind of freedom struggle” (Haulotte, 17). Like Meissner and Smith, Haulotte thinks that there

is virtue to political struggle even if it does not lead to liberation in the foreseeable future, or at all.

Patrizio, Peters, and Villa show that members of privileged groups can avoid self-reflection and change by recruiting scripts about their essential innocence and benevolence. So-called feminist allies often “pay lip service to the cause for a few weeks, and then return the issue to the back burner” (Patrizio, 2). Such “performative gesture[s] of allyship” might garner praise in some circles, but they do not lead to meaningful change. Likewise, privileged white women can use “performative vulnerability” to evade blame for racist acts ranging from racial slurs to extremist violence. In general, privileged groups can leverage excuses more easily than others. They can, for instance, invoke the classic Strawsonian excuses that they “weren’t themselves,” “didn’t know better,” or “were under great strain” to get off the hook for oppressive practices. These examples of “weaponized incompetence” shift the burden of responsibility from the privileged onto the oppressed. Instead of taking responsibility for themselves, privileged people can ask why oppressed people are so sensitive, uptight, or unwilling to take the time to teach them how to be more responsible. These complaints count on oppressed people to be “givers” with never-ending patience for their own oppressors’ intolerance, fragility, and unwillingness to educate themselves about their own privileges.

One of the aims of this issue is to send the message that we can no longer accept the self-serving excuses of privileged people, we must no longer protect their fragile egos, and we should no longer allow them to control the discourse on responsibility. Privileged people’s social advantages permit them to resist, deflect, deny, and evade responsibility when it suits their interests. This makes it all the more important to hold them responsible whether they like it or not.

5. No More Excuses!

This mandate applies to professional philosophy, the historic sinecure of privileged white men, as much as any other profession, and it applies to responsibility theory more than any other branch of philosophy. Who, after all, is going to hold people responsible for ableism, racism, sexism, and other structural injustices, if not responsibility theorists, the people whose *one job* it is to tell us how responsibility works, how it ought to work, and who is responsible for what? Responsibility theorists, of all people, should be holding the profession to the highest possible standard of responsibility, which means refusing to accept flimsy excuses, giving uptake to oppressed people’s testimony, and embracing revolutionary change. However, this is not at all what responsibility theorists have been doing over the last sixty years, as evidenced in the persistent lack of diversity in the field, the dearth of critiques of the profession itself, and the scarcity of revolutionary ambitions in the literature. In fact, some responsibility theorists have stated that they *do not* have revolutionary

ambitions, do not want to transform the moral ecology, and aim to preserve the received wisdom of iconic philosophers, making only minor revisions. Indeed, the general impression one gets from the literature is, *If it ain't broke, don't fix it.*

Rather than holding the profession responsible for creating (what many authors in this volume describe as) an inaccessible, exclusionary, and oppressive culture, conventionalists have been committed to laundering the profession's reputation and justifying its elitist biases. One example of this trend is philosophers' enthusiasm for excusing oppressors. When philosophers aren't ignoring oppression, they are often seen arguing that colonizers are simply the products of their time, rapists are merely doing what they've been taught to do, and murderous tyrants are simply following in the footsteps of their fathers, unable to do otherwise. These exonerating narratives ask us to put ourselves in the shoes of the oppressor, an unfortunate victim of "epistemic and circumstantial bad luck." To do this, we must discount the narratives and interests of the victims, ignore the long history of abolitionist and feminist activism, and discount the ruling elite's efforts to whitewash the historical record to protect their own image. The academic bias in favor of the elite is a form of structural gaslighting that removes oppressed people's experiential knowledge from the "hermetical resources" of their time. It paints oppressed people as passive victims rather than knowledge-producers with critical perspectives and subcultural knowledges, including privileged standpoints on responsibility for oppression.

The tendency to excuse historic wrongdoers also lets modern-day oppressors off the hook whenever their transgressions aren't epic. After all, if colonizers weren't responsible for genocide, then how can we hope to hold contemporary philosophers responsible for comparatively minor offenses such as hiring discrimination or workplace harassment, let alone collective harms like participation in colonialism and patriarchal violence? The bar has been set so low that modern-day elites can get away with almost anything. This is the upshot of generations of exclusionary hiring, misplaced sympathy, historical revisionism, and hero worship.

Meanwhile, oppressed people are offered the gift of condescending pity and paternalistic care. The stubborn paternalism of moral philosophy is an inevitable result of the lack of diversity in the field. Privileged people are consistently trying to solve the (supposed) problems of oppressed people on their behalf. This leads to savior complexes, bad advice, victim blaming, gaslighting, and other affronts. Philosophy will continue to produce conservative, reductive, and stigmatizing narratives about oppressed people's responsibility (or lack thereof) until philosophers commit to meaningful change. Lip service, performative allyship, and other hollow gestures of solidarity will not suffice. Oppressed people must be respected as the authors of our own narratives and trusted with the responsibility of testifying to our own experiences. In short, the principle of "Nothing about us without us" should prevail in

responsibility theory. Any claims about oppressed people’s responsibility should come from us.

This volume is a call to action to hold philosophers to a higher standard, to move the profession away from conventionalism toward revolutionary politics, and to promote justice and universal accessibility. Responsibility theory is the perfect place to begin this transformation, as the practice of responsibility is also the practice of demanding answers, accountability, and change.

If you believe in this project, please share this issue widely and connect with me and the included authors to build a broader network of intersectional solidarity and liberation.

Article Breakdown:

1. Jules Holroyd: The Distortions of Oppressive Praise: Challenges for Practice-Dependent Theories of Moral Responsibility

Holroyd argues that practice-dependent theories of responsibility, which appeal to our real-world responsibility practices to justify the conditions of holding each other responsible, must grapple with the problem of structural injustices in our responsibility practices (e.g., ableism, fatphobia, toxic positivity). Therefore, the typical advice to recalibrate our practices in light of new evidence will not suffice. We should also adopt two “supplementary norms”: (1) attending to the existence of oppressive norms in our social practices, and (2) avoiding and resisting those norms. Whereas responsibility theorists have traditionally focused on blame, Holroyd examines praise, particularly its role in expressing stereotypical expectations that entrench oppression.

2. Hannah McHugh: A Taxonomy of Oppressive Praise

McHugh, too, analyzes the role of praise in producing and reproducing oppressive structures. She notes that praise has been overlooked and undertheorized in philosophy, and this omission has allowed philosophers to ignore the oppressive dimensions of praise, including both the overattribution and the underattribution of praise in ways that entrench systems of oppression. For example, billionaires are sometimes praised for giving a small fraction of their wealth to charity, whereas an oppressed person may be denied praise for a lifetime of hard work. McHugh offers insight into the many ways that praise can “misfire” in oppressive contexts.

3. Shelley Tremain: When Moral Responsibility Theory Met My Philosophy of Disability

Tremain argues that responsibility theorists, including feminists, have reified disability as a natural and deleterious characteristic of individuals in their framing of responsibility as a personal capacity, against which nonresponsibility emerges as a

personal deficiency or pathology. This naturalizing lens is at odds with Tremain's critical analysis of disability as an apparatus of power that advances a range of eugenic goals, including the exclusion of disabled people from the profession of philosophy. The ableist dimensions of the responsibility system have been obfuscated by the prevailing medical conception of nonresponsibility as impairment.

4. August Gorman: Against Neuronormativity in Moral Responsibility

Gorman similarly argues that the literature on responsibility relies on a theoretical ideal of "normal" or "archetypal" agency, against which nonresponsibility is defined as nonneurotypicality. This neuronormative lens stigmatizes neurodivergent people, who are positioned as archetypal cases of nonresponsible agents, in need of treatment and management. Unsolicited offers of "help" from neurotypical people may seem compassionate, but they are, in fact, horribly patronizing. The theoretical and practical errors in the literature are due to a general dismissal of the neurodiversity movement.

5. T. Virgil Murthy: Against Arguing about Addict Agency

Murthy observes that philosophers tend to view addiction through two competing lenses: either addiction is a choice for which one is responsible, or it is a disease over which one has no control. These theoretical questions about addict *agency* divert attention from the reality of addict *oppression*. They also foreclose the possibility of meaningful change. Disease modelists tend to favor rehabilitation for addicts, whereas choice modelists lean toward incarceration; but this is a distinction without a difference, insofar as rehabilitation can be, and often is, as punitive as imprisonment and sometimes takes place *in prison*. Murthy doubts that nonaddict philosophers can address addiction with the requisite sensitivity and insight, and merely asks that they stop speculating about addiction on the basis of abstract case studies and thought experiments.

6. Shyam Ranganathan: Reason and Solidarity with Persons against White Supremacy and Irresponsibility: A South Asian Analysis

Ranganathan highlights that South Asian perspectives on responsibility have been erased from the literature by a colonialist taxonomy that defines "philosophy" as Western secularism while labeling South Asian thought as "religious Hinduism,"—that is, not philosophy. On this taxonomy, Plato's theological arguments are "philosophy" whereas Īśvarakṛṣṇa's naturalistic cosmology is "religion." This distinction makes it impossible to see South Asian thought as relevant to the philosophy of responsibility (except when it has been appropriated and Anglicized by Western philosophers). Ranganathan explains that in his specialization of Yoga philosophy, responsibility is drawn much more broadly than in the Western tradition,

extending beyond human beings to encompass more-than-human animals, interspecies relationships, and celestial objects like the Earth.

7. Shelbi Nahwilet Meissner and Andrew Frederick Smith: Climate Crisis as Relational Crisis: Centering Indigenous Feminist Conceptions of Responsibility in Environmental Discourse

Meissner and Smith, too, contest the settler-colonial demarcation of responsibility as a capacity of (certain) human beings exclusively and of isolated individuals rather than interconnected networks. In Indigenous environmental feminisms, responsibility emerges from “richly interweaving networks . . . composing extended more-than-human kinship arrangements” (1). Responsibility, then, is relational and extended. On this decolonial framework, climate injustice is a leading colonial threat to (the extended kinship networks of) responsibility, and this crisis will persist as long as settlers continue to view responsibility in anthropocentric, individualistic, and presentist (historically detached) terms. Meissner and Smith are not optimistic about the prospect of radical change, but they believe that anticolonial struggle has value in its own right.

8. Katherine Villa: Affective Injustice and Responsibility for Emotion Regulation

Villa disputes the popular thesis that emotion regulation is an ideal tool for enhancing and scaffolding responsible agency. She argues that the norms governing emotion regulation do not reliably enhance agency since they often function to entrench misogynistic relations. For example, women are encouraged to take responsibility for the “duty” of controlling their emotions in response to misogynistic harassment, as well as reevaluating their beliefs, taking fewer “risks,” and so on. In other words, women are “responsibilized” into a submissive demeanor. These same emotion-regulation norms allow men to avoid the responsibility of self-reflection and change. Hence, the idealistic view of emotion regulation as a tool of self-help and self-actualization facilitates an unfair distribution of emotional labor in heteropatriarchal cultures.

9. Katie Peters: Not My Fault: Far-Right Women and the Exculpatory Narratives of Misogyny and Infantilization

Peters uses an intersectional Black feminist lens to explore how white women enlist narratives of victimhood and innocence to evade blame and liability, with a focus on far-right extremists. One popular narrative says that white women can’t be held responsible for far-right extremism because they are themselves victims of (patriarchal) oppression. Another popular narrative says that white women can’t be held responsible for far-right extremism because they are under the control of men, not their own agency. Both narratives let white women off the hook for racist violence

while entrenching white masculine paternalism. Peters argues that holding white women responsible for their racism can be a feminist response that underscores the social dimensions of power relations and distributes the benefits and burdens of responsibility more fairly.

10. Marianna Leventi: Victim Blaming, Justified Risks, and Imperfect Victims

Leventi explains that victim blaming is a pervasive phenomenon that entrenches oppression. Traditionally, philosophers have been preoccupied with questions of moral luck, competence, and control in abstraction from the structural conditions that support victim blaming. In unequal societies, oppressed people are blamed for the consequences of structural injustices like financial crises, racial incarceration, and sexual assault. Often, victim-blaming narratives accuse the victim of taking “undue risks,” such as “being in the wrong place at the wrong time.” (A Black activist might be blamed for participating in a protest; a woman might be blamed for walking through a park at night). Leventi argues that not only are these “risky” activities not blameworthy, but they may be praiseworthy insofar as they challenge oppressive norms. Notably, philosophers have applauded risk-taking in celebrities like (the notoriously problematic artist) Paul Gauguin while ignoring the mundane risk-taking of ordinary folks.

11. Ross Patrizio: “Friendly” Men and Social Roles: Collective Responsibility for a Culture of Rape

Patrizio defends Andrea Dworkin’s famous claim that the only way to abolish patriarchal rape culture is for men to take responsibility for their roles in that culture. While most people would agree that “unfriendly men,” such as rapists and enablers, share in the responsibility for rape culture, there is less agreement over what responsibility, if any, “friendly men” should shoulder. Patrizio argues that friendly men do share in the responsibility for patriarchal rape culture in virtue of their social role as “men,” a “mega” social role that inflects more local social roles (e.g., parent, worker) and which occupies a privileged place in the heteropatriarchal gender matrix. Men in essence, then, share a collective responsibility to change the meaning of the term “man” and its relationship to systems of heteropatriarchal oppression, and they cannot appeal to empty gestures of allyship (like posting feminist memes online) to discharge this responsibility.

12. Penelope Haulotte: Gender Dysphoria for Critical Theory

Haulotte illuminates the cisnormative aspects of the responsibility system. She notes that the diagnosis of “gender dysphoria” frames trans existence as a personal problem that needs to be cured and managed. This lens erases the political reality of cisnormative oppression and its impact on trans subjects, including (in Marxist terms)

alienation due to cisgender domination. The medical model holds trans people responsible to “successfully transition” into the “right body” and “correct mindset.” This leaves no room to take responsibility for resisting cisnormative oppression through one’s choices, actions, and very existence as a social misfit. The medical gaze, as such, imposes a responsibility of assimilation onto trans people. At the same time, cisnormativity society makes “successful” assimilation impossible given that cisnormativity is essentially antitrans. This creates an impossible double bind for trans people.

13. Jill B. Delston: Do Virtue Ethicists Parent Poorly? The Threat of Developmental Psychology for Moral Education and Responsibility in Virtue Ethics

Delston argues that virtue ethics is ill-equipped to enhance responsible character (and virtue in general) because its “scaffolding” methods are not empirically supported. While caregivers often give children virtue-ethical advice such as “be nice” and “be good,” there is evidence that these recommendations are harmful because they decrease motivation, persistence, self-worth, and other virtues. Character appraisals (e.g., “Sally is nice”) are especially detrimental to girls, who are less likely to be praised for masculine-coded traits like “genius” and “intelligence,” and more likely to receive whole-person praise and blame in general. Neglecting the gendered dimensions of virtue-ethical advice allows gender disparities to continue. Delston recommends that we abandon character appraisals in favor of behavior appraisals that reward good deeds. This shift would produce a more equitable, less sexist system of responsabilization and responsibility-holding.

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