

Michael McKenna

Conversation and Responsibility.

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In *Conversation and Responsibility*, Michael McKenna develops a theory of moral responsibility inspired by an analogy with the relationship people bear to each other as part of a conversational exchange. In such a dialogue, one party initiates the exchange (“Would you be willing to complete a book review?”), which then warrants other parties to the conversation to respond in various ways (“I’d be happy to,” “Sorry, I’m swamped with other work at the moment,” etc.). Similarly, McKenna argues, a person’s performance of a morally significant action (telling a racist joke) licenses others to respond (shock, criticism, blame, and the like). In contrast to many philosophical treatments of moral responsibility, McKenna aims to be neutral with respect to the free will controversy. His laudable aim is simply to get clear about what moral responsibility is and how it works. As befits a book developing a conversational analogy, McKenna’s tone is pleasingly relaxed and many of the footnotes refer to discussions with philosophers whose views he considers. More than most monographs, the reader gets the sense that the book emerged from an ongoing scholarly dialogue not confined to the pages of journals and books. McKenna’s inventory of the relevant literature is widespread and rigorous; anyone with an interest in the nature of moral responsibility and blame will leave the book extremely well served by McKenna’s run through the territory.

The first half of the book develops the conversational account and considers objections to it. McKenna begins with a conceptual map of the moral responsibility territory, distinguishing moral responsibility from other related concepts like legal and causal responsibility. He clarifies that he aims to articulate the sense in which people who are morally responsible are *accountable* to each other, in a way that goes beyond their actions merely being subject to normative appraisal. The paradigmatic way in which people hold each other to account is via the attitudes and practices that constitute blame and praise. So, in a case that McKenna develops in detail, Daphne is disturbed that her friend and coworker Leslie tells a joke that involves a racial slur. Daphne tells Leslie that her joke is reprehensible, storms off, and later excludes Leslie from their usual lunch date. Daphne’s resentment, her subsequent speech, and her action constitute her *blame* of Leslie. McKenna argues that this accountability sense of responsibility goes beyond a mere appraisal sense, which he takes to be exemplified by our responses to Lennie from *Of Mice and Men*. Lenny acts badly (we appraise his actions normatively), but he isn’t appropriately held to account as is Leslie in the above example; we wouldn’t, and shouldn’t, resent Lennie for the bad things he does, but Daphne’s resentment towards Leslie for telling the racist joke is appropriate (more on the idea of appropriate resentment below).

McKenna is here further developing an account of moral responsibility indebted to P.F. Strawson’s landmark article “Freedom and Resentment.” Prior to McKenna’s book, the most comprehensive treatment of a Strawsonian theory was R.J. Wallace’s *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments*. McKenna’s book is a welcome addition to the literature and moves beyond Wallace’s treatment in important respects. McKenna follows Wallace in thinking that the nature

of moral responsibility must be understood in terms of the appropriateness of holding each other morally responsible via moral emotions and associated practices. What is particularly distinctive about McKenna's development of the Strawsonian line are the ideas that (1) holding someone morally responsible via resentment, etc. can be helpfully understood via the conversational analogue and that (2) neither holding people morally responsible or being morally responsible is more basic—neither, McKenna thinks, can be fully explained without the other.

These two claims are related. Consider the idea of a competent interlocutor. Our ideas about what psychological characteristics a capable conversational partner must have are informed by the nature of the activity—namely, conversation—in which such a person is able to engage. Similarly, an account of the nature of agents who have the ability to converse can inform our understanding of just what type of activity conversation is and is meant to be (is it transmission of information, or encouragement to action, or...). Similarly, McKenna holds, when a person performs a morally significant action, we interpret her behavior as revealing something about the quality of her will—or, more perspicuously, as revealing of the regard she has for other people and moral considerations. Our emotional and behavioral responses to her are tuned to the kind of being she is and the regard (of lack of it) demonstrated in her action. Attention to the ways we hold each other morally responsible thus informs our ideas about who we consider to be the proper subjects of these responses; an account of the kinds of beings we are also properly informs how and when we hold each other responsible.

A natural response is to wonder whether being morally responsible and holding morally responsible are really as tightly connected as McKenna claims. Wouldn't it be possible for someone like Leslie to make a racist joke intentionally and thereby be morally responsible for doing so, independent of her ability to fully comprehend the import of anyone's resentful response or to engage in such responses herself? No, McKenna argues. Consider the conversational analogy again. Someone who is a competent speaker of a language has the ability both to express herself and to interpret and understand the expressions of others. The inability to understand others impairs one's ability to express oneself properly. Lennie's inability to understand that his strength is something to be feared means he cannot understand why Curley's wife becomes afraid when Lennie strokes her hair and why she reacts to his caresses by screaming for help. Lennie's limited moral responsibility 'vocabulary' makes him insensitive to the full significance of their interaction and contributes to the tragic events that follow.

In the second half of the book, McKenna turns to an examination of the kind of normative claim being made when we say that being morally responsible is to be understood in terms of *appropriately* holding someone morally responsible. If it is inappropriate to resent Lennie for what he does, but appropriate to resent Leslie, what notion of appropriateness is in play? McKenna's initial gloss is that the sense of appropriateness is that of resentment's being a meaningful, fitting, or intelligible conversational response to the agent's action. This is one of the most suggestive and interesting ideas in the book, but I wish McKenna had articulated the idea more fully. Consider the conversational contribution, "What time is it?" It is meaningful, fitting, or intelligible to say "What time is it?" in a capacious number of conversational contexts—even when the time was not part of the prior conversation. However, resentment seems an appropriate response only in circumstances when a morally responsible agent is taken to have shown insufficient regard and thereby done wrong. So I'm unsure about how the

conversational analogy helps us get clear about the circumstances in which resentment is appropriate or not. Making an intelligible conversational contribution is easy; feeling appropriate resentment is not.

McKenna is also not fully satisfied with the conversational analysis of blame's appropriateness, so he then turns to an examination of whether the relevant sort of emotional appropriateness should be articulated, as many other moral responsibility theorists would claim, by the idea of desert. While McKenna denies that blame's appropriateness *must* be understood in terms of desert and explores other ways to understand its appropriateness, he tentatively agrees that blame's appropriateness *can* be articulated with a desert thesis. In spite of his lack of full commitment to desert, McKenna's analysis of what it is to deserve blame is the best comprehensive treatment of deserving blame of which I am aware. McKenna argues that blame essentially involves three harms that are intended to be recognized by the wrongdoer as communicative. These include limitations on social intercourse, demands that the wrongdoer account for her actions, and the emotional upset that comes with realizing that others evaluate you negatively. In the context of blame for wrongdoing, McKenna argues that desert of blame should be cashed out as it being noninstrumentally good that wrongdoers be harmed in these three distinctive manners. Of course, blame can go too far and thereby be unwarranted, as it would if Daphne immediately tried to get Leslie fired for telling the racist joke. But McKenna argues persuasively that milder social ostracism—no lunch date for Leslie with Daphne this week—is a good thing, as it demonstrates Daphne's commitment to what is morally right and communicates to Leslie that she failed to have sufficient regard for others. In a helpful challenge to skeptics about the appropriateness of blame, McKenna notes that many skeptics have urged that we 'tone down' our resentment and instead express sadness at wrongdoing, exhort wrongdoers to do better, and limit our relations with them if necessary. But if these 'substitute' reactions are correctly interpreted by Leslie as responses that are intended to be recognized by her as responses to her wrongful conduct then they *just are* manifestations of blaming, even if their emotional vehicle is not resentment.

I've tried here to lay out the major themes of the book, but McKenna's treatment of the issues covers so many topics in such detail that summarizing them point by point in a review of this length isn't possible. Potential readers will be well advised to get the book and join the conversation.

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