

Accountability as a Virtue

Andrew Torrance

University of St Andrews, UK

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Abstract

This opening article will offer a brief introduction to what it means to understand accountability as a virtue. To do so, I first propose a definition of the condition of accountability, which I go on to distinguish from responsibility. Based on this definition, I then present an account of the corresponding virtue of accountability.

Keywords

accountability, human flourishing, responsibility, virtue

Introduction

Over the past few years of fraught politics, the word ‘accountability’ has risen to prominence in the vocabulary of politicians. Without naming names, it has become commonplace for politicians on ‘the left’ to say that ‘there needs to be accountability’ when it comes to the actions of politicians on ‘the right’ (and vice versa). By this, they tend to mean something like ‘that politician needs to be punished for failing in their particular role’. Consequently, the negative connotations of this word have come to the fore. More than ever, accountability is perceived as a threat to the person who fails in their particular role—‘If you fail, then you will be held accountable!’ Yet, as the articles in this symposium will seek to show, such a view of accountability neglects the more positive and, indeed, virtuous ways to think about the nature of accountability.

So, what might a more positive view of accountability look like? Such a view focuses on the way in which relationships of accountability can serve to upbuild persons rather than threatening to tear them down. In the case of the aforementioned politicians, for example, a positive view of accountability would focus on the ways in which the two politicians could seek to build up one another by holding each other to a high standard (albeit from their different sides). In such a relationship, accountability would not be

Corresponding author:

Andrew Torrance, University of St Andrews, St Mary’s College, South St, St Andrews, KY16 9JU, UK.

Email: abt3@st-andrews.ac.uk

something to avoid but something to embrace, insofar as it helps the politicians to grow and flourish in their roles. While such a positive view of accountability may currently be hard to imagine between politicians from opposing parties, it is not hard to find such a view being represented in relationships between parents and children, teachers and students, employees and supervisors, coaches and players, or sponsors and addicts. As a number of scholars are currently arguing, there are many other areas that stand to benefit enormously from a more positive view of accountability, such as criminal justice, mental health treatment and, as this symposium considers, Christian ethics and moral theology.¹

With its focus on Christian ethics and moral theology, this symposium will seek to show that accountability to God and neighbour should be seen as an essential part of human flourishing—of becoming all that God creates and calls humans to be. Furthermore, this symposium will build a case for thinking about accountability as a *virtue*: one that characterises the person who embraces being accountable to others and, in so doing, fulfils their role in a relationship of accountability.

To introduce this symposium, I shall not offer a summary of the articles—I shall let their abstracts do this. Rather, this article will introduce what it means to understand accountability as a virtue. To do so, I begin by proposing a definition of the condition of accountability. Based on this definition, I then present an account of the corresponding virtue of accountability. Given how much the word ‘accountability’ is thrown around, with little regard for its specific meaning, it is important to take the time to offer a precise account of what we mean by accountability. Another thing to mention here is that while the concept of accountability is increasingly common in discussions relating to Christian ethics and moral theology, the word ‘accountability’ has only emerged in the last two hundred years and has only risen to prominence in the last fifty years. During its emergence, this word has received very little focused attention in the world of theology, and so this symposium will hope to offer an initial contribution to addressing this lacuna.

The Condition of Accountability

One of the greatest contributors to human flourishing—to humans achieving their goals in life—is the relationships we have with other persons who help us to develop and fulfil a better account of ourselves, relative to our specific life goals and values. For this reason, we often seek relationships with certain experts or authorities (e.g., teachers, psychiatrists, religious leaders, etc.) who can provide insightful judgements into aspects of who we are and who we should be, relative to certain aspects of our lives in this world. Such relationships, however, are not necessarily voluntary. Our lives develop in

1. In the wider project out of which this symposium emerges, an interdisciplinary team of scholars is investigating the broader significance of a positive view of accountability. In addition to C. Stephen Evans, Brendan Case, and myself, the core project team includes social scientists (Byron R. Johnson and Matt Bradshaw), a criminologist (Sung Joon Jang), two psychologists (Charlotte vanOyen-Witvliet and Joseph Leman), a psychiatrist (John R. Petee), and two other philosophers (Robert C. Roberts and Brandon Rickabaugh). More information about this project can be found at: <https://www.livingaccountably.com>.

relationships with persons who shape who we become in ways that are beyond our immediate control (e.g., parents, caregivers and, generally, so many of the people who we happen to encounter in our day-to-day lives). These relationships, we consider, can be said to be characterised by accountability. What do I mean by this? Let me propose the following broad definition of the condition of accountability.

Accountability (between persons): the condition of someone standing before another who has authority to judge aspects of who that person is and should be in their role in a shared project: a project that characterises the relationship between the two parties and their roles within it, but which is specifically oriented towards a goal(s) of and/or for the one who is accountable.

To help us gain a better understanding of this concept, let us consider it in the context of a student-professor relationship. According to this definition, we could say that a student is accountable to a professor insofar as the professor has legitimate authority to judge aspects of who a student is and should be relative to the shared project of learning, which serves the academic goal(s) of the student. Or we could also say that the professor is accountable to the student insofar as the student has legitimate authority to judge aspects of who the professor is and should be relative to the shared project of teaching (e.g., by filling out a module evaluation), thereby serving the vocational goal(s) of the professor.

When the professor and the student are willing to embrace such relationships of accountability it is because they both have a certain respect for the other's authority or standing to make constructive judgements about who they are and should be. What do I mean by authority or standing here? In a relationship of accountability, a person has authority or standing over the other insofar as they have expertise that can help the other to fulfil their role in the shared project that defines the relationship. Now, whether a person legitimately has such authority or standing can be difficult to discern, and it should go without saying that it cannot only be problematic but also dangerous to embrace another's authority or standing, namely, if it is illegitimate. As such, careful reflection is needed when discerning whether a person should be treated as having authority or standing within a relationship of accountability—which is something that the articles in this symposium will consider further.

One of the reasons for using the example of a professor-student relationship is to indicate that accountability need not only be a condition that concerns shared *moral* projects. The articles in this symposium will not simply be thinking about accountability as a condition that begets moral praise or blame, moral punishment or reward. Indeed, they resist the overwhelming tendency to think about accountability purely in connection with the punitive (or even retributive) practice of holding offenders accountable for their failings. Instead, they shall think about the condition of accountability more broadly as a condition of a person being in a relationship to someone with standing or authority to judge that person in a way that helps them to grow and flourish relative to a shared project and, indeed, a shared teleology that is not merely a moral teleology.

By thinking about the condition of accountability in this way, this symposium's discussion of accountability will be distinct from many of the more popular discussions of accountability in philosophy and theology, and, indeed, more widely across the media and society at large. In what other ways do people tend to talk about accountability? It is

common to understand accountability to mean something akin to ‘moral responsibility to’ or ‘moral responsibility for’. For example, when we say that a person is accountable for x, it could often make no difference to say instead that they are morally responsible for x. In this respect, ‘accountable’ and ‘morally responsible’ mean ‘morally culpable’ or ‘morally blameworthy’.² Or, to take a different example, often when we say that a person is accountable to person y, we could equally say that a person is morally responsible to person y. Here, ‘accountable’ and ‘morally responsible’ both mean (loosely) that a person ‘has a moral obligation to’ person y.³ Accordingly, Thomas Bivins offers the following view of accountability that is representative of many of the ways in which people think about accountability:

The simplest formula is that a person can be held accountable if (1) the person is functionally and/or morally responsible for an action, (2) some harm occurred due to that action, and (3) the responsible person had no legitimate excuse for that action.⁴

I do not disagree that this is a valid way to think about accountability. Indeed, any representative definition of accountability should have at least some overlap with certain definitions of responsibility and will involve some form of responsibility. For example, according to our definition, we could say that, in a relationship of accountability, two parties are responsible (i.e., have obligations) to one another for fulfilling their specific roles relative to the shared project. Moreover, there are ways in which our discussion of accountability is identifiable with some ways of thinking about responsibility, particularly in theology.⁵ So, any attempt to distinguish ‘(moral) responsibility’ from ‘accountability’ will not be straightforward, and it will not be the aim of this symposium to come up with a view of accountability that is neatly distinguishable from responsibility. At the

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2. For example, in one of the few theological discussions of accountability, Jesse Couenhoven presents a view of accountability as a person’s moral responsibility for their actions, in his book *Stricken by Sin, Cured by Christ*. More specifically, he is concerned about whether a person is liable to be called to account for an action(s) that is worthy of praise or blame. See Jesse Couenhoven, *Stricken by Sin, Cured by Christ: Agency, Necessity, and Culpability in Augustinian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
 3. For example, this is how Stephen Darwall defines accountability in his book *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006). This is one of the leading books on accountability in moral philosophy.
 4. Thomas Bivins, ‘Responsibility and Accountability’, in K. Fitzpatrick and C. Bronstein (eds.), *Ethics in Public Relations: Responsible Advocacy* (London: SAGE Publications, 2006), p. 21.
 5. For example, our view of accountability echoes many of the ways in which Karl Barth uses (*Mit*)*Verantwortung*, which his translators translate as responsibility. Accordingly, our view also echoes some of the ways in which theologians influenced by (English translations of) Barth talk about responsibility. That said, I would argue that, at various points in Barth’s writing, it would be better to translate (*Mit*)*Verantwortung* as accountability. Indeed, Gerald McKenny makes precisely this move in *The Analogy of Grace: Karl Barth’s Moral Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). McKenny translates Barth’s use of *Verantwortung* as responsibility at some points, but also retranslates it as accountability or answerability at other points.

same time, we do think that the word ‘accountability’ is uniquely suited for what this symposium is discussing, as broadly represented in the opening definition.

Distinguishing ‘Accountability’ from ‘Responsibility’

How might ‘accountability’ be especially relevant for our discussion, rather than ‘responsibility’? One obvious distinction between ‘accountability’ and ‘responsibility’ is that ‘accountability’ is especially concerned with an ‘account’ of a person. I say this not simply because ‘account’ is the literal stem of ‘accountability’, but also because of some of the key phrases with which ‘accountability’ is associated: such as ‘to give an account’, ‘to account for’, or ‘to be called to account’. Associating ‘accountability’ with the word ‘account’, however, raises a difficulty: it is often hard to know precisely what ‘account’ means in relation to accountability. In the above phrases, ‘account’ has something to do with an explanation of oneself in relation to another’s account of who one should be:

To give an account (of oneself): to give an explanatory account of an aspect(s) of who one is and has been relative to an authority’s account of who one is and should be.

To account for (oneself): to give an explanatory account of an aspect(s) of who one is and has been relative to an authority’s account of who one is and should be.

To be called to account (for oneself): to be called to give an explanatory account of an aspect(s) of who one is and has been relative to an authority’s account of who one is and should be.

What kind of explanation is an ‘account’ in these phrases? It tends to be a justificatory explanation: an account that seeks to justify an aspect(s) of oneself in relation to an authority’s account of who one is and should be. It could perhaps also be a confessional account. When asked to account for one’s moral failings, for example, a person could respond by giving an account of themselves as guilty. Yet they could just as easily respond by saying that they cannot account for their moral failing and so confess that they are guilty—which, again, points to the view that ‘account’ refers to a justificatory explanation.

While the ability to offer a justificatory account of oneself can be critical to how we think about accountability, it is not a necessary condition for accountability. On the one hand, a person’s explanatory account of themselves can help an authority to form a more accurate account of them, by generating greater transparency. On the other hand, it is possible for an authority to form an account of a person without that person being able or willing to offer such an account. On our view, it is not simply a person’s account of themselves that is most essential to accountability, but rather an authority’s account of them.⁶ This is evident when thinking about another phrase relating to accountability:

6. In making this point, I recognise that it is possible for a person to hold themselves accountable. However, when they do this, they do so by way of an inward relationship, in which they judge themselves in relation to an authoritative account they have of who they are and should be.

To hold (someone) to account: to hold one to an account of who an authority thinks one should be; or to hold one to an account of who one is or has been but should not be, according to an authority.

It is possible for someone to be held to account without being able to grasp why it is that they are being held to account, let alone being able to explain themselves relative to an authority's account of who they should be. Moreover, there are times when holding someone to account can be a way to help them to grasp why it is that they are being held to account. For example, it can be a part of a child's moral learning for a caregiver to hold a child to account *prior* to the child grasping that they are wrong, why they are wrong, or, indeed, what it means for them to be wrong.⁷ Under these circumstances, the caregiver will ideally give the child an account of an aspect(s) of who they are or have been, based on their behaviour, and explain why this is not who they should be, relative to the caregiver's account of them. Or, to offer a theological example, a person can be accountable to God, objectively speaking, even if they do not believe God exists and so cannot grasp (let alone explain) who they should be before God. Moreover, as the Apostle Paul suggests, no person is yet able to grasp fully who they are before God (1 Cor. 13:12). At the same time, this does not diminish a person's accountability to God for their current life.

To summarise, what is most fundamental to our view is not a person's ability to offer an explanatory account of themselves but rather the authority's ability to form such an account of them.⁸ The authority must be able to form an adequate account of (1) who a person is and has been, and an account of (2) who the person should be in relation to the authority, so that they can judge account (1) relative to account (2). An authority forms these accounts based on their narrative understanding of a person, which is based on their larger narrative understanding of things. Accordingly, relative to a shared project, the person exists as a character in the narrative of the authority, and the person is expected to become who they should be according to that narrative.⁹ For example, in a relationship of accountability between a teacher and a student, the student exists as a character in the

7. In using this example, I acknowledge that much contemporary work in psychology argues that moral judgement is a natural product of the evolution of our psychology. However, as Fiery Cushman, Victor Kumar and Peter Railton point out, such research also acknowledges that learning play a 'crucial role' in the development of moral judgement and behaviour. Fiery Cushman, Victor Kumar and Peter Railton, 'Moral Learning: Psychological and Philosophical Perspectives', *Cognition* 167 (2017), p. 1. For further discussion of this issue, see the rest of this excellent edition of *Cognition* on this topic.

8. To be clear, I do not think that consideration of a person's abilities is completely irrelevant to an authority's judgement. There should be differences between how an authority judges a very young child, an adult, or someone with cognitive disabilities. This, however, is because an authority will have different accounts of who each of these persons should be, based on their differences.

9. Here my view of accountability aligns, to some extent, with Robert Bovens, Thomas Schillemans and Robert Goodin's understanding of accountability in the 'Introduction' to *The Oxford Handbook of Public Accountability*. They note that accounting 'implies telling a story, based on some obligation and with some consequence in view'. They then add: 'Accountability

teacher's narrative of what it means to be a learner; and the teacher exists as a character in the student's narrative of what it means to be a teacher. Again, insofar as it is possible, both narratives should be informed by persons communicating aspects of who they are to the authorities.

So how are the concepts of 'accountability' and 'responsibility' distinct from one another? I propose that one way to distinguish them is by recognising that accountability is especially concerned with an authority's account of who a person is and should be relative to a shared project. I am not ruling out that it is possible to think about responsibility in this way or, indeed, in some other way that overlaps substantially with my definition. Again, I am very aware that there are ways in which responsibility will be a key part of a relationship of accountability. If one decides that my definition of 'accountability' is a better definition for a form of 'responsibility', then they are welcome to read this symposium as a symposium on a specific form of responsibility. Using a different word will not change the meaning of the specific concept under consideration.

Accountability as a Virtue

In accompaniment to our definition of the condition of accountability, I propose the following definition of the virtue of accountability.

The virtue of accountability: the disposition that characterises the person who embraces the condition of being accountable (as defined above).

Why describe accountability as a virtue? Much of what I have said so far about the condition of accountability has focused on the extrinsic benefits of accountability, as a condition whereby a person achieves certain goals under the authority or standing of a person who is equipped to help them do so. Such usefulness does not itself make accountability a virtue. For accountability to be a virtue, a person must not only flourish *by* (*means of*) but also *in* (*the very act of*) embracing the condition of accountability. This is required in order for accountability to be seen as a good in itself, which would entail that a person's disposition to embrace the condition/relationship of accountability could be considered as a virtue.

What is the ground for thinking about accountability as a good in itself? Put theologically, it is grounded in the understanding that God creates human beings to flourish not just *by* but *in* embracing God's authority over who they are, and also *by* and *in* embracing the (relative) authority or standing that God gives some humans over other humans. It is thus a good feature of human createdness to delight in being held to the teleological accounts that others have of them—whether it is by embracing God's

is anchored in the mundane yet important practice of record-keeping and gives rise to story-telling in a context of social (power) relations within which enforcement of standards and the fulfilment of obligations is a reasonable expectation'. Robert Bovens, Thomas Schillemans and Robert Goodin, 'Introduction', in Robert Bovens, Thomas Schillemans and Robert Goodin (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Public Accountability* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 2–3. One qualification I would make here is that it is also the case that story-telling gives rise to the record-keeping. The record-keeping is based on a story-telling according to which the authorities establish the underlying standards and obligations.

teleological account of them as a virtuous human, a professor's teleological account of them as a knowledgeable student, or a mother's teleological account of them as a kind daughter. Welcoming accountability to God and neighbour is, therefore, an excellent way of being human.

Why is it an excellent way to be human? This symposium will not speculate over why God defines human excellence in the way that God does. What I will say, however, is that certain aspects of accountability can be seen to reflect aspects of the love of God, as it is made known to us. Eternally, the three persons of the Trinity are defined by a loving mutuality of giving and receiving, according to which the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit necessarily define and are necessarily defined by one another—in a relationship of mutual entailment that is utterly unique to God. On the basis of the love of God, humans are created to be defined by a loving mutuality of giving and receiving, according to which they are defined in and by their relationships to God and to one another—albeit in a way that is utterly unique to humans. One of the features of the virtue of accountability is that it disposes persons to participate in relationships in which they are defined in and by their relationships to one another.¹⁰ In these relationships, a person serves to bring about the fulfilment of the other by helping them to become all that they should be within the relationship of accountability. When such a relationship of accountability is virtuous (at least in Christian terms), this dynamic not only reflects a mutual respect but also a mutual dependency that is characteristic of love. This point is beautifully captured by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians, in his famous passage on love, where he suggests that fulfilment is found when we come face to face with the perfect one, and thereby come to know as we are fully known (1 Cor. 13:10-12). Ultimately, it is by encountering God, and thereby coming to hear and grasp God's account of who we are, that we discover the fullness of what it is to be human.

One of the points that stands out here is that the virtue of accountability, like the condition, is relational. It is the disposition of someone who embraces a relationship to a person who holds them to an account of who they are and should be. According to some thinkers, the notion of a relational virtue could seem to be contradictory. For Aristotle, as Angela Knobel interprets him, 'the more virtuous an agent is, the less he needs to seek the assistance of others in determining the appropriate course of action in a given situation'.¹¹ However, such an account of virtue, she argues, 'runs contrary to the self-understanding of the virtuous Christian'.¹² She elaborates, drawing on Aquinas:

10. This is emphatically not to suggest that we should treat the doctrine of the Trinity as a tool for advocating a social programme of accountability. This is prevented by the important points of disanalogy between the Trinity and our human knowledge of social relationships. I am also not suggesting that accountability exists within the Trinity—i.e., that the Father, Son, and Spirit are accountable to one another. I am simply making the descriptive point that the mutual definition that exists in relationships of accountability can be seen to reflect, in a human way, aspects of the love that is at the very basis of reality.

11. Angela Knobel, 'A Different Kind of Wisdom', in Christian Miller, R. Michael Furr, Angela Knobel and William Fleeson (eds.), *Character: New Directions from Philosophy, Psychology, and Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 352.

12. Knobel, 'A Different Kind of Wisdom', p. 352.

the more virtuous a person of faith is, the more that individual recognizes the need for and relies on divine assistance in the exercise of practical reason. . . . Man needs God's assistance in order to perform acts befitting his participation in the divine life, Aquinas says, in the same way as the moon cannot give off light without the sun, and as the medical student cannot practice his art without the guidance of a doctor. . . . Aquinas believes that it is the Holy Spirit that provides the Christian with the guidance he needs.¹³

While this passage does not refer to 'accountability' *per se*, it beautifully captures the notion of the virtue of accountability which this symposium is considering. Indeed, in line with this symposium, this passage could have begun: 'the more the person of faith embodies the virtue of accountability (to God), the more that individual recognizes the need for and relies on divine assistance in the exercise of practical reason'. Theologically speaking, the virtue of accountability is what moves a person to embrace God's assistance in cultivating virtues that are befitting of participation in the divine life.

Does this mean that accountability (to God) is not simply a virtue but could also be considered the foundational virtue? Let me offer a brief response. While there are ways to consider accountability as foundational to the other virtues, I think there are reasons to be hesitant to make such a bold claim. Such hesitancy is prompted by two difficulties that arise from such a suggestion. First, if a person is not, to some extent, characterised by other relational virtues such as faith, hope and/or love, it is hard to imagine how they could know God in a way that would motivate them to respect God's authority and embrace accountability to God. Second, I am not sure how it would be possible to extricate accountability from other virtues. In addition to faith, hope and love, it is hard to know how a person could embrace the virtue of accountability without a cluster of other virtues such as humility, wisdom, diligence, respectfulness. Indeed, it may be best to characterise the virtue of accountability as a cluster of virtues, albeit held together in a way that is distinctive to the virtue of accountability. In sum, I would not go so far as to suggest that accountability is the foundational virtue. Nonetheless, as the essays in this symposium seek to demonstrate, I do think that there is a strong case for considering the virtue of accountability as having a foundational role to play in our thinking about human flourishing before God.¹⁴

13. Knobel, 'A Different Kind of Wisdom', p. 355; citing Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, ed. Thomas Gilby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), I-II q.68 a.2.

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