

Holding Parents Responsible

Here's a philosophical brain teaser for you: Should parents be held responsible for their children's actions?

My culturally programmed answer to this question is, "Yes, because children can't be held responsible for their actions, they're too young to really know what they're doing, and since somebody should, why not those who are raising them?"

Parents often take pride and credit for their children's accomplishments, so why not for their failures, too?

I think there can only be two possible answers to this question that make any rational sense. These two answers fork at one question: Do we have free will?

If the answer to that all towering question in philosophy is negative, then not anybody is responsible for their actions. Since parents and children are included in *anybody*, neither are they responsible for theirs or anybody else's actions. They and we are all doing what we can't help doing. It's cause and effect, and simply can't be helped.

(Disclosure: I am currently of the mind that free will exists, but mostly, if not entirely, at the margins. I'm not yet ready to explain that.)

If the answer to having free will is affirmative, then children, like their parents, like everybody else, have free will. As such, on the base level, their choices are their own, not their parents.

However, children rarely act at a base level, meaning, at a level free from control by others. In fact, even adults do not always act at a base level. For this reason, what responsibility parents hold for the children's actions should be determined in the same way we determine responsibility for the actions of adults.

Children are ignorant, and are still either being coercively programmed or trying to figure out on their own their values and preferences. If a parent or community is coercively guiding a child into failure (from a certain perspective), then I think the responsibility for that failure is on the parent(s) or community.

If a child wanders into failure on their own, then there lies responsibility.

This is true in the adult world, also. If I threaten something undesirable to induce action, aren't I mostly if not entirely responsible for your actions? You performed them under duress or deceit. I personally think that makes a difference in how responsibility falls for

any failure that results.

If a child's or adult's undirected action results in a failure of some sort, the responsibility is theirs. The only difference in our own responsibility toward that failure is in how quickly we should offer our forgiveness. For a very young child, it should be automatic; an older child and adolescent, less automatic and more contemplative, compassionate, and cooperative (helping them understand the failure and how to fix it; *never* punitive); an adult, all of the preceding, plus wisdom and vigilance in preventing it from recurring up to and including total ostracism, or worse (which I hate to write, but if the problem is technical, like a raging tiger unconcerned for our well-being, you end the problem).

In any event, one size fits all is poor policy as a response to failure by child and adult alike. We are all programmed naturally and culturally, and are constantly being bombarded by control and influence (free will is at the margins, remember?). In one sense, somebody's failure could be society's failure, and in another, it is entirely their own.

Now that I've reached the end, I'm not sure that I've settled this brain teaser, once and for all.