PART III (Continued)

Questions About Moral Problems

34. THE NATURE OF MORAL OBLIGATION

Dear Dr. Adler,

We praise people for being responsible and blame them for being irresponsible. A sense of responsibility is supposed to be a sign of good character. What is the nature of moral responsibility, and what is the source of its claim upon us? Is a man responsible only for what he does to other persons, or is he also responsible for what he does to himself?

G.W.

Dear G. W.,

Responsibility involves personal obligation to others. To be "responsible" means literally to be "answerable" for the things we do or fail to do. This basic notion of responsibility lies at the heart of our ethical codes and legal systems. We are confronted with responsibilities in every phase of our daily life—in the family, in our work or business, and in the political community.

The major disagreements about moral responsibility center in its source and scope—the question of to whom and for what we are accountable. Some thinkers place the source of moral obligation in the command of a superior power—the law of God or the state. Others contend that it is the inner voice of conscience, not merely superior power, which obliges us to obey the law laid down for us. Still others maintain that responsibility derives simply from rules of conduct dictated by our own reason.

For example, a man's obligation to support his family, to care for his wife and children, is usually commanded by the law of the state. He is held accountable under the law, and may be punished if he fails to discharge this responsibility. But most men obey this law not because they are afraid of being punished, but because they feel an inner sense of duty to support their families. Even where there is no explicit law, the moral person fulfills his responsibilities.

So far we have talked about our obligations to other persons. Does our moral responsibility also extend to ourselves? Aristotle holds that it relates *only* to others; for, in his opinion, all our obligations flow from the principle of justice, which "concerns the relation of a man to his neighbor." At first sight this seems a matter of plain common sense, for our promises and contracts always relate to other persons.

But Plato points out that to do injustice to others is to render oneself unjust, and thus corrupt and undermine the very core of moral personality. Other thinkers assert that we a morally responsible to seek the truth as well as to tell it to others. Nietzsche says that lying to oneself, not to others, is the greatest dishonesty of all.

The sphere of moral responsibility may be broadened to in elude the use and abuse of a man's own mind and body. He is responsible for what he does to himself. What is the basis of responsibility when it is thus broadly conceived?

Kant answers that our duties to ourselves and to others are equally under the jurisdiction of the moral law. He holds that we are obliged in conscience to do whatever reason declares to be right, whether or not others are involved. We stand in the same relation to ourselves and to others under the universal moral law. Hence, Kant advocates that we should never do anything that we would not want to become a universal law for all persons, places, and times.

In actual life, of course, conflicts arise between our responsibilities to ourselves and our responsibilities to others. In the classic case of two men lost at sea with a one-man raft between them, the conflict between duty to others and duty to self reaches the tragic extreme. It poses the question of whether a man is required to save his own life at the cost of another's, or to save another's life at the loss of his own. We have less dramatic examples every day in which we must decide between our obligation to others and to ourselves. of all the moral problems a man faces, none is more difficult than that raised by a conflict of duties.

35. THE DIGNITY OF MAN

Dear Dr. Adler,

Political and social reformers often speak of certain conditions as being an affront to human dignity. What do they mean by "human