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Book Review

The Stubborn System of Moral Responsibility

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***The Stubborn System of Moral Responsibility.* Bruce N. Waller. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. 2015. 287 pp. + preface and index. \$38.00 hc. ISBN 978-0-262-02816-5**

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Bruce Waller is known for his work on the issues of free will and moral responsibility. This work is not a defense of his well-known position that our current worldview leaves no room for moral responsibility and the acceptance of this leaves room for a better understanding of freedom (see *Freedom without Responsibility*, 1990, and *Against Moral Responsibility*, 2011). Here, Waller addresses the issue of the bedrock nature of the belief in moral responsibility. As he states:

The purpose of this book is to show that the deep fixity of belief in moral responsibility

is explained by factors other than the existence of good reasons to believe in moral responsibility. The moral responsibility system is stubborn, but it is not stubborn because it is plausible; rather, it seems plausible because it is stubborn (263).

What makes the belief in moral responsibility so entrenched that no matter the arguments against it, people are more likely to give up their own arguments than to give up their belief in moral responsibility? Why are we so quick to say it is absurd to deny moral responsibility even if there is no philosophical argument to support it? One thing to note at the outset is that it is not just the “folk” that Waller is discussing, but philosophers as well (if not more so). Why is the philosophical belief in moral responsibility stronger than the philosophical arguments for it?

As with many philosophical debates there is always the “what do you mean by that” question. There is no shortage of philosophers who argue for a new conception of ‘moral responsibility,’ show previous conceptions to be wanting, and it is theirs that does the most work in establishing agents as morally responsible. Waller does not survey options in order to show that theirs are incorrect and his correct as one might expect. Instead he argues that in attempts to demonstrate there is an embedded desert-entailment in those accounts, a move from bad to blameworthy, which is left unexplained. It is often taken that one’s being blameworthy is due to one’s actions being bad, but this is not blameworthiness in the sense of being justly deserving of blame and punishment (30). There is an ambiguity in ‘blameworthy’ that goes unexplored. Waller argues that the question is not whether one is blameworthy, but whether punishment/reward are *justly* deserved on nonpragmatic grounds. The stubbornness of moral

responsibility is rooted in the stubbornness of moral responsibility being a matter of just deserts.

The issues, arguments, and literature that make up the stubbornness of just deserts moral responsibility Waller covers in just one book is impressive. Waller covers considerable ground: retributive or “strike-back” emotions; the connection between moral responsibility and one’s *right* to feel anger and resentment; the cognitive effects of the unconscious belief that the world is orderly and just; the belief that denying responsibility deadens our emotional lives; nonconscious choices; the confidence humans have in reason and the psychological limits on that very reason; the seemingly inseparable connection between freewill and moral responsibility; that as science proceeds it will be discovered that external causes account for all behavior and so we will excuse behavior; that the necessity of punishment does not entail it is justly deserved punishment; the neoliberal culture and its rejection of societal causal factors; and the narrow focus we place on the individual when addressing responsibility even when the causal factors lying beneath are more pervasive. The belief in moral responsibility is tightly tangled in a big web. No matter how one attempts to defend moral responsibility, you will see how it is connected with some portion of that web. Ranging from philosophy to psychology to biology to political science, one’s interests in this issue are very likely covered in this book.

While different chapters are going to appeal to people for different reasons, I will focus on topics out of two—belief in a just world (Chapter 4) and that investigations into the causes of our behavior have to be already approved by the system (Chapter 12).

The belief that the world is orderly and just has a long history. Much religious writing coincides with or is based on this belief. But religion aside, the belief that the world is ordered and just is necessary for a core idea in moral responsibility—you could have done otherwise. The world is structured in a way that in order to justify punishment, you need some power (freedom) such that you could have chosen otherwise in those conditions. If one could have done otherwise, then she can be justly praised or blamed. We do not need this belief to punish, we need this belief to *justify* punishment. But there is a deeper reason. At the heart of the belief in a just world is the belief that wrongs will be righted, virtues rewarded, and justice prevailing (62). While this is something that psychologists have studied in depth, it is largely absent from the philosophical literature. When we consciously entertain this belief we are quick to point out it is false, but when we look at it as a nonconscious, nonreflective belief, we quickly see how powerful it is. The belief in a just world allows humans to confront the world as if it is stable and orderly, as if good things will happen to good people and bad things to bad people. This allows people to avoid a feeling of helplessness (63) and also can provide an explanation as to why people will blame innocent victims when we cannot easily restore the situation to a state of justice (64-66). But that's just the folk, right? Not so quick. Philosophers, according to Waller, are just as likely to hold this belief. Consciously, philosophers will generate counterexample after counterexample to this. Unconsciously, philosophers assume that the world is such that we can live a morally good life or meet our moral obligations. Even contemporary philosophers believe this when, for example, they rely on self-efficacy and talents. Thoughts of equal opportunities and moral equilibrium are rooted in the belief of a just world. This is not just a simple delusion of which we can recognize and move past, it is something much deeper.

Belief in a just world is not just an unconscious motivator, it is at the root of the “ought implies can” principle. According to Waller, accepting a non-stipulative version of “ought implies can” requires that one believe “all our moral obligations are within our power to perform” (71). This is a claim about our moral world. While there may be counterexamples to the principle, they do not weaken our acceptance of the principle. Why? In a just world, ought should imply can. It does not seem fair that there are things that I am morally obligated to do that I cannot do. If I could fulfill my obligation, then I am blameworthy for failing to do so; and this is simply a feature of our moral world. Furthermore, our acceptance of “ought implies can” underlies our belief that there is a “plateau” of moral development, a place where we are roughly equal, the world is fair and just (74-75). While different philosophers will articulate the plateau at different levels with different criteria, there is always the belief that the world is just and ordered. This puts moral responsibility defenders in a position where they either accept that this fundamental belief is problematic and accept that this helps undermine moral responsibility, give an account of how the world is in fact a just world, or show how this unconscious belief does not undercut moral responsibility. I suspect the latter more common. One might argue that this can be recognized and accepted into the system perhaps placing further limits on the plateau of moral development. However, by attempting to accommodate this one would lose the work that the belief does in the web. This belief lays the conceptual framework for judging future cases. The belief in a just world underlies moral judgment making not just in the present but for any case in which I act or evaluate others. While Waller states that denying the belief in a just world is a “small step” in rejecting moral responsibility, it is a key step.

In Chapter 12, Waller argues that belief in moral responsibility acts as a check against inquiries that might threaten the system. As with the belief in a just world, this is not a conscious belief, it is a feature that is built into the system itself. Moral responsibility functions by blocking the examination of psychological and sociological causes that might explain behavioral differences (235). What is blocked is anything that might shake our confidence in just deserts moral responsibility. This is illustrated in attempts to reject human nature, stresses, and motivations in criminal justice; and in attempts to defend plateau-style arguments where, once met, agents are moral equals. We are not to look for differences that challenge the system.

On the face of it, this worry is not about the system of moral responsibility, but of the assumptions a few defenders make in defending it. However, it is not the belief itself, it is the belief in the system of argumentation that is being used. When Waller talks of the golden mean of responsibility, he is referencing a system of reflective equilibrium (though Waller does not talk in these terms) where evidence of external causes are balanced with the claims essential to maintaining moral responsibility. One's beliefs about moral responsibility are already so entrenched that any evidence that there are some external causes of the agent's behavior are going to be seen as throwing equilibrium off and as such will be ignored. Once this happens over time, I assume, we become habituated to ignore any evidence, the system will preserve itself. All questions of the moral responsibility system will be asked in terms of the preservation of the system. Any investigation into causes can only go as far as to lead to system-approved causes (251). While this is a very interesting argument, Waller does not give the same level of defense as he does throughout the book. Rather than demonstrating instances of it, I wished Waller had given us

more on the empirical literature. While more evidence may be desired, Waller does present an argument moral responsibility defenders need to take seriously.

Waller has contributed a great deal with this book. Every chapter is a wealth of information on the philosophical as well as psychological, sociological, biological, etc. literature. This work also fits in exceptionally well with his other work on the issue of moral responsibility, but does not require the reader know those works. Whatever one's interest in or approach to the moral responsibility debate is, there is a chapter you should look at and work through. This book is original, insightful, well-argued, and engaging. I cannot recommend this book enough.