

1 Ethics and Moral Responsibility: Part 1

2 [NOTE: Approx. 10 minutes spoken] @ 150wpm]

3 Recently, I listened to a radio talk show, whose host posed this question:

4 *Do we have a moral responsibility to be aware of the suffering of others,*
5 *and to do our best to help abate that suffering?*

6 My first inclination is to say that I have a morally responsibility to be aware of the
7 suffering of others, to not bury my head in the sand, but rather to do my best to
8 help abate that suffering.

9 Anyways, that seems to be the right thing to do. It is a value with which I was
10 brought up - to be my brother's keeper, to look after my fellow man, particularly
11 for those I care about. If I consider myself spiritual or religious, I would imagine
12 that my beliefs would inform me that I have a moral responsibility. And if I'm not
13 spiritual or religious, but agnostic or atheist, chances are the ethic that I follow
14 would inform me to have a moral responsibility, as well.

15 But before I can say for sure that I have a moral responsibility to help alleviate
16 the suffering of others, I would want to explore this question further and ask,
17 "What does it really mean for me to say that I have a moral responsibility"? And is
18 there more than one way moral responsibility can be defined? The answer is yes,
19 there is more than one way it can be defined.

20 It is the job of ethics to inform us as to whether we have a moral responsibility,
21 and if so, how it is defined.

22 This article will, first, briefly explore what ethics is and how it informs us about
23 moral responsibility. Secondly, it will examine two fundamental approaches to
24 moral responsibility - duty and obligation. A forthcoming article will address
25 which approach, if either, is the path each of us ought to pursue.

26 **What is Ethics?**

27 Ethics is the science which guides our conduct in life. Ethics helps us come up
28 with a code of values, which determines the purpose and course of our lives.

29 Values are those objects or ends, for which we strive to achieve. Values range
30 from simple to complex. For example, air is a simple but necessary value for any
31 human. We value air. On the other end of the spectrum, complex values might

32 include a successful career, a happy marriage, or wonderful children. Values that
33 fall somewhere in between, might include going on a vacation, making money,
34 buying a car and so forth. While values are ends in themselves, some also serve
35 as a means to obtain other values. For example, to achieve the value of a
36 successful career, we may find it necessary to first go to school for several years,
37 a value, which serves as a means to enter more specialized training, a value,
38 which serves as a means to achieve a college degree, a value, and so on, until
39 we fulfill our final value of a successful career.

40 Values are not categorical – they do not absolutes which exist “out there” as
41 some Platonic form, detached from us. A value exists only when someone or
42 something, the moral actor, chooses a particular object to be a value. A value,
43 then, is relational to the moral actor. The moral actor is the valuer in such
44 relationship.

45 The moral actor can be the individual, but not necessarily. It depends on the
46 ethical system. A given ethical system defines who or what the moral actor is. If
47 the moral actor is something other than the individual, then the individual
48 becomes a moral agent, who acts on behalf of the moral actor.

49 **How Does Ethics Inform Us About Moral Responsibility?**

50 It is the job of ethics to inform us as to whether we have a moral responsibility to
51 act, and if so, how the term is defined.

52 There are two major approaches to moral responsibility – moral duty and moral
53 obligation. So, when we act out of a sense of moral responsibility, we are
54 performing an action or set of actions, either out of a sense of duty or obligation,
55 as a means of achieving some value or end. While the terms duty and obligation
56 are often times conflated in conventional use, they do have different meanings.
57 Let’s also be clear that we’re discussing moral duty and obligation, not legal duty
58 and obligation.

59 Before we can attempt to address the question, as to whether we have a moral
60 responsibility to help abate the suffering of others, we must first determine what
61 who or what the moral actor is within a given ethical system, so that we may
62 know which approach – duty or obligation – is operative.

63 **Who is the Moral Actor?**

64 Ethics identifies who or what the moral actor is. The moral actor is always the
65 one who chooses values. He is the valuer. The moral actor and the individual can
66 be the same, but not necessarily. Several other candidates exist as to who or
67 what the moral actor might be. It depends on the ethical system the individual

68 uses to guide his thoughts and actions.

69 If a particular ethical system defines the moral actor as the individual, then it
70 must follow that the individual is the valuer, who chooses his values. It is
71 important to note that, as part of human nature, the individual doesn't act, just for
72 the sake of acting. He acts for the sake of some end of his own choosing. This
73 process is called final causation. The end is a value. Once chosen, the end
74 determines the means, required to bring about the end. The individual, now, has
75 a moral obligation to himself to perform the means in order to bring about the
76 end.

77 However, if the ethical system defines the moral actor as someone or something
78 other than the individual, then final causation no longer applies. He no longer
79 acts toward an end of his own choosing. Rather, he acts as a moral agent, out of
80 a sense of duty, toward an end, chosen by the moral actor. The individual acts
81 without regard for any personal goal, motive, desire or interest he may have.

82 Now, let's return to the original question:

83 *Do we have a moral responsibility to be aware of the suffering of others,*
84 *and to do our best to help abate that suffering?*

85 **Moral Obligation**

86 *Do we have a moral obligation to be aware of the suffering of others,*
87 *and to do our best to help abate that suffering?*

88 In this case, the moral actor is the individual. Since the condition for obligation is
89 linked to the individual as the moral actor, it is a contradiction in terms to pose
90 the question in such categorical terms. "I" applies here, not "we". It would, then,
91 be accurate to rephrase the question as follows:

92 *Do I have a moral obligation to be aware of the suffering of others,*
93 *and to do my best to help abate that suffering?*

94 Each individual, as the moral actor, must first choose the value - the happiness of
95 others - as his own, before the question above can be true for him. The
96 correctness of the statement doesn't exist outside of him, as some imperative or
97 command. He only answers to himself, when he chooses it to be a value, and is
98 now committed to fulfill it through action.

100 **Moral Duty**

101 *Do we have a moral duty to be aware of the suffering of others, and*
102 *to do our best to help abate that suffering?*

103 The answer is categorically yes, if the ethical system, by which we are guided,
104 identifies the moral actor as something other than the individual. The question
105 may remain categorical, since it applies to all individuals, guided by the given
106 ethical system. They *all* must obey and act upon the commands of the moral
107 actor, out of a sense of duty.

108 In addition, the individual as a moral agent has a moral duty to accept the value –
109 the happiness of others - imposed upon him by the moral actor. This value is also
110 categorical as far as the individual is concerned.

111 So, for example, if the moral actor is humanity, then the value – the happiness of
112 others – is chosen by humanity, and consequently becomes a moral command or
113 imperative which the individual must accept and act upon. The same thing
114 applies whether the moral actor is the collective, tribe, cultural group, our
115 species, Gaia, Mother Earth, the ecosystem, or some other super being.

116 **Sense of Moral Duty or Obligation – Which Approach Should We Follow?**

117 At this point, we must ask ourselves which approach to moral responsibility we
118 ought to follow – moral duty or moral obligation. To answer that question, we
119 must answer the underlying and more fundamental question: Whether the moral
120 actor ought to be the individual or something else. The next article will explore
121 both questions. In it, the case will be made that the rightful moral actor is the
122 individual, whose sense of moral responsibility to choose values and act upon
123 them are based on moral obligation, as the wise path to follow. Ultimately,
124 however, the decision is best left to each one of us, as individuals. It is not a
125 collective or group decision.