

Moral Responsibility for Consequences of One's Own Death: An Illustrative Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses what (if at all) is the moral responsibility of a person for consequences of their own death, and what (in)actions may be morally required of that person in order to try to optimize the balance of negative and positive consequences of their future death. Illustrative analysis using chance, choice and constraint as necessary and arguably jointly sufficient considerations is used. It concludes that a capable person's moral responsibility extends after that person's death, and that some (in)actions are morally required of the person while they are alive to try to optimize their death's consequences to others.

Keywords: chance, choice, consequences, constraints, death, moral responsibility

INTRODUCTION

A person may be morally responsible for their own death, at least in some circumstances. The truth of this statement seems self-evident, e.g, in relation to suicide even if other people or other circumstances influence the person's decision to die. Whether this statement is actually self-evident may require more conceptual and factual examination, e.g., it is unclear whether a (secular) person has any moral responsibility to themselves as such [1]. Yet there is a less examined but also interesting and important related statement that is addressed in the current paper, i.e., that a person may be morally responsible for consequences of their own death. For example, a person may be morally responsible at least in part for the financial well being of their family after – and even more so due to – the person's suicide, e.g., if that person's life insurance disallows suicide (which impacts suicidality [2]). If indeed a person is (under some, but perhaps not other, conditions) morally responsible for consequences of their own death, there may be a need for related interventions, such as education to help people decide in a more informed way what to do and not to do in order to try to minimize negative consequences of their future death and to maximize positive consequences of their future death (hence to optimize the balance of these consequences).

This paper aims to answer the question what (if at all) is the moral responsibility of a person for consequences of their own death, and the related question what actions and inactions – jointly termed (in)actions – may be morally required of the person in order to try to optimize the balance of negative and positive consequences of their future death. To answer these questions, a conceptual approach is applied, addressing moral responsibility as involving three necessary and jointly sufficient considerations: chance, choice and constraint [3]. According to this approach, moral responsibility applies to a person's (in)actions when they result in harm or benefit to others (humans and arguably other sentient beings), if their (in)actions are not

(fully) related to unforeseeable chance, are (at least partly) related to their intentional choice(s), and are not (fully) constrained by circumstances that they cannot change in a timely manner. The conceptual analysis [4] in this paper is illustrative rather than exhaustive, hence it is suggestive rather than conclusive.

MORAL RESPONSIBILITY OF A PERSON FOR CONSEQUENCES OF THEIR OWN DEATH

Many people can plan some consequences of their own death. For example, the law in many jurisdictions allows one to plan – and as part of that to try to ensure – their funeral and estate, with exceptions such as when an inheritance is appealed by some of its actual or contesting beneficiaries. Is such planning morally required? First, it is important to note that a person may have no continued moral responsibility after their death (religious or other spiritual beliefs such as in the immortality of the soul or in reincarnation may counter-argue this statement [5]; such metaphysical argumentation is out of scope for this paper). Hence, if there is moral responsibility involved, it clearly applies to the person before their death. So is planning some consequences of one's own death morally required? It is widely agreed that while alive a capable person has moral responsibility regarding people and other sentient beings who are directly or otherwise clearly impacted by that person's (in)actions, e.g., their dependents (such as the person being morally required to take care of their minority age children and pets); the person also has moral responsibility towards people who they may have never met but are part of their explicit social contract, e.g., people living in their jurisdiction (such as the person being morally required to pay taxes to support society). Arguably, while alive a capable person may also have moral responsibility regarding other people as well as other sentient beings who are indirectly or otherwise less clearly impacted by one's (in)actions, e.g., seriously disadvantaged people in other jurisdictions (such as developed countries' residents being morally required to donate to poverty-stricken individuals and their communities in developing countries, as argued by some advocates of effective altruism [6]).

Thus, a capable person while alive has moral responsibility regarding others who are directly or otherwise clearly impacted by that person's (in)actions. And a capable person while alive arguably has moral responsibility regarding others who are indirectly or otherwise less clearly impacted by that person's (in)actions. Such moral responsibility plausibly extends to the future, according to most if not all ethics approaches [7]. Trivially, it extends to the future if circumstances do not sufficiently change. If circumstances sufficiently change for others impacted by the capable person's (in)actions, the person's moral responsibility related to them may change, e.g., if these others' need reduces then the person's moral responsibility to help them may reduce too. If circumstances sufficiently change for the person themselves, their moral responsibility may change too, e.g., if the person's ability to help others in need reduces then that person's moral responsibility regarding those in need may reduce too. Does the actual or expected death of the person constitute sufficient change in circumstances? Arguably, their death in and of itself is not a sufficient change in circumstances, if related and other circumstances do not sufficiently change. For example, if their estate is available to support their beneficiaries as their wealth while alive supported their dependents, the relevant circumstances have not sufficiently changed. Obviously, circumstances do not often remain exactly the same even during short periods of time and even without death occurring; context and other considerations are needed to determine what is considered sufficient change of circumstances of complex systems such as human beings [8]. Notwithstanding, it seems sound to conclude that a capable person's moral responsibility extends after their death, perhaps

especially regarding others who are directly or otherwise clearly impacted by that person's (in)actions while the person is alive.

SOME (IN)ACTIONS MORALLY REQUIRED TO TRY TO OPTIMIZE CONSEQUENCES OF ONE'S OWN DEATH

If a capable person's moral responsibility extends after their death, some (in)actions would be morally required of them to try to optimize consequences of their death, at least for others directly or otherwise clearly impacted by them. First, and arguably foremost, the person would be morally required to try to minimize negative consequences of their own death. For example, the person would be morally required while alive to try to reduce if not eliminate their financial debt which their beneficiaries may have to pay after the person's death. And the person would be morally required while alive to try to avoid making mortal enemies who may try after the person's death to harm people close to the person, as is sometimes done as part of blood vengeance; if such enemies already exist, the person would be morally required while alive to try to prevent future harm from their mortal enemies to people close to the person after the person's death, such as by non-violent resolution of blood vengeance [9]. Second, the person may be morally required to try to maximize positive consequences of their own death. For example, the person may be morally required while alive to try to not squander their wealth in order to leave a sufficient inheritance for their beneficiaries; whether that is a moral requirement or not (such as a moral preference) would depend particularly on context such as whether the person's wealth is considerable (in which case it would arguably be morally required rather than preferred that they not squander it), which is at least in part a matter of chance [10].

The last example provided above, regarding wealth, raises a broader opportunity to further address chance and choice, as well as constraints (as unchangeable circumstances), in relation to morally required (in)actions. For example, a dying person may have the chance, e.g., if they are still mentally able, to make amends or otherwise positively interact with their family and others who have been significant in their lives. The person may or may not choose to do so, e.g., if they are or are not supported by their significant others to do so. And that person may or may not be constrained in doing so, e.g., if such family and/or significant others are or are not available to be involved thus. If the dying person has such a chance without related constraints, it is arguably morally required of them to positively interact thus with others who have been significant in their lives, in order to try to prevent these others from experiencing distress that may be permanent or at least long lasting after that person's death. Hence, some (in)actions of a person morally required to try to optimize consequences of their death may involve both positively interacting as well as trying to avoid negative interactions with others (arguably even before the person's last stage of life).

CONCLUSION

In summary, a capable person's moral responsibility extends after their death, perhaps especially regarding others who are directly or otherwise clearly impacted by that person's (in)actions while the person is alive. Some (in)actions would be morally required of that person to try to optimize consequences of their own death. First, and arguably foremost, the person would be morally required to try to minimize negative consequences of their own death. Second, the person may be morally required to try to maximize positive consequences of their own death. Chance, choice and constraint are necessary and arguably jointly sufficient

considerations to determine the person's moral responsibility for consequences of their own death.

This analysis is limited by the approach it uses, e.g., it focuses on the person as the primary unit of reference so systemic aspects such as societal factors may be insufficiently addressed. Yet the inclusion of constraints, and more generally of circumstances, refers to such considerations and factors to some extent. More theoretical, as well as empirical, research is needed to address systemic – and as part of that societal – issues, as well as other matters that are involved in a person's moral responsibility for consequences of their own death. Policy implications would have to be explored as part of this inquiry, such as possible funding of education to help people decide in a more informed way what to do and not to do in order to try to minimize negative consequences of their future death and to maximize positive consequences of their future death (hence to optimize the balance of these consequences).

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