

Pitfalls of Being in the World

Draft

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This paper builds on one of Raz's most interesting contributions to responsibility theory: the idea that we are responsible for some inadvertent actions. Raz argues that, as persons, we are not separable from our interactions with the world.¹ The world sometimes cooperates, and it sometimes does not, but in order to act at all, we need to see ourselves a certain way: as having "a domain of secure competence", and within our domain of secure competence, we see ourselves as responsible. Raz thinks that an important aspect of our sense of self (or possibly an *inescapable* aspect of our sense of self) entails that we can (or possibly, must) take on responsibility in some cases where we do not meet the traditional control and intention conditions. I will call this, 'expansive responsibility'.

I agree with Raz about the possibility of expansive responsibility in these cases, though perhaps not quite for the reasons he gives. However, there is an interesting and underexplored aspect of this sort of view, that I take up in this paper. That is the question of how far taking responsibility can expand.² I attempt to go some way towards answering that question by exploring the various ways that we can go wrong in our sense of who we are in this context.³ I defend my account of 'going wrong' by showing that real examples of people taking responsibility are often intuitively problematic. People sometimes take too much responsibility; or they take too little; or they take responsibility in the wrong way.

Clearly, our sense of who we are is deeply permeated by socially constructed views of what 'people like us' should be. It is a familiar thought that these views are distorted by preconceptions about gender, race, class and so on. These distortions play out in differential propensities to take

¹ Raz is following Bernard Williams, who argues that we must take the possibility of moral luck seriously (Williams, Bernard, 1981, *Moral Luck*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). Susan Wolf also has an insightful discussion that takes a similar direction to Raz's. (Wolf, Susan (2001), 'The Moral of Moral Luck', *Philosophic Exchange* 31).

² Wolf and Raz both limit their discussion to things that an agent has done inadvertently. David Enoch offers a very broad account of "penumbral agency" in his 'Being Responsible, Taking Responsibility, and Penumbral Agency', in Heuer and Lang (ed.), *Luck, Value, and Commitment: Themes from the Ethics of Bernard Williams*. Oxford University Press. Enoch is on a slightly different track to Raz: Enoch thinks that taking responsibility is a normative power, and in that sense his primary argument is relevant to ethics rather than to responsibility theory.

³ I use the phrases 'sense of self' and 'identity' interchangeably. I hope that the somewhat loose notion I have in mind is reasonably clear.

responsibility for actions that are outside of the traditional control and intention conditions. For example, there is an obviously gendered dimension in tendencies to take responsibility, though it is not completely simple. In some ways, taking responsibility is feminized, as in the greater tendency of women to feel guilt and shame about their families, their homes, their appearance, and so on. On the other hand, our society makes control central to a masculine self-conception, so that men are under pressure to maximize their responsibility zone.

In cataloguing the ways that we can go wrong in taking responsibility, I am making space for an account of the right way to take responsibility, and defending the Razian view from the criticism that taking responsibility is *always* an error. This focus on the social aspect of being in the world is crucial to a plausible development of an account of responsibility that places self-conception at its center.

1. Responsibility Beyond Control

In this paper I will not address basic skepticism about the possibility of responsibility without control.⁴ Following Raz, I will take it as a valid datum that we generally think we are responsible for negligence. Furthermore, this sort of responsibility is not ‘derivative responsibility’ (responsibility that can be traced back to earlier controlled act that foreseeably led to the uncontrolled act, such as drunk driving). I will assume that the reader is at least willing to countenance the possibility of direct responsibility for negligence. In this essay I explore a fleshed out and expanded account of what responsibility without control might look like.

Raz begins by exploring Bernard Williams’s idea that we are bound to feel ‘agent regret’ about our own actions, even when those actions or their consequences are out of our control. Raz agrees with Williams that our attachment to our own actions and their consequences is key to understanding responsibility. Raz thinks that this is because of our sense of self:” we feel agent regret when we feel that our self is implicated. But Raz doesn’t think that agent regret on its own can give us an account of when we are responsible beyond control, because agent regret is neither necessary nor sufficient for taking responsibility in the right way. We can both feel agent regret when we are not appropriately held responsible, and fail to feel it when we are. So Raz argues that we need to go back upstream, and focus more directly on the sense of self.

⁴ I do that elsewhere, see 2019 and forthcoming.

Raz is not the only one to argue for this general picture.⁵ Susan Wolf also argues that identity is crucial to responsibility. Like Raz, Wolf begins with Bernard Williams's account of moral luck – the phenomenon whereby our moral record is affected in some way by outcomes that are not under our control.⁶ Wolf compares a case where someone has acted in a faulty way to a small degree, and their action has a very bad outcome, to a case where an agent acts badly to the same degree, but gets away with no bad outcome. Adapting one of Williams' examples, she imagines a lorry driver who has failed to have his brakes checked. A child unexpectedly runs out in front of the vehicle and is killed. In such a case the driver will presumably feel awful about what has happened, and will blame himself. By contrast, a driver who is negligent to the same degree in leaving the brakes in need of maintenance, but who (though mere luck) does not harm anyone, will not feel awful. Furthermore, these reactions seem fitting – we think it is natural and right for the driver who killed someone to feel awful and to blame themselves, and it makes sense that the driver who does not, would not feel awful.

Wolf observes that there is something seriously lacking in the driver who kills someone and then manages to detach the fault from the outcome in their own mind, telling themselves, 'my fault here was pretty minor, I should not feel bad'. Wolf considers the idea that the driver is trying to minimize their responsibility, and she hones in on what is disturbing about that: it is that the driver believes the child's death has nothing to do with them. As Wolf puts it, "The problem is not that he refuses to accept what responsibility he objectively has for the child's death; it is that he fails to take responsibility for it, in a way that goes beyond that. He reveals a sense of himself - his real self, one might say - as one who is, at least in principle, distinct from his effects on the world, whose real quality and value, for better and for worse, is at best impurely indicated but not at all constituted by the goods and the harms, the successes and the failures that comprise his life in the physical world. It is as if he draws a circle around himself, coincident with the sphere of his will." (Wolf 2001, 12-13). Wolf's point is that the idea of a real self that is distinct from its effects in the world is bogus – we are not distinct from our effects in the world.

⁵ The basic idea that responsibility and self-formation are intertwined is a thread that runs through much of the literature on responsibility: see e.g. Aristotle on responsibility for character; Harry Frankfurt's account of the concept of a person; Galen Strawson's basic argument; Charles Taylor on responsibility for self; much of Susan Wolf's writing, but particularly her essay on moral luck; Meir Dan-Cohen's discussion of this is particularly relevant to my argument here (2002) – I quote a large chunk of his account below.

⁶ Williams (1981). See also Adams (1985). Adams focusses on taking responsibility for our emotional states and tendencies.

Another argument along these lines is offered by Meir Dan-Cohen (2002).⁷ Dan-Cohen is concerned to defend legal practices of holding people responsible for things that go beyond deliberate actions, including strict liability, vicarious responsibility, and collective responsibility. He argues that there is no firm boundary between the self and the external things that the self causes or produces.⁸ As Dan-Cohen puts it, we can think of the self as having a “relatively cohesive core with gradually decreasing density” (p. 210).⁹ We can identify with only the core, or, we can take a more expansive view, and identify with the periphery.

The underlying argument here depends on us accepting a compatibilist account of responsibility. In brief, the point is that control is not particularly privileged as a ground for responsibility, given that control comes from a determined self.¹⁰ Once we hold on to that realization, grounds for responsibility can dissolve (as for the incompatibilists), or we can accept that we are responsible despite the inescapable fact that everything we do is a matter of luck in the end. As Harry Frankfurt points out, that an act comes from a person – a self – matters to us, even though that self is determined.¹¹

If we take the self as central to responsibility, we need to question what the self is. Is it just the things we control? Or are some of the things we do not control part of our self too? Robert Adams raises this in his account of ‘involuntary sins’.¹² He argues that although we do not control our emotions and motives, we should think of them as part of ourselves. And surely that is right. The things we decide to do are in part caused by our motives and emotions. Sometimes our motives

⁷ Dan-Cohen is concerned with the foundations of responsibility in the law, and sees a philosophical account of responsibility as the essential to that. It seems to me that liability could be defended independently of responsibility. So I want to maintain a distinction between mere liability, even when it is justified, and the richer sense of responsibility that implicates the self and activates emotions such as agent-regret and guilt.

⁸ See esp his remarks on pp.210-211.

⁹ There is an interesting parallel with Holly Smith’s account of how to understand acts done out of culpable ignorance. Her question is not about what counts as part of the self, but what counts as part of the act. We could include past actions in our conception of the ‘benighted act’, so that we are not ‘tracing’ back to a different act, but rather giving a fuller description of the act. (Smith 1981). The similarity here is that when I think of what I have done I can include more or less in the description.

¹⁰ David Enoch’s account of taking responsibility (2011) differs from the others discussed here in that he firmly rejects the possibility of moral luck (see also Enoch and Marmor 2007). Instead of arguing that everything is a matter of luck including our controlled actions, and so we can allow uncontrolled actions into the realm of the responsible (as I think the others do), Enoch argues that we can exercise a normative power that makes us responsible for actions that we do not control. Thus for Enoch, ‘taking responsibility’ marks a genuine coming into existence of responsibility that was not there before. For Raz, Wolf, Dan-Cohen and myself, taking responsibility is not such a radical step. I make that explicit in my account of the (not very fundamental) difference between being responsible and taking responsibility in the text.

¹¹ Frankfurt 1971.

¹² Adams 1985.

and emotions cause us to behave in a certain way without there being a mediating decision – as when we are careless, or thoughtless, or when we betray our real attitude with a smirk, a grimace, a gasp. These involuntary behaviors are part of the self, and so, Adams argues, we should take responsibility for them as we do for our controlled actions.¹³

There is an important issue about what is at stake here that I have not addressed yet: what is the difference between talking about responsibility we already have (we could see Wolf's and Raz's arguments as being like Adams's, in claiming that we are already responsible for actions or states beyond our controlled ones because they are part of the self), and *taking* responsibility? I think the answer that naturally emerges from this picture is that although there is no clear boundary between core and periphery, behavior that springs from the core of selfhood, such as controlled behavior, is behavior we should always take responsibility for. We express that by saying that we *are* responsible. As we move to the periphery, it becomes less clear whether or not we should take responsibility. So the difference between being responsible and taking responsibility turns out not to be very fundamental on this view.

This raises the question, how far into the periphery can we go? That is, what range of things can we take responsibility for? Raz and Wolf both focus on inadvertence in the agent's behavior – negligence, or unforeseen outcomes. Dan-Cohen argues for a wider net, suggesting that we could take responsibility for things others have done. The danger with a wider net is that we are no longer talking about responsibility, but only about liability.¹⁴ Of course we can take responsibility in the sense of accepting liability. That would mean accepting duties of repair and so on, but not accepting that the act in question is really one that belongs to the agent.

My question here is, what makes the difference between the non-controlled cases where we should take responsibility, and those cases where we should not? Motives and emotions are very plausible as parts of the self, they are close to the core. But other things we may take responsibility for - unforeseen consequences, totally inadvertent actions, and the actions of others – takes us much further from what would commonly be accepted as part of the self. This is where we need to bring

¹³ This is the basic thought behind the 'attributionists' in responsibility theory. See (for example) Angela Smith, Nomy Arpaly.

¹⁴ See my forthcoming contribution to the Routledge Encyclopedia of Responsibility (ed Max Kiener) for more on that. I think that David Enoch's (2011) account of taking responsibility is really an account of accepting liability, and that his defense does not need the more radical claim that what underlies strict liability is the deep agential sense of responsibility.

in our own sense of ourself. We have various identities, and these particular identities may involve a more expansive zone of responsibility.

We need to look more closely at exactly how an identity – a sense of self – can ground taking responsibility in cases where there is no control. To recap Raz’s view briefly: Raz focusses on responsibility for malfunctioning (or failures to function) of rational agency. His justification for responsibility in these cases is that our sense of ourselves as agents requires that we take ourselves to have a domain of secure competence – namely, the actions that we are normally competent with respect to, and so even if we have a moment of incompetence, so long as there is no blocking factor (such as unconsciousness or physical barriers), we should hold ourselves responsible.

We could see this as psychological claim: we (psychologically) cannot go on thinking of ourselves as agents if we allow that we are vulnerable to random failures of rational agency. So we (psychologically) ‘must’ accept those into our zone of responsibility. Alternatively, we may see this as a constitutive claim – it is not that we are psychologically bound to accept responsibility beyond control in these cases, it is that part of thinking of oneself as an agent involves accepting responsibility. Given that the identity is unavoidable, expansive responsibility is validated.

My focus in this essay is whether there are other examples of expansive responsibility. It is a familiar thought that our identity as rational agents is inescapable, although of course what that entails is controversial. But why not allow that there may be identities that are optional – being a parent, being a friend, being an American – that could ground expansive responsibility? Of course, these optional senses of identity would need to be justified. If not, the account is vulnerable to the objection that we should abandon that sense of self – and we often do think that that is the case. If someone’s identity is problematic in some way, the psychological or constitutive baggage that comes with that self does not have any normative weight.

Identities such as ‘Proud Boy’¹⁵ are not ethically acceptable, so it would be odd to argue that such an identity can license expansive responsibility. If someone is taking too much (or too little) responsibility as part of their identity as a Proud Boy, the correct response is to argue that the identity is problematic, not that their responsibility taking is valid. However, that sort of example

¹⁵ An alt-right organization that came to national attention due to their role in the January 6th riots. <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/proud-boys>
They remain in my mind mainly because of the parodic responses: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/10/05/proud-boys-gay-men-use-twitter-reclaim-right-wing-group/3620924001/>

doesn't seem to get to the heart of the matter – it is not that the Proud Boy identity does not give rise to expansive responsibility because it is unethical – nothing about its being unethical causes a failure of the mechanism of expanding responsibility. It is rather that the case is not very interesting, because even if that sort of identity did license expansive responsibility, we would not take that as a more general validation of expansive responsibility. In what follows I will assume that the senses of self I am talking about are ethically (and psychologically and prudentially) permissible. But, as I shall argue below, there are more subtle ways that our senses of self can go wrong, and these flaws may block the step from sense of self to expansive responsibility.

The second question is about the link between the identity and the expansive responsibility. I think that Raz takes the link to be pretty tight: if you see yourself as a rational agent, you are bound to take responsibility for negligence, on pain of psychological self-defeat or perhaps practical irrationality. I am not sure exactly what Raz thinks the connection is, and I doubt that the connection is as tight as he thinks. But there may be looser connections between identities and expansive responsibility. What should we say about that? Would it be sufficient to justify expansive responsibility that an identity *permitted* it? So that, for example, some friends take expansive responsibility as a part of being a friend and others don't?

Furthermore, we need an account of what it is to go wrong. We have an intuitive sense that it is possible to go wrong – that someone can take too much or too little responsibility. But what is the link between an identity and a wider responsibility net? Is it just how people feel? Someone may say 'I am a mother, and on my conception of motherhood, I take responsibility for my child's actions'. But the right response is (usually) to try to convince this person that motherhood does not involve taking responsibility for everything one's children do.

So how do we delineate the space for taking responsibility? How do we draw the line between correct/permissible taking responsibility and cases where the agent has made a mistake – where the identity should change or the identity does not involve that sort of expansive responsibility. In this essay I will try to draw some of the lines, but mainly my aim is to convince the reader that there is such a space. We don't have to agree on the exact details of every case.

2. Sense of Self

Like Raz, Wolf and Dan-Cohen, I start from the widely shared idea that our sense of who we are is formed by our engagement with the world: it is not an innate or fixed thing. We are very familiar with the phenomenon of self-formation in general. Our identities are formed by our interactions

with the world – so we are British or American, both, or something in between; we are left-wing or right-wing, vegetarian or not, we have gender, class, race and so on. Furthermore, these things vary in the extent to which they are chosen. As we grow up we are able to notice and endorse or reject aspects of our sense of self. We can choose who to be to some extent.

However, although the sense of self is contingent and fluid, it is not the case that all senses of self are equally good. Some senses of self, such as the Proud Boy's, are unethical. Others are psychologically painful, and so imprudent. And there seem to be other, more complicated ways that a sense of self can be distorted: we can take on too much of something from the outside world, or not enough. For example, someone may fail to acknowledge the extent to which their privilege has shaped who they are. Or someone may over identify with their family's values and fail to develop their own. One's sense of self can be misformed, or misinformed or both. As Robert Adams puts it in his account of responsibility beyond control, it can be 'inappropriately alienated' to fail to identify with one's emotions, even if one's emotions and motives are not voluntary.¹⁶ Adams' point is that there is something like a standard of correctness for our sense of self. Alienation can be appropriate or inappropriate.

Consider excessive identification of sports fans with their teams. There are cases where clearly, the zeal of the fans is a sort of displacement: take the sectarian mania of football in the UK. The teams are not just teams, they are the Catholic team and the Protestant team, and the chants that accompany failures and successes are blatantly sectarian – no-one pretends otherwise. Let's leave that sort of case aside, my interest here is in a much tamer and more affable identification of fans with their teams. "We won!" shouts the Cowboys fan. Who is 'we'? On one level this sort of thing is harmless, we make it more fun for ourselves by taking on the identity of the team, by sharing in their success and failures. We raise the stakes in an imaginative exercise that we end up integrating into our own identity.

But it can go too far. Imagine a football fan, an immigrant to the US who watched the England men's team in the World cup final, losing to Argentina. As the deciding goal is scored, he, like all the other English ex-pats there, flings his hands to his face and howls. The usual banter is exchanged: 'we was robbed', 'we should have been awarded that goal in the first half'; 'horribly ref', and so on. And then people file out and go home, moving on to other more serious things. But our fan does not, he can't leave the bar, he orders another drink, he laments every minute of the game,

¹⁶ Adams 1985.

blaming other players and officials for the loss; he talks about 1966 (though he was not born), he becomes more and more morose, and falls into a black mood that lasts for days. Is this because England nearly won the World Cup? That's what he would say. But surely what is going on here is a sort of displacement, just as in the Sectarianism case but more individual and more hidden. Our fan is unhappy to be away from his family back in England; he doesn't really like the US; he is having a hard time adjusting to fatherhood, and so on. Instead of dealing with the problems head on, he inhabits tropes of masculinity, nationalism, and so on. Hence our judgment that his identification with his team is problematic: he should be *more* alienated from this aspect of his identity.

This example suggests a distinction between affiliation and activity as part of identity. Affiliations, are things like being an England fan, being English, being a Labour party member, and these can, of course, be important parts of people's identity. However, affiliation based aspects of identity get their content from an external source. Activities, such as a being a parent, being an athlete, being a philosopher, being a writer are aspects of identity that are primarily active – being a parent is not about following anyone else, or allegiance to any way of life or set of values – it is about raising these children one has, and there is no particular pre-defined way to do it. The distinction is not without overlap – some affiliations involve activities (being a fan involves attending the games played by your team), and some activities involve affiliation (as a writer I may be a member of a writer's union). But we can make a rough distinction between aspects of one's identity that are primarily an affiliation – such as fandom – and those that are primarily activity.

I don't have space for a full exploration of this distinction here. I am looking for senses of self that can give rise to expansive responsibility. My thought here is that it might be helpful to notice that activity based aspects of identity are a more promising avenue to follow, and that objections that are based on affiliation based aspects of self can be discarded. This is because alienation, or at least, some detachment, is appropriate in the case of affiliation based aspects of identity. My England fan above should take more distance from his affiliation. There is something inauthentic about his taking it on so strongly.¹⁷ Generally, we should be critical of our affiliations, and ready to back off if our team (or country, or political party) behaves badly.

There is a tension here with the idea that people should feel shame for what their country does. Shouldn't British people feel shame about Britain's history of colonization and brutality? The question of national identity is a complex one, but my own view is that both pride and shame seem

¹⁷ I return to the idea of authenticity below.

odd – confused identification with a nation state that leads to follies such as Brexit. The view I take of expansive responsibility need not justify affiliation based expansive responsibility. In what follows I am focusing on senses of self, and attendant expansive responsibility, that are activity based.

3. From Self to Responsibility

The next task for a defender of expansive responsibility is to show that some identities really do involve expansive responsibility – that it is not possible, or perhaps, not desirable - to detach the healthy parts of an identity from the tendency to take responsibility beyond control.

Of course, there will be different sorts of argument depending on the sort of identity and the sort of justification that applies. Take the psychological construal of Raz’s argument, on which the claim is that as a matter of psychological fact, we cannot function as agents unless we take responsibility for acts that fall within our domain of secure competence. That is an empirical claim, and I am not going to attempt to assess it here. It would be very hard to show that we really must accept responsibility for negligence in order to retain self-respect. By contrast, Wolf and Dan-Cohen both accept that taking responsibility can be optional.

Our sense of who we are and our sense of what we are responsible for are formed through our interactions with the world. The world reports back to us that we can generally expect to move our limbs as planned, and that we will be able to walk, lift things, speak, remember where the ordinary objects are, and so on. It also teaches us our limits. The world reports back to us that we humans cannot fly, that is we try, we will fall. But the world, of course, does not restrict itself to factual reports, the world is not a normatively neutral place. As Raz puts it, “...the process of shaping who we are is normatively driven, that is we form views of who or what we want to be in light of views of what people like us should be.” (239). This is where we run into trouble. Our sense of who we are, what we can be, what we are responsible for, can be distorted by ideology.

In other words, the social world is full of schemas for what people should be. These schemas are often problematic, constricting people’s life options on the basis of race, gender, class, and so on. Patricia Hill Collins talks about the ‘controlling images’ of Black women.¹⁸ The world expects ‘people like that’ to conform to certain roles, and this is a self-fulfilling prophecy: as social beings,

¹⁸ The same idea appears in Uma Narayan’s account of the ways that third world women are stereotyped (for example as ‘authentic insiders’), and in Elizabeth Cantor’s work on professional women (Cantor talks about ‘role traps’.)

we accept the expectations of others, and accept that conforming is natural.¹⁹ This is a familiar point from the literature on oppression and false consciousness.

Our conception of our own responsibility zone is subject to the same social forces. As Dan-Cohen puts this point:

“The assumption or denial of responsibility is an instance of self-constitution in which the self draws its own boundary by identifying with or distancing itself from a putative responsibility base. However, such assumption or denial of responsibility is shaped in anticipation of and in response to the ascription of responsibility by others. This reciprocal relationship between the assumption and the ascription of responsibility is mediated by the existence of widely shared social conventions and understandings regarding the attribution of responsibility, which are themselves articulations of a shared public conception of the self. The self’s modularity—the correspondence between socially sanctioned conceptions of the self and particular selves in that society—secures a high degree of fit between assumption and ascription of responsibility. But the fit need not be perfect. The ascription of responsibility may sometimes reflect an aspect of a shared public conception of self while ignoring the particular subject’s deviant self-constitution, or it can assume the individual’s perspective despite its departure from the socially sanctioned self.” (2002, 210).

Dan-Cohen points out that self constitution may be ‘deviant’ – that is, deviating from the world’s expectations. That is certainly true – someone can end up with a conception of their own self that does not match what the world says they should be – and as Dan-Cohen points out, we sometimes side with the world and we sometimes side with the individual. Dan-Cohen does not delve into the issue of why we side with one over the other – what makes it the cases that the individual’s perspective is distorted, or the world’s perspective is distorted. But I think these questions about the standards of correctness are interesting, and help to illuminate the general story about expansive responsibility.

When we side with an individual who rejects the world’s account of how they should be, it is often because we see that the world’s account is ideological and unjust. And, on the other hand, when we side with the world, it is because we think that the individual is at fault in not adhering to a

¹⁹ Sally Haslanger develops this idea at length in her work on social construction.

perfectly good schema. Of course, it may be that people who are subject to ideological responsibility attributions don't notice, so the question of siding with them doesn't come up. The issue here is not about adjudicating the disputed cases: we can take a step back and give a general theoretical account of standards of correctness from taking responsibility.

What I am trying to illustrate in the following examples is there are normative standard for taking responsibility, because there are normative standards for what sort of self we should have and what that involves. My argument is thus less ambitious than Raz's. It is not that we should take responsibility because we must, as agents, on pain of self-defeat or practical irrationality or anything like that. It's just that given certain aspects of identity, we are better people if we take responsibility, and we are more apt for social life. On the other hand, my argument is *more* ambitious than Raz's, because I countenance a much larger scope for taking responsibility.

4. Taking too much or too little responsibility

a. Motherhood

Feminist sociologists have coined various useful terms for the ways that women in our culture (Western patriarchal gendered culture) take too much responsibility in the family context.²⁰ Part of this is about taking on responsibilities, which is different, although related: women do the 'kin work', they do the 'emotional labor', the second shift', and so on. But in addition, women internalize the sense that they are responsible for their family. The phenomenon of "maternal guilt"²¹ is immediately familiar to anyone who is or has a mother. As Adrienne Rich puts it, 'the guilt, the powerless responsibility for human lives, the judgments and condemnations, the fear of her own power, the guilt, the guilt, the guilt'. (1976, 217). So how are these extra responsibilities and attendant guilt or shame at perceived failure to do as well related to expansive responsibility?

There are two ways that these phenomena are intertwined with expansive responsibility in my sense. First, maternal guilt feels like a response to failure to fulfil the perceived obligations. But if the perceived obligations are so demanding that it would be impossible to meet them, not meeting

²⁰ Sometimes people who are not women take the traditional mothering role – in some ways that is a step forward, but it would be better to transform the traditional mothering role. But even when men take equal responsibility for children in heterosexual couples there is a guilt gap (see Hays 1996). The details of the ideology of good mothering and attendant demands may vary with race and class, but the idea is pretty stable across women. (see Sutherland 2010).

²¹ See Rich 1976. The phenomenon is widely accepted by sociologists. See Sutherland 2010 for an account of the structural nature of the issue.

them is not controlled – it is not a matter of not trying hard enough. And this is typically the case with maternal guilt. Pressures to be successful in every domain, to have it all and be it all, are unrealistic. Failure is inevitable. If the world is telling women that that they have failed and they are accepting that, then they are accepting responsibility beyond control.²²

Second, there is a more complex way that the mother identity in our culture involves expansive responsibility. As Rich puts it, women have a “powerless responsibility for human lives”. The phrase is odd – what is powerless responsibility? I think that Rich is expressing something important here. It is the idea that although there is nothing that can actually be done, you are responsible. Contrast a less scary sort of responsibility – I am responsible for the coffee supplies in my dept. I have to keep an eye on the coffee situation, and buy more when needed. This straightforward. But being responsible for a human life is different. Of course there are some things I need to do as a mother – feed my children, clothe them, and so on. But there is a deeper sense in which I am responsible for my children. I am responsible in a sort of brute way. Their happiness or unhappiness is on me. I accept those things as being, not exactly part of me, but in my responsibility zone because they are so very essential to my sense of self as a mother.

Arguably, the first way of taking responsibility is inappropriate. Women should not feel guilty about all the demands that are ideologically laid on them. Women take too much responsibility. However, the second mode of expansive responsibility, accepting that one has ‘powerless responsibility’ for one’s children, does seem apt, although it too is responsibility beyond control. Imagine a person (I will imagine a man because that is more likely given the ideological forces we face) who does not accept powerless responsibility. His child is depressed, and he has done everything he can. His brother is also depressed, and he has also done what he can to help his brother, though of course his responsibilities to his brother are of a slightly different sort and magnitude to those he has to his child. So, he has done what he could in both cases – we can even say that he has gone beyond the call of duty and that he continues to be alert to opportunities to help. But, having done what he can, he does not have anything like guilt or shame. And there is no

²² It is important to add to this that mothering is seen as natural and central to a woman’s identity. Women must explain why they are not parents, but never why they are. Women without children are pitied as the default. (Poor old Jennifer Aniston!). Women are not praised for their parenting as fathers are (women are never described as “babysitting” their own children). So it is not that women walk into this world of ideological demands ‘of their own free will’.

qualitative difference between the attitude he has to his child and that he has to his brother – in both cases, he feels a lot of love and sadness, but, (precisely because he is powerless and knows it) he feels no responsibility for their depression.

Surely this man is getting parenthood a bit wrong. Not hugely – we meet people who take that sort of detached attitude all the time. But it is not the best way to be a parent. If your child is depressed you *should* feel something in the responsibility family, painful and pointless though it may seem. It's just part of the sort of love that makes sense in that context. The feeling that my child's happiness is my responsibility is persistent, even when I know there is nothing I can do. For most women who are mothers, (and for many fathers), this is inseparable from one's sense of self as a parent, connected to the particular children that are one's children.

These two different kinds of expansive responsibility – the inappropriate one that is related to ideology, and the appropriate one that (I argue) is a legitimate part of the parenthood identity – are easy to conflate. This is partly because the ideology of the family encourages women to take too much responsibility, and encourages men not to take enough. So when we look at taking responsibility through a critical lens, conscious of ideological distortion, it may look as though women always take too much responsibility, But, I am suggesting, powerless responsibility is an appropriate case of expansive responsibility.

Often, taking too little responsibility is an individual flaw rather than an ideological one. We all have friends who disavow responsibility for things that we think they really should be responsible for, including their own emotions and motives. This reaches comic proportions in the possibly apocryphal tale of a well-known and successful philosopher, who would say, 'I am an a-hole, but I have made my peace with that'. Having a bad character may not be something that is under our control, but it is something that we think is part of the self, and on the self-centered (so to speak) account of responsibility, we should take responsibility for our characters. The fact that that is enshrined in both our everyday moral practices and our legal practices of ascribing responsibility²³ suggests that the general thought that we should take responsibility beyond control is not as outlandish as it may first seem. One's sense of self ought to include self-criticism, and sometimes we ought to accept responsibility for aspects of ourself that we do not endorse. These are normative points.

²³ Being evil, being motivated in bad ways, being ruthless and so on are aggravating factors, not excusing factors. Of course there is disagreement about particular cases – for example, psychopathy, often treated as an aggravating factor but potentially more appropriate as an excusing factor. (see Fine and Kennett 2004).

My overall point here is that expansive responsibility doesn't always seem inappropriate. The real reason ideologically driven expansive responsibility is problematic is not that it takes us beyond control, it is rather, that it is ideological. It is not a healthy part of the relevant identity. This is just an extension of the idea that identities can be distorted by ideology. One of the ways that ideology distorts identity is by getting expansive responsibility wrong.

b. Fake Agency

Here is another example. When someone is in an oppressed group, their agency is limited and damaged by the social conditions they encounter. Oppressive social conditions typically contain a narrative about hierarchy – that some people are inherently worth less than others. Being told that your personhood is less valuable, less full, less agential than that of others is damaging. People survive by making various psychological adjustments, many of which involve accepting unjust circumstances by not recognizing or not focusing on the unjustness. I am not going to attempt a full account of false consciousness here, but rather, will focus on one aspect of false consciousness, which I call a tendency to fake agency.

The basic idea is very like Raz's account of responsibility for negligence. In Raz's story, we have to see ourselves as agents, and in order to do that we have to see ourselves as responsible for a domain of secure competence, even when competence falters. I think it is right that we have to see ourselves as agential,²⁴ and that in some cases where agency falters, it makes sense for us to be expansive about our own agency and responsibility.

We can observe this in real life, in cases where someone whose actions are, from the outside, caused by false consciousness, nonetheless insists on claiming the actions as her own. The sort of thing I have in mind is illustrated by Nancy Bauer's account of her women students' narratives about their sex lives. To sum it up rather brutally, the young women that Bauer talks to describe encounters that are clearly exploitative, and devoid of sexual pleasure for the women. However, the women report pleasure in their sexual and social agency in these encounters, indeed, in their power over men. Bauer diagnoses the issue as one of narcissism in Simone de Beauvoir's sense. Beauvoir gives us various examples of women in a sexist society, who hide the oppressive nature of their

²⁴ Though I don't think the 'have to' here is very technical. I mean that we will have a very hard time getting along in the world if we don't see ourselves as agential. So the 'have to' means something like, 'it is psychologically almost irresistible to'.

circumstances from themselves by playing the two-dimensional roles that are allotted to women. For example, women under patriarchy are seen as objects. Of course they know that they are not objects, but one way to escape the discomfort of being seen as an object and to enjoy a version of self-respect is to fall into narcissism, to make oneself the best object one can be.

These young women are seen as sexual objects by their culture, but they know they are not merely that. However, it is very difficult to escape the social expectations that are loaded onto social identities. So Bauer's subjects adjust with fake agency: they act the 'babe' role as if it were empowering, and pretend to themselves that they are the ones in charge, they create a narrative that puts them in control, so that they feel agential.

Another example of fake agency is the sort of toxic masculinity that occurs in men who are otherwise low down in an unjust social hierarchy. In a way this is just the mirror image of the narcissism described by Bauer. Young men congregating in groups in the street, raising their voices, cat-calling, and acting in vaguely threatening ways towards passers-by, are inhabiting a role they have been relegated to as they have chosen it, as if it is really their own agency. Often, their voices sound inauthentic – they are not fully convinced by their own performance. The situation is inherently unstable: like the narcissist's self-formed identity, the hyper masculine identity meshes with some aspects of the world, but not with others, and so the agent is bound to rub up against the bad fit at some points in their experience. They need to stifle the cognitive dissonance, and shout the story louder.

On my interpretation, what is going on here is that the subjects are taking expansive responsibility when they shouldn't. They are not fully agents in this situation. But that's a hard truth to face, so it is very natural to avoid it. And my claim here is not at all that it is their own fault – I am not talking about blame or culpability for taking too much responsibility. Generally, false consciousness (of which I take fake agency to be a species) is not blameworthy.

The phenomenon of fake agency is to be expected in a world of oppressive social hierarchies. And the problem goes very deep – the motives and emotions that arise in people living in unjust social hierarchies will be formed by those hierarchies. They feel like the real self. It might be objected that we should see these as we see the sorts of motive and emotion that Robert Adams talks about – we should accept them as part of ourselves and not be alienated from them. Motives and emotion are close to the core self, as Dan-Cohen puts it. But I think we can push back on that in this case. A self can be formed in ways that render alienation appropriate – the history matters.

Take the example of Monica Lewinsky. I think it is plausible to assume that her attraction to Clinton was genuine in one sense. As Catharine Mackinnon argues, heterosexuality is constructed as male power and female submission. So it is not surprising that powerful men are attractive to women. But in a different version of the story, Lewinsky might have detached herself from her own motives. She might have read MacKinnon, and decided that her feelings were not to be endorsed or acted on, that they were not part of her real self. And if someone in Lewinsky's position had had access to an informed and reflective account of the construction of sexuality, it seems likely that she would have disavowed her attraction to powerful men. That's not to say that she would have been able to get rid of it – just that she would not have seen it as an integral part of her self. In other words, not all the motives and emotions we find ourselves with need be accepted as part of the self and thus in our responsibility zone. We can apply normative standards to which ones we incorporate.²⁵

I have been arguing that if a sense of self is formed by oppressive circumstances we should be cautious: ideological forces distort a sense of self. I have argued for this by describing the way that an ideologically formed self takes responsibility in the world, and pressing the point that we agree this is too much responsibility. The declaration of agency rings hollow, despite many of the behaviors meeting the traditional control and intention conditions.

Of course, there may be other cases of problematic identities where a sense of self seems 'inauthentic' that are nothing to do with oppression. People develop inauthentic sense of the self through individual quirks and flaws, as my England fan does. People can be grandiose, or mean; self-martyring, or too intellectual about their responsibility.

Additionally, it seems plausible that we could theorize other general tendencies to inauthenticity that are simply explained by the human condition. Take Sartre's account the phenomenon of refusing to see one's own situation clearly, and instead hiding behind the role one plays. To be in 'bad faith' is to refuse to acknowledge that our choices are self-forming. In one of his examples, a waiter performs his role with obsequious fervor, but the role is merely a role, and the waiter is merely paying at being a waiter, hiding his real situation from himself. He doesn't have to be a waiter, but that thought may be terrifying. As Sartre recognizes, forming a self in a clear headed way is not easy. Being in the world is complicated.

²⁵ This is not a full account – we would need to fill in the details of how the norms work here. This would be part of a full theory of false consciousness.

c. Individualism

I will very briefly mention a parallel area where expansive responsibility comes up. Another example of the tendency to take to little responsibility is familiar from political philosophy. An individualist account of the self lies at the heart of the view that we have no or few obligations to others. We also see this enshrined in the law, which is focused on the centrality of an individual's *mens rea*, and has trouble accommodating collective responsibility and complicity.²⁶ If we think of an expansive self that incorporates social relations as close to the core, these forms of responsibility are not so puzzling. This is Iris Marion Young's point in *Responsibility for Justice*. Her account of a social connection model of responsibility can be read as an account of taking responsibility beyond control. For Young, we are essentially social beings, and although our actual sense of self may be unfortunately constricted by the individualist ethos around us, we (ethically) ought to have a more expansive sense of ourselves and what we are responsible for.

One of Young's concerns is to argue that we *do* have power to do things to alleviate the suffering of distant others. That right and important, but for my purposes it is interesting to see that the responsibility we have as citizens of the world may often be 'powerless responsibility' in Rich's sense. By that, I mean that is independent of particular obligations and opportunities to improve anyone's situation. The fact of responsibility comes with a sense of the self as communal. Lots of people lack that sense of self, and lots of people argue that there is no reason to have that sense of self. I am not attempting to refute them here. Rather, I am suggesting that there may be sensible things to say in defense of the idea that we should have a communal sense of self, and that if we do, we are admitting that there is expansive responsibility.

5. Taking the Right Amount of Responsibility

Despite the pitfalls of being in the world, I think that there are examples where, intuitively, an identity successfully licenses expansive responsibility. I think that one's identity as a parent can license expansive responsibility. Friendship is another example that I have discussed at length elsewhere.²⁷ I have argued that in cases of inadvertent harm, the friendship is better served by expansive responsibility than narrow responsibility. As I see it, expansive responsibility is not inescapable here, it is a choice the agent makes. If I accidentally harm my friend, I can look at my act and decide to explain to her that my true self was not in the harm, because I did not do it

²⁶ These are the issues that Dan-Cohen is interested in.

²⁷ See Mason 2019a and 2019b.

deliberately. Alternatively, I can decide to allow that harm into my conception of things I did, things that reflect who I am, even though they were not done deliberately.

I will not give a detailed account of the arguments I give for the preferability of taking responsibility in this sort of case. There may be different sorts of friendship, or different sorts of friend. But in some cases, in some friendships, expansive responsibility is helpful. The basic thought is that the person who has been harmed needs the harmer to acknowledge the harm done, and the best way for the harmer to do that is to accept it as something they *did* – to resist the urge to detach the act from their self. I can see the counterargument: that in fact it would be better for the friendship for the harmer to make clear that the harm was not deliberate, that it in no way reflected bad will towards their friend. But for my purposes here this disagreement doesn't matter. If my interlocuter can countenance the sort of argument that I offer, if they think it worth replying with considerations in terms of what stance would be best, then my underlying point as been made – considerations about the health of the friendship can affect responsibility.²⁸

Here is another example that I discuss elsewhere. It might be that respect for others sometimes requires taking responsibility.²⁹ Imagine that I treat someone in a way that is caused by my implicit bias. Of course, there are different accounts of bias, and according to some, we are responsible for bias through a tracing strategy. Let's leave that sort of view aside, and take biased action as a case of inadvertent action. It may be that it makes sense to take responsibility.

Again, a skeptic about the whole project will simply insist that responsibility stays in the zone of the controlled and is not up for grabs for what they will think of as the wrong kind of reason. Here, we need to go back to the sort of thing we might take responsibility for. The skeptic's worry is much more pressing as we move away from the core of self. But as Wolf, Dan-Cohen and Raz all stress, the self is not a neatly defined and delineated thing. We have some leeway in how much we include. Once we think of the self as central, controlled actions are not particularly special. They may be nearer the core, but they are not a radically different sort of case to cases where actions are not controlled. This is the thought at the heart of all the accounts of expansive responsibility that I discuss here, though the different authors express it in different ways. We think of actions that spring from our will – our decisions – as 'controlled', but of course we do not control what sort of

²⁸ I am going to assume that my interlocuter and I agree that we are not just talking about what it might be helpful to *say*. Rather, we are talking about whether we should accept expansive responsibility in this sort of case.

²⁹ See Mason 2020.

will we have. When we reflect on the truth of determinism, we can lose our grip on the idea that control marks off a special category. So, yes, we think of controlled actions as being ours, but we could think of other actions as being ours too. Given that gradual decreasing density, other reasons can come into play in deciding (or *post facto* justifying – as of course the process is not always one of decision) whether something springs from part of the self or not.

The reasons that function here are related to being in the world. We form a sense of self through our interactions with others. As we move through the world, our we need to have certain sorts of relationship with ourselves and others. These relationships may not *require* expansive responsibility, but sometimes they are better for it. A friend, or a parent, who does not take expansive responsibility may be good enough. They may have other virtues. But surely a friend, or parent, who does take expansive responsibility is a good friend or parent because of that. On the other hand, there are distorting influences too – being in the world is messy. Sometimes, we internalize expectations about what we should be that are problematic.

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