



The Scope of Responsibility

Are people less responsible today than they were in times past? It's debatable. But one thing is sure: responsibility is more vital than ever in this interdependent world...

□ Anyone who watches those nature programs on television might conclude that responsibility is an instinctive quality. Animals of all kinds can be seen bringing food to their young and protecting them against predators at the risk of their own lives. In some species parental "responsibility" extends to showing the young how to hunt and evade attack, in much the same way as human parents conscientiously pass on the lessons of their experience to their children. Responsibility in the natural world appears to follow an immutable cycle, with each generation taking it up as its members reach maturity.

Among the species generically known as man, a sense of responsibility would also seem to come naturally. In the few primitive societies left in the world, children begin participating in the care of their younger brothers and sisters at an early age. They assume one duty after another as they move up the scale of roles in their tribes until they are able to meet the full obligations of membership. They grow into responsibility as unconsciously as they grow in height and weight.

Even in western countries a few generations ago, responsibility looked like a gift of God bestowed on most, if not all, good Christians. Indeed, in the average middle class household, God had a big part to play in it; a person's ultimate responsibility was deemed to be owed to the all-seeing and all-knowing deity.

For true believers, this had the effect of making virtue into a necessity. The attitude of 19th century American author Lydia H. Sigourney was typical of her era. She thought of earthly life as a proba-

tion. "Every hour assumes a fearful responsibility when we view it as the culturer of an immortal harvest," she wrote.

The great majority of people then lived in a rural setting; children were brought up doing essential chores and gradually taking over tasks from their fathers and mothers until they reached the stage of doing everything on their own recognizance. Whether on a farm or in a city, boys followed in their fathers' footsteps, working for a living, getting married, heading a family. With no questions asked, girls were groomed for the responsibility of raising children and looking after a home.

The transformation in behaviour since then should cause us to reconsider the idea that responsibility is an inborn trait whose development can be taken for granted. That may be so in nature, but most of us no longer live in anything resembling a natural state.

Since horses and carriages roamed the streets, our attitudes have changed just as radically as our urban landscape. Yet the assumption persists in our schools, businesses and public agencies that responsibility is something that simply comes to normal human beings as they go along in life.

It is rare to find anyone outside of a prison or other rehabilitation institution actually teaching someone else how to act responsibly, as a person might be taught how to drive a truck or read a balance sheet or play tennis. True, the subject is touched on indirectly in such courses as social studies, religion, philosophy, and management: otherwise, educators and trainers appear to believe that it is learned by example alone.

It is worth wondering whether this offhand approach is sufficient for the present day, considering the evidence of widespread irresponsibility that glares out of the statistics on crime, drug and alcohol abuse, runaways, vandalism, family breakups, etc. Perhaps the time has come to start looking at responsibility — or the lack of it — as a public concern.

It is, of course, supposed to be nurtured in the privacy of the home; these days, however, it is not easy to instil it in children even in the best-regulated of families. Family life has changed as business has become busier, divorce and separation more common, and more mothers have taken outside employment. The American psychiatry professor Dr. Harold M. Voth traces a decline in familial influence on character formation to “75 years of events — wars, industrialization, inflation, materialism, etc. — [which] have assaulted the family unit to such an extent that for several generations the developing young have been deprived of continuous parental input.”

The technological changes that have taken place during that time have mainly been aimed at making life easier. So have the social changes, although they have been less reliable in their effect. In this age of physical ease, a psychological climate has arisen in which we subliminally seek to avoid anything that is uncomfortable or inconvenient. And often there is nothing more uncomfortable or inconvenient than discharging a responsibility.

*To help children grow up strong,
keep adding to their responsibility*

In the old days life was hard not only physically, but psychologically. The constraints of convention could be heavy to bear. One of these constraints was strict parental discipline. It used to be imposed partly by sanctions, but mostly by the implicit understanding that parents had a God-given right to be obeyed.

Though youthful rebelliousness is as old as the human race, a distinct breaking-point came in the 1960s, when young people in large numbers began to question the authority of their elders. The youth movement helped to give impetus to a number of other movements to secure greater human rights.

In one sense, the loosening of parental controls and absentee parenthood have made present-day young people more responsible for their own well-being than any generation before them. The corollary is that parents should take more care than ever to provide guidance and encouragement to whatever extent they can.

“Few things help an individual more than to place responsibility upon him, and let him know that you trust him,” said the pioneer American Black leader, Booker T. Washington. The way to help children grow up strong is steadily to increase the amount of trust placed in them.

There are some quite simple ways of cultivating responsibility, including having children share in the care of younger siblings, carry out regular chores, handle their own money (“when your allowance is spent, don’t expect any extra”) and take part in family decisions. The idea should be imparted that they are full participants in the family, and as such they must do their share in ensuring the welfare of the family as a whole.

*Freedom — but never freedom
in any way from responsibility*

This may be easier said than done at a time when individual rights occupy such a prominent place in the public scale of values. The drive for rights has meant that people are no longer automatically cast in roles according to their age, sex, class, religion, ethnic origin, marital status, or other personal characteristics. They have been largely set free to go their own way in hopes of finding themselves.

In the process, popular attitudes in a country like Canada have become more tolerant, understanding and forgiving. No longer are men and women expected to live with the consequences of their errors and shortcomings until the day they die.

This is a good thing in principle, but it is not without its undesirable side-effects. It has opened up psychological loopholes through which people can wriggle out of their legitimate responsibilities.

“No doubt Jack the Ripper excused himself on the grounds that it was human nature,” A. A. Milne

observed. The “non-judgmental” approach to conduct allows transgressors to shift the responsibility for their actions from themselves to their psychological condition, peer pressure, upbringing, or whatever other excuse comes readily to hand.

With all the standing orders against irresponsibility gone, one would think that it might be rampant. Indeed, when we look at the current state of ethics, there is much to persuade us that the principle of responsibility is being ignored.

On the other hand, there has recently been a revival of public concern for ethical standards. At the same time, people seem to be taking a more “caring” attitude towards their personal relationships and showing more concern for public issues such as peace and ecology.

It could be said that, after some serious lapses caused by the shock of having a great deal of freedom lavished on them all at once, people are learning to live with that freedom. The chief lesson to be learned is that freedom of action in their personal lives does not mean freedom from responsibility in any way or to any degree.

Freedom can be an illusory thing — just when you think you have most of it, you may find that you have least of it. For instance, people who adopt an addictive habit as a way of thumbing their noses at convention may become slaves to the habit. More generally, no civilized person is free from his or her own conscience. The most painful aspect of letting somebody down is the guilty feeling that you have let yourself down, too.

“There are two freedoms: the false where a man is free to do what he likes; the true where a man is free to do what he ought,” wrote the novelist Charles Kingsley. What one *ought* to do may be broadly defined as living up to one’s responsibility.

The standard definitions of the word fail to convey the depth of its moral implications; one dictionary, for instance, says that being responsible means being “liable to be called to account.” The same dictionary tells us that accountable means “answerable” and “explicable.” From this, the inference might be drawn that, to get out of responsibility, you need only to be able to explain yourself.

The emphasis on accountability could also lead to the impression that responsibility is strictly a

pragmatic matter. This, in fact, is the way the subject is often approached in modern western society. We practice responsibility because it brings us benefits or saves us from penalties. People urge their children to become more responsible because if they do, they are more likely to succeed; if they do not, they are more likely to fail.

Responsibility has always been associated with work. In theory, at least, the more of it a person takes on, the better the job and the higher the income. Viewed in this light, it is likely to be regarded as a necessary evil, to be respected not for any ethical or humanistic reason, but to advance one’s career.

It goes without saying that responsibility is imperative in business and public life. Still, it can be perceived too narrowly. Some tend to associate it *only* with work. It is not unusual for people to be paragons of conscientiousness on the job, and yet be lax in meeting their obligations to their spouses, families and communities.

In the end, we are responsible for our own rights and freedom

There is a further tendency among career-minded persons always to put the interests of their organizations first. Actions that may be seen as responsible in the context of the organization may be irresponsible in the context of the society. Many business and political decisions taken in the name of “enlightened self-interest” are more self-interested than enlightened. They fly in the face of Dostoyevsky’s dictum that “each of us is responsible to everything and to every human being.”

As an educated man of his times, Dostoyevsky was probably familiar with the philosophy of Confucius. According to the great Chinese teacher, one of the guiding principles of a worthwhile life is *jen* — “benevolent concern for one’s fellow man.” The leading interpreter of the Confucius’ thought, his disciple Tseng Tzu, likened a well-spent life to a long journey with a heavy burden of *jen* — a burden which the bearer “has taken upon himself” without reference to external accountability. The reason for following The Way is simply to become a whole person. A “person” in the Confucian sense is the centre of a cluster of relationships as opposed to an individual separable from anyone else.

The concept of interdependent responsibility is not as foreign to westerners as it may appear. It is at the bottom of our tradition of democracy. We are responsible to one another to ensure that the process works; if it does not work, that means that not enough of us are involved.

We cannot really complain (though we often do) that we do not get the candidates we deserve to represent us, because each of us is free to join a political party and participate in nominating candidates, if not actually run for office. Every eligible voter is then free to participate in electing those who will conduct our public affairs.

The threat to human survival comes from irresponsibility

John Rawls, professor of philosophy at Harvard University, wrote in his 1983 book *A Theory of Justice* that, under our system, we cannot "shift the responsibility for what we do onto others. Those in authority are accountable for the policies they pursue and the instructions they lay down, and those who acquiesce in carrying out unjust commands or abetting evil designs cannot in general plead that they did not know better or that the fault lies solely with those in higher positions ... The essential point here is that the principles that best conform to our nature as free and rational individuals themselves establish our accountability."

According to Rawls, you cannot have liberty without responsibility. If members of the public fail to exercise their citizenship by voting and making their opinions on issues known, the way is open to actual or *de facto* dictatorship. Political apathy begets political weakness. To cure the weakness, people have proved themselves willing to surrender their independence to strong autocratic leaders who promise them stability.

Rawls maintains that a feeling of civic responsibility cannot be forced; it does not depend on the threat of deprivation or punishment. What is true of the collectivity is true of the individual. As psychologist Stanley Milgram wrote, "for a person to feel responsible for his actions, he must sense that the behaviour has flown from *self*."

Milgram went on to comment that it is easy to ignore responsibility when one is only an intermediate link in a chain. Ignoring responsibility can never make it go away, however. As in other aspects of life, political irresponsibility is largely a sin of omission.

As the American Roman Catholic Cardinal John Wright pointed out, "evil does not just happen." It is not the work of blind, neutral forces. People perpetrate it of their own free will, and other people acquiesce in it of their free will by allowing it to go on.

Cardinal Wright wrote of "the moral disasters" which overtake mankind. The disasters which threaten us now are both material and moral. When scientists talk about the greenhouse effect, the destruction of the rain forests, acid rain, water pollution, overfishing and the other threats to life on the planet, they are talking about irresponsibility.

Irresponsibility is nearly always traceable to people doing what they want without regard to anyone but themselves. If a person does not do what he or she should do, somebody else is left with a burden. Its impact can be immediate, as when an employee fails to do what is expected of him and a workmate has to cover for him, or in the future, as when a profligate father dies without having provided financially for his family. The irresponsible ecological, fiscal and political practices now plaguing the world fall into the latter category.

How we all live up to our responsibilities as householders, workers and citizens today has a direct bearing on the future. Historically — at least from the decline of the Roman Empire on — the standards of personal conduct have set the tone for the standards of conduct on a mass scale. If individuals behave carelessly and selfishly, the way is left open to collective careless and selfish behaviour. So if the present generation is to demonstrate that it will not allow irresponsibility to ruin life for future generations in this interdependent world, it must overcome its moral apathy.