S. Scheffler, Boundaries and Allegiances

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Individual Responsibility in a Global Age *

Introduction

Europe has been undergoing a process of political transformation whose outcome cannot be predicted with confidence, in part because the process is being driven by two powerful but conflicting tendencies. The first is the movement toward greater economic and political union among the countries of Western Europe. The second is the pressure, in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, for the countries of Eastern Europe to fragment along ethnic and communal lines.

However these conflicting tendencies may be resolved in practice, they pose a theoretical problem for contemporary liberalism, and for many other political philosophies as well. The problem arises because contemporary liberalism —like many other political philosophies—tends to treat the *individual society* as the appropriate unit of justification, while tacitly assuming a one-to-one correspondence between individual societies and sovereign states. Thus, the dominant focus of liberal thought is on the question of how the political institutions of an individual society are to be justified, and it is taken for granted that the society in question, although undoubtedly comprising a population that is highly diverse in various respects, will nevertheless be organized as a single nation-state.[1] In addition, it tends to be assumed that any adequate justification of such a society's institutions will be one that is addressed exclusively to the citizens of that society, and that the justice or injustice of the society will depend entirely on the way in which it adjudicates among the interests of its own citizens.[2] Questions of global justice are considered under

the heading of 'international' justice, if indeed they are considered at all; like international law, international justice is thought of as an area of specialized concern that is most naturally addressed once a body of principles for the more fundamental case of the individual nation-state is in hand. Thus, for example, John Rawls describes himself as working with 'the notion of a self-contained national community'.[3] His primary aim, he says, is to develop principles 'for the basic structure of society conceived for the time being as a closed system isolated from other societies'.[4] 'The significance of this special case', he adds, 'is obvious and needs no explanation'.[5] In Rawls's view, investigation of 'the principles of justice for the law of nations' may appropriately be postponed until after principles for a single society have been derived.[6]

As recent events in Europe demonstrate, this set of assumptions may be brought under pressure from two different directions at once. On the one hand, the growing economic and technological interdependence of the countries of the world, which has helped to produce the drive toward greater union in Western Europe, makes it natural to wonder whether one can in fact produce an adequate justification for the institutions of a single society by treating it as 'a closed system isolated from other societies'. Perhaps societies are so economically interdependent that the justice of the basic structure of any one of them essentially depends on the nature of its political and economic relations to the others. Or, more radically, some may wonder whether, in the conditions of the modern world, the political and economic institutions for which the strongest justification can be found will be those

[1] One liberal who does *not* take the nation-state for granted, but who recognizes that most liberals do, is Will Kymlicka in *Liberalism, Community, and Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).
[2] As Yael Tamir observes in *Liberal Nationalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 10: '[M]any national elements, although unacknowledged, have been fused into liberal thought. . . . For example, the liberal conception of distributive justice is

particularistic and applies only within well-defined, relatively closed social frameworks, which favor members over nonmembers.' For a historical account of changes in the way the concept of a 'nation' has been understood, see E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
[3] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 457.
[4] Ibid., 8. [5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid., 457. In *Political Liberalism* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1993: 272n), Rawls writes: '[A]s a first approximation, the problem of social justice concerns the basic structure as a closed background system. To start with the society of nations would seem merely to push one step further back the task of finding a theory of background justice. At some level there must exist a closed background system, and it is this subject for which we want a theory. We are better prepared to take up this problem for a society (illustrated by nations) conceived as a more or less self-sufficient scheme of social cooperation and as possessing a more or less complete culture. If we are successful in the case of a society, we can try to extend and to adjust our initial theory as further inquiry requires.'
In his essay on 'The Law of Peoples', *Critical Inquiry*, 20 (1993): 36–68, and in his book of the same title (Harvard University Press, 1999), Rawls makes good on his suggestion that the topic of international justice should be addressed once a theory of justice for a single society has been developed. In chapter 6 of his *Realizing Rawls* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), however, Thomas Pogge argues that we should 'abandon Rawls's primary emphasis on domestic institutions in favor of globalizing his entire conception of justice' (240). For a similar suggestion, see Charles Beitz, *Political Theory and International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), Part 3.

of the individual society or state at all, as opposed to some more inclusive form of organization.[7]

On the other hand, although a focus on the political institutions of a single society may seem, from some vantage points, excessively narrow, events in Eastern Europe—and, indeed, in many other places as well—serve forcefully to remind us that there are also perspectives from which such a focus may seem too broad, for it may seem to underestimate both the extent and the political significance of the cultural diversity that exists within most actual societies. Certainly the expectation that each society will be organized as a *nation-state*—as opposed, say, to a multi-nation state—is open to serious question, given the evident power of shared identifications based on factors like religion, ethnicity, language, and cultural history, and given the heterogeneity of the populations of most existing states. Such an expectation may seem to rest on an inflated estimate of the significance of shared citizenship in relation to communal bonds of other kinds.

Thus, although it continues to be widely assumed both that the individual society is the appropriate unit of political justification and that such societies will be organized as nation-states, these assumptions are under political and intellectual pressure from two different directions. Caught between powerful universalistic and equally powerful particularistic tendencies, they define a widely held intermediate position which seems increasingly to require defense. To the extent that a political philosophy simply takes this position for granted, it begs some important theoretical questions to which recent events have lent considerable urgency.

This problem is especially acute for contractarian versions of contemporary liberalism, because of their explicit focus on the individual society as the relevant unit of justification and their tacit reliance on the category of the nation-state; but the problem also arises for other versions of liberalism, and for various other political philosophies as well. There is, however, one theory for which it would appear to be less of a problem, and that is consequentialism.[8] In general, social and communal ties have no direct justificatory significance for consequentialism, and the bond of shared citizenship is no

[7] In 'The Law of Peoples', Rawls writes: 'I follow Kant's lead in *Perpetual Peace* in thinking that a world government—by which I mean a unified political regime with the legal powers normally exercised by central governments—would either be a global despotism or else a fragile empire torn by frequent civil strife as various regions and peoples try to gain their political autonomy.' (46)

Thomas Nagel takes a similar position in *Equality and Partiality* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1991), ch. 15. For a defense of the Kantian idea of a 'pacific union' of liberal states as the most plausible route to world peace, see the two-part article by Michael Doyle, 'Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs', *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 12 (1983): 205–35 and 323–53. See also Jeremy Waldron, 'Special Ties and Natural Duties', *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 22 (1993): 3–30.

[8] Consequentialism, as I understand it, is a view that first gives some principle for ranking overall states of affairs from best to worst from an impersonal standpoint, and then says that the right act or policy or institutional arrangement in any given situation is the one that will produce the highest-ranked state of affairs that is available.

exception. Consequentialists hold that social and political institutions ought to be arranged in such a way as to produce the best overall outcomes, and they take the interests of *all* human beings to count equally in determining which outcomes are best. Thus, on the face of it, consequentialism would appear much better equipped than some other views to accommodate the universalistic tendencies in modern political life, and much less vulnerable to any charge that it takes the category of the nation-state for granted.

Indeed, consequentialists can manage to treat the individual society as a unit with special justificatory significance only by 'arguing back' to this more conventional position from their own radically universalistic and apparently revisionary starting point: by arguing, in other words, that the interests of all human beings will best be served by a division of labour in which the human population is organized into different societies, each of which has its own political institutions that are specially concerned with the welfare of that society. In much the same way, consequentialism can attach justificatory significance to familial bonds only by arguing that the interests of all humanity will best be served if individuals devote special attention to the members of their own families. In principle, the method of 'arguing back' provides consequentialism with a schematic strategy for attaching political significance not only to the individual society but to less-than-universal social groups of any size. However, it can hardly be said that this makes consequentialism directly responsive to particularist or communitarian concerns. On the contrary, what the method of arguing back provides is clearly a strategy for the indirect accommodation of particularist concerns, and one that the consequentialist is entitled to deploy only in circumstances where it is reasonable to assume that universalistic aims will, in fact, best be achieved through particularist structures. Even in these circumstances, moreover, the consequentialist remains committed to denying what the particularist is most concerned to affirm—namely, the unmediated moral significance of those special ties which bind members of a community to each other, but which, in so doing, also serve to set them apart from people outside the community.

In this essay, I will not be directly concerned with the question of whether the individual society is in fact the appropriate unit of justification in political philosophy, nor will I offer any argument about the proper status within political philosophy of the category of the nation-state.[9] Instead, I will be concerned with the universalistic and particularistic pressures that give these questions their present urgency, and, more specifically, with the way in which these conflicting pressures may be viewed in part as expressing conflicting conceptions of responsibility. My aim is to explore this conflict about responsibility and, in particular, to argue that its current political manifestations are in part the outgrowth of a variety of developments in the modern world that have combined to make some fundamental features of our thinking about responsibility look increasingly problematic.

[9] For some interesting suggestions, see Tamir, *Liberal Nationalism*, ch. 7.

Two Conceptions of Normative Responsibility

Different normative ethical theories may be seen as articulating different conceptions of individual responsibility. That is, such theories offer different interpretations of what it is the responsibility of the individual agent to do and to avoid doing. We may say that they offer different conceptions of the individual's *normative responsibility*. Within common-sense moral thought, two doctrines about normative responsibility play a central role. One is the doctrine that individuals have a special responsibility for what they themselves do, as opposed to what they merely fail to prevent. This doctrine is sometimes expressed in the principle that negative duties are stricter than positive duties, where this means, roughly, that it is more important to avoid doing certain sorts of things *to* people than it is to prevent unwelcome occurrences from befalling them or to provide them with positive benefits. The principle that negative duties are stricter than positive duties itself has two sides. The first consists in the idea that the negative duties ordinarily take priority over the positive in cases of conflict. Thus, for example, I may not ordinarily harm one innocent person even in order to prevent harm from befalling two other innocent people, because my negative duty not to harm the one is stronger than my positive duty to aid the two. The second side of the principle that negative duties are stricter than positive duties consists in the idea that the former constitute a greater constraint on one's pursuit of one's own goals, projects, and commitments. For example, I may not be permitted to harm an innocent person in order to advance my career aims, for to do so would violate my duty not to harm. Yet I may be permitted to advance my career aims in other ways, even if by so doing I will miss out on an opportunity to prevent a comparably serious harm from befalling a comparably innocent person.

The other common-sense doctrine is that one has distinctive responsibilities—or 'special obligations'—toward members of one's own family and others to whom one stands in certain significant sorts of relationships. It is true, as Sidgwick emphasized, that there is disagreement within common-sense morality about the specific types of relationships that give rise to special obligations.[10] Although close family relationships are undoubtedly the least controversial example, there is less consensus about relationships of other kinds. Nevertheless, the importance of special obligations in common-sense moral thought seems undeniable. By any measure, they serve to define a large portion of the territory of morality as it is ordinarily understood. The willingness

[10] See Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. (London: Macmillan and Company, Ltd., 1907), Book III, chs. IV and XI. Sidgwick also emphasizes the absence of any consensus about the extent of many of these obligations. The point is not merely that the extent of the obligation depends on the type of special relationship involved, but that with respect to any single type of relationship, it is often difficult to say how far the obligations of the participants are thought to extend.

to make sacrifices for one's family, one's community, one's friends, and one's comrades is seen as one of the marks of a good or virtuous person, and the demands of morality, as ordinarily interpreted, have less to do with abstractions like the overall good than with the specific web of roles and relationships that serve to situate a person in social space.

Because of the significance that it attaches to the distinction between doing and failing to prevent, and to the category of special obligations, the common-sense conception of responsibility may be described as a *restrictive* conception. For the common-sense doctrines that make use of these ideas serve not only to delineate but also to limit the individual's normative responsibilities. Admittedly, there is room within common-sense morality for significant disagreement about the precise content of people's positive and negative duties, and also about the precise degree by which the strength of the latter exceeds that of the former. On any plausible interpretation, however, the principle that negative duties are stricter than positive duties serves to limit normative responsibility in such a way that individuals may, provided they avoid certain types of proscribed behaviour, exercise considerable discretion in the way they choose to lead their lives and to allocate their resources. Similarly, the doctrine that one has special obligations toward certain classes of individuals has, as a corollary, the principle that one's responsibilities toward other people are more limited.

As has often been pointed out, part of the radicalism of consequentialism lies in the challenge it presents to ordinary notions of normative responsibility.[11] To appreciate the radical character of this challenge we have only to observe that consequentialism rejects both of the common-sense doctrines I have mentioned. Thus, in the case of the first doctrine, whereas common-sense morality regards individuals as having special responsibility for what they themselves do, consequentialism treats the outcomes that one fails to prevent as no less important in determining the rightness or wrongness of one's actions than those that one directly brings about. This greatly widens the scope of one's normative responsibility, in so far as it implies that one's positive duties are as strict as one's negative duties—so that, for example, one's duty to alleviate suffering that one has had no hand in causing is as great as one's duty to avoid inflicting pain oneself. This in turn has two further implications, corresponding to the two sides of the common-sense principle that negative duties are stricter than positive duties. The first implication is that one may be required to harm or even to kill an innocent person if that is the only way to prevent still greater harm or death. The second implication is that the permissibility of any activity or pursuit, however innocent it may appear, must always depend on the unavailability of any alternative that would produce greater net benefit overall. Thus, on this conception, those who spend

[11] See, for example, Bernard Williams, 'A Critique of Utilitarianism', in J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 77–150.

money on relative luxuries like movies, restaurant meals, or consumer electronics, when the same money could instead be used to prevent suffering and death, are doing something that is the moral equivalent of killing innocent people. Indeed, in order for it to be legitimate, on this conception, to devote energy and attention to one's most fundamental projects and aspirations, it is not enough that those projects and aspirations should be innocent or benign in and of themselves. Rather, it must be the case that nothing else one could possibly do would produce greater net benefit for humanity as a whole. It scarcely seems necessary to point out how dramatically these tenets serve to widen the scope of individual responsibility, or how sharply they conflict with most people's common-sense moral understanding.

Consequentialism also rejects the second of the two common-sense doctrines I have mentioned. Whereas common-sense morality holds that one has distinctive responsibilities toward family members and others to whom one stands in certain special sorts of relationships, consequentialism maintains that the interests of all people, family members and strangers alike, count equally in determining what one ought to do. Thus, for example, if one can either provide a benefit for one's own child or a slightly greater benefit for a stranger's child, then, other things being equal, one ought to provide the benefit for the stranger's child. Here again, the effect of the consequentialist position is greatly to widen the scope of the individual's normative responsibility. And, in view of the prominence of special obligations in ordinary moral thought, consequentialism's refusal to recognize such obligations provides further testimony to the radicalism of its conception of responsibility.

Of course, although consequentialism neither assigns intrinsic moral significance to the distinction between doing and failing to prevent, nor recognizes special obligations as a fundamental moral category, some consequentialists may wish to 'argue back' to restrictions on individual responsibility that mimic those embraced by the common-sense conception. However, common-sense morality takes the restrictions to operate at the level of fundamental principle, and it is this that consequentialism denies. At the foundational level, in other words, consequentialism remains resolutely *non-restrictive*. Thus, the conflict between the consequentialist and common-sense conceptions may be viewed as a conflict about the legitimacy of restrictiveness in the assignment of normative responsibility.

Global Trends and Individual Responsibility

The restrictions imposed by the ordinary conception of responsibility serve, in effect, to limit the size of the agent's moral world. To the extent that such restrictions are part of moral common-sense, these limits seem natural to us. However, this sense of naturalness does not exist in a vacuum. It is supported

by a widespread though largely implicit conception of human social relations as consisting primarily in small-scale interactions, with clearly demarcated lines of causation, among independent individual agents. It is also supported by a complex phenomenology of agency: that is, by a characteristic way of experiencing ourselves as agents with causal powers. Within this phenomenology, acts have primacy over omissions, near effects have primacy over remote effects, and individual effects have primacy over group effects. Let me comment briefly on each of these three phenomenological features.

The primacy of acts over omissions means that whereas our acts are ordinarily experienced by us as acts, we experience our omissions as omissions only in special contexts. Among these are contexts in which we believe an omission to fly in the face of some specific obligation or norm: as, for example, when I remain silent as the blind person strolls toward the edge of the cliff, or when I neglect to feed my child or to return my suicidal patient's telephone calls, or when I fail to provide you with a promised loan at the appointed time. In each of these cases, my belief that I have an obligation to act in a certain way may lead me to experience my failure to do so *as* an omission or failure to act. With respect to my acts themselves, however, no comparable background conviction is required. I experience my acts as acts whether or not they violate any norms or expectations.

The primacy of near effects over remote effects means that we tend to experience our causal influence as inversely related to spatial and temporal distance. Of course, we know that we can do things that will have effects in distant lands and remote times, and sometimes these effects matter greatly to us. The phenomenology of agency, however, is such that our influence on our local surroundings in the present and the near future tends, as we say, to seem more real to us. This is both because the relevant causal connections are ordinarily easier to discern in these circumstances and because we are more likely to witness the effects of our acts firsthand.

The primacy of individual effects over group effects means that when an outcome is the joint result of the actions of a number of people, including ourselves, we tend to see our own agency as implicated to a much lesser extent than we do when we take an effect to have resulted solely from our own actions. Again, this does not mean that we never feel any causal responsibility for outcomes produced jointly by our actions in conjunction with the actions of other people. However, it does mean that outcomes we perceive as resulting solely from our own actions tend to loom much larger for us, and that it is often easier for us to overlook our causal contributions to those outcomes that are the joint result of the actions of many people.[12]

[12] This is especially true in cases where the outcome in question results from the actions of an extremely large number of people, each of whom makes only a tiny contribution to the production of that outcome. For a discussion of the moral significance of such cases, see Part 1 of Derek Parfit's *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), esp. ch. 3. For criticism of Parfit, see Michael Otsuka, 'The Paradox of Group Beneficence', *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 20 (1991): 132–49.

As I have said, the limits placed by common-sense morality on individual normative responsibility seem natural to us, but this sense of naturalness does not exist in a vacuum. I have been suggesting that it arises instead within a context that is defined in part by a certain conception of social relations, and by certain familiar features of the phenomenology of agency. At the same time, a variety of developments in the modern world have conspired to place that conception of social relations, as well as the image of ourselves that is implicit in the phenomenology of agency, under enormous pressure. These developments include, most notably, the remarkable advances in science and technology in recent decades; the continuing revolutions in travel, communications, and information processing; the increased economic and political interdependence among the countries of the world; and the enormous growth in world population.

These developments have made it more difficult than ever to sustain the conception of human social relations as consisting primarily in small-scale interactions among single individuals. The earth has become an increasingly crowded place. The lives of its inhabitants are structured to an unprecedented degree by large, impersonal institutions and bureaucracies. The interactions of these institutions across national borders have profound effects on the lives of people worldwide, and serve to link the fates of people in different parts of the world in multiple ways. Thus, the quality of life for people in any one part of the world is, to a large extent, a function of a network of institutional arrangements that supports a very different quality of life for people in other parts of the world. And important political and economic developments in one area of the globe often have rapid and dramatic effects on people in other areas, effects that are frequently intensified by the speed with which information about them is communicated. Moreover, in consequence of the growth of population and the development of new technologies, human behaviour now has effects on the natural environment that are unprecedented in scale. These environmental effects distribute themselves in complicated ways within and across national boundaries—often with profound consequences, in turn, for the lives of widely dispersed individuals and communities. In addition, they raise urgent questions about the impact of contemporary behaviour on the lives and circumstances of future generations of people. In this context, the image of human social life as defined primarily by small-scale personal relations among independent individual agents begins to seem like a significant distortion.

Similar remarks apply to the conception of human action that is suggested by the phenomenology of agency. Phenomenologically speaking, our actions loom larger than our omissions; near effects loom larger than remote ones; and outcomes produced individually loom larger than those produced jointly. Yet, in light of the developments I have mentioned, the phenomenology of agency seems like an increasingly poor guide to the dimensions of human action that are socially significant. For surely, any serious accounting of the

most urgent problems now facing the human race, as well as any serious proposals for their solution, will need to refer both to what people have done and to what they have not done—as individuals, in groups, and through social institutions—with consequences both near and far. Whether we are seeking to identify the reasons for global warming, or for the threat to the survival of the Amazonian rain forests, or for the vast disparities in wealth and life expectancy among rich and poor nations, we will need to move beyond the phenomenology of agency if we are to understand the role of human beings in generating these problems.

Thus, although the restrictive conception of responsibility that is embodied in common-sense moral thought may indeed seem natural to us, reflection on the sources of this sense of naturalness should lead us to wonder whether it really counts in favour of the common-sense view. And these doubts will only be reinforced if we find ourselves tempted by the suggestion that 'common-sense' morality is in fact a quite specific cultural product: a product, moreover, that has its deepest roots in those relatively affluent societies that have the most to gain from the widespread internalization of a doctrine that limits their responsibility to assist the members of less fortunate societies.

It is, of course, a premise of this essay that the common-sense conception of responsibility is controversial despite its seeming naturalness. The prominence of consequentialism is one obvious manifestation of this controversy at the theoretical level. More generally, however, I think it is fair to say that there has been, within the culture at large, a decline in confidence in the common-sense conception, even among many people who basically accept it. If indeed the culture's confidence in the common-sense conception has been shaken, this is surely due, at least in part, to the developments I have mentioned. The communications revolution that is itself one of those developments has meant that information about *all* of the developments has been disseminated widely and insistently. To the extent that those developments cast doubt on ways of understanding ourselves and our social world that are congenial to the common-sense conception, it is not surprising that the widespread awareness of them should serve to erode our confidence in that conception.

As I have suggested, the persistence of consequentialism is one symptom at the theoretical level of the decline in confidence in the common-sense conception. It is not the only such symptom, however. Another one, which I have discussed elsewhere,[11] is the reluctance of contemporary liberal philosophers, as well as some of their most prominent critics, to appeal to any preinstitutional notion of desert of the kind that is often associated with the common-sense conception of responsibility. This reluctance is related to a more general tendency, which is clearly illustrated by the modern revolution

[11] See my 'Responsibility, Reactive Attitudes, and Liberalism in Philosophy and Politics', Chapter One in this volume.

in tort law, to conceive of responsibility as something that it is the job of social and political institutions to assign or to allocate to individuals on grounds that make institutional sense. Although this broad tendency is one that is quite hospitable to consequentialism, it need not take a distinctively consequentialist form, since the grounds on which responsibility is to be allocated need not be understood in narrowly consequentialist terms.

Although confidence in the common-sense conception of responsibility may have declined, however, it would be rash to predict the imminent demise of that conception or its imminent replacement by a thoroughly non-restrictive conception of individual responsibility. In order to have any hope of superseding the common-sense conception—any hope, that is, of taking over the place that it now occupies within common-sense moral thought—a non-restrictive conception of responsibility would need, at a minimum, to be capable of being internalized and of coming to function as a guide to everyday thought and action. Yet, despite the decline in our culture's confidence in the common-sense conception, and despite the increasingly sophisticated articulation of alternative theoretical approaches to at least some questions of responsibility, it is by no means clear that any thoroughly non-restrictive conception of responsibility could meet these conditions. This is not because moral common sense is immutable; as I have already indicated, what it seems plausible to us to refer to as common-sense morality is undoubtedly a highly specific cultural product in certain respects. It is one thing to acknowledge this, however, and quite another thing to produce a viable conception of individual responsibility that does not employ any category like the category of special obligations, or any distinction like the distinction between negative and positive duties.

There are two reasons for this. The first has to do with the depth of the hold that such ideas have on us. Thus, for example, the sheer human importance of interpersonal bonds and relationships of various kinds makes it difficult to imagine the widespread internalization of a conception of responsibility that does not leave substantial room for special responsibilities arising out of such relationships. The sheer phenomenological force of the distinction between acts and omissions makes it similarly difficult to imagine the widespread internalization of a conception of responsibility that treats them entirely symmetrically. This helps to explain why, despite the fact that consequentialism considered in the abstract offers a radically expansive conception of individual responsibility, defenders of the view so often find themselves 'arguing back' to a more conventional position that does make room—albeit derivatively—for the analogues of special obligations and the distinction between negative and positive duties.

The second reason is more complicated. The developments that tend to erode our confidence in the common-sense conception, and to encourage us to look for a less restrictive alternative, have these effects because they make a global perspective on the lives and conduct of individual agents seem morally

more salient than the narrower perspective that we are more accustomed to taking. But while these developments do indeed make the idea of a less restrictive conception of responsibility seem more plausible, they do not themselves present us with any clearly defined conception of this kind. An emphasis on the significance for human affairs of various large-scale global developments and dynamics—economic, political, technological, and environmental—does not translate in any obvious way into a determinate picture of how ordinary individuals should conduct their lives. After all, the individual agent *qua* individual agent will typically have only the most limited opportunities to influence these global dynamics, and, indeed, cannot in general be assumed to have any but the sketchiest and most speculative notions about the specific global implications of his or her personal behaviour. Here again, the example of consequentialism is instructive. Taken at face value, the consequentialist conception of responsibility is highly expansionist and thoroughly non-restrictive. It requires individuals always to act in such a way as to produce the optimal state of the world from an impersonal standpoint. In so doing, however, it seems to many people to make wildly excessive demands on the capacity of agents to amass information about the global impact of the different courses of action available to them. Faced with this objection, the most common consequentialist response is to treat it as another reason for arguing back to a more conventional demarcation of individual responsibility, thus abandoning the attempt to provide a non-restrictive conception of responsibility, except at the foundational level. This is, of course, just an instance of consequentialism's well-known normative schizophrenia: its tendency to alternate between presenting itself as a radically revisionist morality, on the one hand, and as a possibly surprising but basically conservative account of the foundations of ordinary moral thought, on the other. This very schizophrenia testifies to the difficulty of producing a credible alternative to a restrictive conception of individual responsibility.

Thus, to repeat, if we come to see the global perspective as morally salient, the immediate effect is not to present us with a developed alternative conception of individual normative responsibility. Instead, the global perspective highlights the importance of various large-scale causal processes and patterns of activity that the individual agent cannot in general control, but within which individual behaviour is nevertheless subsumed in ways that the individual is, at any given time, unlikely to be in a position fully to appreciate. The claim that individual behaviour is 'subsumed' within such patterns and processes is not, of course, meant to deny that individual human beings are the fundamental units of agency. Instead, the claim comprises two theses. The first is simply that it is not uncommon for an important outcome to be the product of a large number of acts performed by many different people, few if any of whom actually intend to produce the outcome in question. The second thesis is that many of the options and choices with which people are presented throughout their lives, although experienced by them as entirely

natural, are nevertheless structured to a considerable extent by institutional arrangements of enormous complexity. By structuring individual choices in the way that they do, these arrangements serve, in effect, to harness and channel human actions: to recruit them as contributions to larger processes that typically have little to do with people's reasons for performing those actions, but which often have profound and far-reaching effects. Frequently, moreover, the individual agents involved, far from intending to participate in the production of these effects, are scarcely even aware that they have done so. Their vision is obscured by the seeming naturalness of the choices presented to them, by the independent character of their own reasons for acting as they do, by the complexity of the larger processes to which their actions contribute, by the often minute contribution to those processes made by any single action considered individually, and by the phenomenological priority of individual over group effects. Thus it is that much of the daily behaviour we take for granted is linked in complicated but often poorly appreciated ways to broader global dynamics of the greatest importance.[14]

In view of these considerations, the most immediate effect of coming to see the global perspective as morally salient may be, not to present us with a developed, non-restrictive conception of normative responsibility, but rather to generate doubts about our practice of treating the individual agent as the primary locus of such responsibility. For although the larger processes within which individual behaviour is subsumed frequently have effects of enormous moral significance, the individual agent's relation to these effects is clearly not what one finds in paradigm cases of individual responsibility. The effects to which principles of individual responsibility are paradigmatically responsive are those produced solely or primarily by the individual's own actions.[15] Among the salient features of the phenomenon of subsumption, however, are the limited contribution each agent makes to the larger processes in question; the limited control each agent has over those processes; the pervasiveness of the processes and the attendant difficulty of abstaining in any wholesale way from participation in them; the extraordinary difficulty of obtaining consistently reliable information about the processes and their effects;

[14] Consider, in this connection, Onora [Nell] O'Neill's claim that '[m]odern economic causal chains are so complex that only those who are economically isolated and self-sufficient could know' that they are 'not part of any system of activities causing unjustifiable deaths' ('Lifeboat Earth', *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 4 (1975): 286).

[15] Consider, in this connection, the following remarks by H. L. A. Hart and Tony Honoré in *Causation in the Law*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), lxxx: 'The idea that individuals are primarily responsible for the harm which their actions are sufficient to produce without the intervention of others or of extraordinary natural events is important, not merely to law and morality, but to the preservation of something else of great moment in human life. This is the individual's sense of himself as a separate person whose character is manifested in such actions. Individuals come to understand themselves as distinct persons, to whatever extent they do, and to acquire a sense of self-respect largely by reflection on those changes in the world about them which their actions are sufficient to bring about without the intervention of others and which are therefore attributable to them separately.'

and the equally formidable difficulty of ascertaining the different contributions that would be made to such processes by each of the various options available to the agent at any given time. Thus, although these processes often have effects of such great moral significance that there is an evident need to bring them under the normative control of a viable system of responsibility, the structure of the individual's relations to the processes makes it doubtful whether we have available any principles of individual conduct that are capable of accomplishing this aim. What we appear to lack, in other words, is a set of clear, action-guiding, and psychologically feasible principles which would enable individuals to orient themselves in relation to the larger processes, and general conformity to which would serve to regulate those processes and their effects in a morally satisfactory way. In view of the moral importance both of the processes and of their effects, the absence of such principles raises an obvious question about the adequacy of a system of normative responsibility that treats the individual agent as the primary bearer of such responsibility.[16]

In brief, then, the second reason for doubting the imminent replacement of the common-sense conception of responsibility by a thoroughly non-restrictive conception is this: the same global developments that make a more expansive conception of individual normative responsibility seem initially more plausible also raise doubts about the very practice of treating individuals as the primary bearers of such responsibility. Since it is by no means clear what the alternative to that practice might be, however, these developments also pose a more general threat to our deployment of the categories of normative responsibility.

If the argument I have been advancing is correct, our practices with respect to normative responsibility face a significant threat. The problem arises out of a perspective on human action that seems increasingly to be forced upon us by a variety of developments in modern life. Up to a point, these developments appear to undermine the common-sense conception of normative responsibility, for they make the limits on individual responsibility imposed by that conception seem anachronistic and difficult to defend. Rather than providing straightforward support for an alternative, non-restrictive conception of responsibility, however, these same developments tend instead to raise a more fundamental question about the availability of a suitable locus

[16] Compare Thomas Pogge in *Realizing Rawls*, 8–9: 'The effects of my conduct reverberate throughout the world, intermingling with the effects of the conduct of billions of other human beings. ... Thus, many morally salient features of the situations of human beings (persistent starvation in northeastern Brazil, civil war in El Salvador, famine in India) arise from the confluence of the often very remote effects of the conduct of vast numbers of human beings. We as individuals have no hope of coping with such complexity and interdependence if we take the existing ground rules for granted and merely ask "How should I act?" ... We can cope only by attending to the scheme of ground rules which shapes the way persons act and co-determines how their actions, together, affect the lives of others.'

of normative responsibility in an increasingly important range of cases. Thus, the net effect of these developments may be, not to encourage the substitution of a non-restrictive conception of responsibility for more restrictive ideas, but rather to leave our thinking about responsibility in some disarray.

Conclusion

I began this essay by taking note of the pressure toward universalism, and the conflicting pressure toward particularism, in modern political life, and by suggesting that these conflicting pressures serve in part to express conflicting conceptions of normative responsibility. It is now possible to clarify and to elaborate on this suggestion. The universalistic pressure—the pressure toward greater social and political integration—is an outgrowth of the very same developments that have made a more expansive conception of responsibility seem more plausible. Moreover, in so far as the tendency of such pressure is to suggest a diminished justificatory role for national and communal ties, and a reduced reliance on the distinction between acts and omissions in favour of a more inclusive concern for the enhancement of human well-being, it may itself be viewed as a manifestation of support for a more expansive conception. At the same time, the pressure toward universalism has met with great resistance, and recent years have witnessed an often ferocious resurgence of particularist loyalties. These complex developments should not be oversimplified, but they serve in part to remind us of the powerful hold that more restrictive notions of responsibility have on people. Indeed, if the argument of this essay is correct, there is a serious question about the extent to which an entirely non-restrictive conception of responsibility could ever fully dislodge such notions. The question arises not only because of the hold that restrictive ideas have on us, but also because the challenge to those ideas is fueled by the growing authority, or apparent authority, of a perspective whose strongest tendency may not be to support a non-restrictive conception, but rather to pose a more general threat to our thinking about normative responsibility.

It should not be surprising that we are faced with such a threat at this time. Recent decades have brought what one historian has called some of 'the most rapid and profound upheavals of human life in recorded history'.[17] Few important areas of life have been untouched by those upheavals, and there is little reason to suppose that our thinking about responsibility, which developed in the context of a radically different social world, is one of them. On the contrary, there is abundant evidence that our ideas about responsibility are in flux. The conflicting tendencies toward global integration and ethnic

[17] Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, 174.

fragmentation constitute one symptom of this phenomenon on the political level. As I have tried to suggest in this essay, however, the underlying problem is a broader one, and we are unlikely to find a solution to the political problem without attaining greater stability in our thinking about normative responsibility more generally. What remains to be seen, then, is whether we can emerge from this period of normative confusion with a defensible and psychologically feasible conception of responsibility which can help to structure our social relations during the enormous additional upheavals that undoubtedly await us. In the meantime, we live in a world that seems increasingly divided, and dangerously so, between an ascendant high-tech global culture and a persistent web of fierce particularist loyalties.