

John Doris *Talking With Our Selves*

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### **Negotiating Responsibility**

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#### **Abstract:**

I argue that John Doris should apply his dialogic or collaborationist approach to agency more fully to questions of moral responsibility. To do so he must discard his form of pluralism which aims to accommodate a variety of theoretical approaches to responsibility in favor of a pluralism that rejects theorizing about responsibility altogether.

#### **Main Text:**

In Part I of *Talking To Our Selves* John Doris marshals impressive evidence to challenge “reflectivism”, the view that human agency consists in judgment and behavior ordered by self-conscious, accurate, reflection about what to think and do.” (p.17) In Part II Doris outlines an alternative account – the “dialogic” or collaborationist” view – which holds (a) that agency involves the expression of human values, and (b) that we express and discover our values through an ongoing social process: via conversation, rationalizing, apologizing, feeling guilty, grateful, angry, forgiving and so forth. “Human beings living in groups,” Doris writes, “shape their lives not as isolated reflectors, but as participants in an ongoing negotiation—a negotiation that simultaneously constrains and expresses who they are.” (p. 148) Agents, he concludes, are negotiations.

Others are better qualified to comment on the evidence Doris mounts against reflectivism. I found Doris’s criticisms compelling, and don’t find the conclusion nearly as depressing as many of my fellow philosophers. Indeed, the dialogic account seems both more attractive and better coheres with my own experience. My criticisms will focus on how Doris applies the dialogic account to questions about moral responsibility.

For Doris, responsibility involves agency, and since agency involves expressing values, morally responsible behavior is behavior that expresses the agent’s values. Since we often don’t know if an act expresses an agent’s values, we can be agnostic about the agent’s responsibility in those cases, or try to learn over time where the agent stands. Doris notes as well that many actions (infidelity, for example) often express more than one conflicting value. He argues that we bear greater responsibility for wholehearted actions than we do for our ambivalent or conflicted actions. He even concedes that in certain cases reflective deliberation might also be necessary for agency. In those cases reflective deliberation might be required for responsibility as well. Doris calls himself a pluralist about both agency and responsibility, though he clearly favors the dialogic view.

Philosophically-minded critics are likely to complain that Doris' account is too indeterminate, pluralistic, and messy. My complaint is from the other direction - I don't think Doris is being indeterminate, pluralistic, and messy enough. Doris, I'll argue, should steer his dialogic approach deeper into the realm of responsibility judgments. To do so, however, he must discard his form of pluralism which aims to accommodate a variety of theoretical approaches to responsibility in favor of a pluralism that rejects theorizing about responsibility altogether.

Doris takes a step in the anti-theoretical direction by embracing a broadly Strawsonian view of responsibility, which associates responsibility judgments with the range of interpersonal reactive attitudes, such as resentment, gratitude, forgiveness, love, guilt, and pride. But Doris pulls back when he concedes that the attitudes and practices "don't carry all the normative weight that might be desired." And he gives up the game entirely when he claims that the way to establish normative authority "is by reference to theory." Attributions of responsibility, Doris writes, only have normative authority when they can be seen "to have a rationale sufficiently compelling to serve as a justifiable guide to thought and action." So even though Doris understands responsibility judgments via the reactive attitudes, he accepts the challenge "to identify compelling theoretical grounds for when and what reactive attitudes are appropriate."

Strawson himself doesn't make these concessions. He insists that the general framework of reactive attitudes are simply given with the fact of human society. Consequently, the framework "neither calls for, nor permits, external "rational" justification." (Strawson, 1962, p. 23). Strawson offers no necessary and sufficient conditions for appropriate instances of the reactive attitudes; he believes that our actual human attitudes and practices get the final say. According to Strawson, requiring theoretical grounds to justify the reactive attitudes "overintellectualizes the facts" about responsibility. So on this issue (and only this issue) Doris overintellectualizes the facts. And this is unfortunate, because Doris' account of agency is very much in the spirit of a truly Strawsonian approach to responsibility.

To see what I mean, consider cases in which an agent's behavior doesn't express his values at all. One example Doris discusses involves a father who accidentally leaves his sleeping child in the car on a hot day, resulting in the child's death. Since acts like this don't involve the expression of values, Doris is inclined (with certain caveats) "to eschew attributions of moral responsibility for slips." My inclination, in contrast, is to resist making generalized responsibility judgments about such cases at all. I don't think it's the philosopher's business to cast judgment on the father's responsibility. Rather, it's up to him, his family, and their community to arrive this determination.

To make the issue more concrete, consider a similar kind of case from the recent film *Manchester by the Sea*. (Mild spoilers to follow.) At the beginning of the movie, the protagonist Lee Chandler (played by Casey Affleck) is clearly burdened with tremendous pain and guilt, but we aren't sure for what. We learn the answer in the middle of the film. One night, eight years earlier, Lee had been drinking with a group of friends at his house. At 2am his wife Randi sent his friends home for being too loud, concerned that they would wake the kids. Too wound up to sleep, and too drunk to drive, Lee decides to walk to the nearest 24 hour grocery store to get a six pack of beer. His wife has been sick, and the heating system dries out her sinuses, so their wood fire was the only source of heat. Lee leaves the fire going to warm the house, but forgets to put the screen on the fireplace. A log rolls out. When

he returns from the store, the house is on fire. His wife is rescued but their three children burn to death in the house.

On Doris' account, Lee would not be morally responsible for the deaths of his children. His act was a terrible accident that did not express his values in any way. Lee himself, we learn, emphatically rejects this verdict. During his confession at the police station, Lee is shocked and angered that the officers won't charge him with a crime. He wants to be held responsible, he wants to be punished. He thinks it's *right* for him to be held responsible and punished. His wife Randi is similarly disinclined to let Lee off the hook – at least in the weeks following the incident. And the same seems to be true for most of the people in the small town of Manchester where they live.

A few things to note about the case. First, the relevant facts aren't in dispute. Nobody thinks that the act secretly reflected Lee's values. Nobody thinks it was the result of deliberation or reflection. They're aware of the facts, but they hold him morally responsible anyway - especially Lee himself. Second, Lee would take absolutely no consolation from a "not responsible" judgment issued by a theory of responsibility. It would mean precisely nothing to him. The only verdicts that matter to Lee are the verdicts of his wife, family, friends, and neighbors. And that seems right in this case. Why should philosophers or theories get to determine Lee's moral responsibility for this tragedy? Why shouldn't we leave it up to Lee, Randi, and the people who are involved in the situation to arrive at – to negotiate - their own responsibility judgments based on what they regard as relevant to the situation?

Agency is a negotiation, Doris claims. Responsibility is often a negotiation too. Not one between compatibilists, incompatibilists, and other responsibility theorists. It's a negotiation between the participants, the people affected by the action. Accepting this means accepting indeterminacy about responsibility, accepting that there are multiple plausible outcomes even under similar or almost identical circumstances. Perhaps if Lee and his wife had different temperaments, or if they lived in a different town, or if they were more religious, or less religious, they might arrive at a different verdict. Maybe Randi could find a way to forgive Lee, and Lee might even eventually forgive himself. That could be a plausible outcome of negotiation too. Indeed, perhaps the most tragic element of *Manchester by the Sea* isn't that Lee is held morally responsible for an accidental slip. The tragedy is that he is so grief stricken that he *shuts himself off from dialogue*. He shuts himself off from negotiation. In a haunting scene eight years after the tragedy, Randi asks Lee to have lunch. She wants to apologize for some of the things she said to him after the incident. But Lee is too broken at this point to continue the dialogue.

Philosophers at this point might be tempted to pounce. *You see?* If only Lee had accepted our theories, he would have understood that he is not technically blameworthy for what happened. But let's be honest. No theory would have a prayer of influencing him on this, nor should it. For Lee to be moved at all by such considerations, they would have to come from a friend, a family member, or perhaps a priest - not from philosophical busybodies and their theories. For Lee to arrive at a different verdict, it would come through dialogue and negotiation with participants

I suspect that Doris will have a great deal of sympathy with the view that I've sketched out here. Indeed, he may claim that it's consistent with his *pluralism* and *variantism* about responsibility (see pp. 171-177). But as I suggested above, Doris' brand of pluralism and variantism is designed to accommodate the normative authority of multiple theories, rather than deny their authority entirely. A thoroughly dialogic approach would resist the urge to offer an account with "all the normative weight

that might be desired.” The participants in relationships must provide the normative authority, or at least most of it.

Does this mean that philosophers have no role to play in evaluating the appropriateness of moral responsibility judgments? Not at all. There’s great value in identifying and describing common trends embedded in our responsibility practices and their associated attitudes. Philosophers (and responsibility theorists from other fields) can also call attention to the mistaken empirical assumptions that people often have concerning agency and control. This is what Doris does so well in Part 1 of *Talking To Our Selves*. This would not count as busybody theorizing if the mistaken empirical assumptions lead people to make responsibility judgments that are false *by their own lights*. What philosophers should resist is the temptation to theorize about how it is rational or appropriate to feel about this new information. Indeed, Doris’ dialogic account of agency points the way towards a principled source of resistance.

### **References**

Strawson, P. F. (1962). Freedom and resentment. *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 48, 1–25.