Are Children Responsible for Their Actions?

A criticism and development of Responsibility as Answerability through the lens of the responsibility of children

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Introduction

The answer to how responsible children are for their actions, as a broad idea, should be obvious to any reasonable reader. Children are somewhat responsible for their actions past a certain point, but less responsible than adults. The exact details of how responsible are very much to be debated, but at an intuitive level the question presented should be obvious.

With the answer to the question already given, in this essay I will be doing three things, firstly I will demonstrate how under the framework of Responsibility as Answerability children are fully Answerable[1], and therefore responsible, for their actions. Secondly, I will analyse why there is such a discrepancy between the answer given by Answerability and our intuitive answer, and thirdly I will use an extension onto the idea of Answerability, which I've termed Culpability, to examine the question again with significantly more coherent results.

Before beginning the analysis, I feel it is necessary to establish the overall position of this essay regarding the field of responsibility, which will inform the analysis throughout. When discussing responsibility, and moral philosophy at large, I feel it is imperative not to lose sight of the notions we are trying to describe. It is not the job of the philosopher to ascribe an idea of morality created whole cloth onto the masses, but to attempt to describe, understand and formalise the ideas of morality that exist in the world.[2] To that end the question of responsibility at the heart of this essay is one of "what do we truly mean when we say a person is responsible", with the analysis relying on some hopefully uncontroversial intuition about what responsibility is.

Answerability

To start, a brief summary of Answerability is in order. The basic thesis of Responsibility as Answerability (Smith, 2015), as presented by Angela Smith in the so titled essay, is very simple: one is morally responsible for an action if one can be called to answer for it, that is be asked as to your justifications for the action, and there be a reasonable moral response based on the justifications given. The simplicity of the framework is certainly a key draw; it is able to encapsulate much of what we mean by responsibility in a definition that can be given within a sentence. It is important to note that the requirement for responsibility is to be eligible for Answerability, not that you actually answer the question, and similarly that one's answers must be eligible for a moral response, not that one may actually be given. Under Smith's framework one is responsible for making a sandwich for yourself, even if such an action is generally morally neutral. Additionally, as it will be relevant later, this is a notion of responsibility for a particular action, not for the consequences thereof. One is responsible for leaving the door open, but not (under Smith's conception) responsible for the dog running out of the house. Responsibility as Answerability is also a morally neutral, it is merely an attribution of eligibility for moral response rather than a value judgement of what the moral response is.

Answerability of Children

To answer the question of if children can be morally responsible using the framework of Answerability one simply needs to use the relatively simple criteria of "can you ask a child to answer for their actions", and "are such answers eligible for moral response". The answers to these two questions seem fairly obvious, that both are yes.

Take the example of a child who has access to some paint pots deciding to paint scribbles on the wall of their home, it would be very much reasonable that their parents would ask them why they did such a thing upon discovery, clearly there is a belief that they can answer for their actions. If the child simply says that they thought it looked cool or doesn't give much of a coherent reason beyond wanting to then we might not have much of a moral response directed at the child, but if they expressed they did it because they wanted to annoy their parents we might feel morally negative towards them, or if they chose to do it because they thought they'd like the pretty pictures we might feel morally positive towards the child.

What is important here is that we have fulfilled both key criteria, in that a child can be asked to answer for their actions and that those actions are able to garner moral judgements. The nature of such judgements will almost certainly be coloured by the fact that it is a child acting, but the idea of Answerability is one that is morally neutral, and so that is of limited impact.

We must also consider the example of an actual infant, who is acting purely on instinct, rather than guided by any kind of articulable conscious thought. One cannot ask an infant to account for their actions, and so we cannot hold them responsible. Where one exactly draws the line is a matter for child psychologists, but I feel it reasonable to handwave away that there exists some line in the early years where one goes from an infant acting on pure instinct to a child acting on

articulable thought, the morality around that line might be an interesting topic for another essay, but it's beyond the scope of this one.

In conclusion, we can reasonably say that by meeting the criteria non-infant children are Answerable, and therefore responsible, for their actions.

Issues with Answerability

From that conclusion it is clear that there exists an issue with the idea of Answerability as Responsibility, as when using the definition of responsibility given by Smith, we get an outcome that clearly goes against our intuitive sense of what responsibility is. This is not isolated to just the children case, consider the example of someone killing in self-defence. They are most definitely Answerable for killing, and so responsible under that lens, but if they were shaken up a friend might easily say "you're not responsible for the death", clearly using some other notion of responsibility.

To get around this I feel it is unfortunately necessary to create another notion of responsibility, arguably going against the core reason for Smith's essay, which was to argue against a dualistic notion of responsibility as suggested by Watson in his 'Two Faces of Responsibility. More broadly when we look at ideas of responsibility there exist two paradigms, we have responsibility as presented by Answerability, where the aim is to attribute the action to a moral actor, and establish some kind of moral connection between the actor and the action, what I will call Action -Responsibility; and then we have responsibility as presented by Strawson's idea of Reactive Attitudes (Strawson, 2008, p. 111), where responsibility is the result of a social reaction to the morality of a given action. That second notion of responsibility, which I will call Social-Responsibility, is the one that is causing the mismatch between intuition and Answerability, because Social-Responsibility inherently relies on the nature of the moral judgement that we make to determine if someone is responsible, not merely their eligibility for a judgement. One must firstly be Action-Responsible for something to be then considered Social-Responsible, the first is a precondition for the latter, but if there exist mitigating factors then one can be held Action-Responsible, one caused the thing to happen in a morally relevant way, but not Social-Responsible. One can also think of Social-Responsibility as blameworthiness, or being at fault, or many other of these fuzzy notions we have that are close to responsibility but not quite as strict as responsibility.

To formally try and extend the idea of Action-Responsibility as Answerability, I posit a notion of Culpability, where one is Culpable for an action if one is socially deserving of a specific moral response for one's Answerable actions and consequences thereof. A key distinction here is that consequences are considered relevant, not just actions, as when using the criterion of social reactions, one cannot just consider an action in a vacuum. If I open my car door then I am Answerable for the action of opening the door, but if I open it into thin air I am not Culpable of anything, as no morally relevant action has occurred, but if I open the door into another car then I am Culpable because I am deserving of a reaction due to damaging another's car. However, if the other car was park improperly and there was no other way to open my door I may not be

considered Culpable, as I had no other option and so the action is morally defensible. The latter is also an example of how we can see the fuzziness of the definition of the word responsible, it would not be reasonable to say I was not responsible for causing the damage to the other person's car, as I was Answerable (i.e. Action-Responsible) for my actions, but I am not Culpable for it.

This definition of Culpable certainly isn't perfect, as it relies heavily on social norms, one is Culpable simply by will of the society that you live in, and any discussion requires significant subjective analysis to try and guess as to what is considered a reasonable social reaction. Social reactions may also be entirely irrational (Twitter, 2025); people can easily attribute blame when no blame would reasonably be attributed. One can get around this by defining the idea as reasonable social responses, but then it is up to the philosopher to try and grasp with what reasonable is. It is a fairly core flaw in the notion I have presented, but I feel like it represents a necessary evil when discussing a notion so intrinsically linked to social norms, and so I have chosen to keep it in its current form.

Back to Children

To return now to the initial question of our essay, we have asked the question of if children are Answerable for their actions, to which the answer is yes, but now we must ask if children are Culpable for their actions, that is are they deserving of specific moral responses according to their actions and their consequences.

The answer to this question is more complex than the initial question, but to answer it we must first ask what mitigating factors might there be for Culpability. For Answerability the only real mitigating factor for actions you did indeed do is that of capacity, one cannot be held to answer for actions which you have no mental capacity to control, if one was experiencing a psychotic break for example. Often this category is the one children are placed into, but as we showed before children do in fact have the capacity to be Answerable agents. For culpability there are significantly more ways to mitigate it, as the social response to one's actions can be defended due to a wide range of factors, for example one may not be Culpable if an action is taken under duress, even if taken willingly.

If simply describing social norms it might be valid to suggest that simply being a child is a mitigating factor for Culpability, we often extend children significant leeway in their actions simply because they are children, without much reasonable analysis. However, I argue that such conventions exist simply because analysing every interaction with every child would be very time consuming, and that it is not some intrinsic property of being a child that is a mitigating factor but instead children naturally find themselves protected by broad social notions of culpability.

The primary factor that mitigates the Culpability of children is that of a requirement to reasonably foresee the consequences of one's actions. When discussing Culpability if one's actions cause some kind of significant harm as an outcome, even if not intended, it is still considered appropriate to hold someone responsible for those harms, one can see a formalism of such norms in the legal concept of negligence. As a motivating example, if I were to have someone house sit for me and when they left they forgot to lock the door and I were burgled, I might hold them

responsible for the burglary, i.e. they're Answerable for not locking the door and Culpable for the burglary, because one could reasonably foresee the consequences of not locking the door. However, if I were to have some obscure locking mechanism that required a specific series of steps to complete, and had not informed them, and they unknowingly left the door unlocked then it could be argued it is not reasonable to hold them responsible for the robbery. They are still Answerable for not locking the door, but because they did not know they had not locked the door and could not reasonably foresee a robbery they are not Culpable. Importantly if they foresaw the robbery or not is immaterial, what matters is the broad social idea of if a reasonable person would foresee it.

With the mitigating factor of one's ability to reasonably foresee consequences it should be fairly obvious how children have reduced Culpability, a child will naturally have both a significant lack of knowledge and experience of how things work, but also a significantly diminished mental capacity to make connections and draw conclusions from what knowledge they have. To return to our wall painting example, the child may be able to form the basic notion that they like the pretty colours so they'll paint them on the wall, but they lack the ability to understand the consequences of the wall being now permanently covered in paint, the effort required to clean the wall, and all the other consequences. As such we do not hold them Culpable because they simply cannot know any better.

There also exists the connected, but distinct, mitigator of a lack of knowledge of what is right and wrong. A child who paints the wall is not to know inherently that walls are not supposed to be canvases or that we attach some moral or aesthetic value to not having walls covered in paint. As such we do not hold them Culpable for such actions because to pass moral judgement we generally require an understanding on behalf of the agent that they are doing a moral wrong, or at least that they ought to know.

One key point is that because the Culpability is based in a child's ability to materially understand their actions and the consequences thereof, it is very much variable depending on the circumstances. If a child paints a wall once they are not Culpable, if the do it again they are Culpable to some degree, if they continue doing it, they are very much Culpable for their actions. There exists some inherent defence in being a child, as they still have diminished mental capacity to understand the consequences of their actions and the expectations placed on them, but the key point is that they can become more Culpable as they learn and understand.

The only other key item to address is how Culpability changes as a child ages, but the above concepts handle that fairly elegantly. As Culpability is not a binary thing generally as a child ages they are more and more able to understand the world around them and build the knowledge and experience required to be a fully morally responsible agent. However the underlying factors still apply the same, for example whilst a teenager might be considered fully Culpable for something like painting on a wall, if they go out and have a few too many we might consider them less Culpable for the mess they make than an adult who did the same, as the adult ought to know better but the teenager is having a learning experience.

To formulate a definite answer, children are partially Culpable for their actions, but their lack of knowledge and mental capacity means they have significantly reduced Culpability than adults doing a similar action, with their Culpability gradually increasing as they learn more and develop cognitively until they reach adulthood.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the point of this essay is less about the specific answer to the specific question about children addressed, though it is my belief that I have presented a full and well-reasoned articulation of the Answerability and Culpability of children, but rather the general duality of responsibility and the nature of Culpability. Whilst responsibility has many definitions, the two presented above are so intertwined that it feels like there should be a way to combine the two into a single overarching concept, as Smith tried, but by crunching responsibility down into a single term you lose a significant and important element of what responsibility means. By providing this specific analysis of a singular question using the two notions of responsibility I hope to have demonstrated what it is that we lose when crunching down to one definition and what we gain by relying on both, and that children are morally responsible (but maybe only a little bit) for painting walls.

Notes

1. The convention I will be using in this essay is to capitalise formal notions that we have defined, like Answerability. When referring to subjects like responsibility without capitalisation I am referring to general intuitive idea and not any formal model

2. Whilst relying on intuition in this essay, the position it, and I myself, hold is not formally intuitionist. This is not meant to be an epistemological statement about how we can determine the truth of morality, but rather a practical approach to applying moral philosophy.

References

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