

Creating a Culture of Responsibility

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In public discourse we hear more about the violation of individual rights than about the abdication of individual responsibility. Yet, it is the abdication of individual responsibility that leads to the violation of individual rights, because it is intrinsic in the nature of responsibility that responsible individuals respect and honor the rights of others. Today we live amid a pandemic of irresponsibility—irresponsibility within governments, business, education, the media, the arts, academe, and other sectors. In this culture of rampant irresponsibility, responsibility as such has become almost a forgotten ethical value and moral virtue. However, it is the responsible action that alone carries with it the requisite integrity that brings about real change. Therefore, unless we can transform the present culture of irresponsibility into a culture of responsibility, social movement of any kind, including peace movements, will bear only bitter fruit, if any.

Responsibility

Responsibility is the individual's ability to respond to any situation in life as the *cause*, not as the *victim*, of the situation. This does not mean that the individual has actually caused the entirety of the situation but that the individual responds to the situation as the causative agent of a new future. Responsibility arises when one becomes free from one's intellectual and emotional dependence on external authority in the matter of living—of thinking and action. The degree of the individual's freedom from various kinds of external authority is directly proportional to the degree of the individual's responsibility.

Responsibility is rooted in concern for the whole of which the individual is an integral part. Individuals deprived of the experience of wholeness and therefore of the conscious connection to the whole in their fragmented and localized concerns are deprived of the very ground wherefrom the seed of responsibility sprouts. A responsible individual is not merely conceptually cognizant but is also *concretely* aware of the whole field of interdependence and interconnectivity that comprises the individual's experience that is coherent and whole. It is in and from this concrete awareness of the whole that the concern for the whole arises. Responsibility stems from the recognition that one can always be the cause, and need never be the victim, of the situation, circumstance, or condition that arises within one's experience, because one has the power over that which arises within one's experience. Responsibility means that one has the ability to respond to a situation, circumstance, or condition as the author, not as the authored. Responsibility thus implies self- authorship, self-authority, and self-creativity.

Responsibility effloresces as the individual's creative action in accord with the individual's authentic concern for the whole. Responsibility moves the individual to respond to the call of the world as the call of one's own creative vision beckoning one to creative action. To respond means to promise anew (*re-*, anew + *spondere*, to promise), and to promise means to expressly create a future which would otherwise not happen on its own accord. Responsibility in its evolutionary thrust for optimization thrusts the individual to author a new future in accord with the call of the world which is at once the call of one's own inmost creative vision.

As Alexander Hamilton states in *The Federalist*, "Responsibility in order to be reasonable must be limited to objects within the power of the responsible party."¹ Actually, only for that which is within the power of the responsible party can it be authentically responsible. When responsibility is present, there exists a field of one's experience that has a coherence and therefore a wholeness to which one can respond, while there is one's recognition that one has no external authority but oneself as the sole internal authority in charge of the destiny of the field of one's experience. The greater is the field of experience with coherence and wholeness, the greater are the "objects within the power of the responsible party," and therefore the greater is the responsibility that the responsible party is genuinely capable of taking.

At the core of responsibility there is love. To love means to respond to that which arises as one's own self and its extension within the field of one's experience. All that arises in one's experience is in at-one-ment with oneself. To love means to respond with care to that which is in at-one-ment with oneself. There is an ancient Japanese Buddhist term, *kan-no-do-ko*, which literally means "deeply-felt mutual response (*kan-no*) and rhythmic balanced mutual interchange (*do-ko*)," which is precisely what the dynamic of responsibility as well as love expresses. Therefore, the deprivation of responsibility betokens a deprivation of love, and the pandemic of irresponsibility bespeaks a pandemic of lovelessness in the world.

Irresponsibility

Human beings live, to varying degrees, inside the world of abstractions of their own making. Our egological self, the notion of the "I" itself, is a form of abstraction that exists inside the sentence, "I am X," in which X is a set of predicates that predicate the "I" to assign it an identity. The "I" is thus predicate-dependent for its identity as an egological self, which is in reality a figment of abstraction, a linguistic marker. The world which the "I" inhabits is a world of abstraction, and everything that co-habits with the "I" in that world is a figment of abstraction. This state of affairs is the glorious tragedy of humanity. It is glorious because with the power of abstraction human beings have been enabled to model the inner workings of the universe and to develop magnificent cultures and civilizations. It is tragic because with the power of abstraction human beings have all too often gone astray from the world of reality into the world of delusion, from the world of concrete coherence into the world of abstract fragmentation, suffering and dying from countless inner conflicts and outer wars of their own making.

Human experience is habitually arrested by errant abstraction—by the fragmented, particularized, and localized awareness and concerns errantly floating in abstraction. Not only are we deprived of the experience of the concrete whole, but also we are not even aware that we are thus deprived. Therefore, when people say, "We are in our head and out of touch with reality," their statement is not too far from the truth. Our awareness is usually fragmented and localized through errant abstraction. Our concerns are often fragmentarily focused on our abstract "selves," "families," "groups," "races," or "countries" in alienation from the concrete whole that comprises our authentic being-*qua*- experience.

The concrete whole in the experience of wholeness is neither pre- nor post-abstraction; it contains the phenomenon of abstraction as a part of the whole experience without being lost in it or being arrested by it. When you consciously experience the totality of your concrete experience, you become aware that you and your experience arise together: without you, there is no experience; without your experience, there is no you. You are your experience; your experience is you.

The whole world emerges in and as your experience, which is experienced as an experience that is coherent, complete, and whole without arrest by errant abstraction. Everything that constitutes your experience constitutes the whole that emerges as your experience, as you. You realize *in the experience of wholeness* that you are indeed ontologically responsive to and responsible for the whole.

Therefore, *in the experience of wholeness*, the question becomes not whether or not you *are* responsible but whether or not you *take* the responsibility that is already yours. We do not usually take such awesome-sounding responsibility because we do not know that we are already responsive to and responsible for the whole. We do not know that we are already responsive to and responsible for the whole because our experience is habitually arrested by our fragmented awareness lost in errant abstraction. We cannot respond to that which is outside the range of our concrete awareness. That is, the range of our concerns is limited to what is inside the range of our concrete awareness, to which only can we be responsive and for which only can we be responsible.

Thus, the fundamental cause of the pandemic of irresponsibility is the habitual arrest of experience by the errant abstraction that alienates us from the whole, from the universe, from nature, from our world, from one another, and even from ourselves. In and through this existential alienation from the whole, we have lost our conscious connection to a coherent whole for which we can be responsible. Hence, to transform a culture of irresponsibility into a culture of responsibility means, first of all, to regain the lost connection to the coherent whole and to heal our existential alienation which fragments and confines the range of our concerns through reclaiming the lost wholeness of our experience.

Toward a Culture of Responsibility

Responsibility belongs to the concrete world and the concrete self, not to the abstract world or the abstract self. In the experience of the concrete world, the concrete self, the self in reality, is experienced as the ground of being of the world. As the experiencer of the experience wherein and whereas the whole world emerges, the self has the power to hold the reality of the world in the way it experiences the world. Because the reality of the world is held within the experience of coherence and wholeness, the world as a whole is experienced as immensely beautiful, valuable, and meaningful. Beauty, value, and meaning—the qualities that are considered merely subjective and therefore relative by those habitually arrested by errant abstraction and alienated from the whole—become known as intrinsic and integral to reality.

This holistic experience is the basis of the Science of Value about which Glenn Olds writes and of a real holistic science that contains within its universe of knowledge, knowledge of the whole universe—of the All. We cannot experientially know the All, but we can know the whole in and through an experience that is coherent and whole. Through the proper use of abstraction, combined with our experiential knowledge of the whole, we can then formulate a hypothesis or theory of the All, which theory continually evolves as our experience of the whole becomes more extensive as well as expansive. For this reason, the whole enterprise of developing a science of value or a holistic science that contains a science of value is critical in the development of a new culture characterized by the prevalence of responsibility and not by the pandemic of irresponsibility.

To heal ourselves of the pandemic of irresponsibility, we must first rescue ourselves from the panorama of *irreality*. This panorama of irreality arises from our penchant for immersing ourselves in and arresting our experience by disembodied abstractions in a world of second-hand symbols without any real referents or

connections in the concrete world. As a result we have lost the ability to distinguish the abstract from the concrete. As Alan Watt used to say, we cannot eat the menu but only the food. Responsibility belongs to the realm of existence to which the food belongs. Irresponsibility is a symptom of our forgetfulness of the food in our errant absorption in the menu.

It is easy to see that the name of a bird or flower is not the bird or flower for which it is a name. However, it is more difficult to see that the abstract concept of wholeness is not the actual experience of wholeness; the abstract concept of responsibility is not the actual experience of responsibility; or the abstract concept of God is not the actual experience of God. Concept exists in the world of abstraction; experience exists in and as the concrete world of reality. For instance, in the experience of God, which is the experience of universal goodness inherent in the experience of wholeness, there exists no seed of fundamentalism or of conflict, violence, or war. It is only with the concept of God without the experience of God, there emerges the seed of fundamentalism or of conflict, violence, or war.

If you were a nominalist, you would deny that any objective referents exist in the concrete world for such an abstract concept as wholeness, responsibility, or God. However, nominalists falsely assume that the concrete world consists simply of objects that can only be experienced or observed sensorially. The concrete world of experience is much richer and more complex than that which is reducible to the "evidence of the senses." What exist in the concrete world, what emerge in the concrete experience, are not only flowers, birds, the ocean, and the sky, but also beauty, goodness, value, and meaning. Experience, and the world emergent therein, is laden with meaning and value. Nominalism, along with subjectivism, relativism, and various schools of materialist philosophy, notwithstanding its intellectual sophistication, exposes the lost wholeness and existential alienation of the human being whose concrete experience is arrested by errant abstraction.

The creation and development of a culture of responsibility requires, first and foremost, the restoration of the concrete experience of wholeness out of which the concern for the whole arises, which concern is the ground wherein responsibility germinates and wherefrom it sprouts. In various educational setups around the world, children and adults both need to be systematically and spontaneously exposed to that which is concrete, *reality*, in contra-distinction to that which is abstract, *virtual reality*.

Natural philosophers of the past studied the universe through the observation of nature of which they were often in awe. Today the extremities of the micro and macro universes transcend the range of direct human observation, and yet what inspires impassioned scientific inquiries remains the same sense of awe and wonder that the scientists feel when they are in direct communion with nature—that sense of awe which Albert Einstein called the cosmic religious sense. A heart that is incapable of awe and wonder, of a cosmic religious sense, is incapable of true responsibility. An essential purpose of education is to nurture and foster such a heart alive with wonder and awe.

Secondly, the creation and development of a culture of responsibility requires the development of authentic individuality. The term "individual" stems from the root word which means "indivisible." A true individual is a human being who has attained an indivisible wholeness and integrity of being, who is self-sufficient and self-governing, and who thinks and acts for himself or herself without dependence on external authority. A true individual is a human being who is capable of that experience which is coherent, complete, and whole without arrest by errant abstraction. It is only the individual who has thus attained true individuality that is capable of true responsibility. Another essential purpose of education is thus the fostering and developing of individuals self-bestowed with true individuality.

Thirdly, the creation and development of a culture of responsibility requires the restoration of *kan-no-do-ko*, rhythmic balanced interchange (*do-ko*) between individuals based on deeply-felt mutual response (*kan-no*). Starting with a group or a community of like-minded individuals, we need to expand the circle of *kan-no-do-ko* across the world. Through *kan-no-do-ko*, we can begin to create communities in which people are mutually concerned for, responsive to, and responsible for one another and the whole community. In the Christian tradition, the principle of *kan-no-do-ko* is expressed in the precept of love: Love thy neighbors as thyself; love thy enemies as thyself. In the experience of wholeness, the experience that is whole and coherent, your neighbors and your enemies emerge *as* yourself in the sense of them being in *at-one-ment* with yourself. As stated before, at the core of responsibility there is love. Therefore, the expansion of the circle of *kan-no-do-ko* from the like-minded to encompass the whole of humanity is not only the expansion of a circle of responsibility but also of a circle of love.

True responsibility demands that individuals take global issues personally and approach personal issues cosmically. Authentically responsible individuals are the only real hope of humanity, because it is only they who hold the real power and integrity to transform the world.

Note:

1. Hamilton, Alexander, 1787, *The Federalist*, No. 63 II. 193. *The Federalist* is one of the earliest texts in which the word 'responsibility' was used and Alexander Hamilton is one of the earliest authors to use it.