Chapter 5. WHO IS RESPONSIBLE? WHO COUNTS?: Suggested answers

5.1 Exercises:

*1.* *Formulate a definition for being a moral agent and repeat the definition aloud to help you remember it.*

A **moral agent** is anyone (or anything) capable of moral reasoning, that we can appropriately morally judge either positively or negatively, and that we can appropriately punish or reward based on the morality of their actions.

*2. What are three important capacities of a moral agent?*

A moral agent must (1) have certain emotional abilities that make it possible for it to be aware of things such as the suffering and well being of other people, (2) have the mental ability to process information, think logically, and (3) have the ability to apply moral reasoning to real-world situations as a result of rational deliberation.

*3. Does a house cat have the capacities necessary to be a moral agent?*

Cats may have sufficient emotional capabilities to be moral agents, but the intellectual capacity to engage in logical thought and rational deliberation seems beyond the scope of what a cat can do.

*4. Should a house cat be held morally accountable for playing with (torturing) a mouse?*

No, because it makes sense to hold only moral agents morally accountable for anything.

*5. Why is there a problem with holding a business corporation (considered as a whole) morally accountable for its actions?*

Corporations do not have emotional or intellectual capacities at all, so they lack the capacities required by the definition of moral agency. But if that is so, then it would seem that they are not moral agents and, like cats, cannot be held morally accountable for their actions. However, the directors responsible for corporate action decisions might be held morally accountable for the corporation’s actions.

5.2 Exercises:

*1. Formulate a definition for each of the following and repeat the definition aloud to help you remember it: (a) necessary condition, (b) sufficient condition.*

(a) A is a necessary condition for B if B would be impossible without A. (e.g., You can't win if you don't play, so playing is a necessary condition for winning, although it is no guarantee you will win.)

(b) X is a sufficient condition for Y if whenever you have X you have enough to also have Y. (e.g., If you are born in the USA you automatically have US citizenship, so being born in the USA is sufficient for citizenship even though there are other ways one can become a citizen without being born in the USA.)

*2. Give an example of a condition that is not a causal factor for each of (a) a necessary condition and (b) a sufficient condition.*

(a) That there is gravity on earth is necessary for playing golf. You could not play golf without gravity. But the presence of gravity does not cause you to be playing golf. All people are acted on by gravity and only very few are playing golf.

(b) John looks out his window when he wakes up and sees a blizzard outside. This is a sufficient condition for knowing that school has been cancelled for the day. However, what John does not know is that the school burned to the ground during the night before the storm began, so the storm did not cause school to be cancelled – the fire did.

*3. Describe a way that individual causal responsibility for the actions of an organization can disappear in a bureaucratic context.*

Often the actions of an organization are the result of many actions by many people that overdetermine the organization’s actions. Since it is true that if any one person had acted differently the outcome would have been the same, this makes it seem as if no one can be blamed for the outcome.

*4. Why is it very difficult to assign individual causal responsibility for accumulative harms?*

When a person sits on a chair and it breaks, it is hard to know how much the chair was weakened by each person who ever sat on it and thus hard to determine what the causal responsibility each person has for it breaking.

5.3 Exercises:

*1. To what considerations would each of the following ethical approaches appeal in deciding whether to hold Amy morally accountable for the offshore disaster?*

*(a) virtue ethics*

*(b) a rights-based ethical approach*

*(c) a preference-based consequentialist approach*

(a) Virtue ethics would consider what aspects of Amy's character went into her decision. It is unlikely that honesty is a relevant virtue, but her vote could have been motivated by the vice of greed (if she personally profits from the decision), unfairness (if the decision is not just) or even timidity (if she wanted to vote differently but was overly concerned with how her colleagues would view her if she did).

(b) Rights that are based in contractual agreements with workers would be relevant to consider, but so would broader rights that are not based in any agreements such as the right to life or to personal security.

(c) The preferences of everyone would have to be considered, including the preferences of the employees who would become employed as a result of the decision, the ones who would lose their jobs, employees (including managers and executives) whose jobs would not be affected, but who might nevertheless benefit or be harmed by the decision, the preferences of customers of the company, the preferences of business partners of the company, and the preferences of the broader members of society that might be affected by the decision.

*2. What would each of the following ethical approaches say about holding a corporation-as-a-whole morally accountable for its decisions?*

*(a) virtue ethics*

*(b) indirect utilitarianism*

(a) While it might not be as clear that a corporation can literally be said to have a character the same way a person can, corporations can act justly or unjustly, greedily or generously, in ways that demonstrate bravery or cowardice. So, a virtue ethicist might hold corporations-as-a-whole morally accountable.

(b) Since corporations can act and those actions have consequences, the indirect utilitarian can hold corporations-as-a-whole morally accountable for the ways their actions are in accord with principles that generally promote or harm the welfare of people.

5.4 Exercises:

*1. Formulate a definition for each of the following and repeat the definition aloud to help you remember it: (a) moral autonomy, (b) personal autonomy, (c) a coercive threat, and (d) an oppressive conceptual framework.*

(a) **Moral autonomy** is the ability to freely choose how to act based on moral deliberation about the available alternatives.

(b) **Personal autonomy** is the ability to make decisions about what to do and how to live one's own life without any external restrictions on or interference with the decision-making process.

(c) **A coercive threat** is made when someone communicates that he or she will inflict some harm on someone if that person does not act the way he or she wants that person to.

(d) **An oppressive conceptual framework** is a network of beliefs held very strongly by a very large number of people and resistant to being discarded that collectively create and reinforce unjust, unequal, and unfair conditions for some people and make them difficult to identify or alter.

*2. Briefly explain how each of the following can interfere with its victim’s moral autonomy:*

*(a) a coercive threat*

The fear of having some harm inflicted on individuals can alter the decisions they might make. The choice they make is not based on what they really want, but is made to avoid the threatened harm.

*(b) a lie*

When making a choice based on what one expects its consequences to be, believing a lie can cause a person to make a different choice than she would otherwise make.

*(c) a failure of information disclosure*

Failing to disclose information can leave a person with a false belief, making it like a lie, or with less than sufficient information on which to base a proper decision about how to act, making it not free.

*(d) a conflict of interest*

When one person counts on a second person to provide information or advice in order for the first person to make a decision, the second person, having a conflict of interest, makes it such that he or she cannot be relied upon, which impedes the ability of the first person to make a free and informed decision.

*(e) an oppressive cultural framework*

Such a framework can result in a person making a decision based, in part, on false beliefs that are a part of the framework or based on coercion that is part of the framework (or both), resulting in a less than fully free decision.

*(f) emotional manipulation*

By altering a decision-maker’s emotions, someone can alter how the person weighs the various factors that must be considered for the decision. When the emotions manipulated are not relevant to the decision to be made, manipulating them can lead to a person making a decision he or she would not otherwise have made.

5.5 Exercises:

*1. Formulate a definition for each of the following and repeat the definition aloud to help you remember it: (a) moral standing and (b) an anthropocentric view of moral standing.*

(a) When the needs, desires, preferences, or well-being of anyone or anything are a part of moral considerations, that person or thing has moral standing.

(b) An anthropocentric view of moral standing is a view that only human beings have moral standing.

*2. Give an example, different from the ones in the text, that illustrates the difference between a direct and an indirect ethical obligation.*

Don has an obligation not to beat up Pat that he owes directly to Pat. However, if Don promises Mel that he will not beat up Pat, then Don will have an additional obligation not to beat up Pat that he owes to directly to Mel and indirectly to Pat. Don then has two ethical obligations concerning Pat, one that he owes directly to Pat and one that he owes directly to Mel but only indirectly to Pat.

*3. Set aside your own ethical views on animals and business corporations, and consider which of the ethical approaches in the left column of Table 5.1 would assign moral standing to (a) a laying hen, (b) an adult chimpanzee, and (c) Apple.*

[No suggested answer is provided. There is no uncontestable answer to these questions, but some answers make more sense than others. The point of the question is for you to use the spectrum of ethical theories as an aid in analyzing the problem.]

*4. Set aside your own views on the problem of abortion and the moral status of the fetus, and consider which of the ethical approaches in the left column of Table 5.1 would assign moral standing to (a) a human fetus at conception, (b) a human fetus when it becomes viable, and (c) a human infant at birth,*

[No suggested answer is provided. Again, there is no uncontestable answer to these questions, but some answers make more sense than others. You may disagree with the implication of one or more of these ethical approaches, and you may regard such an implication as a serious weakness of the approach. The point of the question is for you to use the spectrum of ethical theories as an aid in analyzing the problem.]