

Who's Responsible for Exploitation?

Abstract

In this paper I consider two problems of moral responsibility for Hillel Steiner's (1984; 1987; 2010) rights-based theory of exploitation. In the first, I show that Steiner's theory allows for non-culpably ignorant exploitation: although rights violations are a necessary condition for Steinerian exploitation, the rights violator may be (often is) someone other than the exploiter. If the exploiter is ignorant of the antecedent rights violation, they may be unaware they are exploiting. Many theorists, including Steiner¹, argue exploitation is a *moralised* concept: in calling an action exploitation, we are committed to saying the action is morally wrong. If the act is morally wrong, then it seems that someone must be responsible for the act; yet, this intuition is at odds with cases of non-culpably ignorant exploitation. In particular, I argue that the existence of non-culpably ignorant exploitation is inconsistent with the following four premises: (1) if exploitation occurs, then it is wrong; (2) if an action is wrong, then there is at least one person who is morally responsible for the action; (3) if a person is morally responsible, then they must have acted either intentionally or from culpable ignorance; and (4) a person cannot act intentionally without knowing they performed an action, that is, ignorant exploiters cannot be intentional exploiters. The first half of the paper develops these premises, beginning with a defense of the existence of non-culpably ignorant exploitation. Here I also address worries that the inconsistency relies on an equivocal use of 'responsibility', offering an analysis of blame and moral responsibility that follows Scanlon's (1998; 2008) work. I argue that the inconsistency of the first problem can be resolved by altering premise (3): persons may also be morally responsible if they act negligently. If a person is ignorant of a rights violation that leads to their becoming an exploiter, then they are not morally responsible for the exploitation; rather, the original rights violator, in violating a right, acts negligently and, therefore, is morally responsible for the exploitation. In defending this solution I also defend a distinction between non-culpable ignorance and negligence.

Although the solution to this first problem of moral responsibility places the moral responsibility on the original rights violator, that the rights violator

¹Steiner (1987) argues the basic moral principles of classical liberalism imply a set of property rights; on his theory of exploitation violation of these rights is a necessary condition for exploitation. Thus, the truth conditions of Steinerian exploitation reference a concept that is explicitly moral.

bears such responsibility seems to be a piece of bad moral luck. Consequently, their immediate (and intentional) rights violation seems worse than the more remote (and chancy) exploitation it enables. This intuition can be captured by what I call the ‘principle of diminishing marginal moral responsibility’ which, stated informally, says that when chance plays a role in the occurrence of a series of events, a person’s moral responsibility for each subsequent event decreases as the events become more remote from the original rights violation. Yet, when this principle is combined with Steven Walt’s (1984) objection that Steiner’s theory of exploitation allows for pervasive exploitation a second problem of moral responsibility emerges. The existence of pervasive exploitation means that a single rights violation can allow exploitation to spread through a series of transactions. If (1 from above) exploitation is a moralised concept, then each of these resultant exploitations is morally wrong. And (2 from above) if exploitation is wrong, then at least one person is morally responsible. The solution to the first problem argues that this person is the original rights violator. But by the principle of decreasing marginal moral responsibility, the more remote the exploitation, the less the violator is responsible. Therefore, at the ‘limit’, the rights violator is not responsible—but this contradicts (1) and (2). In the section section I consider the new premises of pervasive exploitation and decreasing marginal moral responsibility, along with the ‘limit reasoning’ that drives the conclusion. I argue that since Steiner provides no theory of partial responsibility, if we accept the solution to the first problem of moral responsibility, it follows that an agent who violates property rights bears full (or at least ‘significant’) moral responsibility for all subsequent exploitations. Yet this departs from our ordinary understanding of exploitation. After considering a number of solutions to the second problem of moral responsibility, I conclude that unlike in the first, no straightforward solution is forthcoming.

References

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