

On Responsibility
by John Grier Hibben, 1911

- 1 There is much loose and confused thinking about the nature of responsibility. Not only are there innumerable instances of persons holding positions of trust who are evading evident responsibilities, but also more particularly, of those who would seek to justify themselves in such a course. The latter are like the figures in Nast's famous cartoon of the Tweed Ring, who are all standing in a circle, and each one pointing aside with his thumb to his neighbor as the responsible person. It is the old story of the other man. There are many circumstances in life where it is convenient to shift the responsibility upon some one else; and whenever one sets himself to defend a convenient course of action, he does not always see straight and think clear. Even though he may succeed in convincing himself, nevertheless if in this process there is any element of self-deception, he is perilously near the danger line.
- 2 There are no fallacies so subtle as those which insinuate themselves into our reasoning at a time when our interests are involved. To play the role of judge and of special pleader at one and the same time is an impossible task. Therefore when we seek to free ourselves from the burden of responsibility in any situation, we must be particularly on guard, that we do not allow ourselves to become ensnared in the toils of those artificial distinction and plausible explanations which when stripped of their verbal dress appear in their nakedness as contemptible subterfuges.
- 3 One of these convenient ideas which serves as a kind of natural anesthetic to conscience is the belief that any responsibility which is divided is thereby lessened. Responsibility, however, can never be dissipated by diffusion. The director of a corporation may content himself with the comforting thought that where many are jointly responsible, his share of the common obligation after all cannot be regarded as very serious. And in this idea there lies a very fundamental error. For responsibility is by its nature something intensive and not extensive. It can be divided among many, but it is not thereby diminished in degree. When by the ordinary processes of arithmetical division, however, one number is divided by another; the result is only a small part of the original amount. It is always a lessening process. But the idea of responsibility cannot be expressed in any such quantitative terms. Dividends can be divided into separate parts, but not responsibility. Responsibility can never be conceived in the light of a magnitude. It belongs to the class of things which, when divided, each part is equal to the whole.
- 4 Responsibility in this respect is like pleasure which, when shared is not lessened, but the rather increased, as Bacon long ago pointed out. The same quality, also, we find in the rewards of honor, or of fame it may be, which come to the many who have served in a common cause and rejoice in a common victory. Thus the glory of the whole is each one's share. It can be divided among many without loss. So, also, the appreciation of beauty in nature or in art shows no diminishing returns, although the number who

experience the joy of it may be increased without limit. This, also, is the characteristic feature of responsibility. Parents share the responsibility of their children, but the complete responsibility and no half measure of it rests upon each. The director of a bank or an insurance company shares the responsibility of his position with his colleagues on the same board; but the shared responsibility is not a per capitem portion, but the whole.

- 5 This is not a new doctrine; but it comes to us with an immemorial sanction. But it seems to have been forgotten in recent years. "My share of the responsibility is but slight," is a common phrase which may be heard on all sides at the present day. If one would thus seek to minimize his sense of obligation as regards that which may be placed in his keeping as a trust, he should not forget that his share of responsibility is not a part, but the whole, undiminished and untransferable. He may have others associated with him, it is true, but his individual responsibility cannot be shifted upon them. He must meet it in the full rigor of its demands, and regard himself as though alone in the discharge of his duties.
- 6 There is also the fallacy of the delegated responsibility. It is impossible for one at the head of large business interests, for instance, to give his personal attention to every minute detail. He finds himself naturally compelled to delegate much of the work of supervision and of administration to others who act in the capacity of his deputies. Otherwise, the business of life would be impossible. This is indeed a commonplace of every-day business routine. But because some one else may assume the responsibility, he who deputizes it is not wholly relieved of it. He passes on the duty of actually performing some specific work, and yet the obligation still rests with him not to do the task, it is true, but at least to see that it is done. We cannot afford to ignore the common-law judgment that the act of the agent is the act of the principal. We cannot take it for granted that the mere transfer of responsibility to another assures a satisfactory discharge of all the duties which it involves. We do not care to shut our eyes to the fact as to whether such duties are fulfilled or not, on the ground that the responsibility now rests upon another and not upon ourselves. It is his responsibility, but it is also ours. A person who is at the head of a large business enterprise cannot be omnipresent or omniscient; but he is responsible for the kind of men who are his partners in responsibility, and also for the atmosphere which pervades his business, for the general morale of the service, for the discipline that is enforced, for the prevailing policy and method pursued, for the spirit and tone which characterize all departments, however various they may be. Division of labor is not a dissipation of responsibility. He who is responsible for a particular task is relieved of that responsibility only when there is evidence that the given work has been done. The head of a corporation should devise certain methods by which such evidence can be regularly forthcoming, so that when any cog in any wheel may chance to slip, the fact may be at once apparent at the central seat of responsibility.
- 7 There is, of course, such a thing as a serial responsibility, as I would style it, that is, where a number of persons in turn assume the responsibility for a certain task, each

contributing his share to its accomplishment, and then pass on the full responsibility to some other. This is illustrated in the sending of a registered package. Each one in the series does his part in the process of forwarding it, and receives a signed acknowledgement that another has relieved him of his particular duty and of all responsibility connected with it. The ordinary business of life, however, cannot always be so nicely adjusted. Responsibility appears more often in an indefinite and diffused form, in which many persons are involved, and not one at any time carries the full burden alone. There is no way of escaping responsibility of this kind as long as we remain within the area of its pervading power. We dare not hang about the outer edge of this region, hoping to reap the possible rewards, and yet think to evade all blame or loss in the event of untoward results. There are many who thus endeavor to hold their course along some such imaginary line, so that they may shrewdly keep within it to share the honor or dividends which may accrue, and yet be able to swerve to the outer side of it whenever the area within may become the storm-center of indignant protest and recrimination.

- 8 Again it is often urged that we are in a measure relieved of the responsibility of an act, when such an act is a customary procedure in the business, professional, or social circles in which we may happen to move. "Everybody does it," it is said, "it is the usual practice; then why should I be over-scrupulous concerning that which general usage has sanctioned as permissible?" Such is the argument. And yet-responsibility at the last analysis must be recognized as an individual matter. No man's responsibility can be judged in the light of another's. Custom does not make right. The low level which the morale of a guild or of a profession sometimes reaches is due to this very fact, that no individual sees his peculiar responsibility in such a light that he is willing to break the bond of custom by protest or by practice. It is not easy to be independent under such circumstances, but that does not make it any the less imperative. Responsibility is not lessened merely because it may entail extraordinary courage and sacrifice. We do not justify ourselves in the failure to meet evident obligations by the pleas that circumstances and conditions are too much for us to cope with. The convenient, the comfortable, and the easy-going are not the symptoms which usually form the diagnosis of responsibility.
- 9 There is another fallacy which many fall into of securing freedom from responsibility by the assumption of a convenient ignorance. A candidate, for instance, may not choose to know the detail of method and of policy pursued by a campaign committee in charge of his interests. The members of the committee in turn deem it wise to have him kept in ignorance. It is generally understood that whatever happens, he is to know nothing about it. The comforting theory is that no responsibility can attach to a person concerning an act of which his is ignorant. This is doubtless true, provided he is not purposely ignorant. A person may not be held responsible for failure to see some obvious circumstances when his eyes are shut; but he is responsible for his eyes being shut when they ought to be open.

- 10 There are men who know that certain results cannot possibly be accomplished without certain definite means being used, and yet consent weekly to profit by these results on the ground that they do not know explicitly the character of the means used to attain them. It is a lame excuse. We are responsible not only for that which we see and hear, but also for that which may be implied in the things seen and heard, and which we are compelled to recognize as the necessary consequences of them. It is not merely the actual situation in which we find ourselves, but also the logic of such situations that must be interpreted and judged by us as to the measure of our responsibility for them. It must be remembered that the very ground of our responsibility is the presupposition that we are in complete possession of our reason. How absurd therefore to narrow the range of responsibility by excluding the obvious inference which the reason of any man of ordinary intelligence must surely recognize. If a campaign committee, for instance, expends large sums of money, it stands to reason that the one in whose interests it has been raised must know that revenues are not created by magic. Merely to choose not to know is to ignore a definite responsibility and thereby assume an indefinite one. It is like signing a blank check to an unknown order and for an unknown amount. The man who would rather not know what his friends are doing on his behalf should be held in strict account for his voluntary ignorance. No one can afford to have things done for him which he would scorn to do or be afraid to do himself.
- 11 There is also a very common feeling that any one may repudiate all responsibility in a given situation, if he will only declare forcibly and loudly enough that he does not regard himself as in the least responsible for the same. He may insist that he will wash his hands of the whole matter; but there are certain stains that cannot be thus removed. The hands may be washed; but they may not be made clean by the process. There is a ceremonial purity which does not penetrate beneath the surface. How often men justify themselves, when feebly yielding to the prevailing opinion of the many associated with them in some position of trust, by the ready excuse that after all the majority must rule. It is true that the majority must rule; but it is equally true that the minority often must fight. A mere verbal protest followed by a quiet acquiescence is not sufficient when honor or honesty is the issue. An uncompromising attitude of opposition may have to be maintained until the court of last appeal is reached; that court may be a board of directors, or the stockholders, or public opinion, or in the regular course of legal procedure even the Supreme Court of the United States itself. Responsibility often demands a fight to the finish. In that case, compromise is cowardly.
- 12 We are responsible for our silence, for our inertia, for our ignorance, for our indifference--in short, for all those negative qualities which commonly constitute the "dummy" directors--those inconsequent personages who would enjoy the honor and perquisites of their office without allowing themselves to be unduly burdened with its duties and cares. The president of a corporation or a superintendent does not assume the responsibility vested in its board of directors; he merely represents the responsibility. And when they would implicitly assign all sense of their personal obligation to his keeping, they not only put themselves in a position to be easily fooled, but actually offer a ready temptation to him to fool them. They are thus doubly

reprehensible; for the neglect of duty on the one hand, and on the other for extending a virtual invitation for someone to use them as tools for unlawful ends. Not only the wreck of a business, but the wreck of a human being must be laid at their door, who by a splendid capacity for negligence do thus expose another to the play of the most subtle temptations which can be conceived.

- 13 There is also the mistaken notion that we may escape certain responsibilities simply by not assuming them. There are some obligations, however, which we do not dare to refuse, and which indeed it is not possible to refuse. We have no choice in the matter. We cannot say in truth that we have no responsibility, for instance, for the general decency and good order of the community in which we live merely because we have chosen to keep out of the village politics, and therefore, not being on the borough council or the board of health, it is none of our business if the law of nature, of man, or of God are violated. It must be remembered that the responsibilities of such a kind are not assumed by definite choice, but belong to us whether we will or not. Certain responsibilities we do not choose; they choose us. If at times they seem to us vague and indefinite, it becomes our duty to make them definite through some effort on our part. We are held to account not merely for doing the obvious duty that circumstance may urge upon us, but also for creating the circumstance which may give rise to a wholly new set of duties. We are not only responsible for lending our service to the cause which has a rightful claim upon us, but also responsible for the very fact, if indeed it be a fact, that our responsibilities in life are so few and so slight. If we choose to carry the lighter burden, it is not a matter of felicitation, but one for our most serious personal concern; for an irresponsible person is always defective in some respect, either in body, mind, or character.
- 14 There are those moreover who imagine that in certain relations of life there can be devised some natural substitute for the sense of responsibility. It is possible, of course, to establish a set of automatic checks upon an employee's activities of such a nature as to reduce his personal responsibility to a minimum. Any failure in the performance of his duties is at once mechanically discovered by the various systems of time-clock, bell-punches, cash registers, and the like. This is very well in all cases where the labor is that of simple routine. Mechanical activity can be checked by a mechanical device. Not so, however, as regards those duties which demand a higher order of capacity--such as that of sound judgment, a fine sense of discrimination, and the power of resourceful initiative. In all such matters there can be no substitute for the responsible personality. Man is a responsible being because of this very element of free activity in his nature which no mechanical contrivance, however ingenious, can ever gauge. We are all so completely depended upon the integrity, fidelity, and efficiency of our fellow-men in the more complex relations of life that we must at times, and often the most critical, trust them implicitly. We do not proceed far in any undertaking without being aware that we are holding another responsible, or that someone is holding us responsible for those inevitable duties which arise out of the relations of man to man the world over. If a man would escape all responsibility he must place himself wholly outside of the relations of life, for life is responsibility. As we have seen, responsibility remains with us

even though we may ask others to assume it; we share it with others, but our portion is the same; when we turn our backs upon it, we find it still facing us; we flee from it, and however far it may be, we behold it waiting for us at the journey's end.

