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Moral Entanglement: Taking Responsibility and Vicarious Responsibility

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ABSTRACT

Vicarious responsibility is sometimes analysed by considering the different kinds of agents involved—who is vicariously responsible for the actions of whom? In this paper, I discuss vicarious responsibility from a different angle: in what sense is the vicarious agent *responsible*? I do this by considering the ways in which one may *take* responsibility for events caused by another agent or process. I discuss three senses of taking responsibility—accepting fault, assuming obligations, and fulfilling obligations—and the forms of vicarious responsibility that correspond to these. I end by explaining how to judge which sense applies in a given case, based on the degree of (what I call) *moral entanglement* between the agent and what they should take responsibility for.

1. VICARIOUS RESPONSIBILITY

I take *vicarious responsibility* to mean an instance where an agent is responsible, in some sense, for the outcome of some agential or non-agential process, such as another agent's actions or the behaviour of an autonomous system. The agents concerned could be either individuals or collectives. This phenomenon is familiar in everyday life, but often obscured in philosophical discussion of moral responsibility, which typically concentrates on cases where the agent is

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directly—i.e., non-vicariously—responsible for something, in order to get clear on issues such as the nature of blame or the role of control or reasons-responsiveness. Given the ubiquity of vicarious responsibility in our lives, this philosophical neglect is unfortunate.

One way to approach the phenomenon of vicarious responsibility would be to examine the different kinds of agents and processes involved. An individual agent could be responsible for (1) another individual's actions, or the (2) actions of a collective. A collective could be responsible for (3) the actions of an individual or (4) of another collective. An agent could be responsible for (5) the behaviour of an automaton. Or an agent might be held responsible for (6) the actions of their ancestors or predecessors. Finally, an agent could be held responsible for (7) a process in the development of their character over which they had no control—resulting in a kind of self-reflexive vicarious responsibility. These possibilities and a brief example of each are provided in Table 1. The results of this general approach include analyses such as Larry May's view of corporate responsibility (May 1983), Deborah Johnson's discussion of responsibility for the behaviour of computational systems (Johnson 2015), and Leonie le Sage and Doret de Ruyter's account of parental responsibility for the actions of children (le Sage and de Ruyter 2008).

TYPE	EXAMPLE
(1) Individual–Individual	A parent’s responsibility for the actions of their offspring.
(2) Individual–Collective	A citizen’s responsibility for the actions of their country.
(3) Collective–Individual	A corporation’s responsibility for the actions of a rogue employee.
(4) Collective–Collective	A university’s responsibility for the actions of the philosophy department.
(5) Agent–Automaton	An agent’s responsibility for the outcomes of an autonomous computer system they deployed.
(6) Agent–Historical	An agent’s responsibility for past wrongdoing committed by an individual or collective to which the agent is related in some significant way.
(7) Self-reflexive	An agent’s becoming responsible for their own moral development.

Table 1. Types of vicarious responsibility.

However, this way of dividing up the conceptual landscape obscures another issue that cuts across these distinctions, namely, *in what sense* is the vicarious agent *responsible* for the behaviour of the other agent or process? For, in each of the seven types above, we could ask, is the agent an appropriate target of blame on account of their vicarious responsibility, or are they blameless yet still morally required to do something in virtue of their connection to the event? For example, the parent of someone who commits a crime might be to blame if they somehow put their offspring up to it—but even if they didn’t, we would still expect that a parent would respond to their offspring’s crime in a way distinctively different from an observer. To put it another way, even though the parent is not responsible, in the sense of being to blame, they still seem to be required to do something to *take* responsibility.

In this paper, I discuss vicarious responsibility by way of the notion of taking responsibility. I distinguish three main senses of taking responsibility—accepting fault, assuming obligations, and fulfilling obligations—and connect each of these to a different sense in which the agent might be or become vicariously *responsible*. In the final section, I suggest that each of these senses of taking responsibility and of being vicariously responsible can be understood as

different degrees of *moral entanglement*, which describes the extent to which one's identity and agency are connected to the events for which they should take responsibility.

2. THREE CASES

To orient the discussion to follow, I will make use of three examples of vicarious responsibility. These correspond to lines (1), (2) and (6) in Table 1.¹

2.1. Individual–Individual

Alex is the father of a troubled teenage daughter, Betty, who commits an armed robbery, injuring several people and damaging property. Suppose that Betty's agency has not been compromised in any way—she has not been coerced, nor does she have a mental disorder that affects her capacity for responsible action. Nor is Alex to blame for her behaviour: he did not pressure her to do it or drive her to criminality through poor parenting. Yet, Alex is wracked with guilt for Betty's actions. He blames himself for her crime, and repeatedly ponders how he might have been able to prevent it. He apologizes to those affected and offers to help with medical and repair bills, saying that he feels he must 'take responsibility' for his daughter's actions.

2.2. Individual–Collective

Celia is a citizen of a democratic country with a powerful military. Claiming to be striking pre-emptively on their enemies, the country's hawkish national government invades a small foreign nation rumoured to be building nuclear weapons. As the war goes on, journalists find that the invaded nation had no nuclear facilities, and that the invading army is responsible

¹ I do not have space to discuss an example of each of the seven types, but I contend that the topic of this paper cuts across all seven types of vicarious responsibility equally.

for various war crimes. Celia is not to blame for any of this. She is not a government official or military service member, and did not even vote for the party in power. Nevertheless, she feels shame for her country's actions. She joins protests and donates to relief efforts in the invaded nation, saying that she and every other citizen of her country needs to 'take responsibility' for what their government has done.

2.3. Agent–Historical

Daphnée is a Canadian whose family settled in Montreal in the 1750s. While digging through some old family records, she is shocked to learn that one of her ancestors was a slaveowner, and that a farm still part of the family estate was built on land stolen from the Mohawk people. Daphnée is not to blame for her family's connection to slavery or colonialism, nor for the status of people of colour and First Nations people in Canada. Yet, this discovery makes her feel some tinge of guilt, and a conviction that she ought to do something. She goes on to learn more about the history and legacy of racism and colonialism in Canada, and to become an active supporter of anti-racism and decolonization movements in the country. One way she refers to these activities is by saying she is 'taking responsibility' for the actions of her ancestors and her country.

* * *

In the examples above, something seems appropriate about how Alex, Celia, and Daphnée feel some sense of responsibility for things outside of their control and done by other people. There is some responsibility for them to 'take'—that, perhaps, they *should* take. But isn't entirely clear how we should understand such takings of responsibility, particularly since none of these agents appears to be directly responsible—i.e., to blame—for the actions of the relevant others.

3. ACCEPTING FAULT

One thing we do when we say we are ‘taking responsibility’ for something is *accepting that we are at fault* for that thing. This can also take the form of an injunction: ‘You need to take responsibility for this!’ often means, ‘You are to blame!’ An agent who accepts fault acknowledges that they are blameworthy for what they have done, and accepts the concomitant treatment they deserve. Conversely, a refusal to accept fault is a rejection of blame. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, a journalist asked Donald Trump, ‘Do you take responsibility for that?’, referring to the USA’s slowness in making testing for the virus widely available. The president retorted, ‘Yeah, I don’t take responsibility at all’ (Panetta 2020).

We find also instances where people accept fault for things for which they are *not* directly responsible, which may imply that they either are or are making themselves vicariously responsible for these things. Sometimes this can be the result of bullying, coercion, or cajolement by another, or the agent’s own timidity or obsequiousness. An employee who accepts the blame for their boss’s failures due to threats of demotion or servile loyalty would be taking responsibility in this sense, and would thereby make themselves vicariously responsible for their boss’s actions, albeit inappropriately. But we might think that there are instances where accepting such fault *is* appropriate. In our examples above, Alex, Celia, and Daphnée may be accepting fault for the actions of others. Certainly, they all feel some self-directed negative affect—blame, shame, guilt—that accompanies a judgement of their responsibility for a wrong.

But, by hypothesis, our three agents are *not* to blame. Alex may *feel* like he is at fault for Betty’s crime, Celia for her country’s aggression, and Daphnée for the legacy of her ancestors’ racism. But it seems wrong, or at least questionable, to say that they are *culpable* for these things. We might be tempted to view these takings of responsibility as signs of over-sensitivity, or perhaps timidity, in response to the actual or anticipated reactive emotions of others. This

conclusion, however, sits uneasily with the intuition that there is something they *should* feel and do in virtue of how they are connected to the events in question—that their relationship to these events is more complex than simply being a third party.

In a discussion of moral luck, Susan Wolf suggests that we can reconcile this tension between our ideas of being responsible and taking responsibility by admitting that in these kinds of cases, the scope of our responsibility is genuinely unclear. In such situations, she argues, we should take responsibility liberally—indeed, she claims that there is a ‘virtue with no name’ that describes a disposition to take responsibility in this way (Wolf 2001).² I am sympathetic to this view, and I return to Wolf’s insight about the messiness and ambiguity of moral responsibility towards the end of this paper. But taken as a claim that we should accept fault for much that is not clearly within the scope of our responsibility, I find it too far out of step with ordinary and philosophical notions of blameworthiness, which emphasize the importance of somehow *attributing* the morally disvaluable outcome to the agent. We might well find something disturbing about an agent who didn’t admit to having some kind of morally significant connection to the relevant events in cases of vicarious responsibility. But full-on blame—even if it is only self-directed—seems too much.

4. ASSUMING OBLIGATIONS

What kind of morally significant connection is in play in cases of vicarious responsibility, then? And what, if anything, would this connection require one to do in such situations? We

² I actually think this virtue does have a common name; it’s just that its name is rather unhelpful. For I think that in ordinary language we might refer to an agent who demonstrates this virtue as a *(highly) responsible* person.

could make sense of this through another meaning of ‘taking responsibility’, namely, *assuming obligations*. With regard to vicarious responsibility, this would work in a similar way to how we take on new responsibilities in general. For instance, if I say, ‘I am taking responsibility for the department coffee machine’, I am taking on a new set of obligations: to keep the machine clean, to maintain the machine in good working order, to buy coffee and filters, and perhaps to put on a fresh pot every morning. When one takes responsibility in this way, one enables others to hold one accountable if one fails to fulfil these new obligations. After I take responsibility for the coffee machine, my colleagues might blame and resent me if I leave the machine dirty and full of spent coffee grounds every night, thereby neglecting my new duties.

David Enoch suggests that this sense of taking responsibility helps to explain the special kind of moral relation that obtains in cases like those of Alex, Celia, and Daphnée.³ On his view, while agents like these are not responsible for the relevant events,

there would be something wrong. . .if all [they] did was to (correctly) point out that these actions are not [theirs]. . .it's not that this would be false. . .Rather, it's that [their] response should at the very least be more complicated than this’ (Enoch 2012, 98).

Enoch proposes that ‘in these cases you are not responsible. . .you are rather under a moral duty to *take* responsibility’ (100, my emphasis). In this sense, taking responsibility for something is an act of will that *makes* you vicariously responsible for that thing—though not in the sense of accepting fault. Rather, Enoch tells us that the relevant sense of responsibility is a modification

³ Enoch develops his account in response to Bernard Williams’s discussion of moral resultant luck (Williams 1981), but his original examples—upon which my stories of Alex and Celia are based—are best described as kinds of vicarious responsibility.

of that introduced by Marina Oshana (1997).⁴ On Oshana's view, an agent is responsible for some action just in case they would be obligated to offer an ethical justification for taking that action, were we to demand it.⁵ Enoch expands Oshana's account in two ways. First, he suggests that the relevant obligations centrally include *apologizing* for that which one is responsible for, and to somehow take action to make things right, in addition to or instead of offering moral justifications. Second, he expands the application of Oshana's account to include cases of moral resultant luck and vicarious responsibility by allowing that the agent may be required to apologize, justify, feel bad about, or make right events caused by other agents, as well as events that the agent caused but for which they are not to blame.

It bears emphasizing that Enoch does not think that, in cases like our three examples, the agent has these obligations to apologize (and so on) from the get-go. On his view, the agent is not initially vicariously responsible, but rather is obligated to *make* themselves vicariously responsible. Put another way, the agent does not initially have obligations to apologize for or to justify the actions of another, but, rather, has an obligation to assume those obligations. Notice that the agent could *refuse* to take on these new obligations. In so doing, they would fail to fulfil an obligation they already have, namely, the obligation to assume those new obligations. It is

⁴ Enoch and Oshana refer to this sense of responsibility as 'accountability', but it has since been labelled *answerability* to distinguish it from Strawsonian views of responsibility that emphasize how we hold people accountable via the reactive emotions. See Shoemaker (2011) for discussion.

⁵ Oshana briefly mentions cases of vicarious responsibility (1997, 72, 81 n. 7), but sets these aside to concentrate on cases of direct responsibility.

such a refusal to take responsibility—to make themselves vicariously responsible—that Enoch points to as what would be wrong with someone who simply brushed off these kinds of cases as things entirely outside the scope of their responsibility.

Let's illustrate this rather complex account with our three examples. Interpreted on Enoch's account, Alex is obligated to take responsibility for Betty's actions by assuming obligations to, perhaps, apologize to the victims of Betty's robbery, or to give the community some explanation of how she could have gone so wrong, or to offer help to those injured or otherwise directly affected by the crime. Similarly, Celia would be obligated to take responsibility for her country's actions by assuming obligations to, say, apologize or offer a justification for her country's actions, or, possibly, to publicly protest those actions. Finally, Daphnée would be obligated to take responsibility for the legacy of her ancestors by assuming obligations to become more knowledgeable regarding the legacy of racism and colonialism in Canada, and perhaps to engage in anti-racist activism or other social justice projects.

Enoch's account is surely pointing to something important about how we should understand vicarious responsibility. It is certainly true that we sometimes assume new responsibilities in connection with the actions of others, and it is plausible that we may be obligated to do so in some circumstances. However, I am not convinced that his account is apt with respect to our three examples. Accordingly, in the next section, I analyse a third sense of taking responsibility, which I argue is a better fit. However, I see our two analyses not as competing accounts for the 'correct' view of taking responsibility and vicarious responsibility, so much as different theoretical frameworks that are more or less appropriate to different circumstances. I outline how we might determine which of these accounts applies to a given case in §6.

5. FULFILLING OBLIGATIONS

It may be true that some instances of vicarious responsibility involve an act of will on the agent's part to assume responsibility for something that was not initially within the scope of what they are responsible for. And as Enoch describes, perhaps we are sometimes required to take on such responsibility. But it does not always seem that such an act of will is necessary. Rather, in some cases, the agent seems to be vicariously responsible all along. In this section, I argue that instead of having to assume new obligations, in these cases the vicariously responsible agent already has those obligations. When they 'take responsibility' for the relevant events, they do so in a third sense: namely, they are *fulfilling obligations* they already have in virtue of being vicariously responsible.

Taking responsibility as fulfilling obligations is a familiar notion. When you're at fault for something, you often have obligations to apologize or to somehow make things right—though exactly *what* you're morally required to do depends on the details of the case. For example, a politician who makes a harmfully offensive joke may be obligated to make an apology to their constituents, or perhaps to resign their post. An addict who causes damage to property or personal relationships while under the influence may be obligated to commit to treatment. A former violent criminal may be obligated to devote the rest of their life to good works. In each of these cases, when the agent acts to fulfil these obligations, we might say that the agent is 'taking responsibility for what they've done', and how they should do so is determined by the specifics of the case.

Notice that this sense of 'taking responsibility' is similar to yet distinct from each of the senses discussed previously. As in the sense of *accepting fault*, the present sense of taking responsibility is in response to something for which the agent is already responsible. But, one could accept one's fault for something and still fail to discharge any of the obligations that come

with such fault (perhaps out of paralysing guilt), thereby taking responsibility in one sense and failing to take responsibility in another. And, as in the sense of *assuming obligations*, in the present sense of taking responsibility the agent has obligations to apologize or to otherwise make things right. In the cases of taking responsibility as fulfilling obligations mentioned above, these obligations stem from the agent's past harm or wrongdoing. There is no need to perform an act of will to assume those obligations: the agent already has them. In the present sense, taking responsibility means *discharging*, rather than acquiring, obligations.

Now consider how the sense of taking responsibility as fulfilling obligations may apply to vicarious responsibility. If it is plausible that Alex, Celia, or Daphnée already have the obligations that, on Enoch's account, they would be required to assume, then we can conclude that the step of assuming obligations is redundant in some cases. There would be no need for these agents to *make* themselves vicariously responsible; they would simply *be* vicariously responsible for the relevant events—though they would be 'responsible' in the sense of the term that Enoch derives from Oshana, and not in the sense of being at fault. We can test this hypothesis case by case by considering how we might respond to *failures* on the agent's part to attempt to make things right. This test works by pinpointing *where* we would find fault with them—for failing to assume obligations to make things right, or simply for failing to make things right.

So, suppose that instead of feeling guilty and apologizing for Betty's crime, Alex simply denies that her actions have anything to do with him. He points out, correctly, that Betty acted of her own volition, and that he had no part in her decisions. To be sure, he blames his daughter for the robbery and feels awful that people were hurt, but he feels no differently than a morally sensitive third party would. That is to say, the fact that the robbery was carried out by his own

daughter plays no role in his reaction to the crime, and he neither apologizes, nor feels any shame or regret, nor takes action to help the victims.

Next, suppose that instead of feeling shame for her country and protesting its foreign aggression, Celia rejects the suggestion that her government's decisions have any moral bearing on what she should feel or do. After all, she doesn't work for them, and she didn't even vote for the current administration. She reacts in a like manner to a citizen of a country other than her own or the invaded nation: she blames the invader and feels bad for invaded, but her status as a citizen and as a voter play no part in how she reacts to her own government's actions. She becomes no more involved in politics or activism than before.

And suppose that instead of feeling a tinge of guilt for her ancestors' actions and their legacy, Daphnée refuses to accept that her family's complicity in racism and colonialism has any bearing on what she personally ought to do or feel. She acknowledges that her ancestors' involvement in the slave trade and in land theft was deplorable. But she regards these acts as if she has no personal connection to their legacy. The ways in which she personally has benefitted from those actions are, to her mind, merely luck and nothing that she personally needs to answer for.

Something seems inappropriate about these agents' responses to their circumstances. But *what* have they done wrong? On Enoch's view, they have failed to assume certain obligations—namely, obligations to feel bad, to apologize, or to try to make things right. It would then be this failure to make themselves vicariously responsible that we should find fault with. Our sense that they should perhaps do something more—that Alex should apologize on behalf of Betty, for example—stems from the more fundamental failure to assume the obligation to do those very things. It is an anticipation of something we would expect them to go on to do *if they were to*

assume responsibility as they ought, rather than a finding of fault with their failure to actually do those things.

But this doesn't seem right to me. What we find fault with in these cases, I suggest, is the agents' failures to *do* the very things that Enoch claims they must first assume obligations to do. In the modified example, Alex's moral failing is that he does not make any attempt to right the wrongs committed by his daughter. Celia's moral failing is that she does nothing beyond blaming her government for their aggression, when it seems she ought to do more than this due to her citizenship. Daphnée's failing is not that she hasn't assumed obligations to learn more about racism and colonialism and to seek ways she can contribute to dismantling these—it is that she hasn't *done* these things. In not taking the actions they were described as taking in the initial presentation, there is something they have failed to do which they ought to have done.

If this is right, then it appears that Enoch's view introduces a redundant step into at least some instances of vicarious responsibility.⁶ In such cases, there is no need to take responsibility, in the sense of *assuming* obligations—that is to say, there is no need for the agent to *make* themselves vicariously responsible. Rather, they are vicariously responsible already; the sense in which they should take responsibility is by *fulfilling* those same obligations. Circumstantial luck like that experienced by Alex, Celia, and Daphnée, can thus make us vicariously responsible and thereby obligated to feel certain affects or to take certain actions.

⁶ I have observed that intuitions vary on these cases. But my aim is to provide a structure for understanding what these intuitions may be telling us *vis-à-vis* vicarious responsibility and taking responsibility, which does not depend on the details of any particular case.

Before explaining where these obligations come from, let me address an objection to the picture of taking responsibility offered in the present section.

Enoch anticipates my proposal, which he presents as an account in competition with his.⁷ Accordingly, he presents the following objection. Enoch claims that there is an important moral difference between someone who has *failed to take responsibility*, and someone who has *failed to live up to the responsibility taken*. He uses a famous example from Bernard Williams to make his point. In a discussion of moral resultant luck, Williams describes a truck driver who, through no fault of his own, runs over a child. The driver was observing all the rules of the road and was neither distracted nor under the influence of any substances; the child simply darted into the street at the wrong moment. According to Williams, despite the driver's blamelessness, it would be disturbing if he did not feel bad about his involvement in the accident in a distinctive kind of way. As he puts it, 'there is something special about [the driver's] relation to [the accident], something which cannot merely be eliminated by the consideration that it was not his fault' (Williams 1981, 28). On Williams's view, the driver should feel a special kind of regret, and would perhaps also be expected to take actions to apologize or make things right.

Enoch uses Williams's example in an argument against my proposal that circumstantial luck might make us vicariously responsible for similar events. Suppose that part of what is morally required of the driver is to repeatedly visit the injured child in the hospital to apologize. Enoch claims that there is a distinction between the moral failing of a version of the driver who

⁷ Recall that my aim is to make space for *both* of our accounts in how we understand vicarious responsibility.

never visits the child, and a version of the driver who visits *once* but never again, which can clearly be made on his account:

Not visiting at all amounts. . .to a violation of the moral duty to take responsibility.

Coming once may well amount. . .to taking responsibility. From that point on, not coming again amounts to failing to respond appropriately to the fact that one is (now) responsible for the injury in the relevant sense. (Enoch, 2012, 111)

In other words, the driver who visits once has, on Enoch's view, implicitly assumed the obligation to visit multiple times; so, his failure to visit again means he has failed to live up to the responsibility he has taken. The driver who never visits at all, by contrast, has not assumed any such obligation; his moral failing is that he has not taken responsibility in the first place.

Enoch claims that the proposal I am making—upon which the driver would simply have an obligation to visit the child multiple times to apologize—cannot make sense of this moral difference between the driver who visits once and the driver who never visits. For, he claims, on the sense of taking responsibility as discharging obligations, both of these drivers would be failing to take responsibility. In particular, both drivers would be failing to fulfil the obligation to visit the child *multiple times*. As a result, Enoch concludes, the distinction—between failing to take responsibility and failing to live up to the responsibility taken—vanishes.

I disagree. We can still make this distinction on my sense of taking responsibility by appreciating the difference in the *extent to which* each driver fails to fulfil his obligations. The driver who never visits at all shirks *all* of his obligations regarding the accident. On the sense of taking responsibility as discharging obligations, he fails to take responsibility at all. By contrast, the driver who visits the child once and never again *partially* fulfils his obligations, but shirks the rest. He begins to take responsibility, in the sense of discharging obligations, but does not follow

through—he fails to live up the responsibility taken. So, the same distinction Enoch thinks it is important to make can readily be made, on my proposal, in terms of the extent to which the drivers fulfil their obligations.⁸

So, both accounts can make sense of this distinction. And both can explain why we find something morally disturbing about people like the driver who fails to feel regret, the version of Alex who fails to apologize for Betty’s robbery, the version of Celia who fails to speak out against her government, and the version of Daphnée who is unmoved by her ancestors’ racism. On these grounds, there is no reason to favour Enoch’s proposal over mine. Additionally, with regard to the cases under discussion, at least, Enoch’s proposal is harder to fit with the exact nature of *why* we find something disturbing about these agents. I conclude, then, that my proposal is preferable as a description of these cases of vicarious responsibility. Agents like the unlucky driver, Alex, Celia, and Daphnée are already vicariously responsible for the relevant events, in the sense that they have obligations to fulfil. However, as I go on to explain in the next section, there is room for all three senses of taking responsibility in how we understand vicarious responsibility.

6. MORAL ENTANGLEMENT

So far I have discussed three senses of taking responsibility that correspond to different sorts of vicarious responsibility. Firstly, the agent might be at fault for the actions of another. Secondly, the agent might not be responsible for the actions of another, yet be morally required to assume obligations to make things right, thereby making themselves vicariously responsible,

⁸ Judith Andre (1983) briefly suggests something very close to my proposal, but with regard to resultant luck rather than vicarious responsibility.

but in a sense different from being at fault. Thirdly, the agent might already have those obligations, and thus simply be vicariously responsible. But questions remain: Where do the obligations discussed above come from? When are we vicariously responsible, and when are we required to make ourselves so? In this section, I sketch a framework to answer these questions.

In explaining where obligations to assume obligations come from, Enoch makes an instructive suggestion. He claims that they arise from ‘ways in which we are morally required to think of ourselves in a normatively rich kind of way’ in particular circumstances (Enoch 2012, 128). What Enoch is pointing to are morally salient aspects of our *identities*; they are the reason-giving considerations that, on his account, are the source of obligations to take responsibility. Importantly, circumstances outside of the scope what can be attributed to our agency can sometimes place us in positions where these aspects of our identities may give us moral obligations. For example, parents, such as Alex, are morally required to think of themselves *as parents* in certain situations. When their offspring do something morally wrong, as Betty does, these circumstances make the parent’s identity as such morally salient, which, according to Enoch, creates the moral obligation for the parent to make themselves vicariously responsible for the actions of their offspring.

I propose to generalize this notion to account for the other two senses of taking responsibility and their corresponding forms of vicarious responsibility. Exactly the same kinds of considerations that Enoch outlines as generating obligations to assume obligations can account for the latter obligations’ already obtaining. In other words, the ways in which we are morally required to think of ourselves in these kinds of situations—the circumstantially morally salient aspects of our identities—could just as well generate obligations to apologize, explain, or regret, instead of obligations to assume these same obligations. As we saw, we might think that this

applies to Alex, Celia, or Daphnée. Their identities as a parent (of a teenage criminal), a citizen (of an aggressor state), and a descendent (of racist colonists) plausibly generate the very obligations that Enoch claims they would have to assume. That is to say, they are vicariously responsible for these events in virtue of these aspects of their identities. To this, we may add the ways in which our *agency* is connected with the behaviour of others, particularly when our own activities contribute to those others' behaviour. Consider a variant on Alex's case, such that he *told* Betty to commit robbery. In this case, it is plausible that Alex should accept fault for Betty's actions.

Together, I call these ways in which aspects of one's identity and agency are connected to others, such that one is (or is required to make oneself) vicariously responsible for their behaviour, *moral entanglement*. We can be morally entangled with any of the kinds of agents and processes that I mentioned above in Table 1. When you become a parent, for example, you acquire a morally significant connection to another being (your child). This relation gives rise to new role-responsibilities, duties, and practical reasons, especially in situations like Alex's, where your identity as a parent gains heightened moral significance. Being (or being required to make yourself) vicariously responsible for your child's behaviour is one of these.

Moral entanglement comes in degrees; it is not simply a matter of being entangled or not. The reason for using a scalar, rather than binary, model of moral entanglement is that different aspects of our identities vary both in the degree to which they are significant to who we are, and in terms of their connections with the other agents or processes for whose behaviour we may have to take responsibility. We usually take parenthood, for example, to be among the most morally significant aspects of our identities and, thus, it is one of the most potent determinants of moral entanglement. But, one's parenthood may become less morally significant in different

situations—as one’s children become older and more independent, say, or if one becomes estranged from one’s offspring. Because these aspects of one’s identity can *weaken* (or strengthen) in significance, as well as simply cease to be, a scalar notion of moral entanglement is appropriate.

Whether (and in what way) you are vicariously responsible for something, or required to make yourself so, depends on the degree of moral entanglement between yourself and the other agent or process involved. At one end of the scale, you and the external agent or process might be *minimally entangled*—your relation to these external things might be peripheral to your identity, highly contingent, or undeveloped. Consider a variation on Celia’s case where she is an expatriate with few remaining ties to her homeland. In these circumstances, her nationality has become a peripheral aspect of her identity, to the point where it no longer has the moral significance it once did.⁹ In this situation, Celia might not be required to take responsibility for her country’s actions in any sense—and thus, she would in no way be vicariously responsible for them.

At the other end of the scale, you and the relevant processes may be *maximally entangled*—your relations with the relevant processes might be so extensive or so fundamental to your identity that you and those processes become (virtually or literally) the same. For example, consider how some philosophers emphasize the importance of coming to view the processes that produce your behaviour as *your own*. We can see this in John Fischer and Mark Ravizza’s theory

⁹ If this variant Celia *chooses* to continue identifying with her homeland, despite the loss of other connections to it, this involvement of her agency may be sufficient for her moral entanglement to reach one of the middling sections of the scale discussed below.

of moral responsibility (Fischer and Ravizza 1998). On their account of moral development, human beings are initially non-responsible creatures in part because, as young children, the reasons-responsive mechanisms that give rise to our behaviour are not among the sorts of things we accept as aspects of ourselves for whose operation we may be held responsible. Part of becoming a responsible agent, on their view, involves accepting these mechanisms as our own in this sense. In doing so, the agent takes something outside the scope of their responsibility and makes it a part of their own, though in a way too intimate to be vicarious. (Fischer and Ravizza refer to this process as ‘taking responsibility’ (1998, 207ff.), revealing a fourth sense of the phrase that is connected to moral entanglement.) It is also possible that other processes could become maximally entangled with an agent later in life, such as a piece of technology that somehow extends their agency.

Most of the cases and variations thereon that I discussed earlier fall between these two extremes. To determine which form of taking responsibility is required of the agents involved—and thus whether they are, or are required to make themselves, vicariously responsible—we need to distinguish further gradations of moral entanglement. In cases where the agent’s identity or agency are closely connected with the relevant events, but not so close as to reach maximal entanglement, the agent may be at fault for the other agent’s actions. For example, it seems right for the variant Alex who told Betty to commit robbery to accept fault for the crime. His actions and intentions and hers are so wrapped up with one another that he and Betty should share the blame.

Somewhere nearer the midpoint between maximal and minimal entanglement, where the relevant connections are relatively strong but short of what is needed for shared culpability, lie cases where the agent is vicariously responsible, and required to take responsibility by fulfilling

obligations they already have. I think that the unaltered cases of Alex, Celia, and Daphnée seem most fitting here. Their respective identities as a parent, as a citizen, and as the descendent and beneficiary of historical racism are morally significant in the circumstances in which they find themselves. They should think of themselves *as such* in these circumstances, thereby giving them reasons to take action to make things right, even though they are not directly responsible for the wrongs committed. They are thus best thought of as being vicariously responsible for the relevant events, in the sense that they have obligations to fulfil.

Cases that are closer to but short of minimal entanglement include those where the agent is morally required to make themselves vicariously responsible—to take responsibility by assuming new obligations. In these instances, there exists some morally significant connection between the agent and the relevant events, but it is more tenuous or contingent than in cases towards the midpoint of entanglement. Here we may place a variation on Celia's case where she is detached from politics and pays little attention to civic life. In this situation, it is plausible that she is not initially vicariously responsible for her country's aggression because the relevant aspect of her identity—say, her citizenship—is not sufficiently salient in a morally significant way. Yet, she may be required to change this by assuming new obligations connected to this aspect of her identity—and thus, to become vicariously responsible. Some may also wish to place Daphnée's case in this category, since the wrongdoing of her ancestors has additional distance from her.

Which degree of moral entanglement is present in any particular case may still be difficult to judge.¹⁰ But with the three (or four) different senses of taking responsibility clarified, we are now in a position to appreciate Wolf's insight. The scope of the things for which we are responsible is multiply ambiguous, not just because luck can complicate our judgements of responsibility attribution, but also because the meanings of *responsible* and *taking responsibility* are multiply ambiguous. Wolf is surely right that we should take responsibility liberally, but exactly *how* we should take responsibility is more complex than accepting fault.¹¹

¹⁰ Before closing, it is worth noting a potential concern. Sometimes, when a member of a marginalized community commits some wrongdoing, there is far too much burden placed on that community to take responsibility for those actions. For example, according to a report by HuffPost, 'Post-9/11 Islamophobia demanded that all Muslims answer for the violent actions of a few extremists. That dynamic forced them into a "model Muslim" role that didn't always feel fair' (O'Connor 2016). Though I do not have space to expound fully, I believe that such instances are examples of overreach—morally inappropriate demands exceeding the scope of any vicarious responsibility that may or may not exist in such cases. Injunctions to take responsibility have their own ethics worth detailing at a later time.

¹¹ Though I do not cite her directly, my thoughts on these topics have been substantially shaped by Iris Marion Young's excellent book *Responsibility for Justice*. For helpful comments on earlier versions of this material, I thank Miranda Fricker, Paul Faulkner, Jenny Saul, Hallvard Lillehammer, David Collins, David Enoch, Andrew Fenton, Richmond Campbell, and the editors and an anonymous reviewer for this issue, as well as attendees of presentations I gave at the Dalhousie University Philosophy Colloquium in 2020, the 2019 American Philosophical

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