Responsibility from Antiquity to the Middle Ages

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Keywords
voluntary, cause, blame, punishment, freedom, fate, determinism, choice, consent, will, god, sin.

Abstract
In antiquity, a variety of different notions are used to capture human responsibility but not all thinkers construe these notions in the same way. While Aristotle uses cause, voluntary, and what is ‘up to us’ to capture aspects of responsibility, Plato uses only the language of cause. For Stoics, Epicureans, and later Aristotelians, the crucial notion for capturing responsibility is what is ‘up to us’, although the Roman Stoic Epictetus is an exception, using ‘up to us’ to capture an ethical ideal that many responsible agents do not achieve. Plotinus has a similarly normative notion of what is up to us, which he links to the Platonic conception of voluntariness; like Plato, he uses the language of cause to articulate questions about responsibility. While worries about the compatibility of responsibility with determinism emerge over the course of antiquity, neither then nor in the medieval period are they the primary focus of accounts of responsibility. Medieval thinkers attribute our control to our capacity of will (whether alone or in conjunction with our intellect) although they disagreed sharply about the precise nature and function of that capacity. Their interest in responsibility extended not just to theoretical explorations of human nature but also to practical philosophy, in particular, spiritual assessment and therapy.

1 Introduction
‘Responsibility’ is sometimes used in English in a very general sense to invoke the relation in which causes stand to their effect; we may call this ‘causal responsibility’. Responsibility in the more specific sense of concern to this essay is a feature of human
agency. Agents who are responsible for their actions in this narrower sense are answerable or accountable for them, praiseworthy or blameworthy for them, open to moral evaluation in the light of them, and perhaps also to reward and punishment (on the differences between these aspects of responsibility, see Watson 1996). Responsibility in the distinctively human domain is sometimes called ‘moral responsibility’ – a characterization that some have claimed has no application in antiquity, either because morality itself is a distinctively modern notion (Williams 1985) or because ancient discussions of responsibility were not restricted to a specifically moral domain (Cooper 2013, Echeñique 2012). To sidestep this controversy, we will eschew the label ‘moral’ when discussing responsibility in these pre-modern thinkers.

The responsibility of concern to us encompasses both Verantwortung and Zurechnung in German and responsabilité in French. Our concern is with the roots of this notion of responsibility in antiquity and the middle ages.

2 Responsibility in Antiquity

In western Antiquity, questions about responsibility are formulated primarily in the vocabulary of the voluntary (to hekousion), of what is ‘up to us’ (to eph hêmin) or ‘depends on us’ (par hêmas), and by a variety of causal notions, including archê (source, principle), aitia (cause, explanation, charge), the cognate adjective aitios, and the cognate verb aitiasthai (to accuse, assign responsibility). These terms are used differently by different thinkers, however, and not always to articulate theses about responsibility. The vocabulary of cause (aitia, aitios) may have originated to assign culpability (Frede 1980, p. 223), but its use is not specialized to human agency, and even when such notions as the voluntary and ‘what is up to us’ us are restricted to the human domain, they do not always invoke responsibility.

2.1 Plato

For example, Plato (430-347 BCE) uses aitia and its cognates ubiquitously throughout the grand cosmological discourse of the Timaeus, which states the causes (aitiai) of virtually every aspect of the physical world. In the same work, however, he also uses
these terms in the narrower sense that invokes the responsibility of concern to us, when he claims that the divine creator is *anaítios* (not responsible) for the evils that humans bring upon themselves (42d-e) – a theme he reiterates in other works (*Republic* 617e, *Laws* 900a, 904a-905c). When he seeks to assign responsibility of the sort we are interested in, he employs the verb *aitiasthai*, usually to indicate who is to blame (*Euthyphro* 15b, *Gorgias* 518d-519a, *Theaetetus* 168a, *Republic* 460a, 489b) but also, on occasion, who is to be given credit (*Rep.* 599e, *Theaetetus* 150e, *Philebus* 65a).

Plato does employ the notion of the voluntary in the notorious Socratic paradox that ‘no one does wrong voluntarily (*hekôn*)’ or that ‘a bad person is bad involuntarily (*akôn*)’ (*Protagoras* 345e, 358c-e; *Gorgias* 509e; *Laws* 731c, 734b, 860d-e). But he is not talking about responsibility in these contexts. The reasoning behind the Socratic paradox is that we all want what is good (*Meno* 77b-78b), and so if we do what is bad, we are acting out of ignorance, and incurring precisely the opposite of what we really want (*Gorgias* 468d). Plato’s point is to exhort us to cultivate knowledge of the good, not to defend or exculpate wrongdoers (Meyer 2006, pp. 149-150). In only one place does he draw a conclusion about responsibility from the Socratic Paradox. After explaining in the *Timaeus* that a person who develops a vicious character does so ‘involuntarily’ (*akôn*), he concludes that the person’s ‘parents and nurturers’ rather than the person himself are to be held responsible (*aitiateon*) for that outcome (86d-e). This is the only Platonic text in which conclusions about responsibility are inferred from the Socratic paradox, and it is significant that it concerns responsibility for developing a vicious state of character, not responsibility for performing a vicious action (Meyer 2014).

Plato shows no interest in deploying the Socratic paradox in order to exculpate human beings for their bad behavior, choices and the consequences thereof. Indeed, nowhere in the Platonic corpus does he seek to exculpate wrongdoers. It is a recurring theme throughout his work that those who perform wicked deeds are justly punished for doing so, and he resoundingly rejects any attempt on their part to disclaim responsibility (*Timaeus* 42d-e, *Republic* 612e-619e, *Laws* 904a-905c; see McKenzie 1981). Thus the
famous refrain in the myth of Er: ‘responsibility lies with the one who chooses; the god is not responsible’ (aitia tou helomenou; theos anaitios -- Republic 617e). Responsibility for action and voluntariness are quite different things for Plato.

2.2 Aristotle

The ordinary distinction between acting *hekôn* (voluntarily) and acting *akôn* (involuntarily) in Greek usage of Plato’s and Aristotle’s time (Rickert 1989) does not map directly onto the distinction between being responsible and being not responsible for an action. Sometimes it distinguishes between intentional and unintentional actions; thus Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother *akôn* (Sophocles, Oedipus at Colonus 964). But it can also mark a distinction, within intentional behavior, between actions performed wholeheartedly and without reservation and those performed reluctantly and under duress, as when a messenger delivers bad news *akôn* (Sophocles, Antigone 274-7). In the latter cases, responsibility is not at issue. While Oedipus may disavow responsibility for patricide on the grounds that he acted *akôn*, the messenger who delivers bad news to the king *akôn* does not thereby disclaim responsibility for the delivery; he only expresses his reluctance.

We have seen that Plato’s interest, when he invokes voluntariness, is primarily with the latter way of drawing the distinction. Aristotle (384-322 BCE) by contrast, is interested in the former way of drawing the distinction; thus voluntariness for him is closely connected with responsibility (Meyer 2006, 2011; Cooper 2013). He develops a philosophical account of voluntariness that both resolves the ambiguity in the ordinary notion of voluntariness and resists the Socratic Paradox (*Eudemian Ethics (EE)* ii 1-6, *Nicomachean Ethics (EN)* iii 1-5; Bywater edition). He takes the defining mark of a voluntary action to be that it has its origin (*archê*) in the agent who knows the particular facts (facts concerning what one is doing, not whether it is good or bad). Thus actions performed under duress or constraint count as voluntary, even if they are performed unwillingly. And agents whom the Socratic Paradox counts as involuntary (since they do
not know that what they are doing is bad) are voluntary on Aristotle’s account (since they do know what they are doing). His definition of the involuntary, by contrast, retains its traditional connection to the unwilling: he specifies that involuntary action must be painful to the agent or regretted, in addition to being not voluntary; thus Rowe 2002 translates *akousion* as ‘counter-voluntary’. It turns out, for Aristotle, that the distinction between what is and isn’t voluntary (*hekousion*) is not the same as the distinction between what is and isn’t involuntary (*akousion*). The former distinction is most directly relevant to questions about responsibility, and it is the focus of Aristotle’s account of voluntariness.

When Aristotle defines voluntariness, he aims to capture the conditions in which agents are the cause (*aitios*) or the origin (*archê*) of their actions and thereby merit praise, blame, reward, or punishment (*EE* ii 6; *EN* iii 1). He indicates that actions of which we are the cause (*aitios*) or the origin (*archê*) are ‘up to us’ (*eph hémin*) to do or not to do (*EE* ii 6, *EN* iii 5). While later interpreters often take the latter phrase to mean that human actions are contingent, or not determined by antecedent causes — for example, Alexander of Aphrodisias — Aristotle simply means that such actions are in our control, or depend on us (Frede 2014, Meyer 2014; for the contrary view see Broadie 1991, Destrée 2011). Unlike his successors in the Hellenistic period, he does not face the question of whether determinism is compatible with our actions being ‘up to us’. He does famously reject a thesis to the effect that ‘everything happens by necessity’ on the grounds that the ‘origins’ of our actions would go back indefinitely and deliberation would be ineffective (*Metaphysics* vi 3, *De Interpretatione* 9). However, he does not thereby reject causal determinism, since he takes the rejected thesis to be false as long as there are accidental occurrences and these, on his account, can be fully determined (Aristotle, *Physics* ii 4-7; see Sorabji 1980, chapter 1; Meyer 1993, pp. 156-161; Donini 2010, pp. 29-50). Nor is Aristotle concerned with whether our choices are ‘free’ or ‘up to us’; it is our actions that he insists are up to us (Bobzien 2014; see also Rapp 1995).
2.3 Early Stoics

It is only with the development of Stoicism, founded in Athens by Zeno of Citium (332-262 BCE), that there arises in the Western tradition anything like modern worries about whether responsibility is compatible with determinism. According to the Stoic thesis of fate (*heimarmenê*), everything that happens, including human action, is the result of antecedent causes (Bobzien 1998, pp. 16-58; Meyer 2009). Nonetheless the Stoics insisted, against the objections of their Epicurean and Academic opponents, that our actions ‘depend on us’ (*par hêmas*), or are ‘from us’ (*ek hêmôn*). It is not clear that the early Stoics used the vocabulary of ‘up to us’ (*eph hêmin*) in these contexts, rather than *par hêmas* or *ek hêmôn*, but their Aristotelian opponents evidently did (Bobzien 1998, p. 280; Eliasson 2008, pp.45-118; Gourinat 2014, pp.142-147 ). We will use ‘up to us’ to translate all three locutions. The Stoics and their opponents agreed that our actions must be up to us if we are properly subject to praise and blame, or evaluated as virtuous and vicious. They disagreed about whether our actions could have this status if they were due to antecedent causes. This is clearly a debate about responsibility.

The Academic Carneades (214-129 BCE) articulated the objection to Stoic fate as follows, according to Cicero’s report (*On Fate* 40): (1) if our actions have antecedent causes that our not in us, then the actions they cause are not in our power (*in nostra potestate*). (2) If our actions are fated, they are due to antecedent causes that are not in us. So (3) if our actions are fated, they are not in our power. The Stoic Chrysippus (281-206 BCE) replied by rejecting (1). He distinguished between two kinds of antecedent causes: those that are ‘perfect and principal’ and those that are ‘auxiliary and proximate’. Only antecedent causes of the former sort would make our actions not up to us, he claims, while those invoked by the doctrine of fate need only be of the latter sort. To illustrate his point, he invokes the difference between the cylinder, which rolls in a straight line when pushed, and a cone, which rolls in a curve when given the same push. The push is only the ‘auxiliary and proximate cause’ of these motions, since these depend on what the body is like (conical or cylindrical), not simply on the push. (On this argument see
The application to human action is clear: while human actions are typically precipitated by external factors (antecedent causes), our response to those external factors (that is, whether we act well or badly) depends on what we are like; it is not wholly due to externals. Thus, the Stoics argued, our actions can be up to us even if they are fated.

2.4 Epicureans

The atomist Epicurus (341-271 BCE) disagreed. Our actions must not be fated if they are to depend on us (par hēmas), he claims, for what depends on us is ‘without a master’ (adespoton; Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus, 133-4), perhaps in allusion to Plato’s famous phrase in the myth of Er ‘virtue knows no master’ (Republic 617e). Epicurus was also concerned to show that the actions that are par hēmas are not simply due to atomic motions, or to our ‘initial constitutions’; rather, he says, they must be due to our ‘developed’ (apogegegnêmenon) nature (On Nature 25). As the later Epicurean Lucretius (99-55 BCE) explains, such actions are performed in pursuit of what we find pleasant, rather than under compulsion or constraint. Lucretius calls these cases of libera voluntas (often given the misleading translation ‘free will’) and he indicates that a swerve at the atomic level is necessary in order to secure this freedom (On the Nature of Things, 2.251-293). The Epicurean swerve was roundly ridiculed in antiquity as an ‘uncaused motion’ (Cicero, On Fate 22), and it is controversial what role Epicurus thought it played in making our actions par hēmas: does every instance of voluntary behavior require a different swerve? And if so, is the swerve the cause of the behavior (Purinton 1999) or its effect (Sedley 1983)? Or need there only be a single swerve or a small number of swerves over the course of one’s life (Furley 1967) or one’s character development (Bobzien 2000, 2006)?

For Aristotle, Epicurus, and the Stoics, the crucial question for responsibility is whether our actions are up to us, not the more modern question of whether our choices or our decisions are up to us (a point emphasized by Bobzien 1998a, 2014). The Stoics also
argued that our passions (emotions such as anger, delight, grief, and the like) are up to us— a prominent theme in the writings of Seneca (*On Anger* 2.1.4). But this is because they construed the passions as experiences we undergo because we assent to them, and assent is what distinguishes our actions from passive movements or reactions (see Graver 2007). All actions, the Stoics claim, are caused by assent to an impression (see Brennan 2005, pp. 51-61). In effect, the Stoics consider emotions to be a kind of action.

### 2.5 Epictetus

While the earlier Stoics claimed that our actions are up to us, because they issue from our assents, the later Roman Stoic Epictetus (55-135 CE) goes the further step of claiming that our assents can be up to us. But in doing so, he is not talking about responsibility. He famously insists that the only thing that is up to us is ‘the correct use of impressions’ (*Discourses* 1.1.7)—that is, to assent to true impressions. He uses the term *prohairesis* to refer to our assents or decisions (Sorabji 2007 p. 87; Wildberg 2014 pp. 339-340), and puts forth the ideal of a *prohairesis* that is *eleuthera* (free) (*Discourses* 3.5.7). Michael Frede has proposed that this is the first occurrence in the western tradition of the notion of a ‘free will’ (Frede 2011, pp. 76-85); and many have read Epictetus as invoking the kind of free choice that figures in modern debates about the compatibility of determinism and responsibility (e.g. Bonhöffer 1890, p. 259; Dobbin 1991). However, being free and up to us, as Epictetus uses the notions, have nothing to do with responsibility or the freedom associated with indeterminism. Rather, these notions, as employed by Epictetus, invoke the absence of impediment and constraint, a condition that a person achieves only by being virtuous (see Wildberg 2014 pp. 340-344). For the Stoics, the virtuous person does not care about external success, which is measured in wealth, health, reputation, and the like and is subject to chance and so not wholly in our control. The virtuous care only about making correct choices in pursuit of these external objectives. If you have chosen correctly, and according to Stoic principles, then you will always get what you desire, and never be forced to sacrifice one valued objective in order to preserve another. This is the ideal that the Stoics consistently label
‘freedom’ (*eleutheria*) as in the slogan, ‘only the wise are free’ (*Arius Didymus, Epitome of Stoic Ethics* 2.7.11i). Epictetus’ innovation on this front is to construe ‘up to us’ in terms of such freedom. To say that our correct assents are up to us is *not* to say that we are responsible for them (as argued by Salles 2014), but rather that such choices, in virtue of their correctness, are immune to impediment or frustration by factors beyond our control. This is not to ascribe to humans quite generally a faculty of free choice (for such a faculty would belong to the good and bad alike), but rather to advocate for the life of virtue. In this respect, Epictetus’ notion of what is up to us is like Plato’s conception of voluntariness: it does not demarcate the domain of responsibility. Where Epictetus does consider questions of responsibility, he uses the vocabulary of cause (*Discourses* 1.28.30; see Salles 2005 pp. 91-110).

2.6 *Alexander of Aphrodisias*

It is only with the later Aristotelian philosopher Alexander of Aphrodisias (2nd century CE) that the central question about responsibility is construed both as a question about what is up to us (*ephēmin*), and as whether our choices or decisions are up to us. (Alexander *On Fate* 180-181, Sharples 1984, Bobzien 1998a, Frede 2011). Alexander claims that our actions are not *ephēmin* unless we have the capacity ‘both to choose and not to choose’ the course of action we take, and that we do not have the latter capacity if the Stoic thesis is fate is true. While he accepts the Stoic position that our actions are up to us because we assent to them, he insists that this is the case because our assents issue from deliberation, and deliberation presupposes that the very same agent, in exactly the same circumstances, is capable to choosing otherwise than she actually does—a presupposition that the Stoics insisted would involve uncaused motion (Alexander, *On Fate* 185.7).

2.7 *Platonism*

With the emergence of Platonism as the dominant pagan philosophy in late antiquity we find a reversion to the Socratic Paradox. Plotinus (205-270 CE) emphatically and
repeatedly endorses the proposal that only the virtuous person acts voluntarily (Ennead 3.1.9-10, 3.2.10), insisting against Aristotle that knowledge of what one ought to do, not simply knowledge of what one is doing, is necessary for voluntariness (6.8.1, 3). Action that leads one away from the good is involuntary (4.8.5, 6.8.4). He endorses a similarly restricted notion of what is eph hēmin. Only the actions of the virtuous are ‘up to them’ or autexousion (autonomous). In contrast to Alexander of Aphrodisias, who uses autexousion and eph hēmin to invoke responsibility, Plotinus uses these terms to invoke an ethical ideal very much like the freedom (eleutheria) that Epictetus attributes to the virtuous. For Plotinus, the virtuous soul is not affected by bodily concerns, and its natural intellectual activity is unimpeded. The vicious soul, by contrast, is impeded and constrained by the corporeal world, and it partakes neither in autonomy, the voluntary, nor in what is ‘up to us’ (see Eliasson 2008, Linguiti 2009).

But even though Plotinus thinks only our virtuous actions are autonomous, voluntary, and up to us, he does not deny that we are responsible for our bad actions. Indeed, he explicitly denies that the Socratic Paradox exculpates the wrongdoer. Even if wrongdoing is akousion, he insists, wrong-doers still act par autôn (of their own accord, 3.2.10; 3.2.4); ‘even if going toward what is worse is involuntary (akousion), the soul goes by its own proper motion (phora ...oikeia)’ and its experience of the worsened condition constitutes its ‘punishment (dikê) for what it did’ (4.8.5). Plotinus concurs with Plato in claiming that souls are rewarded and punished in the afterlife for the good or evil deeds they have performed, and that these consequences are justified as appropriate responses to that behavior. ‘They should not demand to have happiness, if they have done nothing worthy of happiness’ (3.2.4). ‘If those who have not become godlike do not have a godlike life, what is wrong with that?’ (3.2.5). Plotinus, like Plato, insists that it is not the god who is responsible for the bad consequences of human choices, but the human souls themselves, and he quotes with approval from the myth of Er: ‘responsibility lies with the one who chooses’ (aitia helomenou; 3.2.7; Republic 617e). While other Platonists, such Plotinus’ student Porphyry, will use the language of
eph hêmin to describe the soul’s responsibility for its choice when interpreting this same passage in Plato (Taormina 2014, p. 273; Eliasson 2008, pp. 119-167), Plotinus does not.

When Plotinus is talking about responsibility, he uses the vocabulary of cause, accusation, and blame (aitia and aitiasthai) —the same vocabulary that Plato deploys for this purpose. Also like Plato, he does not use the vocabulary of voluntariness to refer to responsibility. In contrast to Plato, however, Plotinus writes after many centuries of Stoic philosophy, and one mark of this legacy is that he has to face the question about the compatibility of Stoic fate with human agency. Here Plotinus is an unequivocal opponent to Stoic fate, and insists that ‘the eph hêmin will be a mere name’ if the Stoic thesis of fate is true (Ennead 3.1.7). However, unlike the participants in the earlier debate about Stoic fate, including earlier Platonists such as Plutarch (46-120 CE), he does not use eph hêmin to invoke responsibility (on Plutarch, see Eliasson 2008, pp.130-141). Plotinus’ point is not that responsibility is precluded by fate, but rather that fate leaves no room for virtuous action, specifically, for the autonomy and independence for which he reserves the label eph hêmin (3.1.7-9). When he quotes with approval from Plato’s myth of Er ‘virtue has no master’ (aretê adespoton) (Ennead 6.8.5), it is not the human faculty of choice or action, but the perfected state of that faculty, that he indicates is immune from causal influence.

3. Responsibility in Medieval Philosophy

In the medieval worldview, humans occupy a special place in the cosmos. Alone among animals, humans are responsible for some of their volitions as well as for certain events and states that result from those volitions. If an agent is responsible for some act or other event, that act’s particular moral character (for instance, of justice, generosity, cowardice, or impatience) is imputable to the agent. On this view, agents are responsible regardless of whether anyone actually holds them responsible or whether it is useful to hold them responsible. Nevertheless, responsibility for good or bad actions does render agents deserving of honor or scorn, reward or punishment; and indeed,
most medievals hold that in the afterlife God will reward or punish people only for their responsible actions and only to the extent that they are responsible.

Medieval accounts of responsibility are driven by multiple concerns, some of which we would now label philosophical, some of which we would label theological. First, the medievals seek to explain why rational creatures—and not God—are the sources of sin in the world. In general, medieval thinkers argue that the world is created by a provident God who gives all creatures their natures. Some of those creatures, those that are rational, grasp the moral law and sometimes sin by acting contrary to it. If those sins result from some element in their nature, they would be imputable to God. However, since medieval philosophers argue that God is perfectly good, sin must originate not in any natural capacity but in human agency. Second, medieval thinkers attempt to explain human nature, to articulate what makes human beings distinctive as beings that bear the image of God. One such distinction is that we are responsible, and so exploring the basis of this particular dignity took on great importance. Third, the soul’s condition—its state of progress toward or regress from the ultimate good—is measured by the degree to which the goodness or badness of what it does is imputable to it. Hence, judgments of imputability play an important role in moral self-examination and are not exercises in what is sometimes called “mere grading.” Through these judgments we gain a sort of self-knowledge useful for staying on the path of righteousness leading to eternal happiness.

Most medieval moral thinkers addressed the topic of responsibility. In what follows, we treat five of the most influential philosophers in the Latin West whose writings advanced the discussion in the period between Antiquity and the Renaissance. Most early medieval thinkers do not explicitly treat the issue of whether responsibility is compatible with causal determinism. It is only in the late 13th century that the topic is treated clearly and regularly. Of the thinkers treated here, only Scotus offers a clear and unambiguous discussion (identifying himself as an incompatibilist), although there is
good reason to think that Anselm is also an incompatibilist (Visser and Williams pp. 184-185). Aquinas, by contrast, is often read as a compatibilist (Irwin 2007 pp. 489-491).

3.1 Augustine

Developing ideas about volition from both ancient philosophy and Biblical texts, Augustine (354-430 C.E.) articulates what is usually taken to be the first explicit theory of will (Kahn 1988 p. 235, Dihle 1982; cf. Frede 2011). This will, working with the intellect, constitutes the human being’s control center through its capacity to grant or refuse consent, and this control renders us responsible. We are not responsible for what lies outside our control, such as the various “suggestions”—roughly, what the Stoics called “impressions”—that occur to us as we negotiate our way in the world. These suggestions present potential objects of consent as attractive or repugnant in any number of ways (Byers, chapter 4). Ordinarily, it is not in our power to prevent these suggestions from occurring to us. Therefore, even when they serve as temptations to perform evil deeds, we are not responsible for them and they do not constitute sins. We sin only when we consent either to linger in the pleasure these suggestions bring or to perform the actions they represent, since this consent marks a disordered desire stemming from our control center. Carrying out the deed adds no further badness, since it adds no further commitment to the evil action than that expressed by consent (De sermone domini 1.12.34, De Genesi contra Manichaeos 2.14.20-21). However, once we perform a sinful deed, we will find ourselves psychologically less reticent to doing so again.

By mid-career, in response to Pelagian concerns, Augustine begins to question the extent to which consent is in our power (Wetzel 2009). He continues to hold that we are responsible only for what we can resist (De libero arbitrio 3.18.50) and that “nothing but the will itself makes the mind a slave of lust” (De libero arbitrio 3.1.2), since nothing outside our will compels us to evil consent. We therefore maintain sufficient control for us to count as morally responsible beings. However, original sin leaves humans in such
a condition of ignorance and difficulty that we all eventually succumb to sin: Our clouded thoughts and wayward desires make it hard to delight in what is genuinely good, and without that delight we cannot be motivated to pursue it. Hence, we fall quickly and inevitably into sin. Repeated sins eventually forge sinful habits, which in turn leave us with an overwhelmingly powerful and unconquerable cupidity (Ad Simplicianum 1.1.10). If we do not fall completely into moral corruption, we will end up at best with a divided will. Augustine paints a famous portrait of himself in this condition, on the one hand wanting to follow God and live virtuously, yet burdened with the conflicting will, born of his sinful habits, to pursue his this-worldly lusts (Confessions 8). In this condition, he cannot avoid living a morally defective life. While some good acts of consent may still be open to him, he cannot consent to follow God, a necessary condition of a rightly ordered life. Therefore, Augustine’s divided will inevitably results in his sinning. Augustine finds that it is only by divine grace that humans may be freed from the inevitability of sinning.

Although Augustine comes to hold that we sin inevitably, he never rejects his early definition of sin as “the will to retain or pursue what justice forbids when one is free to refrain from doing so” (De duabus animabus 11.15; Retractationes 1.15.4)). However, if our will is corrupt or divided, we lack the power to act rightly because we will not be acting out of wholehearted love for God. As Augustine writes Ad Simplicianum, he first posits that we still have the power to act rightly because we have the power to pray for God’s help. On the assumption that God will be merciful, we may conclude that it is indirectly in our power to avoid sin. However, as he develops his ideas in this work, he changes his mind, holding that it is only by the gift of grace that we can will to be delivered in the first place (Ad Simplicianum 1.2.22; Wetzel 2012, p. 341). In that case, we must understand the “sins” we commit in our wretched condition as stemming from a lack of control and agency, a just punishment for our misdeeds, a condition from which we can escape only if we are freed by the grace of God (Retractationes 1.15.4).
3.2 Anselm

While Augustine presents the first explicit account of the will in philosophical literature, his exploration remains unsystematic and leaves the will’s nature and its precise function in our moral psychology unclear. Drawing on Augustine’s foundation, Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) develops a fuller account of the will meant to offer clear answers to the questions about responsibility most important to medieval thinkers. Having created the world out of nothing and ordered it according to his will, the Christian God might appear to be morally responsible for all that happens, including the sinful actions of rational creatures. Sensitive to this concern, Anselm begins his dialogue De casu diaboli with St. Paul’s pointed question, “What do you have that you did not receive?” (1 Cor 4:7). Not only our very being, but all our capacities and the exercise of those capacities are gifts from God. Anselm therefore undertakes to explain both the capacities beings must have to be capable of morally responsible volitions and the conditions under which they—and not something external to them—are authors of those volitions.

Anselm follows tradition in calling the capacity to elicit free volitions “free choice” or liberum arbitrium, which he defines as “the power to preserve rightness of will for its own sake” (De libero arbitrio 3). The aptness of this innovative and initially puzzling definition becomes clear in his dialogue De casu diaboli, in which Anselm presents an account of responsibility that rests on a moral psychology that breaks with the eudaemonist tradition of antiquity. According to Anselm, the will does not have a single basic tendency to pursue happiness. Instead, it has two fundamental tendencies: One inclines it to happiness or advantage, but the other inclines it to justice. In a famous thought experiment of an angel whose will is built by stages, Anselm explains why a creature whose will is directed in just one of these ways could not be free or morally responsible (De casu diaboli 12-14). An angel that has no actual volitions cannot move itself to have volitions; its first will, therefore, cannot be from itself. By “first will,” Anselm does not mean an actual volition but a directionality or tendency to a certain
range of goods. Suppose, then, that God creates an angel and gives it just the tendency toward advantage. This angel would not be free because it would will only its advantage, and since its will has no countervailing tendencies, it wills advantage maximally. As a result, all the will’s activity results from natural necessity. If the angel receives only a will for justice, it wills only what is just out of natural necessity. In both cases, the angel’s activity will be entirely God’s doing, since it will necessarily act on tendencies instilled in it by God. It is only when the angel receives both wills that it becomes free and responsible. While it is still the case that God gives the angel all that it has, including the exercise of its will, the angel now determines for itself what and how it wills.

If rational creatures have the power to preserve rightness of will for its own sake, then they have the power for self-initiated action (Visser and Williams pp. 178-185). Their volitions are not determined by their nature, for that would destroy their agency; rather, Anselm understands this power as an undetermined capacity to elicit volitions in keeping with either the tendency to justice or to advantage. Because each tendency is a gift of God, rational creatures become agents—that is, act in ways that they determine for themselves—and responsible for their volitions only when the two tendencies can be seen as leading to different goods (De casu diaboli 23).

3.3 Peter Abelard
Like Seneca and the early Augustine, whose ethical thought deeply influenced him, Abelard (1079-1142) holds that our mind’s power of consent allows us to exercise control over our activities and create our moral character. Because we have such limited control over our wants and temptations, we are not responsible for them. We are, however, responsible for how we react to them. We sin and are blameworthy if we consent to what they incline us toward; but if we struggle and overcome the temptation, the temptation becomes an occasion of merit (Ethics 12: 22-24). Moreover, Abelard argues that the “external” deeds we perform have no moral value of their own. After all,
for any deed type, such as a killing, a particular instance might be sinful, meritorious, or morally neutral. We can say that deeds are morally good or bad, but those claims mean only that the consent that gave rise to them was good or bad. Therefore, only acts of consent are determinants of responsibility.

Abelard develops an account of sin designed to eliminate any possibility that sin is due to bad moral luck. We sin, he argues, when we consent to what we believe to be unfitting. Hence, even if the act we perform is not actually unfitting—that is, contrary to virtue or God’s will—but we believe it to be, we still sin because we commit ourselves to opposing virtue or God. Likewise, if we erroneously believe that a course of action is permissible when it is actually unfitting, we do not sin as long as our error is not the result of negligence. In such a case, it is simply bad luck that we find ourselves in error.

3.4 Thomas Aquinas

Aquinas (1224/6-1274) investigates the topic of responsibility both as part of his theoretical exploration of human nature and as an important consideration in passing judgments on our progress in avoiding sin and living virtuously. These two concerns are connected. We are responsible for our acts and volitions because we, not nature, control them. This control is what elevates human nature above that of the other animals and constitutes God’s image in us (Summa theologiae I-II Prologue). In addition, this control makes us capable of the sort of virtue that results in a flourishing life and can merit eternal happiness with God. Therefore, Aquinas pens his account of responsibility with an eye to advising us on how we can evaluate our progress toward virtue and happiness. While Aquinas often acknowledges a debt to predecessors as varied as Augustine, Aristotle and his many commentators, and scholars of canon law, his treatment is striking for the ingenious way in which it integrates his original contributions with his sharp and often creative interpretations of these earlier thinkers. Each power in the human soul seeks some object naturally and therefore necessarily, and the will is no exception. However, what nature necessitates us to will is not any
particular object but only the good in general and our happiness in general. To establish that this natural necessitation does not extend to our particular choices, Aquinas explains that two sorts of causes move the will: formal and efficient. The intellect serves as the will’s formal cause. It judges certain objects good and conducive to happiness as the agent conceives it. The agent’s will naturally consents to those objects and, if no better alternatives are found, will select them. The intellect therefore furnishes each act of the will with its form or character. Because it is in our power to focus on select aspects of any object and therefore judge it to be either suitable or unsuitable, there is no object that necessarily moves our will to desire it. The single exception is the vision of God had by the saints, which no one can misconceive as unsuitable in any respect. Aquinas further explains that the will moves itself as an efficient cause: By willing an end, the will moves itself to desire further objects that are conducive to that end. However, we determine those further objects through deliberation, which is not a demonstrative form of reasoning. By weighing alternatives and considering them from various points of view, we determine for ourselves which objects to select. Therefore, as long as our capacity for deliberation is unaffected by a mental disorder, we remain free and responsible for the particular objects we will (Summa theologiae I-II 9.1, 10.1, 10.2; Quaestiones disputatae de malo 6).

Aquinas recognizes factors that can impede the functioning of free choice and thereby limit our agency. Because one of his chief interests in exploring the topic of human agency and responsibility is to instruct agents (perhaps through their confessors and advisors) on how to correct moral flaws and live worthier lives, we need to be able to diagnose our moral conditions accurately and treat them effectively. If we commit sins because of factors that limit our agency, then that is grounds for lighter punishment and calls for less stringent correction (Summa theologiae I-II 73.6). One such factor is passion, which focuses our sensory cognitive powers, in particular, the imagination and estimative powers, on a limited range of objects seen in a certain light. Because our reason depends on these sensory powers to understand and pass judgment, passion
hampers reason’s capacity to weigh alternatives and thus judge accurately. Our judgment and the choice following from it are therefore less free, and we are accordingly less responsible (Summa theologiae I-II 77.1). Likewise, ignorance can affect the degree of our agency. If we perform a bad act A that we would not have performed if we had had the relevant knowledge but we are not morally bound to have that knowledge, then act A is entirely involuntary. By contrast, if we are morally bound to have that knowledge, then our failure to acquire it resulted from our own faulty planning. Aquinas concludes that because we had indirect control over performing A because we had control over whether we remained ignorant, we are responsible for A. However, because at the time of action we also lack the capacity to make fully informed judgments and that incapacity results in our performing an act we would otherwise have avoided, our agency is diminished and we are less responsible for performing A (Summa theologiae I-II 76.4).

3.5 John Duns Scotus
Aquinas’s account of free choice and responsibility remained controversial throughout the Middle Ages: While Godfrey of Fontaines (d. c.1306) advanced views congenial to Aquinas, Henry of Ghent (d. 1293) and Peter John Olivi (c. 1248-1298) insisted that free will and responsibility require that our wills be determined not by the intellect’s judgment but only by themselves. The influential John Duns Scotus (1265/6-1308) develops the views of Henry and Olivi in a particularly sophisticated way, arguing that a position such as Aquinas’s fails to show that the will is not necessitated and therefore fails to establish that we are morally responsible for what we will and do. Scotus identifies an intellectual appetite as an appetite whose nature is to pursue happiness and that responds only to considerations relevant to that pursuit. According to Scotus, Aquinas characterizes the will in just these terms. However, such an appetite, Scotus maintains, would be passive (Ordinatio 3, d.33, q. un., n.6): When our intellect presents an object judged to be most suitable for the attainment of happiness, the intellectual appetite would always naturally desire it. Our volition would therefore not be up to us
but due to nature, since neither the appetite nor the intellect would be self-determining powers. Since our actions would be explained by the intellectual appetite’s natural inclination to causally determined judgments about where happiness lies, there is no room for human agency and therefore no responsibility. Responsibility, he counters, requires more than a mere intellectual appetite: It requires a will, a unique active power that remains undetermined by any innate natural inclination, habits, or external causal influences. Despite any intellectual judgment about what is worth pursuing, it is up to the will to follow the intellect’s judgment, to pursue an alternative, or to refrain from acting entirely. Scotus names the will’s unique capacity to determine itself “the indeterminacy of superabundant sufficiency” (*Questiones super libros metaphysicorum* 9, q.14 n.31) and notes that there is no explanation for why the will has it. It simply does, and that is what differentiates it from every other sort of active power (*Questiones super libros metaphysicorum* 9, q.14 n.22).

Drawing on Anselm, Scotus links freedom of the will and responsibility to the will’s two affections: the affection for advantage and the affection for justice. Much as Anselm had argued earlier, if the will had simply an affection for advantage, it would not be free: By its nature, it could will only what was maximally advantageous. It would still be an intellectual appetite, since it could respond to our intellectual conception of what is advantageous; but it would not be a rational appetite, that is, one that can determine itself to various alternatives. However, when Scotus explains how the affection for justice affords the will its freedom, we can see that his account is strikingly different from Anselm’s (King 2010; Williams 2010). The two affections are not tendencies that can be added to or taken from a faculty of will. The affection for advantage just is the will insofar as it is the intellective appetite and the affection for justice just is the will insofar as it is free. Scotus calls the affection for justice the “primary moderator” (*prima moderatrix*) of our affection for advantage, one that allows us to pursue what is right over our advantage (Ord. 2 d.6 q.2 n.49). However, in asserting that the affection for justice is the will as free, Scotus is not claiming (despite its name) that this affection is a
tendency whose formal object is justice and which thereby allows us to pursue what is just rather than simply our advantage. In fact, he contends, we may choose an act that is neither just nor maximally to our advantage. What makes this sort of choice possible is the affection for justice, which just is the will’s innate freedom.

3.6 Responsibility as Answerability

In this chapter, we have focused on the notion of responsibility that ancient and medieval philosophers focus on and make their greatest contributions to. In post-medieval philosophy, and in particular in Kantian moral philosophy, a “second-personal” account of responsibility emerges (Darwall 2009). According to this conception, we may hold people responsible for their good or bad deeds under certain conditions (e.g., we stand in a certain relationship to them, we have a stake in the beneficial or offensive action they’ve performed, the benefit or injury is significant, and we are therefore, at least typically, due a certain response). When we praise or blame them, on this conception, we are not simply passing a judgment on their moral condition. We are acting with a certain force. While the medievals did not emphasize this account of responsibility, it nevertheless plays a role in their work. However, we will not find it treated together with the dominant conception in discussions of free choice, consent, what is in our control, sin, and merit.

The first heading under which we find this secondary account of responsibility is that of anger. Aquinas, for instance, characterizes righteous anger as an irascible passion that stirs us to the preservation of justice and the correction of sin, in particular when God or neighbor has been injured or dishonored. Because of our stake in the matter—our community with God and neighbor—and the seriousness of the offense, we respond with anger, which seeks to inflict punishment (which might be no more than an apology or the endurance of the angry response itself). This is not simply a judgment of imputability; we are conveying a message of injustice and issuing a demand for a response. Yet another way in which we hold each other responsible according to a wide
range of medieval thinkers from Augustine through Ockham is by neighborly or “fraternal” correction. When we see our neighbor straying from the path to the right end, if we are the right person to make a correction, stand a good chance of success, and are motivated by love for neighbor and not self-glorification, we should take our neighbor aside and offer correction. In this case as well, we are not simply making a judgment of imputability but are acting with a certain force and, if not demanding, then at least inviting a certain response. This secondary account of responsibility remained limited in medieval thought, however. Philosophers cautioned against using anger to protest wrongs against oneself, instead counseling patience and forgiveness in those cases. They also sought to impose significant restrictions on the conditions under which one could engage in neighborly correction. By contrast, the medievals held all human beings have an obligation to tend to their moral progress, and to fulfill this duty they needed the dominant conception of responsibility in this period, one that would help them understand how to atone for sin and gain merit.

4. Bibliography


