

ON CAPABILITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

BY capability is meant the physical or psychological power of performing an act.

By responsibility is meant the moral (as distinct from the physical) necessity of performing an act.

Physical or bodily powers incapable of moral necessity are incapable of responsibility.



A power that is incapable of an act may be responsible for an act, if it has (1) physical, (2) psychological, or (3) moral power over another power which is capable of the act.

(1) Physical: The human will is not capable of cutting a human throat. A knife is capable of cutting a human throat. But a human will using a knife is responsible for cutting a human throat. In other words a human will has not the capability but has the responsibility of cutting or not cutting a human throat.



(2) Psychological. The feet have the capability of walking but not of hearing or of seeing. The ears have the capability of hearing but not of seeing or of walking. The eyes have the capability of seeing but not of walking or of hearing. The human will has the capability neither of walking nor hearing nor seeing.

Now the feet which have the capability of walking are not responsible for walking. The ears which have the capability of hearing are not responsible for hearing. The eyes which have the capability of seeing are not responsible for seeing.

But the human will which cannot walk nor hear nor see can move (or not move) the feet to walk, the ear to hear, the eye to see.

Therefore the human will which has not the capability of walking, hearing seeing, has the responsibility of walking, hearing, seeing.



(3) Moral. Only an oculist has the capability of remov-

ing a cataract, and only a surgeon has the capability of cutting out a tumour; the sufferer, as such, cannot do what is done by the oculist or the surgeon.

But the sufferer can empower the oculist to remove the cataract; or the surgeon to cut out the tumour. Therefore the sufferer has, not indeed the capability, but the responsibility of removing (or not removing) the cataract—of cutting out (or not cutting out) the tumour. Until the sufferer gives the responsibility and the oculist or surgeon accepts the responsibility given, the oculist and surgeon have a capability without responsibility.

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So much expert opinion is now available that the over-anxious "capable person" (i.e., the expert) or the under-anxious "responsible person" (the father, the guardian, the elector, the share-holder, etc.) may allow the sense of capability and responsibility to become one.

This may be seen in the two spheres of Social and Moral life with seemingly opposite results.

Thus in the Social sphere the person who is—or who is taken to be—capable is often taken to be responsible. This subtle and very dangerous fallacy finds expression in such a principle as: "The doctors are responsible for the health of the nation." The truth is that the group responsible for the health of the nation is—the nation; just as the person responsible for the health of the patient is—the patient.¹

Again, the parent is the natural guardian or person responsible for the child's unbringing and, therefore, education as he is responsible for the child's begetting. Yet it has been necessary for our Hierarchy (with the approval of Rome) to formulate the following principles:

(1) *It is no part of the normal function of the State to teach. . . .*

(2) *A teacher never is and never can be a civil servant;*

¹ A poor woman who was saved (for many years) from an operation by the timely arrival of an expert was afterwards counselled by him with Doric emphasis: "My good woman, if they want to take that tumour away tell them to mind their own business. It's your body they are going to cut—not theirs."

and should never regard himself or allow himself to be so regarded.

Whatever authority he may possess to teach and control children and to claim their respect and obedience comes to them from God through the parents and not through the State except in so far as the State is acting on behalf of the parents.

This axiomatic moral truth is not universally accepted. Indeed we have heard it questioned by reputed theologians.

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Here we may call attention to some relevant facts. (1) In point of fact the morally responsible person is, on the whole, the best fitted to have responsibility, and to discern when he should discern, his own incapability. Thus a doctor will witness to the fact that parents, as such, through having a sense of responsibility, have such a consequent sense of their own incapability that they are inclined to over-estimate the capability of the doctors.

In the sphere of education there is one permanent phenomenon, too often overlooked by mere educational statisticians. Whenever there is (as during the war there was) a notable rise in wages there is a corresponding rise in the number of children who are transferred from elementary to secondary schools.

This permanent phenomenon witnesses to the fact that on the whole the person who is naturally responsible is best fitted to have the responsibility. Moreover this sense of responsibility begets a sense of incapability, where such incapability exists.

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(2) A capability may be either in judgment or in act.

A capability of judgment is not necessarily a capability of act. Thus a civil engineer may be capable of judging how to tunnel under a river. Yet only the strong navy is capable of doing the tunnelling.

On the other hand the capability of carrying out a judgment made is not necessarily the capability of making the judgment. Thus it is the army's rank and file that gain the

victory. But the rank and file are incapable of planning the victory.

But neither the capability of making a judgment nor the capability of executing a judgment is the responsibility for making or executing the judgment. The responsibility for teaching a child does not rest with the expert educationalist at Whitehall nor with the practical teacher in the State-endowed school; but with the parent of the child to be taught.

Again the responsibility of giving a judgment is not the responsibility of executing the judgment.

In a word, Judicial Power is not Executive Power; and Delegated Executive Power is not Ordinary (Natural) Executive Power.

What we have said may throw light on the Church's function as a Moral Tribunal. Stated formally, the Church is the Supreme Moral Judiciary; but not the Supreme Executive.

Whether it has or has not the capability of executing its moral judgments it has not the responsibility; because Judicial Power is not Executive Power.

Thus it has the responsibility of judging that drunkenness is a sin. But it has not the responsibility of physically compelling Tom, Dick or Harry to avoid being drunk.

Or again, it might, on consultation, have the responsibility of judging that a certain war was unjust. But it would not have the responsibility of compelling the unjust aggressor to desist from his aggression. In other words, its judiciary responsibility would not be executive responsibility.

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Turning now from the Social to the Religious sphere we find the same principles of importance. The sphere of Religion (i.e., supernatural Truth and Life) is entered by an intellectual act called Faith.

We have seen that the rational will which is not capable of walking, hearing or seeing is responsible for walking, hearing and seeing. This means that the rational will is responsible for *not* walking, *not* hearing, *not* seeing.

Again, as man is a social being naturally inclined to

believe and trust his fellow-men, it is not a rational act never to believe or trust a fellow-man. In other words, it is reasonable—and the Courts of Law rest on its being reasonable—to be certain not only by self-evidence obtained by ourselves directly from objects but by evidence provided by eye-witnesses or ear-witnesses of the objects.

In other words, though an individual intelligence by itself may not have the capability of being certain of a fact it may have the responsibility of being certain of the fact.

For example. Many years ago the town authorities of Louvain were informed by another authority miles away that a heavy head of waters due to a sudden thaw was sweeping down the river. The Louvain authorities hesitated to *believe* the fact which had been told. But the floods came and Louvain suffered damage to the extent of some £100,000. The Town Authority had not the capability of seeing whether there was or was not a flood; but it was responsible for not accepting the word of an authority that was capable.

In like wise the human intelligence is not, by itself, capable of being certain of the truths of supernatural faith. But it is responsible for being certain (or uncertain) of the truths of faith.

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We may point out how a failure to distinguish between capability and responsibility is leading to different results in the different spheres—social and religious.

In the social sphere there is a growing tendency to transfer all responsibility to the group who have, or who enforce their claim to have, the capability. Perhaps the most ominous and visible sign of that is in the new powers granted to medical experts and medical Boards. In the name of human health such inroads have been made on human liberty as would stagger our forbears of a century ago.

Again, some dispassionate spectators of social movements note with apprehension how commonly the financial expert is called upon to give an ultimate judgment on the social policy of nations. Yet it is at least arguable that though these financial experts have shown a currency or financial

capability, this was so tied to tokens and so remote from reality that they should not have been given responsibility.

Perhaps we may see the same principle at work in many attempts to unify and organize the modern State. One of the marvels of the Great War was its organization. Self-defence constrained each of the warring nations to organize and unify all its subjects, even the children, unto one end—victory over a foe. Nations that had instinctively resisted what they called “Communism” found that in the hour of their peril from an aggressor they had to fall back on a policy which, in times of peace, they would have called a very thorough Communism.

Now the example of the unity and efficiency achieved by this war organization seems to have led men of well-intentioned bewilderment into thinking that the same war-organization would bring the same unity and efficiency in time of peace as in time of war. From this it has been easy to conclude that the person to be given the responsibility of peace-units was one who had capability as a war-expert.

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Passing from the Social sphere to the Religious sphere we find that the confusion between Capability and Responsibility is leading not to the same but to opposite results.

In the Social sphere the tendency is to argue that what is capable is responsible.

In the Religious sphere the tendency is to argue that what is responsible is capable.

Although much good-natured satire is directed against mid-Victorian and pre-Victorian rationalism, and though the modern world hardly resents being charged with a “Flight from Reason,” there is little evidence that these fugitives from rationalism or from reason are finding their way to Faith. The old-fashioned, somewhat logical rationalist was so convinced that his reason (mind) was the measure of things that he refused to acknowledge a sphere of authority and faith. His modern satirist if not one with him in explicitly exalting reason is one with him in very effectively rejecting authority and faith, as not modern. Practically he acknowledges kinship with the satirised mid-Victorian by

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refusing to hold to be true anything that he does not *see* to be true. Hence as an Apostle's Creed or a Decalogue cannot be *proved* by his mind, he holds that he has the right to ignore them or reject them. If he seeks to justify himself, even to himself, his justification is that his reason has the ultimate responsibility of accepting or rejecting an alleged truth.

If he could only see it, he has here taken the wrong road at the cross-ways of thought. He has concluded that responsibility is capability, and that as his reason (or mind) was ultimately responsible for all its affirmations and denials it was ultimately capable, by itself (and without the voucher by another mind), of arriving at all its affirmations and denials.

But on this showing social life among reasoning beings would be impossible; because such social life is possible only when men see that it is reasonable to believe men.

If A will accept only what is self-evident, and needs no voucher of another intelligence, how can he begin a discussion with B? Clearly B has no self-evidence of B's professed opinion. He had only B's word that this is B's opinion!

In the sphere of Religion, then, to think the reason which is ultimately responsible is uniquely capable, is in the long run to dethrone reason in a man and to destroy the social life of a man with his fellow-men.

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St. Thomas makes a profound remark when discussing "whether Truth is a part of Justice?" He says, "Since man is a social animal, one man naturally owes another whatever is necessary to the preservation of human society.

"Now it would be impossible for men to live together, unless they believed one another, as declaring the truth one to another" (*Summa Theologica*, 2a 2ae, q. 109, a. 3, reply to obj. 1).

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Thus we see that to confuse capability and responsibility in the social and religious sphere would end with social as well as individual chaos.

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