

Comments on “Doing and Allowing and Seeing Oneself as an Agent” (NEC 2009)

I.

In her lucid and thought-provoking paper, Fiona Woollard argues that morality must hold agents more responsible for what they do than what they allow. Put otherwise, anyone who sees herself as a morally accountable agent must hold herself more responsible for what she does than for what she merely allows.

To get us to accept this conclusion, she argues, first, that morality must hold us more responsible for primary manifestations of agency than for secondary manifestations of agency and, second, that doings are primary manifestations of agency while allowings are secondary manifestations.

Although, like Woollard, I favor moral norms that, as I will put it, respect the doing/allowing distinction – i.e. ones that hold us more responsible for doings than for allowings – I remain skeptical about both Woollard’s conclusion and her argument for it.

While Woollard maintains that it is impossible for sane finite agents to hold themselves to moral norms that do not respect the doing/allowing distinction, I think it is possible for agents to do that, but that they should not do so. Moreover, I do not see why facts about agency or responsibility – or at least the ones that Woollard discusses – have much to tell us about why we should respect the doing/allowing distinction.

II.

I hope to challenge Woollard to say more about why sane finite agents could or should not hold themselves to moral norms that do not respect the doing/allowing distinction.

To do so, I will cast doubt on her two-step argument that I just mentioned: first, she aims to establish that morality must respect the distinction between primary and secondary manifestations of agency and then, second, she argues that respecting the primary/secondary agency distinction entails respecting the doing/allowing distinction.

I will grant her claim that morality must respect the distinction between primary and secondary agency but focus attention on what this claim

amounts to; and I will then argue, against Woollard, that once we understand that claim, it appears that morality can make a distinction between primary and secondary manifestations of agency without respecting the doing/allowing distinction. In other words, I will argue that respecting the primary/secondary agency distinction does not entail respecting the doing/allowing distinction.

III.

Woollard claims, rightly I think, that morality must respect some distinction between primary and secondary manifestations of agency – it must hold us more responsible for primary manifestations than for secondary ones. To clarify why this is true and what it means, we should briefly review her argument.

She argues that if a moral norm holds us equally responsible for all the causal effects of our agency – if it tells us to treat all the effects of our agency as “primary” – then we could not view ourselves as exerting our agency in order to live up to that norm. We could not even view ourselves as agents at all.

Her most telling justification for those claims appeals to the cognitive burden shouldered by any agent who tries to live up to such a norm:

“The agent’s understanding of what counts as part of his agency is so expansive that it becomes meaningless. When so much counts as a primary manifestation of agency, it does not seem as if anything does. There are so many ramifications, so much to take it; the flood of upshots overwhelms any sense of the agent’s having an effect on the world. The agent cannot recognize the manifestations of his agency and thus is not able to see himself as an agent.” (6)

One obvious question is whether this consideration can support a conclusion about all possible moral norms and agents. Are we to suppose that God would be overwhelmed with the flood of ramifications if he tried to hold himself equally responsible for all the effects of his agency?

But let’s put that issue aside and focus on the moral norms we might hold ourselves to. Here, she seems to have a solid point; if a human agent tries to take equal responsibility for every effect of her agency, she will be overwhelmed; consequently, any human moral norm will make a distinction between primary and secondary effects (or manifestations) of agency such that finite agents can comprehend the primary effects (manifestations) for which she will be held primarily responsible.

III.

Assume that morality needs to respect the primary/secondary agency distinction in such a way that it avoids claiming that an agent is equally responsible for all the effects of his agency. Why think that this entails that morality must respect the doing/allowing distinction? In other words, why couldn't morality hold us equally responsible for doings and allowings and still avoid holding us responsible for all the effects of our agency?

In fact, I think this is the question I think Woollard needs to say more about.

In her insightful and promising account of the doing and allowing distinction, she says a lot about what makes something a doing, but not as much about what makes something an allowing. She does say this: "an agent merely allows an upshot if his behavior is relevant to, but not part of, the sequence leading to that upshot." (8)

If we agreed to this claim about allowings, it seems, then an agent would count as allowing any effect of his agency that is not his doing. And a moral norm that held an agent responsible for both his doings and his allowings would effectively hold him responsible for all the effects of this agency. And, as we have granted, no such moral norm is suitable, at least for us.

But this view of *allowing* does not fit with the way we actually use that concept: an agent allows something to occur only if he could, and perhaps should, be aware that that thing might occur and that his behavior is "relevant" to whether it will occur or not.

[Talk through examples – one in which the agent could not notice the prospective effect of their agency and one in which the agent does not notice the effect but should.]

And any plausible moral norm that holds people responsible for allowings as well as doings would have a sensitivity to that point built into it. No plausible moral norm that holds people equally responsible for both doings and allowings would hold people responsible for all the effects of their behavior or agency, because there are many of which they are blamelessly ignorant.

To make this point more concrete, it will help to consider a specific proposal about which effects a moral norm could hold us responsible for without respecting the doing/allowing distinction.

Roughly, the following two propositions capture the type of norm I have in mind:

- P allowed E = P had the ability to prevent E, P should have known she had the ability to prevent E, but P did not prevent E.
- P is fully responsible for E if (1) E is something P did (see Woollard account of *doing*), or (2) E is something that P allowed to happen.

Now as I said near the start of my comments, I do not think we should adopt a moral norm that endorses these propositions. But as far as I can see, an agent could adopt some such norm, hold herself to it, and coherently view herself as being responsible for living up to it or not.

Why would holding oneself to such a norm overwhelm an ordinary agent with ramifications? Why couldn't a finite agent try to live up to such a norm, judge his success or failure, and also judge whether he is responsible for his success or failure – where responsibility is understood along the lines the proposal suggests?

As far as I can see, this is certainly possible.

And since holding oneself to a norm of the indicated type would not threaten the agent's ability to see himself as a responsible agent, Woollard's argument does not seem to help us understand why we should not hold ourselves to such a norm either.

IV.

In closing, I want to note that none of my critical remarks casts doubt on the viability of Woollard's promising account of doing – I only hope they push her to say more about allowing and her claim that if a norm holds agents equally responsible for doings and allowings then no agent can coherently hold herself to that norm.