**document 1 of 1**

**The Good, the Bad, and the Social: On Living as an Answerable Agent**

[Kenny, Robert Wade](http://search.proquest.com.proxy-library.ashford.edu/indexinglinkhandler/sng/au/Kenny%2C%2BRobert%2BWade/%24N?accountid=32521). [**Sociological Theory**](http://search.proquest.com.proxy-library.ashford.edu/pubidlinkhandler/sng/pubtitle/Sociological%2BTheory/%24N/4791/PrintViewFile/213361474/%24B/13F4F61540016F7E48B/1?accountid=32521)[25.3](http://search.proquest.com.proxy-library.ashford.edu/indexingvolumeissuelinkhandler/4791/Sociological%2BTheory/02007Y09Y01%2423Sep%2B2007%243b%2B%2BVol.%2B25%2B%24283%2429/25/3?accountid=32521) (Sep 2007): 268-0\_5.

**Abstract (summary)**

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**Full Text**

**Headnote**

This article describes answerability, a fundamental component of social reason and action. "Holding answerable" and "being answerable" are characterized in terms of their roles in the drama of human relations, and our general tendency to anticipate answerable, rather than ethical, behavior in situations that are ethically problematic is discussed.

This article is predicated on the assumption that none of us enters the role of ethical agent as often as ethicists might assume. Instead, so it suggests, we enter the role of answerable agent, calculating how to satisfy the expectations of others, rather than a standard of goodness.1 A bellhop, for example, may return the money-clip you unwittingly dropped-is the act best understood through ethical reason? Perhaps not-imagine the following as an illustrative possibility: the bellhop's rent is overdue, and he first thinks to keep your cash in order to avoid a forthcoming eviction; then, realizing he is in line with the concierge's gaze, he decides otherwise. True, you get your money back, nevertheless it is clear that the bellhop's action has not been performed in the service of the good; rather, it has occurred in order to strategically manage the expectations of others. Answerability is the term chosen in this article to describe such expectation-driven performances, performances predicated upon motivational clusters that are too often overlooked in environments that treat human action as ethically driven.

For the most part, the basic concept of answerability is a prereflective condition for social relations. Little Tommy, for example, would go into a trance if we tried to explain answerability to him, yet he regularly manages his world with deference to the social expectations that ground answerable behavior. Consider, by way of illustration, an occasion that the boy trips a girl at school-challenged for the act, he tells his mother that Billy dared him to do it, but falls silent when his mother sends him to his room with the retort: "You don't answer to Billy. You answer to me." Both the tripping and the attempt to justify to mother involve Tommy's efforts, not to be good, but to manage the answerabilities that he experiences-one to Billy's dare, the other to parental expectations. His mother's final response prioritizes, but does not resolve, the pressures the boy faces and comprehends, albeit he lacks the reflective capacity to explain how these processes govern his life. Of course, the event only illustrates this ongoing structure of expectation and consequence. The presumption of this article is that this sort of answerability will follow Tommy throughout both childhood and adulthood, as a condition for all his social interactions and relations. Tommy will learn, as do we all, that (1) certain social agents enjoy the right to expect certain actions of specific others, that (2) they also are privileged to judge those actions, and that (3) they might also impose consequences for action-expectation failures-said consequences expressed through a complex of social rituals, some of which are clearly articulated within institutional structures (the trial and punishment of the justice system, for example); some of which exist as normative patterns within the culture (the "grounding" of adolescents in parent-child relations); some of which emerge as distinct relational patterns between members of specific interpersonal units (the withholding of affection within some romantic partnerships, for example). When some other legitimately holds a social agent answerable, the challenged agent must (1) act in a satisfying way, or (2) justify the unsatisfactory action in a manner that the other accepts, or (3) face contextually determined consequences. And, since it would be socially counterproductive to consequence people this way if they never could imagine that happening, it is reasonable to assume that our collective tendency to hold each other answerable finds its counterpart in a capacity to act with foresight toward the answerable expectations of others-in other words, we can assume that the surveillance and enforcement processes gathered under the sign of holding answerable find their corollary in the talent, possessed by social agents, to anticipate the complex ways for being answerable. Thus my wife holds me answerable to a standard of relational fidelity; and my capacity to act in a manner that is in keeping with her expectations is an aspect of the way that I am being answerable, to her, in this relationship.

A fundamentally sociological notion, answerability has profound implications for social judgment of ethical circumstances, and ethical scholarship as well, to the extent that ethics assumes human action occurs with regard to the good. Answerability suggests, by contrast, that, even on occasions when issues of goodness might figure, social agents may respond exclusively in terms of answerabilities. Thus, it offers an alternative and distinctly sociological interpretation of human action in matters typically associated with moral choice. It therefore positions the sociologist before the ethicist in many situations that purportedly call for ethical analysis. Indeed, on many occasions, the sociologist of answerability will be equipped to examine social action in the midst of ethical dilemmas in exclusively sociological terms, and render a more accurate description of the action and its dutiful motives because of it, simply because both society and its agents, in various ways and at various levels, regularly demand an answerable performance, rather than one grounded in virtue or some other ethically determined rationale. Indeed, there are occasions when our capacity to treat a moral crisis exclusively in terms of the answerabilities that attend it, using no part of our ethical judgment, is a necessary condition for being treated as a person of integrity, and for maintaining our freedom.

Various notions of answerability exist in moral philosophy (Hume 1931; Cigman 1986; Smith 2005; Wiggins 1991), but they do not offer insights that would allow sociology to redraw the boundary between ethical and sociological reason. Truly the greatest thinker to argue for such a shift is Emile Durkheim, who essentially theorized a sociological foundation for all moral life. In Durkheim, we read that the obligatory character of the moral comes from the sanctions that society organizes around particular actions that are "blamed or not blamed depending on whether or not there is a rule forbidding it" (1974:43). Ultimately, he argues that each society both produces and possesses its own standard for conduct, which it regularly regenerates in its social members as a condition of the member's emergence as a social agent, a social agent who is under some pressure, internal and external, to conform to the society's symbolically generated demands.2 Durkheim treated obligation as something agents felt toward society, writ large,3 however, rather than each other.4 Therefore, while we acknowledge his bold effort to read purportedly ethical action as social action, we also note that he does so in a manner quite distinct from the effort herein.5

For various reasons, one might argue that some other term be used to name the phenomenon under consideration. The likely alternative would be "responsibility," a word that describes a duty to adequately respond or face consequences, under circumstances for which an action must be justified. Unfortunately, a responsible action can also be thought as an action that shows moral character, one that reflects the agent's prior consideration of the good. In this article, we seek instead to isolate a motive that arises only from an agent's consideration of the expectations of others and the consequences of failing to meet them. Thus it seems better to put aside the term responsibility in this discussion because we need to keep clear that, in characterizing the answerable, we are not discussing anything necessarily linked with a commitment to ethical behavior or goodness.

THE CHARACTER OF ANSWERABILITY

In Western literature, answerability achieves the status of an "ultimate motive" (Burke 1950:333) in stories concerning a final judgment of humanity. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, for example, we find in Revelation 20:12 the claim that a documentation of all action has been recorded in heaven and that the dead will be "judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books." We also find, within the Greek (Plato 1982) tradition, cautions that humanity will be answerable at the time of death, accountability understood as a final judgment of each human soul, "literally suspended as examples there in the prison house in Hades, a spectacle and a warning to any evildoers who from time to time arrive" (1982:305, 525c). Faith in such traditions is faith that, someday, one or several supra-social agents will enforce an ultimate answerability for every human action; consequently, all our choices should be in keeping with the expectations of such anticipated beings. This, of course, lays the foundation for micro processes associated with a life that can, under no circumstance, escape answerability.

Such early texts do not, however, restrict the notion of answerability to contexts in which a final judgment is imposed by a deity. Rather, we also see, in sources that span the centuries, answerabilities that range from citizens held answerable to their leaders6 and to leaders held answerable to their citizens7-indeed, even enemies can hold each other answerable in matters that range from adherence to the Geneva Convention to timely arrival at a pretrial hearing. Answerability is not, then, necessarily directed toward the demand of an Absolute Other, nor even is it exclusively directed toward the expectation of a beneficent other, nor even a righteous other-it is simply directed toward the relational other. Our tendency to hold each other answerable appears to be a building block of interdependence; a fundamental capacity, necessary for effective social existence, even in circumstances that are too mundane to be given the title of ethically bound interactions. Because of answerability rituals, the possible occasions for social failure are greatly reduced, and emergent occasions of social failure are regularly forestalled. Indeed, even when social failures do occur, it is by virtue of answerability rituals that the interrelational management of such disruptions is achieved,8 so that things can get back to normal as quickly as possible. Such prophylactic and restorative powers give, to the process of answerability, its great social significance.

Our talent for holding answerable is, however, no less complex than the various manners of being answerable, for while we clearly recognize our power to say "I hold you answerable for your action," the statement is only meaningful in a context that assumes the answerable agent could somehow imagine being answerable on the occasion. How then do social agents anticipate the possibility of legitimately being answerable for a given act? We find the origins of our answer in Mead's concept of the gesture9 for, since its publication, sociology has recognized the significance of the social agent's ability to interpolate "the attitudes of other individuals toward himself within a social environment" (Strauss 1959:215). Indeed, the concept of the gesture is truly at the heart of Charles Horton Cooley's (1964) most memorable writing, for he grounded the individual's talent for gesture-making in three primary characteristics: "the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling of pride or mortification" (1964:184).10 Cooley said that agents who experienced this threefold condition were experiencing the "looking glass self (1964), and we can associate a social agent's reflective concern for answerability with this classic notion, although the micro processes associated with answerability are oriented toward the ways we are obliged to others (rather than how we appear to such others), most significantly in matters that might otherwise be treated as occasion of moral choice.

There are two competencies that social agents must have in order to manage answerability, and consequently relate effectively to each other: a competency for holding answerable, and a competency for being answerable. The competency for holding answerable relies upon conventions that determine whether, and to what degree, one social agent can impose answerability upon another, on a particular occasion. The competency for being answerable depends on a system of micro processes through which intentional agents imagine the implications of being held answerable, as a contingency associated with the choices they make.

HOLDING ANSWERABLE

Conventions that Regulate Interpersonal Answerability

The right to hold answerable empowers in three distinct ways: (1) it allows social agents to claim and receive those socially determined interpersonal privileges to which they are entitled; (2) it allows them to demand an explanation on those occasions when others fail to give them what is their due; and (3) it provides the conditions for effecting consequences upon, or compensation from, the negligent other or his or her guarantor when expectations have failed and explanations are unsatisfactory. This section of the article will characterize the conditions under which a social agent may engage in holding answerable, in order to establish a groundwork for the sociology of being answerable, which follows.

Holding answerable is a social act, and the conventions for its performance amount to a code, some part of it written and some part unwritten. Among its characteristics we note, for example, that people can hold others answerable, as one mechanism for navigating their social relationships, that is to say they can maintain "legitimate expectations ... with respect to the behavior toward them of persons of other status (read roles-RWK) within the status system" (Linton 1945:77). Answerability is not reducible to Lifton's notion of expectation, however-it is both the expectation and the right to act autonomously and judiciously with regard to it. Thus, the bellhop who returns the money-clip understands not only that the concierge expects him to do so, but also that the concierge has the power to introduce, into the social drama, a holding answerable event: an event in which the concierge might make known his justifiable expectation, insist upon a legitimate explanation, and initiate a type of consequence, where necessary.

The one who holds answerable regularly expects others to act answerably, or to provide a socially legitimate justification if they do not. And this in many ways: social agents can hold others answerable to the clarity and intelligibility of the utterance, as evidenced in expressions such as "Did you hear what I said?" They can also hold the other answerable to the content of the utterance, as evidenced in such expressions as "Well, what are you going to do about it?" And social agents can hold their others answerable to a standard of action and consequence in relation to the demand, as evidenced in statements such as "Well then, get busy and do something about it, or face the consequences!" In the landscape of the social imagination, the right to hold answerable provides a foundation for stable social selves: selves that take up projects, confident that those projects will not be disrupted or dismantled by the actions of others, on whom such projects often depend. The right to hold answerable gives us faith to go forward within the social order that it acts to preserve. It allows us to remove the old furnace, confident that the installers will arrive to put in the new one (the installers are answerable, we know it, and we know that they know it); it allows us to enter dental surgery confident that no healthy teeth will be extracted (the dentist is similarly answerable); it allows us to bank our money for college or for retirement, confident that the bank (also answerable) will give it back to us when we need it; it allows us to stand in wait at a soup kitchen, confident that, once we reach the front of the line, we will be given something to eat. Because we are able to hold answerable, we are able to engage in the process of being who we are.

Social agents well understand that the manner they hold some other answerable is determined by the role that other plays, and the role relation that exists between them. The ways that social agents hold answerable explicitly (in speech) and implicitly (in expectation) are, thus, effectively anticipated through a recognition of role relations. Prereflectively understanding this, social agents rarely hold others answerable when they are not, unless by virtue of a mistaken assessment of the events, or the social order from which the answerability is configured. The Smith family, for example, would think their milkman, not their mechanic, answerable if there were no milk delivery-they are well aware of conventions that allow them to hold particular persons answerable on particular occasions; and, where there is a specified role relation, they usually envision clear answerabilities.

In defined role relations, the ways of holding answerable are quite specific, for the roles release recognizable and familiar demands and consequences. Thus, one quickly takes control at a car accident by saying "Let me through. I'm a doctor," holding others, role-situated as bystanders, answerable to the role of physician. At the same time, however, the words "I'm a physician" initiate a complex, corollary structure that empowers the victim, the bystanders, the police officers, and any others who are role-situated in the midst of that crisis to now hold the doctor answerable to them in specific role-determined ways. Thus, every social role projects, but also absorbs, a litany of situationally specific answerabilities, whether it might be the role of a nurse, a construction worker, a public school teacher, or a politician. Consequently, social agents who would hold others answerable can only do so from within a context in which they themselves are also answerable.

Roles not only confer answerabilities, however, they also prevent them. Thus, the school janitor cannot be held answerable when student homework assignments are incomplete; the French government cannot be held answerable when the high school basketball team loses; and Mrs. Smith cannot be held answerable for Mr. Jones's indiscretions, other considerations being nominal. Ultimately, this means that a social agent must recognize the social limits of answerability that are specific to the other's performed role. Failure to do so creates occasions when we attempt to hold answerable illegitimately, which has its own consequences.

Holding answerable is also factored by the role status of the one who wishes to confer answerability in a particular role relation-neighbor Bill, for example, imagines no right to demand compensation when neighbor Tom arrives late at work, although he might reasonably perceive that right, were he Tom's boss. By extension Tom's status is not sufficient, in either of his hypothetical status roles, to seek compensation from Bill, should Bill be the one late, and Tom knows this. Examples such as these illustrate how status within the specific role relation determines the validity of an answerability event.

Whereas holding answerable regularly arises out of those tapestries of relations where status exists, it coevally occurs in a context from within which power might at some point be exercised. Perhaps, if the only other person to notice the money-clip were a vagrant peering through the lobby window, the bellhop would have kept it, confident that the vagrant could not generate enough power to create a holding answerable event. Indeed, stories are regularly told of citizens who are exploited or victimized because they lack sufficient power to exercise holding answerable rights, suffering, for example, police brutality without recourse to justice. Yet, if we consider video-taped occasions, such as the beating of Rodney King, or the more recent case of a 64-year-old, retired school teacher in New Orleans,11 we see that, should certain conditions for holding answerable be met (in this case, evidentiary conditions and public knowledge), answerability can be demanded where it might otherwise not easily be exercised, when evidence of answerability can be transferred to social agents who do possess the power to hold answerable. Agents who hold answerable must therefore be in control of resources that they can bequeath or withhold as part of the answerability ritual (a basketball referee issuing a penalty, a parent taking away a teenager's car keys) or they must have sufficient status to access those people who hold such resources (the concierge, the police officer, the boss) and provide them with evidentiary conditions sufficient to give rise to an investigation and possible consequence.

The fact that some people are significantly constrained in their ability to directly hold others answerable for actions committed against them speaks to the fundamental relationship between social justice and holding answerable. Every role rightfully claims certain manners to hold answerable, just as it announces its performance features. If I am a day laborer, for example, I know that I will perform labor; but I also know that I can hold my occasional employer answerable for that labor in the form of a cash payment at the end of the day. For me to be an efficient social self, maintaining some control over my responsibilities and my destiny, requires that this employer and others in relationship with me acknowledge those holding-answerable-rights that are specific to my role performance. Implicitly, this means that my holding-answerable-rights are a necessary condition for manifesting personhood. To exist socially, which is to say, to exist as a person (Durkheim 1964a; Henry 1973c), is to claim territory within the matrices of interobligation that join one person with another. When people exploit power inequities in order to successfully, contemptuously, and ongoingly deny any other's right to such territory, they interrupt that other's claim to personhood, a social injustice not only because it negates the other's rights within the role status, but also because it negates the structure of role relation that is bequeathed to the event by, and as part of, the general social order. Questions about the handling of prisoners of war are regularly driven by such concerns; and, of course, the issues take on even greater significance when contempt for the other's right to hold answerable is condoned, sanctioned, or facilitated institutionally, a tendency that can also be read across the concept of betrayal in Erving Goffman's (1961) characterization of the mental patient's moral career,12 just as it can be detected in Jules Henry's (1963) description of the human obsolescence that characterized those hospitals for the aged that he observed.13

Social agents may also compete in their attempts to hold answerable, as a result of the answerable agent's responsibility to intersecting roles: thus families can hold answerable in ways that conflict with ways that employers hold answerable; creditors can hold answerable in ways that conflict with the ways that the mechanic holds answerable; and governments can hold answerable in ways that conflict with the manner the church holds answerable.14 Indeed, on a given occasion of competing answerabilities, several social units may hold answerable, and it could quite easily be the case that their mutually exclusive expectations make it impossible for them to be severally satisfied that their demands have been realized.

Circumstances under which competing answerabilities arise are more challenging for the social agent who would hold the other answerable, but regulative and normative conditions often provide effective cues for performing a holding answerable ritual. Thus, a traffic officer may hold a commuter answerable for driving above the speed limit, showing little consideration to the driver's explanation of a concurrent answerability to a job-related appointment in the next 10 minutes. Here we have a case in which a clear hierarchy of answerability exists, dictating the degree to which, and the manner in which, a social agent might persist in holding the other answerable. The particular case is one that is regulated by law; however, custom may also dictate answerable hierarchies. Thus, if the driver's cell phone should ring and he be told that his wife is in labor at the hospital, both the employer and the officer might release him from answerability to the speed limit and the appointment-indeed, they might even absorb additional answerabilities, the officer escorting the driver to the hospital, and the employer sending flowers. There are, however, times when the hierarchical conventions that govern holding answerable are unclear or contestable, both in law and in custom. A teenage boy, for example, may be held answerable in distinct and competing ways to his friends and to his girlfriend for the self-same act, with neither the cohort nor the girlfriend having clearly defined priority. Under these circumstances, social agents may not be satisfied with the ways that they are allowed to hold answerable and, whereas answerability is a condition for role relations, such occasions can lead to relational dissolution.

Relational stress consequent to competing demands for answerability finds itself well represented in marital conflict. Partners who persist in holding their other answerable, with no consideration to the ways that their other is bound by competing answerabilities, can expect significant strain within, possibly even dissolution of, the dyad. The negotiation of such problematic circumstances is particularly challenging for relational partners because of norm variances that are specific to answerability in intimate relations (one partner may reason from the presumption that love rules over all, while the other may begin with a presumption that labor obligations mitigate relational priorities)-a problem that is exacerbated because partners may not be aware that their crisis results from an inadequacy in normative guidelines for relational answerability. Indeed, the very institution of marriage erodes under the pressure of competing and irresolvable answerabilities-one illustration of the effect of increasingly complex, role-based answerabilities on relational units and institutional structures. Role innovations, while they offer greater complexity and perhaps satisfaction to the individual (Rose Laub Coser 1975), create new ways to hold answerable, and these situate themselves against a social agent's finite capacity to be answerable. Under these circumstances, within a triadic structure that involves partner A, partner B, and the institutional structure that unites them, C, all three experience disconfirmation and strain.15 Ultimately, this creates conditions under which even complex institutional structures transform, by virtue of the stress of answerability upon them-macro processes that are influenced by micro tensions.

The vicissitudes of competing answerabilities obligate the social agent to ongoing vigilance in order to effectively enforce those rights that he or she holds over the answerable other, simply because the movement of a social agent, in and out of relational presence, "insulates the status-occupant from direct observation by some of his role-set (so that) he is not subject to uniformly competing pressures" (Merton 1968:428) While it is the case, for example, that motorists are answerable to the speed limit, they are also answerable to children, spouses, employers, friends, co-workers, and associates, who expect them to arrive on time and stay a specific period. The temporal window between such answerabilities may be quite narrow, and drivers may choose to risk possible consequences for failed answerability, to the speed limit, for example, in order to satisfy a definite answerability to, for example, the boss. The state, of course, has a right to hold them answerable for this, but it must create structures of vigilance that ensure that it will have the opportunity to do so, for society and its agents are only capable of holding social others answerable to role-situated action that can be detected. Given that people may conceal roles (Goffman 1973:145-49) in order to escape the conventions of answerability associated with them (a talent commonly recognized in roles that range from bigamists to terrorists) those social agents who would hold them answerable must guard against such deception with vigilance-a watchfulness that is growing in a culture that values surveillance as a means of social management and control (Ellul 1965).16 Of course, if role concealment occurs and is detected, social agents can exert answerability, upon the deceiver, for the deception.

The power of social agents to hold answerable alongside transformations of the social order, as well. Thus, even one hour after a construction company fails under bankruptcy, a foreman no longer has the right to hold his former subordinates answerable, even if he is still wearing his white hat. Such circumstantially created shifts in answerability are related to issues of normative performance, discussed, for example, in the writings of Erving Goffman (1973, 1974). Included among them are well-known transformative rituals that change the performance features and answerable duties of a relationship, for example, the dissolution of a role relation or the revocation of a social status. Thus a man may be left by his romantic partner, and a doctor may be disbarred-should either attempt to hold relevant others answerable to conventions that existed prior to the recent transformation, they may be told "I don't answer to you anymore." However, under such circumstances, answerability itself does not dissolve, rather, new structures of answerability emerge.

As selves move in and out of roles, the whos and hows of holding answerable transform, transformations that are easily navigated by social agents when role migration is regular and predictable. Thus, an employer's ability to hold answerable is significantly affected when the workday officially ends, yet the employer clearly knows this and usually respects the reality with a social performance of holding answerable that is appropriate to the changed circumstance. Unexpected events may create conditions under which no hierarchy of role and answerability clearly exists, however, and social agents will be pressed toward on-the-spot negotiation of their relational answerabilities when that happens if they intend to organize the experience. Such a negotiation occurs when one person asks another to stand in for a work shift or a social event.

The tune constraints for holding answerable, while they are uncertain, can be quite long; so it is possible to hold social agents retroactively answerable, in new and unanticipated ways, for actions that they took long ago, actions that might otherwise be dismissed as water under the bridge. Retroactive and reversed answerability can occur for a variety of reasons, among them a heightened and expanded level of surveillance that arises when a social agent makes a status elevation bid. Thus in 2004, presidential candidate John Kerry was held answerable to an occasion of 30 years earlier, during the Vietnam War, when he allegedly threw his military medals away, as part of a public war protest. The act occurred and was judged within its own time as part of a general attempt to hold government answerable for its persistent engagement in Vietnam, yet it awakened more than 30 years later, when norms of duty and valor had shifted, only to be reinterpreted by new normative standards and ways to hold answerable. In a similar vein, the 1992 election saw efforts to hold presidential candidate William Jefferson Clinton answerable for smoking marijuana-something he did decades before that presidential bid. The cases suggest that a social agent's bid for an elevation of status is regularly met with a broadening of the temporal and circumstantial boundaries for holding answerable, as well as an initiation of rituals performed with answerability in mind. The charges of sexual harassment brought against Justice Clarence Thomas during his bid for the Supreme Court further illustrate this phenomena, which also appears to be the mechanism that has kept Senator Edward Kennedy away from the presidency (i.e., Chappaquiddick).

General shifts in public sentiment can also bring about retroactive and reversed answerability. Thus, while the issue of George Walker Bush's military service did not figure prominently in the 2000 election, it gathered momentum in the post 9/11 election of 2004, when conventions associated with valor had shifted.17 Fallout from sentiment-driven shifts in answerability is often experienced by military officers, for example, Bill Budding (2003), the submariner aboard the HMS Conqueror (S48) who, in answer to a direct order, manually released the torpedoes that sunk the battleship Belgrano during the 1982 war in the Falklands. Attitudes toward the Falkland engagement shifted dramatically after fighting had ended, and any positive sentiment directed toward those who fought dissipated as well. The fickle character of answerability surprised Budding and his shipmates who were not greeted as returning heroes, and Budding expressed his general dismay by referring to a specific event: "There was a politician calling me a murderer. He bloody sent me there!"18 Changes in public attitudes, such as the decrease in religious authority, the loosening of normative standards governing sexual discourse, and the elevated levels of moral outrage associated with child abuse, seem to have played a significant role in the retroactive answerability rituals that have plagued the Catholic Church.

Because social life unfolds in time, answerabilities follow answerabilities in series. On a case-by-case basis, this can lead to relationships in which social agents may hold answerable inconsistently for a variety of reasons, including their personal characteristics, problems they have with surveillance, and uncertainties they have in terms of the power they are able to exercise. At the same time, it should be pointed out that the right to hold answerable is limited by a duty to consistency. Thus, if I intermittently hold my partner answerable for arriving late, it is much harder for me to introduce her to a holding answerable event on any individual occasion that this happens. Where answerabilities are held inconsistently, social others are more likely to overlook their answerabilities or even risk them, particularly in environments where other answerability demands are powerful. It is for this reason that the expression "be consistent" is an old saw regularly given to student teachers as they enter the classroom for the first time.

Clearly, social forces may make perfect answerability impossible, for the answerabilities associated with a role are "replete with traps of contradiction and disturbance" (Coser 1975:240). That does not mean, however, that the various demanding agents will yield in their expectation of answerability from the individual. Indeed, there are a variety of circumstances under which answerability, though it is demanded, can never be achieved. The parents of Teri Schiavo, for example, continue to hold their former son-in-law answerable for her death, yet there is nothing he can say or do that they might withdraw this charge or cease their vilification of him.

Holding answerable is thus regulated by an array of familiar social factors. It requires competency in (1) recognizing role relations, (2) exploiting and recognizing power, (3) gathering and presenting available evidence, (4) competing for priority, (5) determining and responding appropriately to hierarchy, (6) recognizing normative expectations, (7) maintaining vigilance, (8) responding to role transformations, (9) negotiating situational uncertainties, and (10) timeliness. Social agents with these competencies will regularly succeed in holding answerable. What skills will they also need in order to be answerable to those who hold them answerable?

BEING ANSWERABLE

Requisite Social Competencies of Answerable Agents

In a world that so regularly holds answerable, social agents must have competencies that allow them to be answerable, that is, to meet answerability demands. These competencies are complex and of great personal and social significance; nevertheless there is virtually no formal process that directly instructs social members in them. Instead, we expect people to informally absorb the answerabilities specific to a given role as a condition for the effective performance of it-indeed, we treat others as if their capacity to be answerable were an unreflective and unpremeditated expression of their goodness and their mental health.

In general, being answerable requires that an agent is able to imagine how to defend an act or a failure to act, to various audiences present and anticipated. This capacity for imagination is similar to Cooley's suggestion that "imagination" (1964:184) is the faculty we use to envision how our social performance appears to others. It is, in particular, what Northrop Frye (1969) characterizes as a concerned imagination meaning that it is an imagination regulated by reasonable constraints, reflecting upon acts for which we might be legitimately held answerable, not dwelling upon the sort of anxieties that have their roots in neurotic fixation. The ability to exercise a concerned imagination allows social agents to develop the specific capacities necessary in order to be answerable, which include talents for discernment, comprehension, habilitation, and discrimination.

The first competency a social agent requires in order to succeed at being answerable is an ability to discern when answerability is in play. Circumstances offer cues that allow social agents to identify when they are the specific people who will be held answerable, and each effective social agent must have a talent for discernment of such cues. Thus, the strategic bellhop who has followed us from the outset is also, by way of illustration, a discerning social agent. True, the sight of free-range money provides no ethical cue to him, but it certainly provides an answerability cue, in that he immediately discerns how the concierge's gaze relates to his being answerable. Discernment is not a talent exclusively associated with villainy, however-a teenage boy, for example, may be especially solicitous to the slightest demands of his sweetheart, discerning a heightened answerability if the girl's parents also happen to be present.

The capacity for discerning answerability can play a significant role in crisis situations. Thus, when a man falls over at a restaurant, a waiter will not negotiate this emergency by performing a tracheotomy, but will instead call out "Is there a doctor in the house?" Perhaps on an otherwise deserted island, the waiter, trained in first aid, might attempt the delicate procedure, for there he would discern his situation-specific answerability-back in the restaurant, however, he knows better. Although the case seems nonproblematic, it need not be, for the subtleties of the social order can make discernment challenging under many circumstances. By way of illustration: if only a third-year medical student and a lifelong paramedic are present at the restaurant emergency, it might be hard to discern who will be held answerable for exercising medical authority in the situation. Under such circumstances, the situational competency of agents often plays a determining role interpolating the event, in terms of who should answer it. All the same, when social agents are unable to discern the role status and situational competencies of other present agents, they may flounder, in terms of their talent to discern their own answerability to the situation. This goes some way toward explaining the actions of indirect witnesses to the Kitty Genovese tragedy-it is not necessarily the case that they failed to act because of moral or affective indifference.19

In addition to using the discerning competency described here to reflect on immediate answerability, the effective social agent will also use it to anticipate answerability outcomes that might occur at a later date. The right to hold answerable is largely unconstrained by time limits, and social agents may eventually find themselves held answerable in new ways for past decisions that seemed strategic when they were made; consequently, they must do their best to anticipate the future demand outcomes that might be associated with the immediately answerable act. Of course, this often cannot be done. The sense of "arrival" that is associated with current mores is powerful, and social agents regularly succumb to the illusion that current expectations will not change, except to become even grander reflections of the answerability codes already in place. History does not always support this naïve view of social or moral evolution, however, and those who think otherwise often become its victims. Of course, the McCarthy witch hunts provide a significant illustration, at the level of national public regard: decades earlier, many young American intellectuals believed that a turn toward communism was an appropriate answer to the economic and social challenges faced by the nation. Holding themselves answerable to the political community in which, to one degree or another, some of them had inserted themselves, they became, years later, the scapegoats of public scandals; held answerable to a culturally legitimated paranoia that expressed itself in hearings dealing with vague activities, decades old. Indeed, we have recently seen another political turn that is associated with revisiting answerable events from the past, as some effort has been made to generate retroactive answerability rituals associated with the American invasion of Iraq; and it is worth speculating whether Donald Rumsfeld, for example, anticipated being held answerable in the ways that have been brought forth, and that might yet be brought forth, for decisions and actions that can be traced to his office.

Answerability to nonpresent audiences may also exist, and this means that the effective social agent must be able to discern multiple realms of potential answerability that are not immediately apparent. Some of the recent scandals and embarrassments that have come out of Iraq might have been avoided had social agents better discerned this sort of potential answerability. Consider, for example, Deanna Alien, the female soldier stationed at Camp Bucca prison, who was photographed mud wrestling and exposing her chest. Of the event, her mother says: "It was just a thing where she was coerced by a bunch of people, and with all the excitement, she lost her sanity for a moment."20 We would more properly say that, while her actions at that time were an answer to the hoots, and calls, and dares of her immediately present, fellow soldiers, they were never intended as an answer to the potentially realizable expectations of superior officers, or the media, or the general public, or even her mother. The young officer either made the common mistake of responding to immediate and apparent answerable expectations without discerning the potential and nonobvious ones, or she risked it, underestimating the surveillance factors present in the environment. Similarly, one should not overlook the role of discerned answerability when assessing the "shocking" actions of social agents in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Stories of police lootings;21 of nursing-home negligent homicides;22 of euthanized hospital patients23 are all stories that can be assessed against a backdrop of reduced surveillance, heightened circumstantial complexity, the sense that immediate answerabilities take priority over possible future answerabilities, risk-based decision making, and other similar factors associated with discernment.

Social drama is fluid, as are the roles played within it; thus there are marked differences between the role performance of a schoolteacher in the classroom and the role performance of a schoolteacher in the staff lounge. Given that such differences are directly linked with ways to be answerable, Mr. Jones may rightfully discern no answerabilities limiting teacher-to-teacher discussions of last night's intimate escapades, so long as this occurs in the staff lounge. He would most probably recognize, however, the ways that answerability shifts as he moves from the lounge, to the hallway, and back to the classroom. Thus, to successfully manage variations in answerability that are consequent to the sort of role fluidity that is a fundamental feature of social drama, social agents must be capable of discerning the subtle yet complex and ever-shifting social order that appears in the midst of situations, as well as the answerable expectations that are associated with these shifts.

Successfully being answerable also requires comprehension of the particular cultural context. Sir James George Frazer (1951) thus tells us that "[i]n the Highlands of Scotland it is said that no sister should comb her hair at night if she have a brother at sea" (1951:273), in that the action could homeopathically stir the waves into a storm. Only a woman educated in a particular way could comprehend the possibility of being answerable to combing her hair in this context. And, associated with this, only a community that included this parcel of knowledge would be suspicious of her hairbrush (holding answerable), in the event it be learned that her brother's ship was lost. Frazer's text can be read as a sourcebook for such antiquated answerabilities, and his examples are worth noting, for they remind us that norms of answerability also exist in cultures that are guided by magical, rather than rational, reasoning-that it is possible for a society to have a radically different standard for answerable behavior, one that it, nevertheless, imposes meaningfully and consistently and, therefore, that it is possible to think of answerability outside what we usually associate with a fully rational disposition.24

Educated answerability implies not only comprehension of social practices, but also a comprehension of episteme and techne as they are manifested in the culture. This is significant because one cannot appropriately answer a demand, either in word or in deed, if one lacks the intellectual and mechanical aptitudes necessary to give answer. A physician who lacks sufficient knowledge of a particular syndrome, for example, may thus not be able to answer a patient's request for diagnosis and treatment. Subsequent tests and consultations will increase the physician's comprehension, but until it reaches a threshold, an effective answer to the situation, whether in the form of diagnosis or treatment, will remain impossible. For a doctor to communicate these limitations to parties who might hold answerable may be more difficult than we might immediately imagine. There are also social agents who are in transitional relationship to roles: medical interns, cashier trainees, and junior lifeguards, to name a few. Such transitional agents may feel the strain of being answerable to levels of technical competency that they do not yet confidently possess, particularly if others present (patients, customers, patrons, etc.) do not distinguish the novice's role performance from the role performance of an expert.

Of course, given any body of information, there are those who know it and those who do not, but there are also those who are expected to know it and those who are not. Agents who play the role of expert are customarily answerable to a specific knowledge performance, while agents not-so-situated are discharged from such expectations-thus the substitute math teacher may be forced to deal with chants of "He doesn't know!" when he cannot immediately identify the square root of 37, while the janitor need never face this humiliation, even if he has (as did my high school janitor) a Ph.D. in mathematics.

An answerable social agent must be knowledgeable of the episteme and techne specific to the expected role, but the agent must also know the society well enough to know if the expression of this knowledge is acceptable from within the circumstances available, for as Jules Henry says: "There is no absolute punishment for stupidity, no matter how exuberant and suffocating it may be, but intellect, exercised without limit, provokes a ferocious attack from society" (1965:165). Scholars seeking academic positions, for example, may find themselves ultimately disappointed if they treat the on-campus interview experience as an opportunity to perform an intellectual tour de force. Similarly, social agents may be held answerable if they use their unanticipated and unusual knowledge outside a role that legitimately allows such a performance, a behavior that is in some circumstances referred to as practicing without a license.

We have already established the significance of the social role in terms of how it constitutes the answerable agent, and we know that social roles generally involve patterns of behavior that emerge in routine fashion. In a society that is underwritten by technology, some of these routines involve very high levels of precision, and this means that the role-situated agent must perform answerabilities so quickly that no time for reflection really exists between the moment the demand emerges and the moment action must be taken. Consequently, and much in the manner that pianists must practice in order to perform without reflecting upon the distinct moments necessary for striking each individual key, social agents must develop a talent for habituated answerability, if they are to perform with the proficiency expected of them. With that in mind, the military works hard to develop soldiers who respond to commands immediately, and health professionals are trained to match answers to situations without pause-their professions require them to develop situationspecific answerabilities that can only be developed as routine, instant, and habituated responses. Such habituated answerability is a fundamental aspect of efficient performance within professional and general social settings; however, it is worth noting that, on many occasions, such mechanical responses might inappropriately occur when greater reflexivity would be more appropriate; sadly, mistakes made on such occasions are regularly treated as ethical failures25 because of the general conflation of the answerable with the ethical.

Having discerned that we are answerable, we must thereafter act in a manner that appropriately manages the demand expectations, and discrimination is that capacity we require in order to engage qualitatively with expectations as they arise. No answerability exists outside a matrix of answerabilities that concurrently expresses itself. The coffee shop where I sit closes in 10 minutes. Someone asks to take a chair from the table. My department expects my papers graded by morning. The editor expects to have this essay before noon. My cell phone rings, and the kids have no way of getting home from the skating rink. Such are the competing ways that others hold answerable, in the time it takes to draft half a paragraph; and in the midst of such demands I am compelled to act as an interpretative agent, discriminating how to answer in a world of expectation that shifts with every glance at my wristwatch. Discrimination is thus a talent: one that is dependent on factors such as attentiveness and circumspection; one that may wax or wane, depending on how motivated we are, how alert we are, and such.

A talent for discrimination is evidenced in triage medicine, but it is common to a variety of other circumstances as well. Discriminating how to allocate resources answerably is something we all face from time to time, whenever resources are limitedthus a teenager who has three tickets to see the Pittsburgh Penguins, and three best friends, faces an answerability crisis. In such circumstances, when resources are insufficient to manage the situational complexities, some sort of discrimination must be performed in order to approximate a best available resolution to the answerable crisis.

Occasionally, situations are framed in such a way that demands for answerability will seem to come from only one other person. Thus when I bump into someone in the hallway I can answer for the act quite easily by saying "excuse me." On other occasions, however, a number of people may feel a right to hold me answerable for an action. Thus I may be answerable to appear in three places at approximately the same time, or one friend may hold me answerable to the support of an idea that some other friend expects me to condemn. Successfully answerable agents must envision all probable demands associated with various likely agents; then they must determine the best situational answer, privileging some, and disregarding other expectations associated with various demand agents. They may also be materially unable to satisfy all elements of a complex answerability and they might therefore need to discriminate the expectations that must be met from those expectations that can be overlooked. Thus, many airlines, answerable to their stockholders, still answer every passenger's demand to be conveyed from one city to another, but no longer serve free meals. Several answerable demands can also arise with equal priority and significance, however, and these are much harder to discriminate among-thus students with more than one final exam on the same day often face a discrimination crisis.

Discrimination is also required when an agent attempts to preempt the other's right to impose answerable consequences through acts ranging from goodwill offerings to self-mortification. There are many ways, for example, to deal with a late arrival for a date. One is to pick up flowers along the way, another is to tear open one's shirt and beat one's breast in remorse. A discriminating social agent anticipates whether flowers will be sufficient, or whether some other answer to the situation will be required. In such cases, it should be noted, waiting for the other to take us through a holding answerable ritual appears to be a secondary offense.

Associated with this discriminating quality of answerability, social agents may develop a talent for risking answerabilities, chancing that some agents who, so they have already discerned, could and might hold them answerable will not realize that it is necessary and appropriate. Clearly, risking answerability involves a failure to satisfy all others who hold answerable, but it is often done, with neither contempt nor malice-ironically, in order to perform other answerabilities that are co-present on the occasion. Thus, it may be perceived necessity (real or imaginary), and not contempt, that causes an employee to skip a meeting in order to complete an assignment, for risked answerability and failed answerability are often the result of a sincere effort to manage an excessive and even paradoxical burden of duty to others.

The capacity for discrimination is also a fundamental talent if agents wish to negotiate the precise character of answerability within a situation. Thus, my 15-year-old may want a drive to school at the moment I realize that I am late for a meeting with the Dean. Because we both are discriminating social agents I can hand him two dollars and say: "Take the bus, I'm late for the Dean." Doing so, although I do not give him a ride, I give him an answer that is situated within a matrix of rights and responsibilities. Because I know he understands the forces associated with his and my answerabilities, I am able to discriminate a minimal expectation in a complex situation. Further, if he attempts a negotiation that would result in him taking the van or emptying my wallet, I know where I can rightly draw the line.

There are, as we have seen, varied competences required for being answerable, just as there are competencies required for holding answerable. Social agents who would be answerable must possess a concerned imagination, and with that imagination they will be able, to one degree or another, (1) to discern the likelihood of being answerable now or later; (2) to situate themselves within the appropriate knowledge base for answerabilities specific to a culture, an institution, or a relationship; (3) to transform routine answerabilities into habitual and therefore efficient responses; and (4) to discriminate among various answerable demands, in terms of demand significance, priority, and methods of resolution. All this involves a form of social reflection that is both complex and challenging. Not the least challenging of its features is that such processes must often be engaged on the periphery of reflection. Just as we often move our hand along a wall to locate a light switch without being aware that we are doing it, so do we perform the various competencies associated with being answerable from a reflective state that makes those issues less than central within our immediate concerns. So it is, sociologically speaking, easy to understand those occasions on which people fail to achieve answerability. Ironically, however, these answerable competencies are regularly confounded with ethical quality, a state of affairs that will be examined below.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF ETHICAL JUDGMENT

Adam Smith (1937) illustrates the division of labor by explaining how one unskilled man could perhaps make a pin a day, while 10 men trained in those separate yet respective skills necessary to the task make 48,000 (i.e., about 5,000 pins per person). Such workers, so he tells us, will wear coats that are "the product of the joint labour of a great multitude of workmen. The shepherd, the sorter of the wool, the wool-comber or carder, the dyer, the scribbler, the spinner, the weaver, the fuller, the dresser ... must all join their different arts in order to complete even this homely production" (1937:11). Smith's examples illustrate more than the intricacies involved in making a product-they illustrate, as well, the complex interdependent character of productive social relations. And while Smith privileges the barter covenant as the motivating force that drives this productivity,26 it is important to recognize, as well, how answerability holds this process together, for neither Smith's coat nor his pin could be made if the context of interrelationship were not also a context of interobligation; and answerability is the mechanism that regulates this dutifulness, through its structure of expectation and consequence. Perhaps the worker whose task is to grind the top of the pin will fail an answerability to appear for work, perhaps a father will fail an answerability to pick up his children after school-these are simple errors of a form that regularly occurs, yet they might easily lead to a breakdown of complex social processes. Answerability rituals manage such failures-they amount to transitory steering events that gather a broken social act, compensate for the inequities that result from it, and return social agents to their way of life.27 All this can occur efficiently, however, only when the persons involved are primarily committed to relationship and routine, when they are, that is to say, driven by a commitment to answerability.

Ethical agents, by contrast, are driven to satisfy a standard of goodness, not a structure of relationship nor a system of routine. While one might prefer a world where answerable duties were identical to ethical sensibilities, the existential of this relationship is incidental, not necessary; consequently, social processes may easily be at odds with an individual's ethical commitments. Those among us who feel ethically compelled under such conflicted circumstances may be obliged to defer answerability (ergo efficient social routine), regardless of the consequences. Ipso facto, as ethical agents, we threaten to disrupt social processes and institutions whenever they press us to act in a manner that conflicts with our sense of the good. It therefore should be no surprise that social agents and institutions whose routines might be threatened by the other's ethical sensibilities tend to seek, instead, the other's answerable behavior, as if answerability were the summa bonum of all choices.

For complex reasons, however, societies regularly manage their answerable routines as if they are guarding the ethical sensibilities of a people; and social agents often treat answerable phenomena as if they were ethical phenomena, a strategy that has worked its way into ethical philosophy, itself: in particular, applied ethics, which suggests that the ethical alternative involves "the course of action which has the best consequences, on balance, for all affected" (Singer 1989:12); and situation-based ethics that claims to be "in the middle, between moral law and ethical extemporism," (Fletcher 1968:251) in such a way that one's moral compass is directed by other persons, not a standard of goodness (Fletcher 1968:255). Such theories, though grounded in interpersonal expectations and relations, struggle to demonstrate that these strategic practices are indistinguishable from the ethical. In this sense, they offer wonderful apologetics for a society that is regularly satisfied by answerable conduct, cloaking interpersonal expectation with an ethical mantle.

HOLDING ANSWERABLE AS HOLDING ETHICAL

Where the ethical and the answerable can be clearly distinguished, the tendency is not to hold individuals to their ethical sensibilities; rather, it is to hold them to their situationally determined answerabilities. At the very least, it is clearly the case that social agents have long expected answerable action over and against its ethical alternative. We see this even in a state such as Sparta, where boys, raised as soldiers, were "taught to steal, and were punished if caught-not for stealing, but for stupidity" (Russell 1945:103). When someone is held answerable, there very well may be ethical overtones (e.g., "How could you do such a thing!"), but this is probably driven by the occasional tendency to invigorate the answerable issue of high valence by treating it as an ethical one, ironically occurring even on occasions when no clearly ethical issue is actually involved.

Indeed, holding answerable often occurs in the form of a ritual that treats the answerable failure as an ethical one, if the one holding answerable attributes high valence to answerability. Thus, when my mother learned that my sister broke house rules by hiking the waistband of her skirt over her bellybutton in order to bring her hemline two inches above her knee, Linda was not punished for answerability to the skirt-length rule, she was punished for being a "bad girl." Conversely, when I answerably followed my father's instruction, and punched the neighborhood bully in the nose, I later cried for ethical shame, but my father told me I had done a good thing-good, in that I had done what I was told, and in that I succeeded. These common acts of (1) sanctioning, as unethical, agents who have failed to be answerable and (2) heralding, as ethical, agents who have simply been answerable illustrate what Jules Henry (1973b) refers to as falseness in a false world (Henry 1973c).

Henry's words ring familiar, but the pitch is too high for the occasion. Although ethical and answerable conduct are not identical, we do not necessarily turn toward falsehood, away from our ethical sensibilities, simply because we hold others answerable. All the same, the tendency to seek answerability may place us in a gray and somewhat confusing region between the two. Consider, for example, professional codes of conduct: those answerable expectations that are purportedly created from ethical standards. Authorities may use such codes to instruct others, and they may use them to perform an ethical judgment of others, but they are in fact operating from within a holding answerable paradigm, unless they treat the other's ethical sensibilities (not just the criteria interior to the code) as the driving feature in their instruction and assessment. Similarly, we may regularly hold others answerable to truthfulness (honesty, the associated ethical virtue) but this is not an ethical expectation if the truthfulness we seek is an answerable truthfulness that manages our routines, not the ethical truthfulness that could occur in spite of and to the detriment of these routines. Indeed, it is the prevalence of answerable truthfulness that makes it possible for others to casually suggest that we put honesty aside on those "critical" occasions when it would "do more harm than good" (Henry 1973b:106-07). The falsehoods we see here, then, are more properly characterized as confusions-they amount to a general inability to distinguish ethical action from answerable action, even in cases of critical ethical assessment and judgment.

The tendency for those who hold answerable to treat a failure in answerability as an ethical failure might also be associated with the tradition of pillorying those who do not stay within the boundaries of normative conduct-a phenomenon pointed out by Emile Durkheim (1964a, 1964b). As is well known, Durkheim held that people are made criminals not by "the intrinsic quality of a given act but that definition which the collective conscience lends them (sic)" (1964b:70). Similarly, one can argue that certain answerabilities will be heralded as ethical, if doing so promotes high valence answerabilities to the status of morals "whether expressed in public opinion and the unwritten law, in a formal legal code, or in religious commandments and prohibitions" (Thomas 1968:316) Holding others answerable for their failure to achieve high valence answerabilities may, thus, give rise to a performance of ethical censorship in what Garfinkel refers to as identity degradation, a ritual that falls "within the scope of the sociology of moral indignation" (1968:206)-a ritual that helps brace a culture's high valence answerabilities with affective force.28 Shunning is an example.

On occasion, social agents may attribute a positive ethical valence to an agent who, when held answerable, complies with the answerability for ethical reasons. Thus American soldiers who found virtue in the preemptive Iraq campaign were heralded for their ethical stance. Indeed, a positive relationship between one's ethical sensibilities and one's answerable expectations is a serendipitous one, and those who hold the other answerable may praise that other for any display of ethical motivation when the answerability occurs. All the same, it seems obvious that social agents will not honor the other's ethical sensibilities when those sensibilities lead to a refusal to accept the holding answerable expectations that are in play.

Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to assert that a successful social agent is one who abandons ethical commitments and acquiesces to the extant social structure of answerabilities. As was discussed earlier, and illustrated with the case of Bill Budding, should society change sufficiently, the social agent who performs a heralded answerability may later be denounced for doing so, and the reverse-a defining feature of the Vietnam War veteran's experience. So it would be better to say that answerability is organized in a manner that makes it impossible for social agents to strategically and unfailingly control their social identity or their freedom through negotiating with it, ethically or strategically, because changes in circumstance may give rise to new answerabilities that show no respect for the earlier ones, and because complexities of the moment may also make it impossible to satisfy all contingencies. Society brokers no discount for such considerations.

BEING ANSWERABLE AND BEING ETHICAL

The Catholic Church's original, internal management of abuse charges illustrates, more starkly than any other case I can imagine, the tendency of individuals and institutions to subordinate being ethical to being answerable. As is well known, the bishops were made aware, on a case-by-case basis, decades before the lawsuits began that specific parish priests were behaving inappropriately toward some of the parish children. As ethical issues, such abuse cases should call for inquiries, castigations, possible laicizations or excommunications, and a litany of changes that would make such acts no longer possible-in other words, it should have led to an interruption of the Church's social routines. And it is perhaps for that very reason that the bishops of the Church did not manage the cases as ethical ones. Rather, they discriminated what they took to be, in their time, that minimally answerable response necessary to allow routine to continue-specifically, they moved the accused priests to different parishes when such atrocities were brought to their attention. The bishops' repeated and regular handling of misconduct in this manner is only explicable if we assume a predisposition in favor of handling social routines without regard for the ethical dimensions of the circumstances-it shows this tendency to be so powerful, at least on this occasion, that it determined the actions of an organization claiming to function as its community's moral and ethical compass. The ultimate failure of the answerable strategy used, the lawsuits that eventually surfaced, the public scandal, and even the Church's current position, including Pope John Paul II's public statement, can all be understood through the vocabulary of the theory that has been put forward here; and the case can be argued as a specific illustration of an institution choosing to be minimally answerable, disregarding any ethical obligation, on an occasion that it was confronted with an ethical crisis.

Much smaller cases, involving distinct social agents, tend to fall out in a similar fashion. Motivated to preserve their own social routines, social agents often suppress the ethical dimensions of their experiences, when those ethical dimensions arise in clear opposition to answerable demands. They quickly learn, as Jules Henry suggests, that: "One does not apply ethical principles to one's relationship with a pistol pointed at one's head, but rather thinks of one's enlightened self-interest" (1973a:108). Thus, a competent social agent easily slips into the habit of subordinating ethical sensibilities to answerable demands-may even conclude that the ethics of any issue are reducible to the answerabilities specific to the situation. Indeed, within a technological society, agents may capitulate, without pause, to the assumption that an answerable performance will fulfill ethical requirements, not even realizing that they are doing so29-as efficient answerable agents in a cultural context that blurs the distinction between the ethical and the answerable, they might learn to preserve their freedom by keeping their ethical considerations below the level of conscious reflection30 on occasions when, perhaps, it should be otherwise.

Under comparatively routine circumstances, even those who hold answerable are not motivated to stress the ethical premises that govern their rights-they tend to avoid going into a prolonged discussion of respect ethics with a friend who arrives 15 minutes late, for example, because they know such routine oversights can be handled much more efficiently through answerability rituals that are in place. Not so, however, if the violator proposes an ethical defense for an answerable failure. Consider Johnny, for example, who arrives home two hours after curfew: should he admit the wrongdoing and accept the consequences, the threat to routine is nominal; indeed, there is no need to belabor the incident in a social world that will have many other occasions to hold answerable within a 24-hour period. All this would change, however, if Johnny were to say: "It is wrong that one person has control over the destiny of another; and on this ethical principle, I chose to stay out until I was ready to come home." By providing this ethical defense of a failed answerability Johnny would effectively transform an event-specific disruption into a general attack upon a social routine. Such challenges often carry far-reaching implications, so they tend to be met with vigorous opposition, extending the duration of the crisis and often resulting in harsher consequences. Consequently, social agents, should they wish to put their failed answerabilities behind them, do not use the failure as an occasion to ethically challenge the expectation; and, in that light, we all know that some people could magically escape consequences by confessing and "giving names" during the McCarthy hearings, while others who challenged the inquisition by taking the ethical high road found it a much more difficult path to travel.

In the same way that answerable social agents learn to avoid standing behind their failed answerabilities on ethical grounds, so they may also learn to stand against their failed answerabilities on ethical grounds, when the stakes are high. This may have been the case, for example, when actors Mel Gibson and Michael Richards were taken to task for their racist slurs. Every violation of an answerability threatens, somewhere between a minimal and a maximal degree, the answerable routine itself; and major incidents of failed answerability-theft, infidelity, assault-suggest the possibility of an alternative social world where these activities legitimately occur, an outlaw zone. Agents who fail in significant answerable routines may find themselves consigned to that world, unable, that is to say, to avail themselves of those resources that abound in the answerable realm they have violated. Consequently, on occasions of significant failures of answerability, social agents who perform ethical remorse are better positioned to negotiate their awkward status meaningfully because their self-mortification bolsters, rather than threatens, the violated answerability in principle. By taking up this role of the morally fallen, they imply that they rightfully (aside from their "sin" or their "illness") belong in the world that holds this answerability. They then enter a rite that will eventually conclude that a "cleansing" has occurred (Garfinkel 1968), even as it legitimates the answerability itself, ultimately leaving them free to go about the business of living. Engaging in ethical self-mortification for the sake of managing answerable expectations requires a competency for what Jules Henry characterizes as sham, "a combination of concealment and pretense: concealment of how we really feel and pretense of feeling something different" (1965:99). But this does not require a charge of insincerity be heaped upon the agent who performs ethical remorse, for sham is regularly performed without knowing it (Henry 1973a:121) through mechanisms of self-deception-indeed, the social agent capable of ethical sham is most effective when the sham structure is both external and internal to the agent. Was President Clinton acting insincerely when he called in national members of the clergy after failing to manage answerabilities associated with his intern affair? Was Miss USA, Tara Conner, sincere when she tearfully claimed that she regarded her "wild girl" actions as well as her involvement with alcohol and drugs the products of a personal battle with her own demons? Or were they both, possibly, additional subjects to their own staging of ethical remorse? The question is an open one, but it can only be answered in their favor if we acknowledge a sort of false consciousness associated with the answerable/ethical motives that compel human action.

The perceptively answerable agent also knows to explain successful answerabilities in terms of ethical commitments, on those occasions when the answerability is brought to light as a principle. Most of the time, no attention is given to our successfully answerable actions. Sometimes, however, for the sake of the principle itself, the action is brought to public attention. Perhaps a news crew observes the bellhop returning the money-clip to the hotel guest, and sees this act as an opportunity to do a lighthearted article on good Samaritans. If they do, the bellhop must know how to treat his successful performance of answerability as an ethical triumph. He is not expected to explain his "good" action in terms of who was watching when given his moment to speak to the camera. Rather, he is expected to speak about ethical motivations; and it is in his interests to do so for, as Tönnies suggests, "it is helpful to appear morally good and noble, fair and just, if and for so long as the appearance of these qualities has value for you" (1957:160).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Bertrand Russell says that there are three questions we can ask about any ethical philosophy: "(1) Is it internally consistent? (2) Is it consistent with the remainder of the author's views? (3) Does it give answers to ethical problems that are consonant to our own ethical feelings?" (1945:182). This article is based on a fourth question that we might ask: Does the research delineate a proper area of ethical inquiry? It suggests an answer in the negative, on occasions when ethicists perform ethical analyses of answerable behavior.

Indeed, there is a proper place for ethical reason, and this article is not written to subvert that activity. At the same time, it is inappropriate to assess social action under the sign of ethical performance when ethical considerations do not figure as determining motives governing the assessed action-to do so brings false light to human circumstance and provides no gain to anyone who would wish to understand human conduct, even those who also wish to better it ethically. An understanding of situational motives and situational competencies, such as the ones discussed in this article, provides the best condition for considering the nature of action, and mediating it.

The answerable reaches as broadly across social life as does its cousin, the norm; consequently, only so much can be said in a single article. Just as it would be inappropriate to constrain the norm and its implications to one part of sociology, so would it be inappropriate to do this answerability. Answerability can and should be considered in terms of ideology, power, organizational structure, discourse analysis, macro-micro relations, and the like. Nevertheless, the foundation of the concept is set forth in such a way that sociologists, naturally disposed toward unpacking the significance of an idea, can develop the argument from what has been given-without, and even against, the direction of the originating author.

**Footnote**

1 While there is little common to all moral philosophies, they all attempt to "analyze such concepts as 'right,' 'wrong,' 'permissible,' Ought,' 'good,' and 'evil' in their moral contexts" (Pojman 2002:2)

2 For a recent discussion of the emergence of symbolically generated moral authority in Durkheim, see Alexander (2005). While that author is primarily concerned to show the historical transformation of Durkheim's thought, as well as the rationale that brought it about, the essay also acknowledges the authoritative role that "ritual, sacred authority, and representation played in secular life" (2005:151).

3 Durkheim recognized the fundamental role that divine or idealized concepts played in moral life. Many moral theories (e.g., Kant) argue that morality is grounded in such ideal realms, and Durkheim did not disagree; however, he characterized those realms as social creations, rather than realms of, for example, deities. Thus Durkheim's moral agent is obeisant in the presence of a (socially generated) uber dictumwhile the answerable agent feels no such moral compunction and acts only with foresight to the social expectations and consequences associated with the circumstances specific to the occasion of answerable demand.

4 In Durkheim's words, our moral actions are directed toward a "richer and more complex moral reality than our own ... collective being" (Durkheim 1974:52). The issue addressed here was taken up by Robert King Merton through the concept of the role set. As Rose Laub Coser (1975) points out, "Merton has stood Durkheim on his head; rather than having the individual confronted by ready-made social norms that are external, coming down in toto, so to speak, for Merton individuals have to find their own orientations among multiple, incompatible, and contradictory norms" (1975:239). For Durkheim's position, see, for example, Durkheim (1966, 1973, 1974). See also Kenny (under review).

5 It should also be mentioned that the closest sociological description of those processes that fall under the purview of answerability is found in an essay entitled "The Role-Set: Problems in Sociological Theory," published by Robert King Merton in 1964. Merlon's essay lays the groundwork for an interpretation of social action through expectations associated with role dynamics, and the present article makes use of this groundwork by focusing on how such expectations challenge and override ethical commitments, and by elaborating those mechanisms through which such expectations are both held and realized. Thus Merton has practical significance to this study, and could be read alongside or against it. That said, in terms of topical focus, conceptual breadth, and potential significance, Durkheim's sociology of morals comes closer to making the claims made in this article.

6 Thus at Luke 2:3 of the New Testament (1994) we read that "all went to be registered, everyone to his own city," in response to the decree of Caesar Augustus.

7 Thus Plutarch (no date) tells us that the Roman citizenry was greatly displeased by Antony's affair with Cleopatra and that he performed answerability to their concerns by telling them "that the way to carry noble blood through the world was by begetting in every place a new line and series of kings" (n.d.: 1125).

8 .. .when those disruptions are associated with social actors and institutions.

9 Mead (1962:42-51).

10 Cooley says: "In opening ourselves to another we are impelled to imagine how our conduct appears to him; we take an outside view of ourselves" (1964:387).

11 See the following Associated press news release: "3 New Orleans Officers Indicted in Taped Beating: Videotaped Attack on Retired Teacher Occurred in Aftermath of Katrina," at http://www. msnbc.msn.com/id/12066917/. Updated 3/29/2006.

12 [T]otal institutions disrupt or defile precisely those actions that (attest) to the actor ... that he has some command over his world ... that he is a person" (Goffman 1961:43).

13 "A large proportion of the aged sick and poor ... spend ... their remaining time in ... institutions ... which ... destroy personality ... in the sociological sense" (Henry 1973c:38).

14 For example, protesters outside the hospice where Teri Schiavo was dying because of a courtsanctioned disconnection of her feeding tube, wore placards that called the hospice workers murderers. Certainly, in the eyes of the court, they were not. AP photo, viewed in Vickie Chachere (Associated Press), "Culture war's latest chapter: Schiavo case." USA Today, http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/200503-29-schiavo-culture-war-X.htm. Posted 3/29/2005.

15 Some part of this issue was recognized in writings as early as those by Ralph Linton (1945) who says "conflicts ... may become fairly frequent under the conditions of our current society. Under the necessity of reorganizing our social structure to meet the needs of a new technology and of a spatial mobility unparalleled in human history, our inherited system of statuses and roles is breaking down; while a new system, compatible with the actual conditions of modern life, has not yet emerged. The individual thus finds himself frequently confronted by situations in which he is uncertain both of his own statuses and roles and those of others. He is not only compelled to make choices but also can feel no certainty that he has chosen correctly and that the reciprocal behavior of others will be that which he anticipates on the basis of the statuses which he assumes that they occupy. This results in numerous disappointments and frustrations" (1945:82). See also Goode (1960) and Snoek (1966).

16 Ellul (1965) argues that a technological society cannot efficiently suffer disruptive effects and, therefore, must anticipate and forestall disruptions of its own routines. Consequently, "every citizen must be thoroughly known to the police and must live under conditions of discrete surveillance" (1965:100).

17 Bush was challenged to answer for actions allegedly committed during that time, including using cocaine and being absent without leave from the Coast Guard. Interestingly, the Republican strategy used to manage Bush's answerability on this occasion was also holding answerable-they held the journalists who brought forth the story answerable to standards of journalistic integrity.

18 The Sinking of the Belgrano. National Geographic Television and Film. PBS WCET Cincinnati. Viewed March 30, 2005, 10.00 p.m.

19 This interpretation resonates with the notion of the bystander effect (Latane and Darley 1970). As well, other answerability factors figure, for example, the tendency to discern being answerable weakens when there are no apparent others observing: bystanders, out of visible range, knew they could neither be seen by Kitty, nor each other.

20 see http://www.outsidethebeltway.com/archives/2005/02/female.gisJlash.breasts-thongin-mud-wrestling-contests/.

21 "Witnesses: New Orleans Cops Among Looters: At Least a Dozen Officers Investigated; TV Video Used in Probe," at http://www.cnn.com/2005/US/09/29/nopd.looting/index.html, posted 9/30,2005.

22 "Nursing Home Owners Face Charges: Couple Charged with 34 Counts of Negligent Homicide," at http://www.cnn.com/2005/US/09/13/katrina.impact/, posted 9/13/2005.

23 "Louisiana Probes Euthanasia Allegations: Investigation Focuses on Reports of 'Mercy Killings' at New Orleans Hospital," at http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/9699709/, posted 10/14/2005.

24 Frazer's entire text is dedicated to unfolding the ubiquitous character of contagious and homeopathic associations in world culture; providing ideal examples of answerability in contexts where rationality is not fully expressed on every page-though the author does not mean to imply that rationality is fully expressed in Western culture, either.

25 See Kenny (2007).

26 Of course we must mention Durkheim at this point, for he suggests that the division of labor "produces, and its true function is to create in two or more persons a feeling of solidarity" (1964a:56). The relationship between answerability and solidarity will inevitably become a topic of discussion.

27 If we characterize discrete social interactions and events with an organizational vocabulary, we can distinguish between those outcomes that are the direct purpose of organized (i.e., social) activity, and those secondary purposes associated with managing organization, itself. Organizations, much like machines, break down, and they similarly need to be cared for judiciously and repaired, not for the pleasure of the repair act, but for the sake of the processes that the organization's primary routine produces. Answerability is to social process, in general, what the instruction/handling and repair manuals are to a machine. It is a system of subroutines necessary for maintaining and reestablishing primary social processes. Because of its secondary nature, in this sense, efficiency is its principal duty-under ideal circumstances, it occurs in a manner that gets things back on track as quickly as possible.

28 The power of answerability over ethics can reach a virtual tyranny in technically complex societies, if Jacques Ellul is to be taken seriously, for he claims that "a principal characteristic of technique is its refusal to tolerate moral judgments" (1965:97). He believes that the rationality of technique demands that it overlook goodness ethics, rather: "It is absolutely independent of them and eliminates them from its domain" (1965:97). And in the place of a goodness ethics: "It tends, on the contrary, to create a completely independent technical morality," (1965:97) one that could only appropriately be situated under the sign of technical answerability.

29 Similarly, Stanley Milgram ultimately explained the perverse obedience he observed in terms of an agentic state, entered by a social agent "when he defines himself in the social situation in a manner that renders him open to regulation by a person of higher status" (1969:134).

30 As Jacques Ellul has written, "a principal characteristic of technique is its refusal to tolerate moral judgments" (1965:97).

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