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Responsibility-Internalism Collapses: Conceptual, Normative, and Relational Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Moral responsibility is a fundamental component of ethics, shaping our understanding of accountability, blame, and praise. Responsibility-internalism, which holds that moral responsibility is grounded in some internal mental states, such as beliefs, desires, and intentions, represents a novel yet radical departure from traditional frameworks that focus on the outcome, circumstances, and interpersonal relationships to draw the moral line. While this theory presents a simple, self-contained picture of moral responsibility, it faces serious theoretical problems that challenge its coherence and practical utility. It specifically cannot adequately explain cases of negligence, culpable ignorance, and the relational aspects of moral responsibility that are central to human interactions. This paper offers a critical-analytic examination of responsibility-internalism and its theoretical and practical shortcomings. It examines positions that would incorporate both internalist assumptions, emphasizing the control agents possess over their actions, and externalist and interpersonal factors, aiming to offer a more complete and nuanced conception of moral liability. Some of the paper is devoted to discussing case studies in which the limitations of responsibility-internalism relative to its alternatives are illustrated. And it concludes that although responsibility-internalism offers a novel take and a new tool in the discussions of moral responsibility, such an internalist approach ultimately fails to provide a full and usable theory of moral responsibility.

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Intruduction

Few ideas in the field of moral philosophy have caused as much disagreement and argument as moral responsibility. It provides a foundation for understanding excusable behaviors, bases for assigning blame or praise and serves as a practice of punishment and justice. Moral responsibility is thus a topic at the center of ethical theory. It is also a paradigm, a window through which we view interpersonal relationships, and accordingly influences broader discourse on free will, moral agency, and the nature of moral norms.

Among the various theories that seek to clarify the conditions under which people are responsible, Stephen Kershnar's *Responsibility Collapses: Why Moral Responsibility is Impossible* (2024) offers a provocative and novel take: responsibility-internalism. This theory posits that moral responsibility is based only on internal states, like beliefs, desires and intentions — and that external factors are irrelevant. The book draws on earlier critiques of responsibility, morality, and desert in "Responsibility and Foundationalism" (2015), *Total Collapse: The Case Against Responsibility and Morality* (2018), *Desert Collapses: Why No One Deserves Anything* (2022), and "Proportionality Collapses: The Search for an Adequate Equation for Proportionality" (2023).

"Responsibility and Foundationalism" suggests that moral responsibility requires a foundation, but no viable foundation exists which leads to its collapse. It then offers a framework that informs the later development of Kershnar's internalist account. In *Total Collapse*, moral responsibility and morality itself are examined under the lens of internalist theories, with the argument that both collapse under analysis. Similarly, *Desert Collapses* extends this skepticism to desert, arguing that it is a fundamentally flawed concept, with no adequate theoretical or justificatory basis. In "Proportionality Collapses" Kershnar argues that without a precise equation for proportionality in punishment, the concept itself collapses. Together, these works provide the foundation for *Responsibility Collapses*, where responsibility-internalism is presented as a streamlined yet contentious theory that, if responsibility ever existed, grounds responsibility entirely within internal mental states.

Responsibility Collapses is rooted in a skeptical tradition around moral responsibility found in the works of thinkers like Galen Strawson, Neil Levy, and Derk Pereboom. In his seminal essay "The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility" (1994), Strawson famously asserts that ultimate moral responsibility is impossible due to the problem of infinite regress. Moral luck, Levy argues in *Hard Luck: How Luck Undermines Free Will and Moral Responsibility* (2011), undermines responsibility by revealing how external factors, not under an agent's control, can affect the moral results. In Free will, Agency, and Meaning in Life (2014), Pereboom defends hard incompatibilism, the view that we do not have free will and are not morally responsible. Focusing strictly on internal states, *Responsibility Collapses* offers a distinctive variation within this skeptical framework, thereby challenging conventional arguments for accountability and the external conditions of moral responsibility.

This paper employs a critical-analytic approach to evaluate responsibility-internalism as articulated in *Responsibility Collapses*. It begins by giving an exposition of the theory and its foundational claim that moral responsibility is a function of internal mental states only. It then goes on to critique responsibility-internalism. The critique then focuses on some central problems: its conceptual circularity, reliance on modal considerations, inadequate grounding of moral desert, the theory's problematic treatment of negligence and akrasia, and its unrealistic emphasis on the exercise of moral capacities. Finally, the article examines alternative approaches, with a focus on interpersonal frames of responsibility, as potential ways that go beyond the internalist paradigm.

Internalism: Motivation and Responsibility

The application of internalism to moral responsibility is innovative and novel, yet it has some in common with other internalist theories like motivational internalism. This shows the distinctiveness of Kershnar's approach and, at the same time, contextualizes it in a broader philosophical discussion.

Motivational internalism is the metaethical view that there is a necessary connection between moral judgments (or reasons) and motivation. In particular, it holds that if an agent truly judges an action to be morally right, they must have some degree of motivation to do it (van Roojen, 2013). This theory links an agent's internal psychological states—say, their moral beliefs with their motivational structure. It contrasts with externalism, which denies such necessary connections. In the same way, responsibility-internalism holds that moral responsibility is entirely determined by the agent's intrinsic features, such as their choices and psychological connections, and not by external factors (Kershnar, 2024, 85).

Both these theories make internal states more important than external circumstances. While responsibility internalism focuses on the internal creation and evaluation of moral responsibility, motivational internalism is concerned with the relationship between our moral beliefs and the corresponding motivation to act. In both cases, external influences are considered irrelevant for determining motivation and responsibility. This parallel emphasizes the general applicability to internalism as a philosophical framework.

And yet, responsibility-internalism is also somewhat novel in that it extends internalism to moral responsibility, a domain that traditionally includes external factors, effects, social norms, and interpersonal evaluations of blameworthiness or praiseworthiness. By confining responsibility to intrinsic features, it is believed that responsibility can only exist if the grounds for responsibility are generated only "in the head". Motivational internalism, for example, does not necessarily deny external factors, but rather prioritizes internal moral beliefs as the necessary driver of motivation. Responsibility-internalism, on the other hand, denies that anything external adds to moral responsibility.

Responsibility-internalism has its own implications for moral theory that are independent of those of motivational internalism. The core issue for motivational internalism concerns moral judgments' action-guiding role in practical reasoning and moral behavior. Responsibility-internalism, for its part, considers the conditions under which

people can be obliged to bear responsibility for their actions, making it a stricter application of internalist principles if true.

Understanding Responsibility-Internalism

Responsibility-internalism seems to be the core element of the philosophical structure in *Responsibility Collapses*; as it posits that the very foundations of moral responsibility are entirely rooted in the intrinsic characteristics of the person. In summary, responsibility is "in, and only in, the head" (Kershnar, 2024, 90). This internalist position is grounded by a number of interconnected arguments.

To begin with, Kershnar argues that moral responsibility is such a basic concept that cannot be broken down into parts. It is simply what makes someone deserving of praise or blame, but explaining it in terms of praise and blame would be circular and not a real definition (Kershnar, 2018, 113). This basic claim lays the basis for the conditions under which someone is responsible.

The central element of responsibility-internalism is the concept of a basic responsibility-maker. It is something that makes a person morally responsible. It is argued that a basic choice is the only basic responsibility-maker. A basic choice is a choice that is not the result of another choice. It is when a person ends deliberation and makes a decision, where there is a direct relationship between mental states and moral responsibility. In fact, for a basic choice to count as a responsibility-maker, it needs to meet two criteria: (a) the choice relates to the individual's psychology, and (b) the individual has basic control over that choice (Kershnar, 2024, 85). In other words, the basic responsibility-maker must both mirror who the person is and be under their full control. However, according to the argument sketched in *Responsibility Collapses*, no such basic responsibility-maker exists, shaking the very foundation of moral responsibility.

In addition, the existence of non-basic responsibility-makers or external factors to the agent's intrinsic properties is denied. The case for the rejection of non-basic responsibility-makers is that (1) a basic responsibility-maker is an intrinsic feature of a person, (2) there is no non-basic responsibility-maker. Responsibility could shift from a decision to an open act if there were non-basic responsibility-makers. But this transfer is impossible, for it carries with it two troublesome consequences: backtracking and a mismatch of blameworthiness. Backtracking would imply that later events determine responsibility for earlier decisions. Mismatch is the incoherent transfer of blameworthiness from one moral state, such as negligence, to another, such as akrasia, or vice versa (Kershnar, 2024, 85). Because responsibility-transfer cannot escape these problems, the notion of non-basic responsibility-makers is untenable.

Kershnar's view extends to the claim that ultimately no one is responsible. While he maintains that no one is morally responsible, he investigates what the structure of moral responsibility would look like, if it existed. He argues that even though some basic responsibility-maker is theoretically necessary, none fulfills the necessary conditions. Responsibility-internalism is only true if responsibility exists at all (Kershnar, 2024, 3). By

denying the existence of a basic responsibility-maker, the account concludes that moral responsibility collapses. The consistency of this internalist framework relies on the interaction between foundational claims around responsibility, the function of basic choices, and arguments against responsibility-transfer. These components as interconnected pieces of a single theory are ripe for critique and philosophical assessment, which may show internalist explanations to be inadequate on their own.

Circularity

There is one notable circularity in Kershnar's defense of internalism of responsibility that undermines its persuasive power. He starts by saying a "basic responsibility-maker" must be something internal to an agent, like a mental state or event, and that there is no non-basic (non-mental) responsibility-maker (Kershnar, 2024, 85). This leads him to reject responsibility-transfer; the idea that responsibility can include external acts or consequences. But his argument against responsibility-transfer relies on the internalist framework he's trying to prove, that responsibility must remain internal.

This logical loop becomes clearer when unpacked: (1) Responsibility is limited to intrinsic features, such as basic responsibility-makers; (2) Responsibility-transfer requires external factors, or non-basic responsibility-makers; (3) Responsibility-transfer is impossible because external factors are excluded by definition; and (4) The impossibility of responsibility-transfer proves responsibility is intrinsic (Kershnar, 2024, 85). The conclusion just restates the initial premise, thus providing no independent justification for rejecting responsibility-transfer. Internalism is confirmed by the absence of these external elements and external elements are ruled out by internalism. A more principled defense of internalism would require showing the inherent flaws of responsibility-transfer without assuming internalism's constraints from the outset.

Modal Reductionism

Responsibility-Internalism relies on some form of modal reductionism that prioritizes abstract hypothetical coherence over the complexities of real-world moral responsibility. The proportionality and mismatch arguments, for instance, reject the possibility of responsibility-transfer between different types of blameworthiness, such as negligence and akrasia, on the grounds that their modal structures are incompatible (Kershnar, 2024, 95-102). By framing responsibility in terms of rigid modal constraints, he assumes that any discrepancy between an agent's internal state and an external outcome renders responsibility non-transferable. However, this reliance on modal constraints contradicts his own rejection of modal blameworthiness in nearby possible worlds when he criticizes Fischer's "guidance control" for relying on modal considerations, arguing that merely being more or less blameworthy in a possible world has no bearing on actual-world responsibility (Kershnar, 2024, 175).

This inconsistency weakens Kershnar's critique of Fischer while it also exposes a problem in his own theory. If modal blameworthiness is irrelevant, as he claims against

Fischer, then his own appeal to modal incompatibilities to block responsibility-transfer should be equally suspect. He rejects externalist modal reasoning as too abstract, but his own theory relies on internalist modal constraints that isolate it from real-world moral practices. If we are to assess responsibility in light of actual moral contexts rather than hypothetical modal structures, then his mismatch argument, which maintains that responsibility cannot extend beyond an agent's internal mental state due to modal inconsistencies, rests on the very modal reductionism he dismisses.

Responsibility without Desert?

An inconsistency in responsibility-internalism stems from Kershnar's reliance on intuitions about moral responsibility for outward acts that cause harm to others. For example, he refers to the intuition that Bernie Madoff is blameworthy for his fraudulent Ponzi scheme and for his role in depriving his clients of billions of dollars, in an unjust way (Kershnar, 2024, 86). However, he denies that these intuitions have any philosophical weight. He asserts that there is no adequate theory of what desert is, no justification for desert even if such a theory existed, and no plausible account of what people actually deserve (Kershnar, 2022, 5). If desert lacks justification, then blame, punishment, and other responsibility responses become unanchored reactions rather than normatively justified practices.

Yet, it is more than an internal evaluation; it is also shaped by how actions communicate meaning within a moral community. When someone commits an overt act, such as Madoff's fraud, that act conveys "agent-meaning" (McKenna, 2012, 92-94) expressing the agent's disregard for moral norms and the well-being of others. McKenna contends that blame, in turn, is not just a reaction, it is "directed blame", a directed moral response that holds the wrongdoer accountable (McKenna, 2013, 121). Responsibility, in this sense, is inherently relational, and desert provides the normative foundation for why blame and punishment are appropriate.

Even if one rejects desert as the fundamental basis of responsibility, moral accountability need not collapse. Vargas's "agency cultivation model" offers an alternative justification: responsibility norms, such as blame and praise, play a crucial role in 'building better beings', shaping agents into morally competent ones who are responsive to moral reasons (Vargas, 2013, 166). In other words, responsibility is justified not because individuals intrinsically deserve blame or praise but because these practices help cultivate agency that is sensitive to moral expectations. While Kershnar believes that desert must be justified first, Vargas demonstrates that responsibility can stand independently on normative grounds.

No Mismatch

A leading argument for responsibility-internalism is that moral responsibility cannot transfer between distinct types of blameworthiness that are fundamentally different in kind, as in the case of negligence and akrasia, which involve distinct psychological failings. Negligence is a result of inattention or inability to foresee consequences, whereas akrasia is a conscious failure of will. According to Kershnar, this "mismatch" between the two

forms of blameworthiness cannot work because the type of blameworthiness in each case is of a fundamentally different nature (Kershnar, 2024, 101). But Michael Zimmerman's "culpable ignorance" shows how negligence and akrasia can be causally and morally related.

Zimmerman insists that ignorance can itself be culpable when it is the result of an agent's earlier negligence. For example, when doctors do not keep up with essential updates in medical practice, their failure to know puts them in a state that can influence their future decisions, like writing a harmful prescription. Even if the doctor truly believes the prescription is right at that point, he is still morally responsible for the damage because the ignorance was developed in earlier negligence. Blameworthiness for ignorant wrongdoing "is to be traced to blameworthiness for some prior piece of behavior…" (Zimmerman, 2022, 225) referred to as a 'benighting act' (Smith, 1983, 547). Such a chain is called "a chain of culpability" (Zimmerman, 2008, 176). This shows how negligent behavior shapes the circumstances such as culpable ignorance that directly feed back into future choices, akratic choice included. As a result, the different kinds of blameworthiness are not contradictory but can coexist within a larger moral system.

Unlike simple negligence, "willful ignorance" occurs when an agent deliberately avoids acquiring knowledge that could impose moral or legal responsibility. Zimmerman illustrates this with the case of Charles Demore Jewell, who deliberately refrained from inspecting a car for contraband, preferring to remain ignorant of whether he was transporting illegal substances. The court concluded that his deliberate ignorance was morally equivalent to knowing wrongdoing because he consciously chose to avoid confirming what he already suspected (Zimmerman, 2020, 57). This form of ignorance involves both an initial negligent failure (or refusal) to inquire and an akratic-like avoidance of moral responsibility.

This view helps ground the idea that responsibility can cross types of blameworthiness. For example, a military captain negligently fails to prepare his unit for a mission. This neglect allows the captain remain ignorant of its unit's vulnerability—a state of blameworthy ignorance. Then the captain can consciously choose to ignore the urgency of the situation in favor of sleep and make an akratic decision. In the end, the captain is responsible for the akratic act; this is in part because the negligent omission itself is part of the context which leads the akratic decision to occur. Moreover, if the captain willfully ignored signs of vulnerability to maintain a false sense of security, his culpability would deepen, bridging the gap between negligence, ignorance, and akratic failure. The foreseeability of these downstream effects links the earlier wrongful act to the later akratic failure, thus creating a unified chain of moral responsibility (Zimmerman, 2022, 214-217). Such assessments are indicative of a more nuanced view of responsibility as interconnected. Ignoring this interdependence results in counterintuitive and incomplete moral judgments.

Failure to Exercise Capacities

Kershnar asserts that responsibility comes from the exercise of capacities rather than having capacities (Kershnar, 2024, 88). This is a key difference when it comes to his critique of theories like Fischer's guidance control, which suggest that the mere possession of some specific control-related capacity is all that is required for responsibility. By insisting on the exercise of capacities, he demands a more rigorous accounting of responsibility. But his internalism undercuts this very standard, for it removes the external opportunities and contexts that allow capacities to be meaningfully exercised.

This internalist framework contains a gap, as evident in some examples Kershnar himself provides. He discusses, for example, speech acts, such as valid consent, which require mutual agreement and the recognition of the second party (Kershnar, 2024, 87). Consent does not simply occur in the mind; it is an interaction between the person consenting and the recipient. Promise, like consent, is more than an internal intention, it needs to be communicated to a second party who understands this as such, just like consent. So, if responsibility truly lies in exercising capacities, then these external dimensions cannot be ignored.

Kershnar's critique of guidance control underscores an insistence on the exercise of capacities rather than their mere possession. Guidance control is concerned with whether an agent has the requisite capacities for reflective self-control and a responsiveness to reasons (Fischer & Ravizza, 1999, 210). Kershnar believes this is an insufficient condition, because "reasons-responsiveness is a capacity" and responsibility cannot be based on the mere, passive possession of capacities; rather, responsibility requires that our capacities be actively exercised (Kershnar, 2024, 173). But the internalist model runs counter to that insight. For instance, a person's capacity for diligence or foresight cannot be exercised until they are situated in a context that demands its application, like a difficult decision in a medical or ethical dilemma. Just as modal constraints distance responsibility from real-world causation, so does internalism reduce capacities to theoretical possibilities rather than actionable realities.

Beyond Responsibility-Internalism

Responsibility-internalism presents an attempt to ground moral responsibility in internal conditions, requiring that an agent satisfy the epistemic criteria at the moment of action, but it collapses due to its circularity, modal dependency issues, an overly restrictive view of desert, its problematic account of negligence and akrasia, and its unrealistic emphasis on the exercise of moral capacities. In response, a more comprehensive approach to responsibility must reject Kershnar's internalist strictures and recognize the relational, historical, and control-based features of responsibility.

Responsibility in Relationships

P. F. Strawson's classic paper "Freedom and Resentment" (1962) expresses a relational understanding of responsibility that fundamentally opposes responsibility-internalism.

Strawson holds that moral responsibility is best understood from the "participant perspective" that is constituted by "reactive attitudes" such as resentment, indignation, and gratitude (Strawson, 2003, 79). These are not merely psychological reactions but key components of the moral dimensions of our relationships that shape our social and moral expectations.

This framework challenges the internalist commitments by demonstrating that responsibility is not an abstract metaphysical relation between an agent and their mental states but is instead embedded in the way we expect, demand, and enforce moral considerations in human relationships. The practices of praise and blame function irrespective of whether an agent meets strict internalist conditions. Instead of reducing responsibility to an internalist epistemic threshold, Strawson insists that our moral life is constituted by attitudes and expectations that we cannot simply step outside of—suggesting that responsibility is an inescapable aspect of moral life rather than a set of abstract conditions to be met or failed.

Responsibility in Conversation

Michael McKenna's theory expands on P. F. Strawson's framework by presenting moral responsibility as a conversation; some sort of interaction, which McKenna terms a "moral responsibility exchange" and is modeled on the "analogy with a conversational exchange between competent speakers of a natural language" (McKenna, 2024, 29). According to McKenna, responsibility unfolds in three stages. First, there is "moral contribution", in which an agent performs an action that carries moral significance. Second, there is "moral address", where others respond to the agent's action with blame, criticism, or praise, initiating a moral dialogue. Finally, there is "moral account", in which the agent has the opportunity to offer explanations, justifications, or apologies (McKenna, 2012, 88-90). This framework underscores the dialogical and interactive nature of moral responsibility, contrasting with internalist theories that isolate responsibility within an agent's mental states rather than embedding it within the social practices of holding and being held responsible.

McKenna's model provides a dynamic, processual account of moral responsibility which is opposed to the static and momentary internalist criteria. Whereas Kershnar sees responsibility as a condition an agent either meets or fails to meet at a given instant, McKenna situates responsibility in an evolving communicative practice that unfolds across time. This aligns responsibility with how we actually engage in moral practices and underlines Strawson's claim that responsibility is inseparable from our moral interactions.

Responsibility over Time

Zimmerman's chain of culpability presents moral responsibility as an extended sequence of events. The "Origination Thesis" encapsulates this idea: "every chain of culpability is such that at its origin lies an item of behavior for which the agent is directly culpable and which the agent believed, at the time at which the behavior occurred, to be overall morally wrong" (Zimmerman, 2008, 176). Further along this chain are subsequent developments: first, the

ignorance in or from which the agent performed a later action, and second, the action itself. For these subsequent elements, the agent holds only indirect culpability. This structure, reinforced by Zimmerman's "ledger view", conceptualizes an agent's moral record as an accumulating ledger of epistemic and moral failures over time, rather than as a responsibility that arises solely in isolated moments of decision-making (Zimmerman, 1988, 38).

This historically embedded approach directly undermines responsibility-internalism, which confines culpability to an agent's internal epistemic access at the time of action. According to this view, if an agent entirely lacks awareness of their wrongdoing within "the relevant time frame", they cannot be held responsible (Kershnar, 2024, 39). But Zimmerman's framework shows why this falls short in considering long-term epistemic duties: even if the agent does not meet internalist conditions at the time of harm, they remain culpable because their past omissions and failures in moral reflection have already been recorded in their moral ledger. In this way, responsibility extends over time, is cumulative, and not reducible to a single moment of awareness.

Responsibility Through Control

John Martin Fischer's concept of "deep control" offers a "middle way" between two extremes: "total control", which demands tracing responsibility all the way back to the ultimate origins, and "superficial control", which lacks historical depth (Fischer, 2012, 20-21). Instead of requiring alternative possibilities at every decision point, Fischer (1994; 2006) argues that moral responsibility depends on 'guidance control', where agents act through their own decision-making mechanisms, which are reasons-responsive and shaped by their history of taking responsibility. This structure allows for moral accountability without requiring an impossible form of metaphysical self-creation, while also rejecting models that fail to trace responsibility back far enough to an agent's own evaluative standpoint and historical development.

Guidance control is grounded in two key components: a historicist "taking responsibility" requirement, ensuring that actions stem from an agent's authentic moral identity, and a "tracing requirement", which holds agents accountable for past omissions or formative influences. Fischer recognizes that responsibility is shaped by the historical processes through which agents become the kind of people they are. This view avoids internalist demands that responsibility must be tied to mental states at the moment of action. Unlike Kershnar's responsibility-internalism, which collapses responsibility when internal conditions are not met at a particular instant, Fischer's approach—like Goldilocks' choice—is "just right" (Fischer, 2012, 21). It is strong enough to secure responsibility, yet flexible enough to accommodate cases of negligence, akrasia, and the gradual formation of moral character. By embedding responsibility in an agent's history of responsiveness to reasons, guidance control offers a more philosophically tenable alternative to the inflexible constraints of internalism, one that better aligns with our actual moral practices.

Toward a Holistic Account of Moral Responsibility

Taken together, these frameworks—Strawson's reactive attitudes, Fischer's guidance control, Zimmerman's culpable ignorance, and McKenna's conversational model—offer a more comprehensive and defensible account of responsibility that avoids the internalist pitfalls. Rather than reducing moral responsibility to a rigid set of internalist conditions, this alternative approach recognizes that responsibility is relational, control-based, temporally extended, and dialogical.

Responsibility-internalism neglects the lived realities of moral agency, the epistemic demands of culpability, the dispositional nature of reasons-responsiveness, and the social dimension of moral address. In contrast, a model of responsibility that synthesizes these alternative views offers a more philosophically strong and practically applicable construct for moral responsibility. *Responsibility Collapses* ultimately fails to provide a tenable foundation for understanding moral responsibility. If responsibility collapses, as Kershnar claims, it does so under the weight of internalist assumptions that distort its true nature. When freed from these constraints, responsibility emerges not as a brittle puzzle but as a dynamic, resilient, and essential feature of our moral lives.

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