The Descartes Lectures

A SOCIAL PRACTICE ACCOUNT OF RESPONSIBLE PERSONS

Cheshire Calhoun

Commentaries by Jules Holroyd, Heidi Maibom, and Gunnar Björnsson

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Layout design: Proefschrift-aio.nl | Annelies Lips
Cover design: Proefschrift-aio.nl | Guntra Laivacima

ISBN: 9789403771083
DOI: https://doi.org/10.26116/908v-q016

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Introduction

"The Descartes Lectures" is a biennial event at Tilburg University that invites a distinguished philosopher to deliver a series of three lectures, each followed by commentaries from other experts in the field. In 2022, Tilburg University had the honor of hosting Cheshire Calhoun for a series of talks on the important philosophical question of what it means to be a *responsible person*. The commentators for the lectures were Gunnar Björnsson, Jules Holroyd, and Heidi Maibom. This book is a compilation of the material of Calhoun's lectures, the commentaries by Björnsson, Holroyd, and Maibom, as well as Calhoun's replies to their critiques.

In her lectures, Calhoun explains that our routine practices of attributing responsibility (to others and to ourselves) challenge the entrenched philosophical view that responsibility can be reduced to accountability to blame. She builds on this discussion to motivate a novel account that aims to do justice to both our normative ideals of what responsible persons *should* be and to our commonsense understanding of what responsible persons *are*. Her main contention is that this approach better captures three key dimensions of being a responsible person: i) the normative requirements of accountability to blame, ii) the expectations we have towards each other, and iii) the disposition of responsible persons to act benevolently, beyond what is expected of them. Calhoun's lectures thus promise to make headway on thorny theoretical debates about responsibility while urging crucial reflection on the importance of adopting a broader framework to analyze responsible persons that can neatly incorporate both normative and descriptive elements.

The three commentaries on Calhoun's lectures engage in critical but constructive investigations of the details of Calhoun's arguments. First, Jules Holroyd endorses Calhoun's focus on the social practices out of which responsibility practices arise. But she argues that we should take a "non-ideal" approach to these practices, which pays closer attention to the role they play in oppression. Taking this approach, Holroyd argues, results in a more ambivalent, but more realistic, view of the value of responsibility practices.

In the second commentary, Heidi Maibom focuses on Calhoun's claim that acting in line with our community's basic social norms is not only something we think people *should* do, but it is also something that we expect that they *will* do. While Calhoun argues for this claim through a detailed look at our social practices, Maibom argues that we can reach a similar conclusion by looking to folk psychology within the philosophy of mind. However, Maibom argues, based on this literature, that we

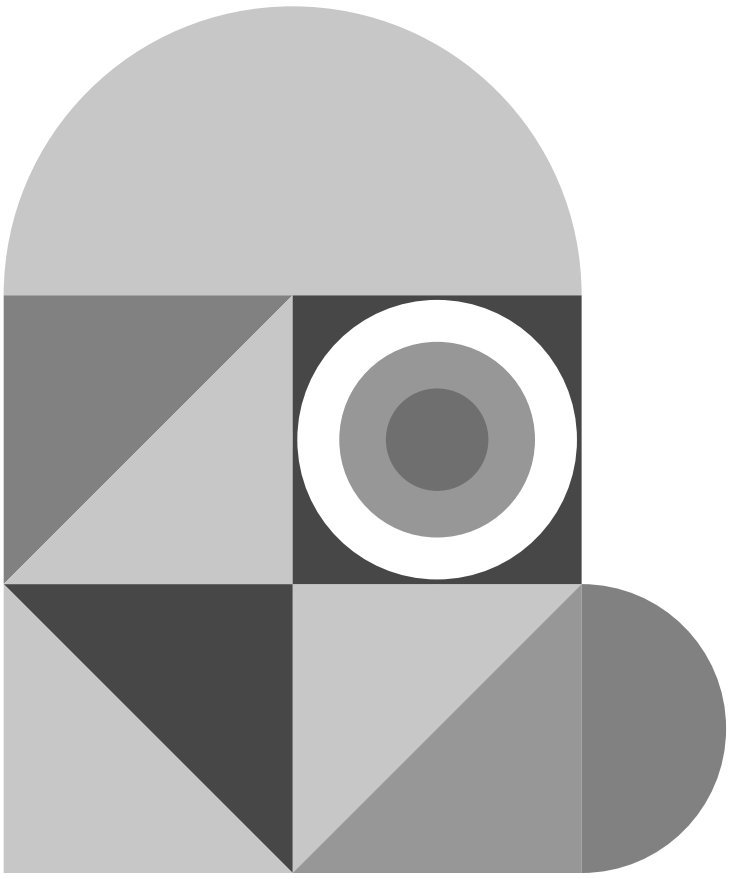
should place less weight on the role of predictions of other people's behavior and instead focus on the role of effective strategies for dealing with cooperation problems.

The final commentary, by Gunnar Björnsson, examines Calhoun's claim that we have a default assumption that other people will be disposed to take responsibility, meaning that they are disposed to promote good ends in ways that go beyond what is needed for compliance with social norms. Björnsson provides an account of what underlies the normative expectation to promote good ends and argues that this gives us reason to think that we do not generally expect people to be responsibility-takers. Rather, we expect people to comply with the moral norms and one of these norms is that people have a *pro tanto* duty to promote the good. Promoting the good does not go beyond what is normatively expected, then, as it is part of what we expect from others.

Calhoun closes the book by responding to these three commentaries, addressing first Björnsson's critiques, then Holroyd's, and finally Maibom's, noting where she agrees with them and, where she disagrees, before providing additional arguments to support her position.

We are most grateful to Cheshire Calhoun for a rich and insightful set of lectures and to Gunnar Björnsson, Jules Holroyd, and Heidi Maibom for providing such thoughtful and constructive commentaries. The lecture series was funded by the Department of Philosophy at Tilburg University, and we are very grateful for this support. We also wish to thank our fellow organizers of the lecture series, Pilar Lopez-Cantero and Maureen Sie, for their work in making these lectures possible, and Lennart Janssen for providing crucial assistance during the event. Thanks too to all the participants at the Taking Responsibility Workshop, which took place alongside this lecture series, for their contributions to a wonderful three days of philosophical discussion. Finally, we wish to thank Mor Lumbroso, the publishing manager at Open Press TiU, Guus Gijben, our typesetter, and Emma Bolton our copyeditor for their contributions in making this book possible.

Miguel Egler and Alfred Archer



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ACCOUNTABILITY RESPONSIBILITY

> "Morally responsible agency marks a distinctive status; it carries with it a particular sort of social and moral significance. An account of such agency ought to tell us about the nature of this status, this significance." *David Beglin (2020, 2361)*

1.1 Introduction

Here is the question: "What is a responsible person?" My aims in taking up this question are twofold. First, I aim to loosen the grip that a pervasive view of responsible persons has on philosophers. It's the view that responsible persons are beings who can be held to account for failing to live up to normative expectations, which is to say, they are those who are liable to blame. It's not that I think this view is wholly wrong. Accountability, in some sense, is part of being a responsible person, although I'll be rejecting the identification of accountability with liability to blame and instead suggesting that there's more to accountability than such liability. More importantly, being accountable is not all there is to being a responsible person. Second, I aim to describe in some detail a more expansive conception of what a responsible person is, of what count as the signature ways of treating persons as responsible (what Strawsonians call "responsibility practices"), and the range of attitudes through which we recognize others as responsible persons. I hope you will find my descriptions utterly familiar from your everyday life with other people. In short, one might say that the goal here is to disrupt entrenched philosophical intuitions about what an account of responsible persons *should* look like in order to capture everyday understandings of what responsible persons *are* like.

The expansive conception of responsible persons that I'll be developing distinguishes three distinct dimensions of responsible persons. Responsible persons are, first of all,

accountability responsible in the familiar (to philosophers) sense of being capable of living up to normative expectations. Second, they are compliance responsible, which is to say *in fact* disposed to live up to minimal normative expectations, so that many of our normative expectations of responsible persons are also predictive ones. Finally, they are responsibility-takers: they are capable of taking, and are at least sometimes disposed to take, the initiative to do good things that they are not morally required to do. My three lectures will take up each of these dimensions in turn.

Before taking up the first of this trio—accountability responsibility—let me lay more of my cards on the table, starting with my use of the phrase "responsible person." Philosophers tend to talk either about moral responsibility or about morally responsible agency. I avoid these more familiar terms because of their very strong associations with the project of figuring out whom we can properly make *demands* of to show us a suitable level of regard or respect, and who we can thus *hold accountable* should they fail to do so. I don't want to bias the investigation into responsible persons from the get-go. I also avoid talk about specifically *moral* expectations, and thus *moral* responsibility for meeting them, in favor of the broader notion of *normative* expectations. Normative expectations cover not only clearly moral ones, but also expectations having to do with etiquette, job responsibilities, the proper ways of doing things such as queuing in line, and so on.

I intend my alternative term, "responsible person," to draw attention to three points that will be important in what follows: "responsible person" is a *status*; that status is *cross-temporal*; and it is a *default* status in social life.

To have a status is to have a rank in some order of statuses. For example, philosophers are already used to thinking of "moral person" as a status, and take that status to be an especially important and dignified one. For any status, it will be important to ask how we should treat beings with that status, which attitudes toward them are or are not acceptable, and how we can insult them by not treating them or by not having attitudes toward them that befit their status. Kant, for example, thought that contempt was not an attitude we should ever have toward those with the status "moral person."

The idea that "responsible person" is a status is not entirely unfamiliar. Toddlers and cats, we might say, lack the status "responsible person." An advantage of focusing on "responsible person" as a status is that it invites us to think about why anyone would *want* this status and would value being recognized and treated as a responsible person and feel aggrieved if they were not. The idea that this status is something we

might prize is not perspicuous when accounts of responsibility emphasize holding other people to account in ways they will no doubt find unpleasant.[1] It's hard to see why anyone would want this status except as a kind of admission price for others' willing interactions.[2] Moreover, treating our interest in responsibility as primarily an interest in holding others to account shifts attention to the victim's valuable status as a *moral person* who deserves to have their moral personhood recognized in responsible persons' behavior. The agent's own valuable status as a responsible person thus disappears from view.

Nevertheless, the idea that being a responsible person is a valuable status isn't wholly unfamiliar. In Kant's retributivist thinking, to not hold people accountable to the moral and civil law is to fail to recognize and appropriately treat them as having the moral status "person." Thus, the status "responsible person" is valuable because it is a status only moral persons have.

Peter Strawson (2008), by connecting being a responsible person with being viewed from the participant attitude, also suggested that the status "responsible person" is something to be prized. Were we viewed merely from what he calls the "objective attitude," we would be for others merely objects to be managed by pressing the right causal levers. Regarded from the participant attitude, we have for others the distinctive status of being fellow participants in social life and the terminus of interpersonal exchanges. To be regarded and treated as a participant, rather than an object, he thought, just is to be regarded and treated as a responsible person. Although Strawson's emphasis was on our unwillingness—indeed, our likely inability—to give up the idea that others have the status "responsible person," it seems equally true that we ourselves would be unwilling to give up our own status as responsible persons who are fit for interpersonal engagement within social practices.

Assuming that "responsible person" is a valuable status, we can inquire how we should and conventionally do treat persons with that status. Strawson helpfully drew attention to our *responsibility practices*. Although he, and subsequent Strawsonians, took responsibility practices to concern the ways we hold people to account and excuse or temporarily exempt from blame, I will be using "responsibility practices"

1. Susan Wolf's *Freedom Within Reason* (1993) is an especially notable exception. Throughout, her emphasis is on what she calls the "status of a responsible being" or the "status of responsibility."
2. So, Steven Bero (2020), for example, argues that taking responsibility by, for example, expressing contrition and apologizing, is important to us because it assures others that we are eligible for meaningful relationships. And Mark Alfano (2021) argues that we voluntarily accept the burden of potential sanction by taking on responsibilities in order to be seen by others as "worthy partners for future cooperative endeavors" (502).

to refer to the broad spectrum of ways that we treat people as having the status "responsible person," with particular emphasis on the ways that persons with that status might value being treated and sometimes demand to be treated.

Assuming that "responsible person" is a valuable status, we can also inquire into the attitudes that it is appropriate to have toward responsible persons. Strawson and Strawsonians have focused on what Strawson called "reactive" attitudes, with an overwhelming focus on negative reactive attitudes such as resentment and indignation and an occasional nod to positive attitudes such as gratitude. Because, as I'll argue, not all of the central attitudes toward responsible persons are *reactive* attitudes that look backward at what has been done, I'll instead use the descriptor "responsibility-recognizing" attitude. Since the social recognition of persons' status as responsible persons occurs by way of both the expression of responsibility-recognizing attitudes and responsibility practices of treating them in distinctive ways, failures to extend those attitudes and treatments constitute a distinctive set of status insults.

As a status, being a responsible person is something that one is *cross-temporally*, in the same way one has the statuses "adult," "middle class," or "moral person" cross-temporally. Even when we are not responsible for particular actions—when we are excused or temporarily exempted from responsibility—we retain the status "responsible person." Significantly, the status "responsible person" is a *default* status in social life. Within everyday life, we do not first look for evidence that those we interact with deserve the status "responsible persons." They are simply presumed to have this status. Of course, we do not presume but instead look for evidence that they are conscientious, dedicated, especially trustworthy people—that is, that they are responsible persons in the sense of having a virtuous character trait. But a status is not a character trait. Strawson thought that it is a central and inexpungeable feature of social life that we adopt the participant attitude toward other people—we see them as the termini of interpersonal interaction, rather than merely as objects to be managed. The participant attitude is a deep and constitutive feature of human social life, one we would be unwilling and likely unable to give up as a general attitude toward others. The participant attitude is thus an attitude of regarding others as having, by default, the status of fellow social participant, which is to say, the status of responsible person. In coming to a conference, in hiring baby-sitters, in sitting peacefully on a train with others, we do not first ask ourselves what evidence there is for regarding all of the people we interact with as social participants with the status "responsible person." We *assume* they are and are to be treated as such. Where evidence is needed is in supporting our judgments that, in the case of particular individuals, it is a mistake to see and treat them as responsible participants.

So here is a more refined version of my initial question: What does the default, cross-temporal status "responsible person" amount to, and in particular, what competencies ground having that status? How should we treat, and what attitudes should we have toward, individuals who have that default, cross-temporal status? What counts as a status insult to responsible persons?

1.2 Method

In concerning myself with understanding the conception of responsible persons embedded in everyday social life, our responsibility practices, and responsibility-recognizing attitudes, my methodological approach to responsibility falls within the Strawsonian tradition. But it differs in several important ways. I said at the beginning that I intended to avoid expressions like "morally responsible agency" because I do not want to bias the inquiry from the get-go. It makes a methodological and substantive difference whether we begin by focusing on moral responsibility and morally responsible agency, as is typically done, or whether we begin by focusing on the status of responsible person. "Moral responsibility" and "morally responsible agency" naturally invite us to think about what people are responsible, and thus accountable, *for:* What kind of respect or regard do they owe us? What can we demand from them? When are we licensed to react negatively toward—to blame, shun, punish—those who fail to deliver what we normatively expect? The inquiry into moral responsibility thus equally naturally becomes an inquiry into the capacities and features that someone must have if we can properly expect respect or regard from them, can press specific normative demands, and can appropriately hold them responsible and blame them.

If one starts by focusing on responsibility for actual or potential failures to meet normative expectations, it is natural to make the following assumptions about responsible persons, all of which should sound familiar, but all of which I think are mistaken:

1. *The capacities and features of responsible persons are all and only those that license blaming attitudes and holding to account for wrongdoing, absent an acceptable excuse or temporary exemption*.[3] If a feature or capacity is not necessary for blaming attitudes to be generally licensed, it is not a feature or

[3] Excuses presuppose that a person presently has the requisite capacities but that some factor interferes with their expression in norm-complying action; for example, the person was pushed or in ignorance of relevant facts. Temporary exemption presupposes that the person standardly has the requisite capacities, but they are inoperative due to some factor, for example if the person is suffering a temporary psychotic break.

capacity constitutive of being a responsible being.[4] The focal contrast, then, is between those who are *liable* (even if sometimes excused or temporarily exempted) and those who are completely *exempted* from liability to blame.

2. *The Strawsonian participant attitude just is the attitude of seeing others as beings of whom we can have normative expectations, and on whom we can make demands,* for a certain kind of regard, goodwill, or respect that recognizes our own status as moral persons.

3. *All responsibility-recognizing attitudes react to blameworthy failures to live up to normative expectations (resentment and indignation) and (in most Strawsonian accounts) to creditworthy exceedings of those expectations (praise, gratitude),* and so are properly called "reactive attitudes."

4. *Responsibility practices are all and only practices of holding accountable* for—*or excusing or temporarily exempting from accountability* for—actions that fail to meet our normative expectations, or (again, on most accounts) that exceed them.

So familiar are these four assumptions that you might be mystified as to what else a responsible person could be, or how there could be a *responsibility* practice that is not about holding responsible, or how attitudes fundamentally different from resentment and indignation could be responsibility-recognizing attitudes.

This mystification about what else a responsible person, responsibility practices, and responsibility-recognizing attitudes could be, is not, I think, because there is no other conception of responsible persons, responsibility practices, and responsibility-recognizing attitudes embedded in our everyday interactions with other people within a huge variety of social practices. Indeed, as I suggested at the beginning, one of my goals is to remind you of the much richer, more complexly three-dimensional conception of responsible persons that ordinary people in ordinary social life have. Rather, the sense of mystery, at least for those of us heavily influenced by Strawson, arises from uncritically adopting Strawson's specific concern about responsibility and his specific methodological approach of looking first to *responsibility* practices rather than to social practices generally.

In his enormously influential essay, "Freedom and Resentment," Strawson does not take up the general question "What is a responsible person?" Rather, he begins from

4. Jules Holroyd calls this the "liability assumption: that to be a responsible agent is to be liable to praise or blameworthiness" (2018, 153).

a very specific concern with responsibility. That concern is with the *propriety* of *holding* people responsible, given uncertainty about what the metaphysical facts are: is determinism true or do people have metaphysically free will? When we hold people responsible, we do unpleasant things to them: blame them, shun them, even jail them. We also demand that they do unpleasant things: feel guilty and remorseful, apologize, make restitution, undertake character reform. We need a justification for doing these things. For the determinist, holding responsible by blaming or punishing must be justified by its utility in altering future behavior. For the libertarian, holding responsible can only be justified if blame or punishment is deserved; and desert depends on the metaphysical freedom of individuals—whether they could have done otherwise. Neither approach seems adequate. The determinist must see individuals as simply objects to be managed by pulling the right causal levers, and thus must exit the participant attitude. Libertarians, while retaining the participant attitude, must rely on an unverifiable, and potentially incoherent, assumption of contra-causal freedom. It is as an intervention into the debate between libertarians and determinists about the propriety of holding responsible that Strawson offers his responsibility-practice account of responsibility. His influential insight was that the accountability of individuals, and practices of holding accountable, do not depend on the truth of any metaphysical view, either determinism or contra-causal freedom. Rather, because practices of holding accountable are essential parts of taking the participant attitude toward others—an attitude that, no matter what the metaphysical facts are, we are unwilling to abandon—we should treat those practices as constitutive of our conception of responsible persons. However, by *starting* from a specific concern with the propriety of holding responsible, we never get a chance to ask, "Is liability to being held accountable all there is to being a responsible person, and are practices connected with holding to account the only responsibility practices?"

Although justifying moral condemnation and punishment is certainly *a* concern we have about responsibility, we need to be open to the thought that individuals' statuses as responsible persons also matter for reasons *other than* our interest in pressing demands. Mightn't we also be interested in who can be *predictively* expected to comply with the basic norms that structure social practices? And mightn't we also be interested in who we can *call on* to volunteer to take on new responsibilities?

In addition to approaching responsibility from the perspective of a specific concern with justifying punitive responses to wrongdoers, Strawson also recommended a specific methodological strategy. We are to begin from the "facts as we know them," given our experience of social life with others, and then *derive* the conception of responsible persons from those facts. Which facts? If one's concern is with

the propriety of holding others to account, as Strawson's was and subsequent Strawsonians' has been, the facts are facts about those attitudes and responsibility practices relevant to holding others to account—resentment, indignation, and practices of subjecting to and excusing or exempting from blame. It might seem obvious that these just are the only social facts as we know them that concern responsibility. However, that obviousness is, I suggest, a function not only of the fact that these are responsibility-recognizing attitudes and practices, but also a function of their *salience* to conscious awareness. Resentment and indignation are emotionally felt, and often intensely so. The practices of holding to account—blaming, punishing, demanding apologies, exhorting to better behavior, and so on—are also highly salient to conscious awareness. Such practices involve our *deliberately doing* something, and moreover something that will be unpleasant for the miscreant. Even the acceptance of excuses and extension of temporary exemptions are things typically done after reflection on the evidence.

However, there is no reason to think that, because a set of attitudes and practices are *salient to conscious awareness*, that set is necessarily coextensive with the complete set of responsibility-recognizing attitudes and practices. Suppose that some responsibility-recognizing attitudes and practices are not salient in this way. Perhaps some responsibility-recognizing attitudes are neither felt emotions nor reactions to specific misbehaviors. Perhaps instead they are taken for granted, automatic, and thus unnoticed attitudinal stances. And perhaps some responsibility practices involve *not* doing anything, and in such a way that we don't even notice that there's something we are not doing. This would mean, first, that an account of responsible persons derived only from salient attitudes and practices may be incomplete. Second, and perhaps more worrisomely, the prospects of *deriving* an account of responsible persons from "the facts as we know them" may not work. Instead, we may need to proceed in reverse order, by trying to get a fix on the conception of responsible persons embedded in social life and using that as a guide to identifying responsibility-recognizing attitudes and practices that are not salient to conscious awareness.

Anticipating the second lecture, *the* most pervasive attitude toward responsible persons in everyday life within reasonably well-functioning social practices is basic trust. I don't mean trust in specific individuals—the kind of trust you might decide to invest or find that over the course of repeated interactions you have come to invest. I mean a generalized and default trust that most of the people, largely strangers, that you interact with in assorted everyday social practices—such as sharing trains, shopping at stores, using the library, attending conferences—both know what the

basic normative expectations within those social practices are and will in fact comply with them. This kind of trust, as Annette Baier (1986) observed, is like the air we breathe and is noticed only in its disorienting absence. The responsibility practices that go along with such trust in others' routine compliance with minimal practice norms are exactly what you'd expect—not checking up on people, not taking self-protective measures, not installing surveillance cameras, not insisting on contracts, and so on. We are highly unlikely to notice the things we *don't* do that are nevertheless an important part of treating others as responsible persons.

Given this, I adopt the methodological strategy of starting from social practices generally—not practices of responsibility specifically. We can then ask: what conception of a responsible person is embedded in our social practices? I will argue that it is a complex conception of responsible persons as accountability responsible, compliance responsible, and as responsibility takers.

1.3 Accountability Responsibility

Strawson took accountability responsibility to rest on the capacity to manifest goodwill in one's attitudes and actions. More recently, many have suggested that the basic capacity requisite for accountability responsibility is reasons-responsiveness, which plausibly includes a capacity to understand normative concepts, to detect normatively relevant considerations, and to deliberate on and govern one's actions in light of normatively relevant considerations.[5] Such a capacity might also rely on emotional capacities like identifying empathy with the effects of one's actions on others.[6] This, I hope, sounds both familiar and acceptable as a general description of accountability responsible persons' capacities. My aim is not to defend a particular, precisified account, but just to get in view the general conception of an accountability responsible person.

It is, however, important to be clear on what "capacity" means here. Given that the capacities are ones that make one *accountability responsible,* it is very tempting to think that this must be a *realized capacity*. How could anyone be an accountability responsible person who is not *in fact* sensitive to morally relevant considerations, but instead just has a bare, developable but undeveloped capacity? The thought is especially tempting—indeed it seems inevitable, if one accepts the truth of the first assumption I mentioned earlier—that the capacities and features of responsible persons are all and only those that *license* blaming attitudes and holding to account

5. See, for example, Wallace 1994; Vargas 2013. The reader should feel free to substitute in their preferred account of the capacities requisite for accountability responsibility.
6. See Shoemaker 2020; 2007.

for wrongdoing in the absence of some special excuse. So, let's think about exactly what it might mean to equate being an accountability responsible person with having a realized capacity for reasons-responsiveness. To require that the capacity must be *fully* realized sets the standard for being an accountability responsible person too high. Quite possibly no one meets the idealized standard of being responsive to all normatively relevant considerations. While people might generally be expected to be sensitive to very general and very important considerations (e.g. causing unnecessary pain or humiliation), a large part of our capacity to live up to normative expectations depends on familiarity with specific, local contexts and practices—for example, with the dress norms for different occasions, or the dinner behavior norms in just this family, or standards for ethical medical practice—and this will require quite specific sensitivities.

Avoiding idealizations, one might preserve the connection between being accountability responsible and having realized capacities by adopting Manuel Vargas's (2013) circumstantialist approach. On his view, we should not think of a responsible person—what he calls "morally responsible agency"—as a cross-situational, and by implication cross-temporal, status. If being an accountability responsible person is to license blaming, then the person's capacity for detecting normatively relevant considerations must be *realized*. But since we only have realized capacities with respect to some considerations, in some types of situations, it follows that we sometimes are and sometimes are not accountability responsible persons. We are, that is, not merely excused (which presupposes that we *are* accountability responsible persons[7]), we are totally exempted in some contexts, similar to the way toddlers and cats are exempted in all contexts.

On Vargas's view, as I've said, we must give up the idea that the status "responsible person" is a cross-situational and thus generally *cross-temporal* status. We must also give up the idea that it is a *default* status. After all, whether one is a responsible person or not will vary by context, so we shouldn't presume that individuals are responsible persons across contexts.

Adopting Vargas's circumstantialist view seems exactly right on the condition that one accepts three of the four assumptions I mentioned at the outset of this lecture. Re-stated in simplified form, those three are:

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7. To be excused is to be in the type of situation to whose normatively relevant features we typically are sensitive—as he puts it, in nearby possible worlds we are reasons-responsive in this type of situation—and our failure to be reasons-responsive on this occasion does not show an absence of good will.