

# Do We Live in a World of Responsibility?

## - Philosophical seeking of responsibility's ethics –

Sorin Tudor MAXIM, *Professor PhD*  
*Department of Philosophy, Social and Political Sciences*  
*Faculty of History and Geography*  
*“Ștefan cel Mare” University of Suceava, Romania*  
*maximsorintudor@yahoo.com*

### Abstract

*Often pronounced and more and more capitalized, the notion of “responsibility” acquires new clarifications, especially under the aspect of its moral dimension. The fact according to which the responsibility should become “the arch key of the entire moral edifice” – according to Kant – is an affirmation that still has to be proven theoretically and explained at the moral action level. A problem regarding the question about the new matters of human action is tough put into discussion – such problem represents some “applicative ethics” – and does not involve unprecedented debts and obligations, and can lead towards significant risks, able to require new approaches of moral philosophy, different from those classical, specific to imputableness and regarding the responsibility. In this way, the responsibility assigns a relationship in three terms: the responsible person, the field of responsibility (tasks, actions, attitudes) and the jurisdiction towards which we should answer to (court, people assigned by a decision, awareness, God).*

**Keywords:** *Responsibility, moral responsibility, awareness, answerableness, applicative ethics, inter-human relationships, individual or collective responsibility.*

Responsibility has been seen as an answer to some problems, rather than being a problem; the freedom is a problem, as well as moral awareness, moral virtues or values. “Responsibility is not a problem, and if it is, it assumes few answers, and for these reasons, its difficulty results [...], Sponsio, spondere, to be a guarantor, to allow, to commit. For the Other and in front of the Law, meaning towards the others Community. It involves a path of continually answer, of responding to the present, of being responsible for the Other in my presence... The first content of responsibility is this presence, of your own and of your fellow, presence that ignores the ideas of: for what and why the answers should be given (s.n).” The common language has established in some measures the meaning of

responsibility notion, making a connection to the debts and obligations that revert to an individual related to a certain position in the society; this fact also imposes some ways of acting, reasonable and careful, meaning “responsible”.

According to “Ethical dictionary of moral philosophy”, issued in Paris 1996, the philosophical view over the responsibility “aims towards the conditions of imputable character of acts and our lacks”.

A problem regarding the question about the new matters of human action is tough put into discussion – such problem represents some “applicative ethics” – and does not involve unprecedented debts and obligations, and can lead towards significant risks, able to require new approaches of moral philosophy, different from those classical, specific to imputableness and regarding the responsibility.

And, if things would be different, should discerning between moral responsibility and responsibility be applied? The responsibility is the topic of all days. But who are the responsible persons? The question comes with unyieldingness, almost quotidian, either concerning a new road or aerial catastrophe or related to unemployment, rate of infantile death, education, proliferation of AIDS, to the sphere of ecological or political points of view.

Often pronounced and more and more capitalized, the notion of “responsibility” acquires new clarifications, especially under the aspect of its moral dimension. The fact according to which the responsibility should become “the arch key of the entire moral edifice” – according to Kant – is an affirmation that still has to be proven theoretically and explained at the moral action level. “On one hand, we should prove that insertion of responsibility in any moral speech of our times; on the other hand we should better formulate the responsibilities in places we develop activities, thus emitting the confusing utilizations that make these obscure”. We are facing an initial indetermination, which certainly “comes from the complexity of responsibility’s phenomena, but also from the objective impossibility of having an exhaustive knowledge”.

*The Vocabulary of Philosophy* (Paris, 1980) defines the responsibility as “solidarity of human being with his actions, recognizing himself as author and which, taking into consideration the intentions, assumes the virtues and non-virtues, thus involving awareness and freedom for the agent” ; it represents the “precursory condition of any real or judicial obligation” (M. Blondel). The definition emphasizes the necessity of reporting a participant to actions that this has had in a conscious way, thus involving the feeling of being connected to his activities and of being responsible for them.

In this way, the responsibility assigns a relationship in three terms: the

### *Do we live in a world of responsibility?*

responsible person, the field of responsibility (tasks, actions, attitudes) and the jurisdiction towards which we should answer to (court, people assigned by a decision, awareness, God).

The psychology dictionary appreciates that responsibility “is the ability of stimulating an action that serves socially and of finishing it, thus conferring identity and the entire manner of using it, but also the evaluation (the value) that should be given to it”; in this way, the most important responsibility is that we should have towards the own person, towards the necessity of not idling away the availabilities and of “not passing through life without a contribution to society’s progress, no matter how significant this contribution would be”.

Neither of these definitions makes references to the fact that people are also responsible for what happens around them because of their actions; obviously, this situation does not involve the future of persons and of human beings.

Making a delimitation between responsibility and moral responsibility, “The small dictionary of Ethics” issued at Fribourg in Switzerland 1993, appreciated that as concerns the moral point of view, the responsibility does not assume either a reward or lack of punishment; whereas, considering the judicial point of view, the human being becomes an object of the civil punishment or reward.

The definitions analyzed make a distinction between responsibility and moral responsibility, implicit for the first definitions and explicit – but not fully enough, according to this opinion – and in the situation of the third.

We are now able to suggest a first definition of moral responsibility: a worthily assuming made by a person for the actions and consequences of these actions carried out on purpose, as well as the fact of being responsible to own conscience as concerns the personal attitude towards the others activities.

One might ask us from the beginning if the approach in a triadic manner of the relationship answerableness – responsibility – moral responsibility, introducing the notion of “moral responsibility”, has a higher relevance for the analysis of the phenomenon under discussion. We believe in this: the distance between answerableness and responsibility is at least high as that between responsibility and moral responsibility; there are three levels, different stages of various heights for the same ability achieved by an individual within his socialization process.

The responsibility is not the same with making responsible, where the first means the result and the second the process. This signifies that according to circumstances from the beginning of individual’s socialization, this will be more or less responsible; as a matter of fact, less or not at all. By making responsible, one might understand the specific process of inducing to human being, by

education different levels of responsibility, successively higher. As E. Dupréel properly remarked, the processes of making responsible can be considered as generators, as intensifiers of internal life, to which the form is achieved. In this way, our human condition is built.

The responsibility is not something we were born with it. Probably some dimensions of the moral sense – understood as moral conscience - are born as existing with potentiality. But, the responsibility does not certainly exist at the beginning; we do not born with it, but we become responsible in time. Firstly, we become responsible by own actions. This is a minimal; condition of the responsibility. Then, we are responsible towards an authority that invests us with this quality: The Law of community, God or the laic authority. Finally, I am responsible towards the others, in any face I see, according to the formula used by Lévinas: “You will not kill anymore!”

As a matter of fact, to be responsible in a moral way means more than that, means the fact of being also responsible for the others responsibility: “I will not let you kill either!”

“Am I the guardian of my brother?” – Cain asked himself, by rejecting any responsibility towards other potential actions. As considering the moral point of view, the answer is: “Of course I am”. This does not involve the idea that I should answer for your actions, but only that my responsibility is not exonerated by what happens around me.

This is because “Responsibility is not directly registering within the basic of an inter-subjective point of view. It represents, event within its construction process, an answer to the Other (s.n.) in the same time with self affirmation; and, as Lévinas emphasizes, and this inter-subjectivism is already found within a sphere exceeding the level of dialogical and reflexive registers, thus finding the roots into infra – verbal communication, as for instance: the look.” The remark is essential: the responsibility is not the exclusive result of the awareness; the feelings, the gestures that are expressed in this way, are also understood as specific manifestations of the responsibility, carrying with them a cognitive dimension, but not expressed by the awareness logic.

The answerableness ensures the minimal condition of an individual into a society, that resulting from the respect of social norms and from the wish of ensuring the normal functionality of relationships established in the society.

If the responsibility ensures the society’s equilibrium, the responsibility is the one not depending greatly by the restructuring – sometimes even on revolutionary path – and of developing the social life. Assuming in a conscious

### *Do we live in a world of responsibility?*

way, after an own effort of clarifying and understanding, not only “what it is”, but especially “what is aimed to be”, the individual exceeds his area of answerableness, thus integrating within the collectivity as responsible human being that proposes the creative invasion of the norms, even if this thing is socially desirable. The responsible human being implicitly assumes the consequences of his actions; he might be positively punished or, more often, in a negative way, since he breaks knowingly the social norms, if he considers these things as necessary.

From this point of view, one might understand that a human being will not assume the answerableness of his actions, included within a normative frame; the social individual, meaning the responsible human being will assume this, thus representing the prototype of the historical, active and innovative agent, thus proposing to transform the society, and by this, himself. Of course, the answerableness and responsibility can be included within any area of human action, but mentioning that the first has especially a judicial level, where the last one proves especially a moral point of view.

The moral responsibility is more than that; it is the highest plan of the responsibility. It is about an individual’s responsibility, individual that sees the Other as being more important than himself. The responsibility will thus become the action of creating the accomplished moral sense, which proves to be responsible not only for own actions, but for those of his neighbors.

Assuming the moral responsibility means the way of assuming the task of social and moral progress, without affecting the Other! Having the quality of moral commandment, the Other is placed within a dimension of ideal. This means that fundamental exigency that is raised towards responsible moral awareness does not affect anybody, is not real but ideal, since in real life, the Ego can determine any potential bad actions.

For these reasons, the moral responsibility signifies a new path of currently being highly ideal: “to be – for – the others”.

The idea of being responsible in name of others signifies the idea of being responsible for “the generic other”: “No human being or any generation will be exonerated by the responsibility of experiences – good or bad – which we commonly live.”

On the other hand, for reasons more often met to citizens rights, the judicial doctrines have insisted on the idea of individual’s responsibility towards own actions. Judicially speaking, we are not responsible either for intentions or wishes and, the less for the others’ actions. Even these doctrines have progressed

nowadays towards an idea of decline of the individual responsibility, towards an assuming a collective responsibility or a social responsibility.

Being extremely original, and why not saying - valid in this way the conception of Dimitrie Gusti that affirms that individual responsibility is directly proportional to the level of collective responsibility. Even if it is an attribute of the individual, the responsibility has origins and objective and external origins as concerns the individual, thus fulfilling a social function. Only in this way, "The moral principle of responsibility might represent an active principle", with a part especial view in creating and forming the character.

Gusti does not approve the idea according to which "the collective responsibility" is "primitive and mystic", and by individualization this would become moral responsibility, passing from "the law of talion" towards the appreciation of guilt's intention.

We are not only assisting to a paradox, with negative effects over the responsibility's symptoms:

a) on one hand, the individual responsibility – that of own actions – is not able to satisfy the requirements of social progress, risking to be damaged, and even to corrupt the inter-human relationships ;

b) on the other hand, the indubitable social advantages that social assuming of responsibility introduce will lead towards a general thinning of its carrying out, event to the feeling of its collapsing.

In other words, we are more and more convinced and aware of the fact that responsibility signifies the condition of our humanity, but we are less willing to assume precise tasks, of proving it either to individual, group or institution levels.

### **Bibliography:**

1. *Petit Dictionnaire d'Éthique*, CERF, Paris, 1993.
2. Dupréel, Eugén, *Traité de Morale*, I, II, Presses Universitaires de Bruxelles, 1967.
3. Etchegoyen, Alain, *Le Temps des responsables*, Julliards, France, 1993.
4. Genard, Jean Louis, *Sociologie de l'éthique*, Éditions d'Harmattan, Paris, 1992.
5. Gusti, Dimitrie, "Spre o etică vie a națiunii noastre", in *Opere*, vol II, Academiei R.S.R. Publishing house, Bucharest, 1969.
6. Morfaux, Louis Marie, *Vocabulaire de la philosophie et des sciences humaines*, Armand Colin, Paris, 1980.

*Do we live in a world of responsibility?*

7. Simon, René, *Étique de la responsabilité*, CERF, Paris, 1993.
8. Vacquin, Monette, *La responsabilité. La condition de notre humanité*, dirigé par Autrement, Paris, 1994.