

Living Accountably: Accountability as a Virtue

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ABSTRACT: This article tries to show that there is an important virtue (with no generally recognized name) that could be called “accountability.” This virtue is a trait of a person who embraces being held accountable and consistently displays excellence in relations in which the person is held accountable. After describing the virtue in more detail, including its motivational profile, some core features of this virtue are described. Empirical implications and an agenda for future research are briefly discussed. Possible objections to the virtue are considered and rebutted, and relations to other virtues, particularly the personal virtue of justice, are discussed. In conclusion, we suggest that though this virtue has not received the attention it deserves in contemporary society, it has been more clearly recognized in other cultures. Some of the reasons for the partial eclipse of the virtue are understandable and justifiable, but there are good reasons to think our society would be improved if we paid more attention to accountability from a virtue perspective.

ALL THINGS BEING EQUAL, AN EMPLOYEE IS RESPONSIBLE for the quality of her work. Plausibly, if she fails to meet the quality standards of her job description, she owes an account of this to her boss. That is, she is accountable to her boss. If we compare an employee who is disposed in her character to avoid rightful accountability with someone who lacks this disposition, the latter seems to be virtuous in a way the prior person is not. In this article we defend the claim that there is an important but under-recognized virtue we call “accountability,” a trait that is linked to but distinct from the relation in which someone is held accountable.¹ The virtue is most clearly displayed in various social relations in which people with particular roles are held accountable to others. This virtue is a trait of those who are rightfully being held accountable who welcome and embrace being accountable and thereby show a sensitivity to what the relation requires. We shall try to show that the virtue is not only important in special relations but plays a broader role in the moral life generally.

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ACCOUNTABILITY AS A CONDITION OR RELATION AND AS A VIRTUE-TRAIT

The word “accountability” normally denotes a state of affairs or condition in which some individual (person B) is responsible to some other individual (person A) for some action or actions. As a result, B can be required to “give an account” to A because A has the authority or standing to request or require this, as well as the right to make a judgment about the underlying actions accounted for.² We shall say that a person has standing when that person can rightfully require or expect someone else to act in particular ways and has the privilege of asking for an accounting as to how those requirements or expectations have been fulfilled.³

We regard standing as broader than authority. Authority can be understood as a special kind of standing when the person has the right and ability to punish the one who is accountable if the accountable person does not fulfill legitimate requirements. Our students have standing; they can rightfully expect us to teach professionally and conscientiously, and they can rightfully ask us for an explanation of why we require the kinds of tests and written assignments that we do. However, though my students have standing, and we are accountable to them, they lack authority. If they believe we are not fulfilling their reasonable expectations, they might complain to someone with authority (such as a dean), but they themselves lack authority to punish us.

Generally, holding another accountable means that the person with standing makes some kind of judgment, positive or negative, about the actions of the one who is responsible (often concerning some project or goal, since the standing or authority is usually domain-specific). This judgment is often the result of an explicit accounting that has been given, which the accountable person may be required to provide, though someone can be held accountable by someone with standing even when no account has been given. The person held accountable is affected in various ways by the consequences of this judgment. If the person with standing has authority, these consequences can include serious sanctions such as punishment. If the person has standing but lacks authority, those consequences may only amount to disapproval. Admittedly, even disapproval is a kind of sanction, but it seems a stretch to call disapproval punishment.

It should be clear, we think, that the requirements that hold for the accountable person are not simply to give some kind of description and/or explanation about what has been done. Rather, the obligation to “give an account” presupposes that the one who is holding someone accountable has some legitimate underlying expectations or requirements as to how the person being held accountable should act. If an accounting is required, its purpose is to help the one to whom the account is given assess how well those underlying expectations have been fulfilled. In many

²Some may think there can be accountability without a relationship to someone who holds one accountable. We won't argue the English term “accountability” always requires a relationship. However, there is clearly an important type of accountability that does require this. Our interest is in developing an account of accountability as a virtue when there is a relation to another.

³For an excellent attempt to provide an analysis of this concept of “standing,” see James Edwards, “Standing to Hold Responsible,” *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 16 (2019): 437–62.

cases there is no need for an actual account to be given because it is already clear or evident that the accountable person has or has not fulfilled those expectations. So, someone can be held accountable without any explicit account being offered or required.

Thus understood, accountability is ubiquitous in human life. There is general agreement that accountability is important and that in many cases, it is good to hold people accountable. Examples are not difficult to find. There is much talk about the need to hold politicians accountable. In the sphere of education, people debate whether teachers should be held accountable for student learning (or the lack of it). In business, employees are held accountable by supervisors, and executives are (at least sometimes) held accountable by the boards of corporations. Many traditional religious people who hold theistic faiths (notably Jews, Muslims, and Christians) also think of themselves (and other humans) as accountable to God for their lives as a whole.

Although accountability is perhaps most clearly on display in hierarchical role relations, it is not limited to such relationships. One can say that there is a relation of accountability whenever someone has standing to request or require an account from someone else, but there are many different types of such standing, and it is acquired in different ways. Friends sometimes voluntarily agree to hold each other accountable. Though students are accountable to teachers, we have already affirmed that there is also a sense in which teachers are accountable to their students. Some philosophers, such as Stephen Darwall, have argued at length that there is a sense in which all humans as humans are accountable to each other.⁴ We are sympathetic to this type of view. As we see it, to make sense of this we simply have to say that in any human relationship, the people in this relationship have a kind of minimal standing with respect to each other. One acquires a minimal kind of standing in relation to other human persons simply by being a member of the human moral community.

Talking about holding someone accountable is often a shorthand way of discussing how to punish or sanction someone for failing to do what is required or expected. Because this is so we sometimes think that being held accountable is inherently negative. For example, James Edwards, in his article about the “standing” to hold accountable, says that “we do not need to account to anyone for having performed some action, unless that action is *pro tanto* wrong.”⁵ We believe Edwards is wrong about this. For example, in annual reviews, employees are often required to give an account of their activity and there is no presumption that any wrongdoing has occurred. However, that Edwards should view accountability in this negative light is indicative of how often “holding accountable” is regarded simply as “punishing.” It is therefore not surprising that accountability is often viewed as something to be avoided. However, despite this, we believe the practices of holding someone accountable and being held accountable play a positive and important role in human communities generally and the moral life in particular. Certainly, many philosophers

⁴Stephen Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

⁵James Edwards, “Standing to Hold Responsible,” *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 16 (2019): 446.

have discussed the importance of holding others accountable or responsible as a significant part of moral practice.⁶

There would seem to be excellent practices linked both to holding people accountable and being held accountable, but in this article, we will focus almost solely on the latter type of excellence. The virtue we have in mind is a trait possessed by those people who are willingly accountable to those to whom they must rightly answer. What characteristics should we expect to find in someone who is consistently excellent in fulfilling the role of being accountable? No doubt there will be many such characteristics. We suggest that a central one is this: those who are consistently excellent at being accountable have a disposition to *welcome* being held accountable. They see the condition or state of being accountable, when certain conditions are present, as an important good rather than a nuisance to be avoided or as a regrettable necessity.

It is not clear that we have an agreed name for this virtue. Some have called it (or something very similar) “answerability” or “responsibility,” but we shall call it “accountability” to emphasize the close connection between the virtue-trait and the state or condition of accountability. Angela Smith has discussed “answerability” as a quality that is identical to being morally accountable, although as we read her, the focus of her work is on the state of “being responsible.” This is connected to the backward-looking judgment made about the one being held responsible, rather than the virtue we have in mind, which is a forward-looking quality.⁷ Ronald Dworkin discusses a quality close to what we have in mind by “accountability,” though he calls it “responsibility.”⁸ Dworkin explicitly claims that responsibility in his sense is a virtue distinct from a relation: “someone is responsible who accepts moral integrity and authenticity as appropriate ideals and deploys a reasonable effort toward achieving them.”⁹ One way our account differs is that we emphasize the close connection between the virtue-trait and the state or condition of being accountable to others. Dworkin’s view is a kind of accountability without anyone to be accountable to. It is therefore more like “conscientiousness” in the end. In what follows we shall try to make it clear when we use “accountability” to refer to the condition or relation of being accountable and when we use it to refer to the virtue.

Why think the trait of accountability is a virtue? Human persons are social creatures, and it seems obvious that many of our social relations involve legitimate expectations and requirements on each other. It seems reasonable that the characteris-

⁶Perhaps the most influential article is Peter Strawson’s classic “Freedom and Resentment,” in *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1974; originally published in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1962). For more contemporary examples, see Angela Smith, “On Being Responsible and Holding Responsible,” *Journal of Ethics* 11 (2007): 465–84; Garrath Williams, “Sharing Responsibility and Holding Responsible,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 30 (2013): 351–64; Antony Duff, “Blame, Moral Standing, and the Legitimacy of the Criminal Trial,” *Ratio* 23 (2010): 123–40; and Gregory Mellema, *Complicity and Moral Accountability* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016).

⁷See her “Attributability, Answerability, and Accountability: In Defense of a Unified Account,” *Ethics* 122 (2012): 575–89.

⁸See his *Justice for Hedgehogs* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), chapters 6 and 9.

⁹Dworkin, p. 109.

tics that enable people to act well with respect to such expectations will be virtuous. Acting well with respect to such expectations requires a cultivated sensitivity to and concern for the standing of others and the demands that properly can be made by others in virtue of the standing they possess. The individual who responds well to such demands will also understand such things as the proper limits of this type of standing or privilege. (We say more about this below.)

Our society puts a great deal of emphasis on the *condition* of being accountable, and there is much talk about *holding* people accountable when they do not act as they should. When we think of accountability from this angle, our focus is often on the *lack* of accountability on the part of people who do not seem to care about the legitimate social demands of others. The perspective here is retrospective, in that we want to assign praise or blame (mainly the latter) to people for how they have behaved. This is the basic understanding of accountability in political theory, with some recognition of accountability as a virtue. For example, according to Mark Bovens, the virtue of accountability “refers to substantive norms for the behaviour of actors.”¹⁰ It isn’t clear how this characterizes a virtue as norms for actors are not necessarily character traits. Another political theorist, Jonathan Koppell, offers a clearer characterization by marking specific features of the virtue of accountability: transparency, liability, controllability, responsibility, and responsiveness.¹¹ These are understood, however, as *conditions* of being accountable.

Does it not make sense to give attention to those who do fulfill the legitimate expectations of others, or at least strive to do so, and value feedback and correction when they have failed to do so? We need to look at the qualities that enable or dispose people to live accountably by accepting accountability. This requires a forward-looking perspective, in which we ask what people who welcome accountability are like. What qualities do they have that facilitate their excellence in this regard? How can the qualities that constitute or enable this trait be developed and encouraged? There might be less need to hold people accountable if the virtue of accountability were more prevalent than it is.

WHAT ARE ACCOUNTABLE PEOPLE LIKE?

We shall call someone who has the trait that enables that person consistently to fulfill the role of being held accountable with excellence an “accountable person.” (We admit this is an innovation, and that we do not normally speak in this way.) What are such people like? We can begin by asking what sort of motivational profile we would expect to find in the accountable person when that person manifests the virtue. For many virtues, the motives for actions seem to be at least partly constitutive of the virtue. At least this seems true for substantive virtues such as gratitude and honesty; it may not be true for structural virtues such as courage or self-control. A

¹⁰Mark Bovens, “Two Concepts of Accountability: Accountability as a Virtue and as a Mechanism,” *West European Politics* 33 (2010): 949.

¹¹Jonathan G. S. Koppell, “Pathologies of Accountability: ICANN and the Challenge of ‘Multiple Accountabilities Disorder,’” *Public Administration Review* 65 (2005): 94–107.

person with the virtue of honesty is not just a person who regularly tells the truth, for a person might fit that description simply because the person fears discovery if he or she lies. In a similar way, people with the virtue of accountability do not comply grudgingly when they act as they should, and do not resent having to account for their actions. Nor do they comply only because they fear sanctions if they do not do so.

It would also not be virtuous if a person eagerly embraced being accountable for very self-serving reasons. Suppose I am eager to do what my boss expects me to do, and eager to give my reports, but my motivation is that I want to become the boss myself and no longer have to take orders or give such reports. Suppose I take every opportunity to “suck up to” the boss, hoping thereby to gain his support for a raise or promotion. Such motivations might not be evil, but they do not appear to be virtuous either.

We have said something about what kinds of motivations do not qualify as those of an accountable person, but what shall we say positively about such a person? One thing seems sure: the accountable person recognizes and respects the standing of the person to whom he or she is accountable. Standing is itself a normative notion, and thus it is virtuous to recognize and be sensitive to the legitimate expectations of the one who has standing.

However, there is more to the motivation of the accountable person. In accountability relations, there is generally a “common project” that underlies and defines the scope of the standing that the person who is holding someone else accountable has. If I am being held accountable and have the virtue, then my motivation for being accountable will be linked to my commitment to the common project that underlies my accountability relationship. If I am a university professor, then I am committed to my students’ learning and to the success of my research, and I share my concern for those ends with those I must give an account to. I may welcome being accountable for many reasons, but among them will be my recognition that being accountable makes me a better teacher and researcher, and a desire to advance the goals of the common project that I share with colleagues in my department and the university as a whole. I don’t embrace being accountable merely because it will help me, but because it will help my university to become a better institution. This embrace of being accountable includes a concern for the well-being of my students, colleagues, and the staff with whom I come in contact.

Although those who hold others accountable often have the power to mete out sanctions to those accountable to them, we have already noted—and want to emphasize—that it would be a mistake to connect the motivations of the one who has the virtue of accountability too closely to such sanctions. It is possible for sanctions to play a positive role as “backup motivation,” and as such their value can be appreciated. However, on both sides of the accountability relation there is an understanding of what each owes to the other. The one who exercises authority assumes that the one who is held accountable can understand what is right to do and in virtue of this understanding can do what is right with appropriate motivation. Someone who is accountable only out of fear of sanctions lacks the virtue of accountability, because

such a person does not welcome being accountable, but rather feels constrained to behave accountably by the sanctions.

What about the accountability relation that philosophers such as Darwall describe, the relation that I have to other humans as part of the moral community? In this case the common project will surely be morality itself. I see myself as accountable to all other humans because I see all of us as engaged in the project of becoming morally better and flourishing as human persons, both individually and collectively. The motivation for embracing accountability will then be linked to my commitment to what Darwall calls the moral community.¹² We understand moral obligation by seeing it as “involving demands that are ‘in force’ from the moral point of view, that is, from the (first-person plural) perspective of the moral community.”¹³

We have said that there are excellent ways of being accountable, but there surely are less-than-excellent ways as well. We often understand a virtue better if we compare it with what we might call its correlative vices. So, what are the vices connected to accountability? Aristotle famously thought that many of the moral virtues can be understood as a mean between extremes: courage is in between cowardice and foolhardiness, while temperance is within a mean between gluttony and pointless asceticism.

In a similar way, we can perhaps recognize accountability as falling within a range between two extremes. The person at one end of this continuum is one who resents being accountable to others, perhaps due to an excess of pride or an exaggerated desire for independence. Taken to an extreme such a trait may pass over from being a moral vice to being a form of mental pathology. Consider the person who has little or no concern for fulfilling the reasonable expectations of others and who lives as if he does not have to account for his behavior to anyone. If such a person really lacks the ability to care about the needs of others, then the person would seem chillingly like the individual we call a sociopath or psychopath. In that case we are no longer talking about moral vice but mental illness. The vice might be described as the trait of someone who has the ability to care about the expectations of others, but habitually fails to do so. We could also imagine that eventually such a person might lose this ability altogether through such habits. Perhaps the individual initially had some degree of empathy for others and concern for what is owed to others, but by willfully failing to act on this concern has lost that ability.

On the other end of the spectrum, the individual who is excessively concerned to please others and always worried about a failure to do so seems too concerned about the expectations of others, and perhaps lacks a robust sense of what he or she is entitled to expect from those others. This kind of trait is sometimes called “scrupulosity” or “over-scrupulosity,” especially if the anxiety is motivated by moral or religious concerns. Again, we can imagine behavior patterns that cross over the line from being a moral vice to being a form of mental pathology. In this case the

¹²More specifically, according to Darwall “To understand moral obligation . . . we have to see it as involving demands that are ‘in force’ from the moral point of view, that is, from the (first-person plural) perspective of the moral community.” Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint*, p. 9.

¹³Ibid.

pathology would be in the family of anxiety disorders, such as obsessive-compulsive disorder.¹⁴ However, there surely are people who do not suffer from a clinical disorder who are overly concerned about fulfilling the expectations of others, even when those others have standing. We would add to this that what counts as an excess or deficiency is not simply a matter of quantity, as if the goal were simply to hit some arithmetical average. Rather, we should probably say that the “right” amount of concern for others is the amount modeled by the person of practical wisdom, who adjusts this concern in light of circumstances. Aristotle himself says something similar about his mean in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1106a36–b7. There are doubtless other traits that block or hinder the virtue of accountability, but these two seem to be vices that directly involve an excess of concern or a lack of concern for being accountable.

Since this virtue is connected to the relation of accountability, we might call it a relational virtue. Interestingly, there are other relational virtues, such as gratitude and forgivingness, which have been extensively studied by contemporary positive psychology.¹⁵ Like the virtue of accountability, these virtues are exercised in a relationship, even though they are excellences possessed by individuals. Those with the virtue of accountability will have an appreciation for and a sensitivity to a certain kind of self-confidence that aids one in being open to criticism, because they recognize that only by engaging in (mutually respectful) criticism do we grow and develop, while a lack of self-confidence fuels defensiveness which gets in the way.¹⁶ Accountability also resembles gratitude and forgivingness in that they all have relevance both to the moral life and to religious life (for people who are religious).

A MORE CONCRETE, FINE-GRAINED DESCRIPTION OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Can we give a more fine-grained description of the virtue of accountability? An interdisciplinary team has developed a list of “core features” that characterize the

¹⁴For a good account of scrupulosity as a disorder see C. H. Miller and D. W. Hedges, “Scrupulosity Disorder: An Overview and Introductory Analysis,” *Journal of Anxiety Disorders* 6 (2008): 1042–58. For a recent philosophical treatment of scrupulosity, see Jesse S. Summers and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *Clean Hands: Philosophical Questions from Scrupulosity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

¹⁵For a clear and readable introduction to positive psychology, including the research on gratitude and forgivingness, see Mark R. McMinn, *The Science of Virtue* (Grand Rapids MI: Brazos Press, 2017). Perhaps the main pioneer in the scientific study of forgiveness is Everett L. Worthington, Jr. who has published many articles and books; a good starting place to understand his work is his *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2006). Just as is the case for gratitude the case for the benefits of being a forgiving person are surprising and extend to physical as well as mental health. The leading expert on the scientific study of gratitude is Robert A. Emmons, the founding editor of *The Journal of Positive Psychology*. For a good introduction to his work that is accessible to non-psychologists, see his *Thanks: How Practicing Gratitude Can Make You Happier* (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 2008). Some of the benefits of gratitude are quite surprising. In one study, students randomly assigned to do a “gratitude journal” not only were happier but exercised more and slept better than a control group.

¹⁶We are grateful to John Lippitt for suggesting this point.

virtue and enable its exhibition.¹⁷ The work of the team described in this section was mainly conceptual in nature, the result of intense interdisciplinary conversations. Later we shall describe some of the empirical work that followed. Here we shall list these core features and offer some comments on each. In calling them “core features” we do not mean to say that they are all essential for the virtue to be present. Some are qualities of the virtue itself, while others are conditions that facilitate the manifestation of the virtue. Obviously, a virtue understood as a trait-disposition must be something that is likely to show itself in particular ways under certain conditions. However, just as obviously, it is possible for a person to possess a virtue but not exhibit it at some particular time, either because the person at that time is acting out of character or (more commonly) the conditions that allow the virtue to be exhibited are not present. In some cases, the absence of these conditions does not mean the virtue could not show itself at all, but just that this is less likely or that the manifestation will be less clear. The virtue could still impact behavior but not be exhibited clearly or transparently. Here are the nine core features, along with some comments on each:

1. People with the virtue of accountability are disposed to seeking to know the expectations of people with the standing to hold them accountable for their attitudes, thoughts, emotions, and actions.

Comments: This seems quite straightforward. Someone with the virtue of accountability welcomes being accountable and regards it as a good. Such a person will clearly have an interest in knowing the requirements and expectations of those who hold them accountable.

2. People with the virtue of accountability are disposed to willingly answer to people who rightly hold them accountable.

Comments: A willing embrace or welcoming of the requirement to be accountable lies at the center of the virtue. Those who welcome being accountable will willingly answer to those who rightly hold them accountable. The most important feature of (2) is that the people to which one is willing to answer must be people with the standing to hold someone accountable. This standing is a normative matter and is not a status earned simply by being powerful. It is not a virtue to be willing to answer to someone who is a bully or a blackmailer. Of course, we are here assuming that the person being held

¹⁷What follows in this section reflects the work of this whole team for the Accountability as a Relational Virtue project: Charlotte Witvliet, Lavern and Betty DePree Van Kley Professor of Psychology, Hope College; John Peteet, Associate Professor of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School; Andrew Torrance, Senior Lecturer in Theology, University of St Andrews, Scotland; Robert Roberts, Distinguished Professor of Ethics, Emeritus, Baylor University; Byron Johnson, Distinguished Professor of the Social Sciences and Director of the Institute for Studies of Religion, Baylor University; Sung Joon Jang, Research Professor of Criminology, Baylor University; Joseph Leman, Post-doctoral Fellow (Ph.D in Psychology and Neuroscience, Baylor University).

accountable rightly discerns the standing of the person to whom they are accountable, including the limitations of that standing.

3. People with the virtue of accountability are disposed to be transparent and honest with people to whom they are accountable.

Comment: This also seems straightforward. It is difficult if not impossible to be accountable in a virtuous way if the person giving the account is deceitful or dishonest, either to himself or herself, or to the person he or she is accountable to. Again, we are here assuming that the one to whom we are accountable has good intentions. They have the appropriate standing, and they have our well-being in mind.

4. People with the virtue of accountability are disposed to discern and wisely question, resist, and/or protest when people try to hold them accountable in inappropriate ways or with inappropriate goals.

Comment: Core feature (4) supplements and strengthens feature (2). (2) says that one owes an account only to someone who has the proper standing to ask for one. However, even a person who has the standing to ask for an account may abuse that authority and make demands that are inappropriate or even immoral. Someone with the virtue of accountability will have a disposition to resist such demands. This is what distinguishes this virtue from such vices as being overly deferential or mindless obedience.¹⁸ This means that the virtue of accountability is consistent with some forms of moral autonomy. A person who seeks to be accountable does not abandon his or her own moral stance (including the moral stance of his or her community) but brings that stance to the situation of accountability.

5. People with the virtue of accountability are disposed to wanting to be accountable to do well in working toward good goals.

Comment: The purpose behind this requirement is to rule out cases in which one must give an account to an authority of sorts, but where the project that is relevant is simply evil. A mob hitman might be accountable to the head of the crime organization, but a willingness to be accountable in such a situation would not be virtuous.

6. People with the virtue of accountability are disposed to value people they are accountable to as well as those who are impacted by their own actions.

Comment: While this feature may not be essential for the virtue to manifest itself, it seems plausible that it would be a factor that would make this manifestation more likely. Consider first the relation to the one to whom one is accountable. Suppose those who are accountable do not value those to whom they are accountable. In that case, it seems likely that the accountability

¹⁸Later in this article we say something about obedience and its relation to accountability.

relation will be one that is just tolerated but not fully valued. Why would I welcome being held accountable to someone whom I do not value or respect? As for valuing those whom one's behavior impacts, this also seems reasonable from a motivational aspect. The person who welcomes being accountable is glad to be held accountable because he or she sees this requirement as something that helps produce better actions. But one would not be as likely to be glad for this if one did not care about the people impacted by those actions.

7. People with the virtue of accountability value learning how to improve and adjust their behavior based on input/feedback from those to whom they must give an account.

Comment: This requirement makes sense because the person with the virtue of accountability knows that he or she profits from the feedback. It is not only the fact that one is accountable that makes the difference, but the concrete suggestions for improvement provided by the accountability relationship. Of course, one can value being able to learn in this way but realize that the particular accountability relationship one is in does not provide such learning, because of the incompetence or malevolence of the one to whom one is accountable.

8. People with the virtue of accountability are disposed to accepting their responsibility to give an account even when it is difficult or costly to them.

Comment: This factor is a crucial component in any robust instance of the virtue. If I am not willing to be accountable in cases where this is costly to me, then I clearly value my own interests above the requirement to be accountable. At least this will be the case when one is considering egoistic interests. Perhaps for the person who understands the value of accountability, there is no long-term conflict between self-interest and being accountable, because the person with the virtue sees the relationship as one that will in the long run make one a better person. However, even when this is the case, there clearly will be cases in which accountability will be costly in the short run in the sense of requiring someone to accept consequences that are unpleasant and not immediately desired. Of course, there are reasonable limits to this willingness. It is one thing to receive a poor raise because one is honest; but it seems quite different if one's life were at stake.

9. Those with the virtue of accountability are disposed to growing or becoming better by being accountable to others.

Comment: This last feature claims that the person who has the virtue will be one who thereby over time is more likely to become a better person generally, not merely someone who becomes better at answering to some particular authority. This makes it understandable why someone who values

moral growth would value being accountable, even if this is costly to some short-term interests.

OBJECTIONS TO ACCOUNTABILITY AS A VIRTUE

There are of course a number of worries and objections that might be raised initially to this proposal.¹⁹ A major worry one might think is that this trait is simply identical to a more traditional, already-recognized virtue, or perhaps a combination of such virtues. For example, could accountability simply be another name for conscientiousness?²⁰ Certainly, if we are right about the importance of the condition of accountability in the moral life, one would expect a positive correlation between conscientiousness and the virtue of accountability. However, it does not seem that the two traits would be identical. For example, one can easily imagine someone who might be extremely high on conscientiousness, but who is averse to being accountable to other persons. Such a person might take pride in his or her ability to act morally, but dislike having to give an account to others. We could even imagine someone like this who feels superior to those who are seen as needing social reinforcement.

Someone who agrees with this response might still object to seeing accountability as a virtue, on the grounds that accountability, while not identical to conscientiousness by itself, is simply a combination of conscientiousness and agreeableness.²¹ The agreeable person, who welcomes social interaction, would not have the aversion to being accountable to others that might make a morally conscientious person different from the person who has the virtue of accountability. Nevertheless, we agree that it does seem likely that accountability would be positively correlated with agreeableness, and likely that there would be an even stronger positive correlation with the conjunction of conscientiousness and agreeableness.

However, it still does not seem that the virtue of accountability would be identical to this conjunction. Agreeableness is a personality trait of someone who values the approval of others generally. The person who has the virtue of accountability, however, values a more specific kind of approval, the approval of others who have a particular kind of moral standing that gives them the right to hold someone to account. In discussing the “core features” of accountability, we have already highlighted the fact that people with the virtue of accountability resist the demands of those who lack proper standing, and even resist pressure from someone with standing if that person’s demands are inappropriate. A person high in agreeableness might want to please an authority who makes inappropriate or unwarranted demands, but an accountable person will resist such demands.²² Hence, agreeableness and

¹⁹We shall ignore objections that are commonly made against virtue ethics in general, but which have no special force against the claim that accountability is a virtue, such as the “situationist challenge.”

²⁰Conscientiousness is one of the “Big Five Personality Traits” generally recognized as important by psychologists. See *Psychology Today*, “Big Five Personality Traits,” <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/big-5-personality-traits>.

²¹Agreeableness is another one of the “Big Five” personality traits recognized by empirical psychologists.

²²We are grateful to John Lippitt for suggesting this downside to mere agreeableness.

accountability as a virtue can come apart and are distinct even if they are likely to be positively correlated.

Social approval, morally speaking, is a two-edged sword. It is morally beneficial to desire the approval of the *right* kind of people. However, a general desire to be a “people-pleaser” might well be conducive to moral deficiencies. Someone who is a stickler for doing the right thing may offend peers who are less morally committed, and thus moral behavior sometimes requires a willingness to disregard the opinions of some others. Most people fear being described as a “goody-two-shoes” and find it uncomfortable to take stands that might make them vulnerable to the criticism that they think they are “better than other people.”

Could accountability just be the virtue of responsibility? If one thinks of responsibility as a virtue, and not just a condition, then this virtue may be identical to the virtue we are calling accountability. It depends on how “responsibility” is understood. Someone might understand being morally responsible as simply being responsive to moral principles, which makes responsibility seem very much like moral conscientiousness, which we just discussed. However, if moral responsibility is understood as the quality of someone who is sensitive to how one should respond to the legitimate expectations of others, then it would seem to be the same thing as what we are calling accountability. Dworkin’s description of the virtue he calls “responsibility” seems close to our concept of accountability. However, as noted before, Dworkin thinks one can be responsible or accountable without being responsible or accountable *to* anyone, and that is surely an important difference.²³ Still, there is a striking similarity. However, the fact that there are two alternative names for the same (or a very similar) quality does not mean the quality is not important. It is helpful to have an agreed-on name for a quality, but what is ultimately important is the recognition of the quality. It is, we think, a point in favor of accountability that a distinguished philosopher such as Dworkin has recognized it, or something very similar, even if under another name.

Empirical data may have a bearing on whether accountability as a virtue is distinct from other virtues. The interdisciplinary team described in footnote seventeen has developed a sociometric scale for measuring accountability as a trait, and such a scale makes possible empirical research on the relation between this trait and kinds of actions, as well as other traits.²⁴ One initial study did come up with results

²³When we began working on this research project, we originally intended to call the virtue “responsibleness” rather than “accountability.”

²⁴This team conducted two national US studies. *Study 1* used a twelve-item scale using Rasch modeling on 484 participants with the following characteristics: gender (242 Male, 241 Female, 1 Other); primary ethnicity (304 White, 171 AHANA, 7 multi-ethnic, 2 other); age (18–91, $M = 46.66$, $SD = 17.23$); and education (40.1 percent HS diploma or less, 59.9 percent some college+). *Study 2* used cross-validation on the psychometric properties using Rash modeling in a separate sample and assessed addition measures for construct validity. The study included 773 participants with the following characteristics: gender (376 Male, 389 Female, 5 Other, 3 no response); primary ethnicity (516 White, 253 AHANA, 3 multi-ethnic, 1 other); age (18–98, $M = 44.41$, $SD = 16.52$); and education (30.3 percent HS diploma or less, 69.7 percent some college+). See, C.V.O. Witvliet, S. J. Jang, J. Berry, C. S. Evans, B. R. Johnson, R. C. Roberts, J. R. Peteet, and A. Torrance, *Accountability: A New Frontier in Positive Psychology*, presented at the 2019 American Psychological Association Annual Convention, Chicago, IL. See also, C.V.O. Witvliet, S. J. Jang, J. Berry,

that are intuitively satisfying here, in that accountability, as measured by this scale, had more predictive value for some important moral traits than conscientiousness or agreeableness or their conjunction.²⁵ Some research has also been done on the relation between accountability and forgiveness and relational repair, and this research suggests there is a positive relationship.²⁶ There is much more research to be done. Still, these studies provide some evidence that the virtue of accountability, while positively correlated with conscientiousness and agreeableness, goes beyond them in predicting such important factors as relational repair after wrongdoing, the presence of meaning in life, and general human flourishing.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND THE VIRTUE OF JUSTICE

There is one other already-recognized virtue that someone might think accountability is identical to: justice, understood as a character trait of persons rather than a feature of institutions or laws. Our response to this objection is complex. We will argue that the objection is rooted in a true insight, but that the point made is not really an objection. We agree that the virtue of accountability is closely connected to the personal virtue of justice; it actually is a sub-virtue of justice, one of the ways that justice manifests itself. However, far from being a problem, we will argue that this point actually provides a defense against another objection to accountability as a virtue, the objection that an important virtue would not have gone unrecognized. We will then suggest that even though accountability is a sub-virtue of justice, it is important enough that it deserves to be recognized on its own, as is the case for other manifestations of justice that could be viewed as sub-virtues but are recognized in their own right.

It would actually be a problem for our view if it turned out to be the case that this virtue was up until now unrecognized. After all, the western classical philosophical tradition is a virtue tradition, and one might think that it would be suspicious if none of the classical philosophers had recognized the virtue. We believe that accountability was recognized by at least some ancient philosophers and that they described this virtue as an aspect of the personal quality of justice, understood as “giving to each his due,” a definition taken from Ulpian, endorsed by Cicero and included in Justinian’s *Digest*, which made this view of justice very influential in the

C. S. Evans, A. Torrance, B. R. Johnson, R. C. Roberts, and J. R. Peteet, *Accountability to the Transcendent: A New Frontier in Psychology*, presented at the Association for Research in Personality (ARP) Annual Convention, Grand Rapids, MI (June 2019).

²⁵See, C.V.O. Witvliet, et al, *Accountability: A New Frontier in Positive Psychology*.

²⁶See, C. V. O. Witvliet, L. Luna, L. Root, E. L. Worthington Jr., and Jo-Ann Tsang, “Apology and Restitution: The Psychophysiology of Forgiveness after Accountable Relational Repair Responses,” *Frontiers Psychology* 11 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00284>; C. V. O. Witvliet, N. G. Wade, E. L. Worthington, L. Root Luna, L., D. R. Van Tongeren, J. W. Berry, and Jo-Ann Tsang, “Apology and Eestitution: Offender Accountability Responses Influence Victim Empathy and Forgiveness,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 48 (2002): 88–104; and C. V. O. Witvliet, “Forgiveness, Embodiment, and Relational Accountability: Victim and Transgressor Psychophysiology Research,” in *Handbook of Forgiveness*, second edition, ed. E. L. Worthington, Jr. and N. Wade (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2020), pp. 167–77.

medieval period in the West.²⁷ Nor is this conception of justice without defenders in the contemporary world. Nicholas Wolterstorff, in his *Justice: Rights and Wrongs*, although his focus is not on the virtue of justice but the “social condition that those who possess this virtue seek to bring about,” takes the Justinian definition of justice as his basic starting point.²⁸

Suppose justice is giving to each person what is due to that person. In that case, it seems that one way this virtue would manifest itself would be in accepting and embracing the need to fulfill the legitimate expectations and requirements of others, including the requirement to give an account to someone who has the standing to require such an account. One particularly important way this would manifest itself in a hierarchical society, such as was found in the ancient and medieval worlds, would be a recognition of what someone owes to a person who has authority that one ought to recognize, someone to whom one is accountable. In such a situation, accountability would mainly show itself as obedience.

We believe that the virtue of accountability was recognized by Thomas Aquinas, but was called “obedience” and understood as a sub-virtue of justice.²⁹ For example, Aquinas says that the one who has the virtue of obedience is one who “is moved at the bidding of the person who commands him, by a certain necessity of justice.”³⁰ One might think that Aquinas’s concept of obedience is quite distinct from the virtue of accountability, since obedience appears to be a virtue that can only be manifested to superiors, while we have argued that accountability can be exercised towards peers and inferiors. Interestingly enough, however, Aquinas, despite calling the virtue “obedience,” understands the quality of justice that the obedient person manifests as a quality that can also be exhibited by a superior to an inferior. The reason this is so is that the authority of a superior is always (except perhaps for God) limited. Even a feudal lord had an obligation to respect the rights of a vassal, since those rights were part of a reciprocal system of rights and duties that the lord himself appealed to when asking for obedience from the vassal. This point even has relevance for the case of a slave and slaveowner. In the words of Brendan Case, “if ‘obedience’ names the virtue by which the slave is prompt to recognize and respond appropriately to authoritative commands justly given, then the same virtue would seem to be required in the master with respect to the slave’s just demands for liberty in this or that protected sphere.”³¹ (We trust that it is obvious that neither Case nor we, in using this historical example, are endorsing the judgments of ancient and medieval thinkers that slavery could be a just institution. The point is that these medieval thinkers rightly recognized that the kind of justice

²⁷This section of this chapter is heavily indebted to Brendan Case, *The Accountable Animal: Justice, Justification, and Judgment* (London: T&T Clark, 2021), 20–24.

²⁸Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 22.

²⁹See Case, *The Accountable Animal*.

³⁰Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II–II.104.5, corpus.

³¹Brendan Case, “Accountability as a Sub-Type of Justice: Reflections on ‘Obedience’ and ‘Religion’ in Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae*,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 34, no. 3 (2021): 334.

shown in obedience to a superior can also be shown by the superior in relation to persons of lesser status.)

So, Aquinas recognized something much like accountability as a sub-virtue of justice but called it “obedience.” However, if the substance of the virtue turns out to be a quality that a superior can exercise in relation to an inferior, then one can indeed reasonably argue that “obedience” is not the best term for it. I certainly have the right to require honest work from my students, but they in turn have the right to request fair grades from their teacher. “Accountability” would seem to be a better term than “obedience” for the trait of someone who is regularly disposed to satisfy such requirements, particularly since there is reasonable suspicion in contemporary society about whether obedience (at least unqualified obedience) is a virtue at all.³² The recognition that what is virtuous in some cases of obedience is a quality that can be found in peer relations, in relations to subordinates, and (as in Darwall) in relations that we have to other humans as part of the moral community helps us see the true nature of the virtue Aquinas had in mind and also why it deserves a new name.

Why have a special name for accountability if it is a sub-virtue of justice? The answer is that the personal virtue of justice can be manifested in many different ways, and we find it helpful to have names for some of the more important and distinctive ways. Gratitude can also be understood as a sub-virtue of justice, in that a person who extends gratitude to a benefactor is indeed giving the benefactor what is “owed,” not in the sense of a debt one is required to pay but a kind of debt that is appropriate and fitting, a debt that the grateful person gladly assumes and does not wish to be free of. The virtue of honesty can also be understood as a sub-virtue of justice. For example, honesty, when we converse with others, is rendering to others the truth that we owe them. Honesty in business dealings is connected to respect for property rights, and honesty when playing a game is a respect for the rules that make play of the game fair.³³ However, as we have already seen, there is much powerful research on the virtue of gratitude, and the importance of honesty as a virtue is practically universally recognized.³⁴

Aristotle himself, when discussing the virtue of justice, notes that the term can be used in two distinct ways. In Book V of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he says that

³²We have in mind here the tremendous influence of Stanley Milgram’s famous (and infamous) psychological experiment, in which many psychological subjects were induced to give what they believed to be painful or even fatal electrical shocks to others, because an authoritative figure told them “the experiment must continue,” and they felt they must obey the order. Milgram’s experiment in turn was partly influenced by the Nuremberg trials, in which many Nazi defendants used as their defense that they were “just obeying orders.” For Milgram’s own account, see *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974). Earlier in this article we explained why someone with the virtue of accountability would avoid such unthinking obedience.

³³For a good discussion of the connection between honesty and justice along these lines, see Ryan West and Robert Roberts, “The Virtue of Honesty: A Conceptual Exploration,” in *Integrity, Honesty, and Truth-Seeking*, ed. Christian Miller and Ryan West (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 97–126.

³⁴Honesty has, however, been under-discussed in contemporary philosophy. See Christian Miller, “Honesty,” in *Moral Psychology, Vol. V: Virtue and Character*, ed. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Christian Miller (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2017), pp. 237–74. Also, see Miller’s forthcoming *Honesty: The Philosophy and Psychology of a Neglected Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

the term “justice” is used as a general term for all the various ways a “just person” treats others, but also as a term for a particular virtue, as when a person repays a loan to another. The close link between accountability and justice suggests that something like this is true of accountability as well. When used as Darwall uses it, in an expansive way to characterize what we owe to humans as members of the moral community, then accountability would seem to be another name for justice understood in the broad sense. However, as Aristotle saw, this concept is so broad that it is useful to have names for specific types of attitudes and actions that one owes to others. Gratitude is what one owes to benefactors; honesty (as truthfulness) is what one owes to conversation partners. Accountability is what one owes to others who have standing to ask for an accounting as to how one has fulfilled their rightful expectations. We see no reason to think that accountability is less worthy of being given its own name than gratitude and honesty. Given the importance the relation of accountability has in human life, excellence in playing the role of being held accountable seems worthy of special consideration, especially with respect to particular relationships that carry with them specific types of responsibilities, including the responsibility to give an accounting.

As we have already claimed, the question as to whether accountability is a distinct virtue is partly to be answered empirically. Positive psychology has done much fruitful research on other relational virtues, such as gratitude and forgiveness, that parallel accountability in interesting ways.³⁵ Our own prediction is that research on accountability will be similarly fruitful, and this essay is partly a call for such empirical research to be done.

Accountability is surely related to a number of other virtues. For example, a person who is generally dishonest and untrustworthy will not be likely to give truthful accounts to the people he or she must report to, so some degree of honesty will be necessary for accountability to be present. Virtues such as moral courage will surely be needed if a person who is accountable is pressured to conform to immoral standards and practices. It seems highly likely that a person with the virtue of accountability must also have some degree of the virtue of humility, since an arrogant person is unlikely to welcome being corrected and held accountable by others. However, the fact that accountability requires other virtues and cannot exist in isolation is hardly an objection to recognizing it as a virtue, since the same thing is true of many virtues.

There is, to our knowledge, no generally agreed upon criterion for how to individuate and distinguish virtues, and we can hardly settle the issue here. We shall be content with mentioning some possibilities. One influential proposal has

³⁵The leading expert on the scientific study of gratitude is Robert A. Emmons, the founding editor of *The Journal of Positive Psychology*. For a good introduction to his work that is accessible to non-psychologists, see his *Thanks: How Practicing Gratitude Can Make You Happier* (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 2008). The main pioneer in the scientific study of forgiveness is Everett L. Worthington, Jr. Worthington has published many articles and books; a good starting place to understand his work is his *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2006). With respect to both gratitude and forgiveness, the benefits of the virtues are surprising and extend to physical as well as mental health.

been made by Daniel C. Russell.³⁶ Russell suggests that a virtue gets its identity through the “kinds of reasons” the virtue is responsive to. He claims that “different species of reasons can belong to the same genus.”³⁷ This in turn makes it plausible to think that there are a limited number of “cardinal virtues,” each corresponding to a genus of reason-types, with sub-virtues of these cardinal virtues corresponding to the different species of reasons belonging to each genus. If this is right, then it makes sense to think of justice as one of these cardinal virtues, with such virtues as honesty, gratitude, and accountability as subordinate virtues of justice. It would then make sense to think of the virtue of justice as linked to reasons for action that are grounded in what we owe others. When I am accountable to someone, that accountability relation would seem to give rise to a reason of this type, but one that could usefully be distinguished from what we owe to someone as a participant in a conversation (truth), or what we owe to someone by virtue of the relationship of being a benefactor (gratitude).

Christine Swanton’s account of the virtues might also help with the question as to how we should individuate virtues: “A *virtue* is a good quality of character, more specifically a disposition to respond to, or acknowledge, items within its field or fields in an excellent or good enough way.”³⁸ In the case of the virtue of accountability, the “field” would seem to be a sensitivity to the legitimate expectations presupposed in social relationships where there is standing to ask for an accounting and hold someone accountable.³⁹

Even someone who is skeptical about the theoretical case for recognizing accountability as a distinct virtue might be persuaded by a pragmatic case. Perhaps to decide whether we ought to think of and speak about accountability as a virtue, we need to ask such questions as this: Does speaking and thinking in this way help in developing moral character? Is it helpful in the moral education of children? Are there corresponding vices that we can come to understand and avoid if we think and talk of a virtue of accountability? Although this is obviously speculation on our part, we believe that the answers to these questions will turn out to be positive. Even if, contrary to what we have argued, the virtue of accountability turned out to consist of a cluster of other virtues, it could still be helpful to have a single term for the cluster.

³⁶Daniel C. Russell, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), especially pp. 177–208.

³⁷Ibid., 194. Russell’s account seems more likely to work for substantive virtues than for structural virtues, such as those linked to the will.

³⁸Christine Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 19.

³⁹We are not suggesting that Russell’s view is incompatible with Swanton’s view. Plausibly, one can hold onto Russell’s idea of broad and sub-virtues without endorsing his method for individuating virtues into a genus of reason-types. Consequently, one could adopt Swanton’s framework of identifying the field of the putative virtue, and then elaborate on what excellence in relation to that field might look like. We are grateful to a referee who pointed this out, as well as Sheki Lafanzio who expressed to us a similar point.

CONCLUSION

A strong case can be made that there is a virtue that could be termed “accountability,” the virtue of one who is properly sensitive to and responsive to the legitimate and justified claims of others who have standing to request or even require an accounting. This virtue does not seem identical to other, more widely recognized virtues, or even a conjunction of other virtues. As is the case with other virtues, there is a need for empirical research to investigate the nature of this virtue, its relation to other virtues, and its role in contributing to human flourishing. The fact that authority or standing is often abused does imply that there will be many occasions in which someone who has this virtue will not have the opportunity to exercise it robustly or manifest it, and it makes it understandable why this virtue has less prominence in our society than previously might have been the case. Still the virtue can be displayed in non-hierarchical relationships as well as hierarchical relations in which authority is properly being exercised. The recognition and appreciation of this virtue might enhance the character of modern societies that tend to be individualistic, showing that there is something to be learned from older, more traditional societies. For example, it would be instructive to compare the virtue we are calling accountability with the virtue that Confucians term “filial piety.”⁴⁰

There might also be something to be learned from the ancient Hebrews, who considered the “fear of the Lord” to be an important virtue, one that is “the beginning of wisdom.” The fear of the Lord is a puzzling concept to many modern thinkers; it is hard to see how fear could be virtuous. Perhaps what those who used this term had in mind was not literally being afraid of God but rather having a proper reverence and respect for what they believed God could rightly demand from his creatures, a condition that they believed would enhance human flourishing. The fear of the Lord might then be, for those who have the requisite religious beliefs, a special case of the virtue of accountability. To make sense of this, one would have to believe, as the ancient Hebrews did, that the God they worshipped was good, a God who wants the best for his people, and that those who attempted to satisfy God’s expectations would flourish.

We believe that the cultivation of the virtue of accountability would enhance modern societies. It is true that those with authority often abuse the authority, and that this fact partly justifies our suspicion of authority. However, some of the reasons for the partial eclipse of accountability in our society may be less flattering to us. It is generally recognized that western culture, in comparison to many traditional cultures, is more individualistic, and sometimes this individualism can even go to the extreme of narcissism. Of course, many thinkers have made this kind of point. One example is Alasdair MacIntyre, in *After Virtue*, who argues that accountability is essentially connected to personal identity, and suggests that modern individualism

⁴⁰A recent article by Sungwoo Um focuses primarily on filial piety. The relational virtue of filial piety seems very similar in some respects to the relational virtue of accountability. Perhaps the former is a specific form of the latter. See, Sungwoo Um, “What Is a Relational Virtue,” *Philosophical Studies* 178 (2021): 95–111.

has led to a thin conception of the self which lessens our sense of accountability.⁴¹ When someone believes that “it is all about me,” that individual will not welcome being accountable to anyone, even if the person to whom he or she is accountable has proper authority and is exercising that authority for the good of the person being held accountable. Recovering this virtue of accountability would be a step towards recognizing the fundamentally social character of human persons. It would help us see that we humans need each other even when we are striving to become morally better people.

⁴¹Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd. ed. (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), especially pp. 216–25.