



PROFOUND PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY PART ONE: BORN TO RESPONSIBILITY

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A tree growing in the forest possesses no responsibility whatsoever because it has no agency—no ability to think, learn, choose, and act. The life of the tree is determined by fate. If its seed takes root in poor conditions it will wither and die. If there's a fire, it will burn. If there's a sudden, severe, sustained drought it cannot go searching for water. If the river cuts the bank under its roots it will fall and be torn from the earth. The ability to learn and act—to gain knowledge and make choices—is the prerequisite condition for responsibility. Without the capacity to learn and take action, one has no responsibility.

Because we have knowledge, choice, and agency, because we have imagination and live in a world of possibility, and because we are free, we can act or choose not to act. Both are choices, both have consequences, and we are responsible for the choices and the consequences. This means that responsibility is a fact, not a notion, and there is no escape from it. To *accept the fact of responsibility* is to assume the joy and burden of being human. The joy comes from having a greater degree of control—from being self-propelled in life. The burden comes from accountability for ourselves, our choices, our actions, and our results.

Instinct And Responsibility

Compared to plants, animals have a wider range of capacity to act. At one end, a barnacle or mussel, in its ability to learn and act, more resembles the tree than the coyote. But across this wider range—even in the coyote, a pretty crafty and adaptable animal—most behavior patterns are limited and hard-wired into the animals. These instinctive “obligations” or patterns of acting are much like the hardware and software in a computer. So, while there is no question that many animals can learn, choose, and act, much of how they act is essentially wired into their beings. A bird breeds, builds a nest, hatches young, and feeds and cares for them out of this hard-wired imperative, not out of a thoughtful consideration of choices: “Should I have children or develop my career?” The adult bird is hard-wired to mate and to be responsible for its young; it's not an informed, conscious choice. Therefore we don't think of animals as having responsibility in the way humans do.

The coyote and the rabbit can run from danger, search for food, find a mate, stake out a territory, and in other ways control and influence the content of their lives. The coyote and the rabbit have some *conscious agency* within this somewhat limited range of choices. The agency of the coyote pitted against the agency of the rabbit is played out thousands of times every day. If the coyote fails he'll live to hunt another day, but still must be successful at “making a living” soon. If he doesn't eat he'll die within a couple weeks. For the rabbit it's much more immediate—if at first you don't succeed, you end up as lunch.

Most of the moves in this drama have been scripted through thousands of years of evolution. While the coyote is amazingly cunning and adaptable, his choices are quite limited. Unlike a human, the coyote can't build pens and domesticate rabbits as a way of lessening the hazards of hunting in nature. Because of these limitations we still do not apply the human notion of responsibility to creatures like coyotes.

Inherent Responsibility

Neither plants nor most non-human animals are *inherently* responsible to any degree. Some animals possess a *small amount* of inherent responsibility in that they can learn and then make choices within a limited range. Their actions can make a difference, but they are limited in creativity and resourcefulness. In contrast, human beings—having a large brain that can learn far beyond any instinctive impulses, and possessing the ability to think about and make choices—inherit responsibility through birth. It takes years to *actualize* this birthright, so we don't consider young children to be self-responsible, but because we are born capable of learning and making informed choices, we are born to responsibility.

This means that if we succeed, the success is ours; if we fail, the failure is ours. In spite of this burden, anyone who has a profound understanding of responsibility refuses to acquiesce to the notion of not being responsible. To do so would be to surrender what it means to be human, and to accept a "dust in the wind" view of life where, like the tree, we are victims of fate. We accept the fact of responsibility because it empowers us in our lives.

Responsibility As Self-Control And Self-Management

As humans we have the ability to understand logic and causality—that A causes B, or B follows from A. In other words, we understand causal relationships in general, and more specifically that our actions have consequences for our lives and the lives of others. It is this ability to understand causality—that our actions have effects and consequences—that further makes us responsible. The earlier in life we learn this, the better, so conscientious parents try to instill an awareness of causality and personal responsibility in their children beginning at a very early age. It's important to have this good start because the refusal to accept the link between actions and consequences produces much misery for ourselves and others. As a simple example, I've been involved in both rock-climbing and ski-mountaineering. In both of these sports I've encountered people who are a danger to themselves and their partners because they are reckless or lack self-control.

Because we have the ability to be self-aware and to understand causality, we are responsible for our impact on others and on the world around us. We expect people to exercise their freedom in a responsible manner: "Your freedom ends at the tip of my nose." Hopefully, as children we learn that we cannot be loud, rude, intrusive, or self-centered at the expense of others. Ideally this self-control and awareness of others grows in us as we mature. We may be born to freedom, but we do not have the right to behave wantonly, recklessly, or with careless disregard for others.

Although most animals have little to no ability to learn responsibility, many of the animals we have domesticated are capable of some learning. Caring dog owners teach their pets appropriate behavior and boundaries, both to keep the pets safe from danger and to prepare them for

life around people. If an animal is capable of learning and acting, then we can teach and expect some “responsible” behavior. Dogs can develop a *conscience* about some impulses and behaviors, and learn to be self-managing. As most of us know, it’s unpleasant to be around untrained dogs and spoiled, bratty children. Whether it’s dogs or children, self-control and self-management tend to lead to good outcomes; in both dogs and children a lack of self-control tends to lead to bad outcomes. If the dog becomes dangerous or burdensome he may end up at the pound; if the child doesn’t learn self-control, all kinds of bad outcomes become likely.

Responsibility As Accountability

Contained in responsibility is the notion of accountability, of being answerable. If we are responsible, then we are accountable and answerable. If we have the capacity to act, then we’re responsible. If we refuse to act, we’re still responsible and we’re still answerable. The story of Pontius Pilate washing his hands is a story of accountability. Because he had the capacity to intervene, but didn’t, he remains accountable. If you have agency, then you have accountability. Marie Antoinette’s famous statement, “Let them eat cake” is another example. Her head was separated from her body because she had the ability to care and take action, but didn’t.

When we understand the full implications of profound responsibility we understand that we cannot wash our hands of responsibility and accountability. This fact imposes some tough dilemmas on us. It’s hard—and some would say very wrong—to stand by while truly bad people do truly bad things to others. This is Edmund Burke’s notion, “The only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing.” Think of Rwanda and Darfur, and also Iraq under Hussein. Failure to take action can produce horrific results; intervention can create a real mess. The fact that these are tough dilemmas does not cancel the fact of inherent responsibility.

If we behave in a way that causes harm, we can expect to be held accountable for our actions. The more carelessly, recklessly, or callously we behave, the greater the demand for accountability. We are expected to make amends and to restore things to an unharmed condition. If that’s not possible, then some equitable compensation is expected. If, through our actions, we show that we cannot be trusted with freedom, we’ll be held to account and made to answer for our behavior. If the behavior was harmful enough, then freedom will be taken from us (prison) until—hopefully—we learn to live responsibly with others. While it’s true that prison is punishment, another view is that some people don’t handle freedom very well, so we limit their choices.

In organizational life we’re expected to live up to our roles and commitments. If we’re given responsibility, meaning authority and resources, then we can expect to be held accountable for fulfilling our roles and utilizing the resources to produce the expected results. We’re expected to commit to and achieve measurable goals. In marriage we’re expected to keep commitments and be faithful. Our word should be our bond. If we father children we should care for them. If we have animals we should feed them and treat them humanely. In general, life has obligations and we’ll be held accountable, in various ways, for meeting these obligations.

Responsibility And Freedom

If we accept that responsibility is rooted in our ability to make choices, then the greater our personal freedom, the greater our responsibility. The one follows from the other. Conversely, if we have no freedom then we have no choice, and therefore we have no responsibility. Americans, in general, are born to freedom, born to choice, and therefore born to responsibility. This doesn't mean that some people are not born into bad circumstances. It means in spite of that bad luck they are also born into the good luck of living in a free country with virtually unlimited opportunity. The American dream is the embodiment of the notion that no one should be prevented from reaching for his or her potential. Those who are born to bad circumstances still have that most human gift of taking responsibility and building a life worth living.

It's a sad fact that worldwide there are still millions of people born into dangerous, oppressive, barbaric circumstances. In the worst of these, a person who refuses to submit risks death, rape, unimaginable cruelty and torture, and the prospect of placing those they love at risk. In these cases the dignity that comes with human freedom is stripped away, and most people become compliant as a matter of survival. Under these circumstances there is little capacity to be fully self-responsible, and life is a matter of negotiating very bad choices. Given that so many people do not have the gift of freedom, it is doubly tragic when those born to freedom waste the gift, view themselves as powerless, and live the life of a victim. In a way it's an insult to those who really and truly are subjugated and oppressed.

Responsibility And Respect

One of the most admired and respected traits among humans is the *individual actualization* of the birthright of freedom and responsibility—of making exceptional choices. Perhaps it's a heroic story of rising above circumstances or responding to the call of duty. Maybe it's imagining and fulfilling a grand possibility, or facing down fear and danger. Perhaps it's living a life of sacrifice for others or becoming the leader that the times demand. When people take responsibility in exceptional ways, others admire and respect them and their efforts. The *fact of* responsibility—and our ability to be responsible, to take responsibility, to accept responsibility—are what make us human.

On the other hand, when people have the capacity to be competent in their lives, but deny such self-responsibility, and instead become helpless and play the victim, they lose our regard and respect. They may gain our compassion and even pity, but not our respect for how they live. They also lose their own self-regard and self-respect, and find themselves in a wicked dilemma—cognitive and emotional dissonance. Somehow they must square this horrible circle. They have to succumb to the view that they are helpless and pitiful creatures, adopt the view that they are somehow entitled to the efforts and contributions of others, or blame others and the society within which they live for the condition of their lives. Not very wonderful choices. It's a great tragedy to be born to freedom and opportunity, and to do nothing with it.

Responsibility As Social Obligation To Others

Humans are born as social creatures, capable of conscience. Conscience has two primary components. One is self-management so as to avoid causing harm. The other is *social obligation*—the felt obligation to *contribute to others* and to *reciprocate* after receiving benefits

from others. Humans, working together, create many benefits enjoyed by the individual members of the group. One aspect of personal responsibility is to understand and accept that I have obligations to contribute, to do my share, to be a giver and not a taker, to help build benefits for the group and not just be a selfish consumer of the benefits the group has created. Kennedy's challenge to "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country," is an appeal to this sense of responsibility. Similarly when people say, "I want to make a difference," they are expressing the desire to fulfill their sense of social responsibility in a meaningful way.

We create codes of behavior in order to teach and enforce responsibility to others. Our laws define the outer limits of what's acceptable. Violate those limits and we may bring the power of the state down on our heads. Ethics and morals are the codes of behavior that define expectations beyond the law. Ethics are the codes that emphasize awareness of and caring about others, particularly stressing decent, non-exploitive treatment of others. The Golden Rule is the best-known example of such an ethic, and shows up in some form in virtually every culture. Morals are the codes that encourage respectful treatment of ourselves and avoidance of behavior that degrades others through our influence. Beyond all of these various codes of behavior, and within all cultures, there is an additional expectation: that members should reciprocate when they benefit from others and should contribute to the greater good. At best free-riders are pitied; at worst they are resented or shunned. They are never respected.

The Role Of Conscience, Shame, And Guilt

Shame and guilt—and embarrassment—are not enjoyable emotions. We live in an age when some believe that no one, especially children, should feel shame or guilt. The thought is that shame and guilt are harmful to self-esteem. But imagine for a moment people with little or no capacity to experience these powerful feelings. There are words for such people—psychopaths and sociopaths. Shame and guilt derive from conscience, an internalized set of rules and values, and without a conscience we don't experience shame and guilt. People who lack conscience, who operate without a moral and ethical compass, are often extremely manipulative, exploitative, and cruel.

Children are not born with strong consciences. Golding's book *Lord Of The Flies* portrays a savage and cruel culture of children who have no wise adults to guide them. Conscience develops over time, as children grow into adults. When parents do a poor job of teaching responsibility, children can become monsters. The juvenile courts are full of kids who have learned no boundaries. The scariest ones are *casually cruel*, have no real feelings for others, and show no remorse for what they've done.

Shame, guilt, and some forms of embarrassment are the feelings that come when we violate community standards or personal values. Conscience, accompanied by the *emotions of conscience* (shame and guilt), is a critical component of a self-guided life. Shame and guilt are like emotional guardrails, helping to protect us from doing wrong and allowing us to look back, learn, and correct our mistakes.

In business life, leaders have the responsibility of making sure the company internalizes sound

ethics and *business morality*. This means that the company, through its people, develops a conscience. When the leaders themselves behave in such a way as to undermine or compromise standards, rules, and ethics, bad events usually follow. We all know about WorldCom, Enron, Qwest, Arthur Andersen, and a host of other companies tainted or destroyed by truly bad leadership.

Without a conscience, people will do whatever they can get away with, paying no regard to the consequences or effects of their actions on others. With a conscience, we self-impose our own guidelines for behavior, making us safe for others. In short, we wouldn't want to live in a shameless world of people unwilling or unable to experience these self-correcting emotions.

Responsibility As Duty

A more profound extension of responsibility as social obligation is found in responsibility as duty. At its highest level of meaning is the notion that there are certain things (values, family, country, way of life, perhaps even dignity) that are worth fighting and dying for. We have a responsibility to stand and be counted when those precious aspects of our lives are threatened. We may have to take up the fight and place our lives in physical danger. This extension of responsibility as social obligation in effect says, "If you care, then you have duties to fulfill." Responding to the call of duty is the ultimate self-sacrifice for the greater good. All countries have ways of enforcing this responsibility, and even free countries like the United States have used the draft to force individuals to step up and do their part in time of war. Historically perhaps the two most despised persons were the coward who refused to fight and thereby became a free-rider, or the traitor who cravenly bought his safety by betraying and sacrificing others.

It's a sad commentary that in our culture today little is taught about duty and those things that are worth fighting and dying for. The notions of self-fulfillment and self-actualization have taken over the space that sense of duty and honor used to occupy. Nevertheless, to *remain* a free human being, the notion of duty must be deeply understood. If we are under-educated in the notion of duty, we may create a culture that allows some to become cultural free-riders, while others carry the burdens and take the risks. Perhaps even worse, precious ground—won at great cost over hundreds of years—may be lost. So, duty and honor should be approached seriously by all of us. Ideally, responding to the call of duty should be a deeply understood, individual, informed choice to stand with the group and defend what's precious to our collective lives. Honor is making sure I do my part. There's a line in a Joni Mitchell song, "You don't realize what you've got until it's gone."

The Leadership Challenge: Building A Culture Of Responsibility

The most effective leaders know that company culture is critical to success, and they know the major elements of success-producing cultures. Regardless of industry, companies that have sustained long-term success have common cultural elements that contribute to their success. The leadership challenge is to build these elements into the company culture.

One key element of successful company culture is responsibility. In companies where responsibility is visibly valued, the company has a conscience and behaves ethically and within the law. As

a CEO-friend said “There’s plenty of room to win while staying within the lines.” The best leaders and the best companies create success by building cultures of self-responsible people. There’s a strong emphasis on clear purposes, goals, metrics, and consequences for performance—in other words, on commitment, measurement, and accountability. The strong cultures engender a focus on high quality processes that lead to results. The leaders constantly work to build accountability and answerability into the business. They know that bureaucracy—activity and process disconnected from purpose and results—grows like kudzu. The more they can engender a focus on clear purpose and results, the less likely the company will spawn endless, expensive, and pointless processes that accomplish nothing of value.

At Cruxpoint Consulting we often work with companies in trouble. This means we encounter thousands of employees who have become dispirited, resentful, resigned, afraid, and even vengeful. Many have become trapped in a victim mindset. They may feel betrayed. There is widespread blaming and finger-pointing. Many—sometimes most—feel out of control of the situation. They have lost their sense of *positive agency*—the ability to act effectively and make a difference. One of our first tasks is to get people out of these destructive mindsets so they can focus on turning things around and winning.

Cultures of responsibility enable and empower people, not for reasons of workplace democracy, but so they can be effective and get things done. Leaders work hard to develop a *sense of agency* in their people—the belief that they can decide, act, and be effective. The goal in these cultures is to create self-responsible people who focus on purpose and results, take on challenges, and want to be measured and rewarded for performance.