INTRODUCTION

Metaskepticism about Moral Responsibility

Just after the shootings at Virginia Tech University, a reporter for the National Public Radio program *Day to Day* set out to interview Koreans living in Los Angeles about the massacre. At first the reporter had trouble finding anyone who was willing to answer her questions. Some actually fled from the microphone. Finally, a Korean realtor agreed to be interviewed. He claimed to be deeply ashamed about the incident. The reporter was incredulous: "Why?" she asked him. "You had nothing to do with it!" The man replied, "I know, but he was a fellow Korean."[1]

In the same week Rev. Dong Sun Lim, founder of the Oriental Mission Church in Koreatown, released this statement: "All Koreans in South Korea—as well as here—must bow their heads and apologize to the people of America." And South Korean Ambassador Lee Taesik called on Korean Americans not just to be ashamed, but to repent. He suggested a thirty-two-day fast, one day for each victim of the carnage.

Many Americans found this attitude baffling. Why should Koreans living thousands of miles away from Blacksburg, Virginia, feel compelled to apologize, never mind starve themselves, for something over which they had no control? What did they have to apologize *for*? Adrian Hong, a board member of the Mirae

Foundation, a national organization of Korean-American college students, offers this explanation:

> First-generation Koreans tend to have a cultural sense of shared responsibility. If something good happens to one, it happens to all Koreans, and if something bad happens to one, it happens to all of them. [2]

UCLA anthropology professor Kyeyoung Park adds:

> In Western culture there is an emphasis on guilt; in many Eastern cultures the emphasis is on shame. I think Korean-Americans want to do something [about the incident] because they feel ashamed. Some of them feel *truly responsible*, even though it is ridiculous to think they are responsible for the action of this person.[3] (italics added)

The Koreans' sense of shared blame, along with the failure of many Americans to understand it, is one example of variation in perspectives about moral responsibility across cultures. Many of these differences concern beliefs about the *conditions* or *criteria* for fair assignment of blame and praise. The incredulity of the *Day to Day* reporter—"But you had nothing to do with it!"—illustrates the common Western intuition that moral responsibility has a robust control condition: in order to be genuinely blameworthy for a state of affairs, you must have played an active role in bringing it about. This intuition is so deeply embedded in the Western individualistic belief system that it seems self-evident, like a mathematical truth or an elementary rule of logic. But like other intuitions and beliefs about moral responsibility, it is not nearly as universal as we might think.

These cultural differences are not merely interesting from an anthropological perspective. They are also philosophically significant—deeply relevant, I will argue, to contemporary debates

about moral responsibility. This is because (1) contemporary philosophical theories of moral responsibility develop *universal* conditions for fair assignments of blame and praise; and (2) they appeal to intuitions about cases and principles to justify these conditions. Consequently, these theories rely (at least implicitly) on empirical assumptions about the universality of the intuitions to which they appeal. In this book, I will develop an empirical and philosophical challenge to this assumption, one that if successful casts doubt on the prospect of establishing any theory of responsibility as objectively correct.

Plan of the Book

Chapter 1 examines the methodology that philosophers employ to defend their theories of moral responsibility, and reveals the ways in which they rely on appeals to intuition. I also show that most leading theories aspire to universality; that is, they aim to provide conditions for moral responsibility that hold for human beings across cultures. I then identify the crucial empirical assumptions upon which theories of moral responsibility rely because of these common features.

The next three chapters develop my challenge to these assumptions by examining evidence for cross-cultural variation in intuitions about the conditions for moral responsibility. Chapter 2 focuses on the norms, attitudes, and practices of groups commonly referred to as "honor cultures." Chapter 3 examines literature highlighting the differences between "individualist" societies (e.g., the United States, Great Britain, and Western Europe) and "collectivist societies" (e.g., Japan, China, and South Korea). I survey literature from a wide variety of disciplines, including anthropology, social psychology, cultural psychology, sociology, and classical literature. My overarching goal is to give the reader

a taste of how differently human beings have regarded moral responsibility across cultures and throughout history.

Of course, some defenders of objectivity or universality are happy to concede the existence of this variation. But they claim that the differences can be explained away as the products of irrationality, superstition, conceptual ambiguity, or ignorance about non-moral facts. According to this view, some cultures are simply mistaken about the conditions for moral responsibility, just as some cultures are mistaken about geological or biological facts. In the search for the truth about responsibility, what matters are the attitudes of "fully informed" individuals operating under more ideal conditions of rationality. Such fully informed individuals would share common judgments and attitudes regarding the conditions of moral responsibility, and it is *those* judgments that either constitute the truth or guide us to the truth about moral responsibility.

I believe this is the most promising strategy available for defending universalist or objectivist theories of moral responsibility. Its success, however, is dependent on a crucial empirical assumption. Specifically, the assumption that under ideal conditions of rationality human beings would come to share considered intuitions about moral responsibility *whatever their physical and social environment.* In chapter 4, perhaps the most important chapter in the book, I raise serious doubts about the plausibility of this assumption by examining the origins of these intuitive differences and the psychological mechanisms that underlie them. I review recent theories in the evolution of cooperation, which suggest that a wide variety of norms may emerge as a response to the different features of a culture's social and physical environment. I then appeal to theories about the psychology of norm acquisition to argue that variation in norms about responsibility is grounded in cognitive mechanisms as-

sociated with emotional responses and intuitions about deservingness. Since our attitudes and norms are grounded in the deepest levels of our cognitive psychologies, which in turn are shaped by our social and physical environment, I conclude that it is unlikely that we would ever reach agreement about the criteria of moral responsibility—even under ideal conditions of rationality. Since there will always be variation in human environments, there will be always be significant variation in the core starting intuitions that form the basis of our considered, reflective judgments about moral responsibility.

By the end of chapter 4, I will have presented evidence that there are significant differences in intuitions about moral responsibility across cultures, and that at least some of these differences are not resolvable by rational argument or philosophical analysis. Since theories of moral responsibility ultimately stand or fall according to their intuitive plausibility, I conclude that there is no set of conditions for moral responsibility that applies universally, and therefore that no theory of moral responsibility is objectively correct. This challenge applies not only to positive accounts of moral responsibility, but also to skeptical or nihilistic theories, which claim that human beings *everywhere* cannot deserve praise or blame. Consequently, I have labeled my position *metaskepticism about moral responsibility.*[4]

Part Two of the book examines the implications of metaskepticism. Chapter 5 compares metaskepticism and other non-traditional views of moral responsibility, focusing especially on the work of Richard Double. I then sketch out a methodology for arriving at settled beliefs about moral responsibility, given the truth of metaskepticism. I argue that although no theory can be objectively or universally true, there are principled ways in which we can approach moral responsibility within our own social, cultural, and psychological frameworks. The chapter concludes with

a discussion of four factors that must be taken into account if we are to arrive at reasonable relativized judgments about the conditions for blame and praise.

My final two chapters apply these factors in an attempt to reach the most reasonable all-things-considered judgment for people in individualistic societies who share my starting intuitions. These chapters are in large part programmatic. Their primary goal is to illustrate how one can evaluate different positions on moral responsibility while remaining consistent with the metaskeptical thesis. Chapter 6 considers arguments in favor of restricted versions of libertarianism and compatibilism. Chapter 7 examines the case for first-order skepticism or eliminativism about moral responsibility, and offers a very tentative endorsement of this position in the context of our environment, historical period, and circumstances.