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RESPONSIBILITY RECONSIDERED

A SNOWBALL whizzed past my ear, planting itself on a nearby tree. I stood paralyzed for a moment, arms full of books and papers. To stand motionless was surely to be hit. Prudence might compel me to run quickly for cover. But I've never been one to pass up the opportunity to throw a few snowballs. After about five minutes of hand-numbing fun, I gathered my soaked papers off the snow and headed into a campus building, leaving students behind me to continue the fight without my help. After about ten minutes in the building I returned to that same doorway to find several shamefaced undergraduates staring mournfully at a broken window. To their credit, they had not fled the scene. They were not quite sure what to do; one of them jokingly blamed me for the broken glass.

I praised them for their honesty, patted them on the backs, and went back to my duties as professor at a small Christian college. My window happens to overlook the field and the carnage, and as I tried to craft a lecture on responsibility, I couldn't help but ponder that fuzzy line where responsibility begins and ends. How responsible was I for that broken window? The question seems rather simple and straightforward. In a court of law I would almost certainly be exonerated. I hadn't thrown the offending missile, and the window at the center of the controversy had been intact when I entered the building. No discernable cause-and-effect process tied me directly to the crime, nor would a reasonable person accuse me of being "to blame" for the event. I had been a part of the melee, and it was unclear who had thrown the errant snowball, but both my lack of arm strength and absence from the scene during the crime seemed to release me from any sort of responsibility. Still, does the fact that I was not tied to the crime by fault truly relieve me of responsibility?

Instincts, honed since childhood, drive us to find our way out of responsibilities when they can be avoided. Responsibility comes with hassle, cost, pain, and risk. We give people credit for being "good" when they own up to their tangible and obvious duties. The term "charity" tends to designate unprovoked, voluntary donations of time, money, or goods. We drop money into Salvation Army buckets at Christmas and occasionally donate to fight hunger or cancer. But even in these cases we tend to think of the sacrifice as charity and not responsibility. The term "responsibility" is reserved for situations in which people are legally or morally obliged to assist. This tendency is reinforced by ages of cultural, legal, and even religious support. At face value, responsibility seems to be de-

terminated by way of blame. We only find ourselves responsible for others when we can be connected legally to their suffering.

It is that concept, responsibility, so widely and diversely understood, which serves as the focal point for this book. This journey is driven by a suspicion that the concept of responsibility needs to be rethought on broad and practical levels. We will explore a host of ways in which responsibility is shifted, shirked, passed, and ignored. The core questions here relate to the posture with which humans ought to encounter strangers, enemies, the poor, and the oppressed. This is thus a book about social justice, about the questions that arise when humans, and Christians in particular, analyze the length and breadth of their responsibility for a broken world.

The concept of responsibility appears all over the world today. When something goes wrong, we want to know who is responsible. Journalists scramble to be the first to identify the culprit behind the suffering splashed on our screens and newspapers. Whether investigating disasters like 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, or the 2007 Virginia Tech University shooting, the world wants to know *who* is responsible.

Children learn at a shockingly early age how to sidestep or embrace responsibility for broken windows and blackened eyes. "Responsibility" is a word wielded effectively by governments, who encourage citizens to do their "civic duty." Charities implore us to take responsibility for the poor, the wounded, the oppressed, and the overlooked. Religion, in its nearly infinite manifestations, often challenges humans to carefully consider a kind of supreme and transcendent responsibility.

One does not have to look far to see a host of conflicting models offered through various political, theological, and ethical perspectives. The variety of attitudes toward respon-

sibility doesn't hide in dusty ethical textbooks. They make themselves known in the games we play, the media that enchants us, and certainly in the myriad of cultural traditions that inform daily life. Ethics, the philosophy of responsibility, is everywhere. This book is driven by the sense that there is something profoundly wrong with the way responsibility is developed in the world today. Some of the problems I am eager to identify may be peculiar to my corner of the human experience. Some of them pertain to global problems, some to North American problems, and there is always that chance that some of them only pertain to me. Still, the concept of responsibility seems sufficiently broken to warrant a close look and a careful examination.

Responsibility is inherently practical. A philosophy of obligation that does not translate into tangible human behavior is a silly contradiction. The explorations of this book make use of resources ranging from television and art to ethical philosophy. With these tools we will seek a fresh perspective on responsibility as it is lived and ignored in modern society. We will explore a variety of themes from religious and philosophical traditions around the world and across history. I am wagering, from the outset, that the Jewish and Christian traditions call for a form of responsibility that is easily overwhelmed, tainted, and obscured by the louder and more visible models that drive our daily interactions. Our discussions here will gradually push for a close association between the Christian gospel and concern for "the least of these" (see Matt. 25).

My hope for this book is that readers will join me in searching for the humble way responsible human communities should meet strangers, foreigners, neighbors, widows, and orphans. The philosophies of responsibility offered by

popular media and politics simply cannot answer the call for justice that rises, sometimes silently, from the faces of those who suffer.

In religion, the question of responsibility has too often been reduced to a game whose goal is to figure out how to secure divine approval. In such a contest one's neighbor becomes profoundly secondary to the concept of obligation. The whole pursuit of responsibility is oriented toward the self. Inside and outside of religion, the question of responsibility has repeatedly returned to the self, the "I." Responsibility has come to refer to the extent to which a person must meet obligations to other people in order to fulfill the requirements of "goodness." Perhaps this echoes the young man, often called the rich young ruler, who approached Jesus to ask, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Mark 10:17). The question is already loaded with a self-centered perspective on responsibility. The young man stumbled his way to Jesus in search of his own salvation, in search of his own eternal bliss. The problem he longed to solve was his own insecurity, his own doubts and fears about his spiritual status. This young man, sincere as he might be, already had his opinions about responsibility. He came to Jesus to discover the key to winning the game he was already playing.

Told to give all he had to the poor and to come follow Jesus, the young man became discouraged and overwhelmed. He walked away, kicking the dust. His disappointment may stem less from the extreme nature of Jesus' requirements than from his broken model of responsibility. Jesus asked him to be *more* responsible than can be considered reasonable. This result often jars modern readers. Hearing this story we imagine selling our houses and cars, dropping off bags of cash at

homeless shelters, and setting out to live as vagrant wanderers. But these images miss the point as clearly as the young ruler himself. Jesus is offering a different model of responsibility, a different way to think of poverty and suffering and holiness. The old model, the young man's game, seems to be a pretty common one in the world today. People tend to ask the question of responsibility for self-centered reasons. What might it mean to ask the question of responsibility for the sake of others? For the sake of the poor?

The young ruler and the modern reader of that narrative look in vain for a measure against which they can judge their worthiness. The measure is not offered by Jesus, except in an absurd gesture toward a bottomless responsibility that would leave the follower broken, totally given over to the poor and to the ministry of Jesus. Jesus has not tweaked the ruler's model for responsibility but offered an overwhelming alternate model. This book does not offer any definitive answers about how this new model should function but sets out on a journey toward the kind of responsibility that somehow exceeds the question, "What *must* I do?"

Human communities tend to ascribe responsibility where fault is found. At best, we are to take responsibility for the suffering in the world we have caused. Sadly there is a host of suffering in the world for which no one claims responsibility, either because of negligence or because there are truly no identifiably guilty parties. In many cases the guiltiest parties are ignorant of the damages they cause, far from the suffering, or even long dead. Modern racism and sexism sometimes operate this way, as contemporary societies reap the whirlwind of past sins. To make matters worse, the habits of culture and history make us blind to the ways we reproduce and reenact the injustices of our

ancestors. Responsibility cannot be simply tied to the damages we cause, as our judges and juries are encouraged to assess. Such a perspective on responsibility, pivotal in proving fault in courts of law, is hopelessly ill-equipped to deal with the suffering that abounds in the world today.

Our courts are often at a loss when it comes to allocating responsibility. In 2006 a New York man stumbled out of a bar after watching a hockey game in Manhattan. Drunk and clumsy, he fell onto the subway tracks and was badly injured by a downtown train. The driver of the train, for his part, mistook the drunken man on the tracks for an “inert object.” Struggling to place blame in the right place, the courts found the injured man “35 percent” responsible for his own injuries; his settlement was therefore reduced by that amount.<sup>1</sup> This game reduces responsibility to a formula. But this is a sad calculus, full of equations that will never balance out.

The problems of social justice are bolstered by a more fundamental quandary in interpersonal morality. When I encounter another person, I come face-to-face with someone whose needs, history, scars, fears, hopes, and dreams far exceed my comprehension. The other person needs more than I can give, hurts more than I can see, has been through more than I can understand, and hopes more than I can imagine. In this sense, the other person passes above and beyond my understanding. How can I be responsible for all these overwhelming, untraceable, and even unknown issues? Should we be considered responsible for what we cannot know or understand? Our journey moves toward an understanding of responsibility appropriate for a world overflowing with injustice. But this investigation must confront the unsettling fact that our duties are not particularly well defined. How respon-

sible am I for the unknown and infinite needs and hurts that exceed my knowledge and abilities? Among the tensions that will constantly haunt this book is the paralysis that can be produced by competing responsibilities. When we choose, after all, which charity we will support, we are less vocally denouncing and refusing most of the others. When we choose an intimate friendship with one person, we are declining others this access to our lives. When we choose one career, we denounce most others, at least for a time. People regularly choose to live irresponsibly, squandering life and resources on selfish and shortsighted choices. But even when we attempt to be responsible, we remain caught between competing claims on how we ought to act. Pay attention at election time; candidates from every political party will beg you to come to the poll and vote “responsibly.” This tension is seldom acknowledged, dwelling often as a subtle uneasiness that plagues us even as we overcome the temptation to live selfishly and resolve to make responsible choices. This lack of *ease*, sometimes called *dis-ease*, stands squarely in our way as we attempt to live responsibly.

Some of the most polarizing and fascinating ethical tensions in contemporary society reveal this tension. Pressed to rectify and prevent the injustices of racial and gender discrimination, we are faced with a difficult choice. Should companies hire and schools admit students with lower qualifications based on the gender or ethnicity of the applicant? Affirmative action is a complex and divisive issue, precisely because it appeals to a double responsibility. We feel responsible to hardworking candidates with the strongest SAT scores and sturdiest résumés. Simultaneously, we would be negligent to suppose that social and economic pressures fail to influence

scores, grades, and personal histories. It is understandable that people weigh in passionately both in favor and opposition to affirmative action. On our best days, we establish opinions on ethical issues, not because our positions serve our own interests, but because we deem our stances maximally just. We hope that our efforts and opinions lead to a better, fairer world for everyone involved. Some issues, including affirmative action, place us in a tension that refuses to be easily resolved. We are pressed by authentic requests for responsibility on multiple sides. The temptation, to be sure, is to scoff at one request for justice and sleep easily at night.

The tension of competing responsibilities illustrated by affirmative action is the tip of the iceberg. Pressed to live frugally so we might direct resources to the poor, we buy clothing sewn by children in a South American sweatshop. Longing to avoid wastefulness we readily donate our used clothing to charities, flooding the world's clothing market with cast-off American clothing. Struggling to live responsibly with our ecological environment, we pour enough money into a hybrid Toyota Prius to inoculate a small country against the tetanus virus.<sup>2</sup> Tensions like these fill our daily lives with a sense of absurdity and with the very real danger of hypocrisy. Moral "high ground" is harder to achieve than we would like to think. This reality does not, of course, make the struggle any less vital.

We should also be painfully aware of the temptation to treat these pressing disagreements as a game. Savvy students often identify the irresolvable tensions inherent to problems like affirmative action, global poverty, and environmental degradation. In these issues, and in countless others, trying to rectify an unjust situation runs the risk of worsening the injustice or wasting energy on frivolous initiatives. There is a

strange brand of comfort afforded by cynicism, which justifies inaction by identifying the potential perils of every action. This may be one of the more dangerous perils awaiting anyone who enters the complex and messy field of applied ethics. Cynical critiques come easy, far easier than pursuing solutions for the painful issues that plague our world.

We struggle with and against a seemingly natural impulse to draw a very tight line around our area of responsibility. Guilt, a sensation most people wish to avoid, is often tied directly to responsibility. We feel guiltiest when we see suffering that can be tied directly to our actions. So when we can show ourselves and others that we are not responsible for suffering, we directly address the way guilt influences our lives. Courts, juries, and judges provide one way of addressing the question of responsibility. Phrases like “probable cause” and “beyond reasonable doubt” are meant to establish the likelihood that an accused person can be connected to a crime. To avoid a guilty verdict, defendants seek to dissociate themselves from the cause-and-effect process by which someone or something was harmed. Tobacco companies blame consumers for abusing their products; countless murderers have blamed their crimes on temporary bouts of insanity; jilted lovers blame their enraged behavior on their unfaithful spouses. To find a person “guilty” in court prosecutors must usually establish either intentional wrongdoing or negligence. The defendant must be shown to act either maliciously or with a gross lack of ordinary concern for others. For the most part, acquittals rest on undermining the causal link between the accused and the crime. “If it doesn’t fit, you must acquit.”<sup>3</sup>

Even more sinister is the question of intentionality. We excuse ourselves from responsibility, consciously or other-

wise, when we feel as though we “did not mean to do it.” But the world is full of broken windows nobody meant to break. Human society is rife with corrupt systems nobody intended to distort. This is not to insinuate that we have any shortage of intentional acts of greed, selfishness, and abuse. These abound, to be sure. But what concerns me here is my own ability to acquit myself of responsibility for broken windows and scarred bodies. Nobody likes to feel complicit for the suffering of others; but to what lengths do we go to avoid the pang of a guilty conscience? For these reasons, responsibility is often reduced to what can be pinned on people.

I was eager to pay for the window broken in the snowball fight, despite my lack of direct fault in the breaking. But what concerns me is that I viewed my act as charity, not as responsibility. In this instance, charity allowed me to stand morally distinct from the seemingly careless behavior of my students. My act was still about me and my desire to be charitable. Even when I act generously to rectify injustice, I long for my actions to be seen as charity, not compulsory behavior based on unavoidable responsibility that has fallen to me. But perhaps the quotable actor Peter Ustinov had it right when he quipped, “It is our responsibilities, not ourselves, that we should take seriously.”<sup>4</sup>

This book will traverse a broad cross section of fields and topics. One cannot attempt to explore the concept of responsibility without engaging, among many other disciplines, anthropology, psychology, sociology, politics, philosophy, and religion. The lines between these fields are sometimes blurry, sometimes distinct, but the primary orientation of the book is ethical. It must be underscored from the outset that I do not write as one who has discovered the answers to the ethical issues engaged here. It is critical, of course, to seek solutions

to the ethical challenges that plague human existence. So this book is riddled with suggestions about how we might make such judgments and live differently because of them. Ethics, after all, is truly useless if it does not lead to actions and decisions. Still, this book is primarily intended to encourage readers to thoroughly consider the deceptively complex concept of responsibility and think through the implications of everyday claims about personhood, otherness, justice, and love.

Above all, this is a book about responsible engagement of the world. These reflections presume a reader who is interested in thinking about responsibility beyond the bounds of what can be proven in court, or required by any prescriptive code. This book is for communities and individuals who long to *take responsibility* for the broken bodies, empty plates, and leaking roofs of the world, even without a causal link binding them to the injustice. We must also learn to *act* on behalf of this suffering, despite the confusion that arises when we are less than sure which remedy we should seek.

Ironically, responsibility may sometimes require *inaction*, for not every act of compassion is actually helpful or beneficial to people caught in the vice of suffering and oppression. In the past fifty years, more than one trillion dollars in development-related foreign aid has been channeled from rich countries to various countries in Africa. Unfortunately, this well-intentioned generosity has frequently strengthened the political and economic problems behind hunger and disease in Africa. This doesn't mean that richer countries should ignore suffering in Africa or be released from responsibility for African suffering. Yet it certainly means that taking responsibility for suffering on that continent is more complicated than writing checks and dropping pallets of food from airplanes.

We must remain mindful; taking responsibility is not always about *doing* more.

Responsibility is much more than the duties reluctantly pinned on people who fail to acquit themselves of blame. The concept of responsibility, as it will be presented here, is about awakening to the sense that I *am* my responsibility. My very identity is bound up in responsibilities I have not chosen or sought. Responsibility isn't something I can take or leave. Children awaken to a world in which they are already responsible, already bound to others. Unfortunately, negative and legal notions of obligations have hijacked the concept of responsibility. This leaves me only responsible for the direct results of my intentional actions. Responsibility as blame distorts the very heart of humanity, let alone Christianity. To be human is to be responsible, to be bound both wonderfully and frighteningly to the faces that surround us.

This is not another book encouraging readers to be charitable, though love and charity are certainly pivotal to what follows. But neither blame nor charity provides an adequate tool for understanding responsibility. This is a book about the slippery nature of obligation, the competing calls to justice, and the perilous temptation to dismiss and avoid responsibility. This is a book about faces unattached to causes, suffering that never hits front pages or bumper stickers. Our journey takes us to the heart of a world full of gaping needs that hide no romance, charm, or glory. This is a book about an overlooked concept of the utmost importance for human life and community. This is a book about justice, about reconciliation, and about hospitality. In a word, this book is an invitation to reconsider the very notion of responsibility.