The Monist, 2021, 104, 168–181
doi: 10.1093/monist/onaa030
Article

OXFORD

Vicarious Responsibility and the Problem of 'Too Much': Moral Luck from the Perspective of Ordinary Ethics

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores vicarious responsibility and circumstantial luck from a first-person perspective, drawing on ethnographic research on parenting in Reform Era China. The paper focuses on how informants drew boundaries between what they could and could not control in raising a child who might thrive in a hypercompetitive society. In doing so, the paper engages the question, "What kind of moral agent do we want?" by proposing that we also ask, "What kind of moral agent do we find?" In contrast to the hypothetical figure of a walled-off agent who must be convinced of the duty to take on responsibilities in a circumstance of moral luck, empirical research finds instead a vulnerable agent who has taken on 'too much'.

The paradox of moral luck presents a problem that invites denial, evasion, or absorption, all of which attempt to protect or restore the consistency of the principles on which moral reasoning is based (Lillehammer n.d., forthcoming 21; Urban Walker 1991, 15–16). It does not seem fair to hold someone responsible for an outcome related to factors over which an agent had no control (resultant luck), to judge a person's character for behavior that was shaped by circumstances that person did not choose to be born into (circumstantial luck), or to deem a person blameworthy for wrongdoing committed by an associate (vicarious liability). To do so violates the 'control condition', an intuitive principle limiting moral assessment to factors under an agent's control, leading some philosophers to argue that moral luck is illusory (see Urban Walker 1991, 15–16). It has even been said that the doctrine of collective responsibility—which holds in certain scenarios an entire society or social network responsible for the conduct of a single individual—is a "barbarous notion" found amongst "primitive peoples [who] pay little heed to the individual" (Lewis 1948, 3, 15). And yet, reason- and principle-defying distribution of responsibility in both situations of moral luck happens all the time in practice, while formal analysis has shown how moral assessment in cases that present the starkest conflict between the

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control condition and luck sensitivity will remain sensitive to luck (Lillehammer forthcoming). There will be responsibilities to bear and distribute (ibid. 20).

As an anthropologist, I arrive at the debate from a different direction. I too take interest in the phenomenon of blame distribution, but the prominence of the nonrational in human experience (see Shweder 1984), which may be observed in all sorts of social phenomena including moral luck, is hardly surprising. In social anthropology we learn to understand seemingly unreasonable behavior as symbolic behavior that says something to someone about something. This goes not only for 'primitive peoples', which of course is not a useful term, but for any human person or group engaged in social practice directed toward certain ends.

E.E. Evans-Pritchard's account of Azande witchcraft is famous in anthropology for delineating a philosophical system that was enacted in social practice. In responding to misfortune by making an accusation, the Azande select the "socially relevant cause" out of the multiplicity of causes they recognize as being involved, with the understanding that every explanation answers a different question, and not every cause is amenable to human intervention (1976). But, and I believe this is an underappreciated aspect of Evans-Pritchard's account, whether witchcraft is attributed or not depends on the proximity or distance of a given person to the misfortune to be explained. In other words, how responsibility gets distributed depends on the position of the judge—they may be a kinsperson to the dead man (ibid. 27–29), or they may be an observer on the side of taboos that have been violated.[1] Whatever the case, the point to be established here is that ordinary people engage in the labor of discrimination just as philosophers do. Philosophers and social actors do however differ in their purpose. For the former, the issue is a matter of determining what is fair and reasonable to expect of a given agent "engulfed" by a set of externalities (Lewis 1948, 14–15). Well-reasoned discrimination concerns law, justice, citizenship, and policy. For social actors, the labor of discrimination tends to follow in the wake of a misfortune that directly affects the things and people who matter most. In the cases I will consider in this paper, doing the right thing concerns moral ease, well-being, and what regrets an agent may have to live with.

In this paper, I draw from ethnographic research I conducted on popular advice for parents in Reform Era China, focusing on the lived experience of middle-class mothers who struggled to reconcile new definitions of good parenting with the realities of academic and social competition in the context of a major state project to 'improve population quality'. Although this research material was collected more than one decade ago,[2] the problem of competition has only intensified in the 2010s and it happens to speak volumes to the issue of vicarious responsibility and luck. In presenting this material, I hope to offer a first-person perspective on responsibility and luck, to counter the picture of moral agency as presented in third-person philosophy. In the latter, the presumed moral agent is one who takes on too little responsibility, or it is an agent deemed to be accountable *for* something—a duty or a requirement, abstractly or formally conceived—rather than accountable *to* someone, a concrete person who matters, unique in her singularity and irreplaceability. In contrast to the hypothetical parent who may be responsible, but has not yet taken responsibility, for something a child has done as found in the philosophy literature, the concrete parents I came to know keenly felt the burden to do right by their child. It is a burden they recognized as being as much a matter of circumstance as moral ease. They used the phrase 对得起 in speaking of this responsibility, which may be translated as “to not have the slightest guilt/shame over one’s own actions in relation to the wellbeing of an other” (cf. DeFrancis 2003). I hope to show that the difference between too much versus too little, accountable for versus accountable to, is a difference as significant as the difference between kinship and state bureaucracy as ideal types, between first-person experience versus third-person judgment, between ordinary ethics versus normative philosophy.[3]

1. WHAT KIND OF AGENT DO WE WANT? WHAT KIND OF AGENTS DO WE FIND?

Addressing the misfortune of being related to an individual or associated with a group that has committed a grave wrongdoing, Marina Oshana offers the concept of ‘moral taint’, which recognizes the involuntary nature by which responsibility can travel like a virus or be inherited “like a flawed gene” (2006, 366, 373). Is an individual in such a circumstance directly responsible? Oshana’s answer is no; the issue is not whether an agent should or should not bear responsibility for the grievous transgression, the burden lies instead in how he *responds* to finding oneself in a situation of moral taint. One could either refuse to respond or try to do the right thing (ibid. 372, 356, 372). In a similar vein, David Enoch offers the concept “penumbral agency” in addressing both vicarious responsibility and resultant luck to discriminate between what lies in the core of a person’s agency from the area directly outside this core to clarify what an agent is in fact being judged on. Like Oshana, Enoch accepts that one indeed need not and cannot take responsibility for things that lie beyond one’s sphere of direct control, but when it comes to the things that lie in the area of penumbral agency, i.e., the actions of one’s child or of one’s country, one can, by “an act of will,” “*take* responsibility, and thereby *become* responsible” (Enoch 2012, 101). This distinction allows Enoch to demonstrate that what an agent is being judged on is whether or not the response to a duty that has arisen secondarily from an unfortunate association or a fatal accident is ‘appropriate’ or not.

While the focus on response and effort in Enoch and Oshana is immensely helpful in clarifying what people ought to be judged on from a normative perspective, and also why judgments occur in common practice in the first place, what I find less clear is how they understand what motivates appropriate response. They in fact mention a variety of voluntary and involuntary forces and reasons, but give only the former systematic treatment. Coming from another discipline, I cannot help but find the emphasis on moral requirements and the will rather striking, given how taboo it is to speak in the language of voluntarism in anthropology and our agnosticism about norms. But mostly I find this orientation curious for assuming a moral agent who must be convinced—the kind of person who might say, “your problem is not my problem.” Following his point that “we should take interest in the world” (ibid. 127), Enoch reformulates the same proposition in stating “there are sometimes moral requirements to incorporate certain things into one’s self” (ibid. 128). In a similar vein, Oshana describes the process of erasing moral taint as consisting of a "willed, purposeful effort to travel the distance" between the wrong committed and the affected parties (2006, 369). This process of atonement is usually painful because it involves turning a critical lens on oneself. "But it is necessary," Oshana writes (ibid).

It should come as no surprise that I would feel a sense of affinity with the answer Susan Wolf gives to the question what kind of moral agent do we want, the person who is unconditionally committed to morality or the person who does not have a single thought too many in a situation in which the safety of a loved one is at stake (2012). Wolf prefers the agent who partially cares so much about certain people, illustrated by the husband who loves his wife, he will, when faced with the choice to save a stranger or his wife, be so totally filled up with "the sound and sight of his wife in danger" he thinks no single thought nor exerts any will to do the morally requisite thing (84). This hypothetical husband simply acts.

Indeed, "some situations lie beyond justifications" (Williams 1981, 18). It is a point that coheres well with human conduct as we find it in empirical research, which does not negate the importance of morality, specifically an ethics of care, to ordinary people themselves. It is also a point that helps to explain a situation opposite to having to convince someone they in principle have 'additional' responsibilities, that is, situations in which the taking of responsibility is as instantaneous as a hypothetical husband leaping into the sea. Urban Walker is right to point out that "moral luck threatens paradox only in the context of a view of moral agents as noumenal" (1991, 17), for an agent might blame herself before anybody else does for a misfortune that has befallen a loved one resulting from factors she had no control over, or, take vicarious joy for an experience that is not hers in a strict sense. Even in the most atomized of postindustrial societies, people will have friends, family, lovers, and projects they care deeply about, i.e. loved ones who are *already* well incorporated into an agent's sense of self. She need not have a single thought of "going the distance" when an occasion calls for it, because the interest of the other is already an interest of her own.

Allow me to make the point by quoting the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins at length, for it approaches the question of vicarious responsibility and luck from another direction:

> It is the intelligibility in common ethnographic reports of the diffusion among kin of agency and material interest, of ritual participation in birthing and dying, and of the effects of bodily injury. The same sense of conjoined existence is involved in taking responsibility for the wrongful acts of relatives, for their fortunes in the hunt or war, even for the shape and health of their bodies. In sum, where being is mutual, experience itself is transpersonal . . . . (2013, 44)

If we agree with Sahlins, then it is easy to understand how responsibility may be taken without "a single thought too many" in the context of kinship. To put this another way, the act of taking will be an involuntary rather than voluntary matter. In the historical circumstance I will consider in this paper, the act of taking is compelled by the force of the first-person moral emotion known as agent-regret, which consists of wishing one could have acted or done otherwise to avoid a negative outcome, even though the agent knows it is futile to do so. The emotion seizes upon the agent like the sight and sound of a wife in danger, filling and encompassing her concerns to such a degree that they become as much a part of her as the other with whom she shares a conjoined existence. It is likely she has taken on too much rather than too little responsibility, thereby presenting a problem that inverts the one entertained in normative thought.

In emphasizing the importance of kinship to an understanding of vicarious experience and vicarious responsibility, I do not mean to say that all of life is lived in a state of fusion with intimate others. Moreover, in accepting vicarious experience as a social, hermeneutic, and emotional reality, I also do not mean to say that ordinary people always and only have a hazy understanding of what they are responsible for wherever kin are concerned. People do draw lines between what they can and cannot control, just as normative philosophy draws lines in defining and justifying what is fair to assess. A professional philosopher and a person in the midst of ongoing action differ in their reasons for doing so, but the stakes are high in both domains.

2. THE CIRCUMSTANCE IS A PILEUP OF PARTICULARS THAT IMPINGE ON YOU

It often starts with an uncomfortable realization that one had done something wrong as a parent—failed to notice, or failed to prioritize in the right way. For Zhou Huawei, it happened when her daughter Jiajia entered the first grade:

> We realized, she was starting the race behind everybody else. She really was not the same. I don't know what it's like in America, I doubt that parents squawk about pouring in all kinds of things during preschool. There is a lot of that here! I suddenly realized that my kid was downstream.

Zhou Huawei and her husband had been laissez-faire about preschool, "It's just preschool," they thought, "And so what if she's stupid?!" Besides, they simply did not have time. Everyone was just "one busy mess." With a long and arduous road ahead, why bother? Then came the awakening: Jiajia was alone in not having yet learned basic arithmetic and character recognition.

The very banality of this story may obscure the moral import of ordinary family life—for this is hardly an extreme case, no traffic accident has occurred, no grievous wrongdoing to atone for. The problem of realizing that a child has already fallen behind her peers is such a familiar story in China it has found its way into pop culture: at the beginning of the 2015 hit television series *Tiger Mom* (*Huma maoba*), a certain incident causes the protagonist to realize she has been too devoted to her career to the neglect of her preschool daughter. Mundane and unspectacular, one might assume family life and a mother's work-life dilemma cannot be good to think with since 'natural' love does for familial morality what obligation does for citizenship. But of course it is not so simple. People do not naturally live in total fusion with kin, as anyone who has ever experienced a family should know. Instead, lived experience oscillates between mutuality and disconnection (cf. Kuan 2017), with the former being a nice ideal and the latter resulting from the myriad contingencies of life.

The middle-class families I knew in Kunming were all double-income families who could not afford to be otherwise given the pressures of modern life and the expenses of rearing a child. And, like working women in other parts of the world, my informants worked a 'second shift', taking responsibility for managing the daily details of a child's academic career, unwittingly becoming the so-called 'tiger mother'. In the advice literature consumed by the parents I knew, experts urged their readers to control themselves, criticizing them for loving their children but not understanding how to love them the right way. According to the popular experts, Chinese parents are too 'nagging'; they 'pull at sprouts to help them grow', 'hate that iron does not become steel', 'meddle in the affairs of others', 'raise filial sons under the club', and 'make mountains out of molehills' (Kuan 2015, 6).

Indeed the Chinese mothers I came to know were guilty of some of these things, but their 'problematic' behaviour must be traced not to 'Chinese culture' nor weak control of hope on the part of an individual parent. Instead, I have argued before, their hope and anxiety must be situated in a broader historical context (Kuan 2015). What I would like to emphasize here is how the hypervigilance of the Chinese mother can arise from a sudden realization in the midst of routine, compelling a full reckoning with the circumstances one must contend with in negotiating the competing demands of life. They include the social pressure to submit one's child to a highly competitive race to achieve—a competition everyone recognizes as problematic yet impossible to escape. One father put it like this to me, speaking for himself, friends, and colleagues, "We all feel it's terrible. But it's useless to know, you still have to let your kid go and study."

In the late 1990s, the central government expanded university enrollment as part of a larger project to stimulate domestic consumption, but the decision led to academic inflation, creating stiff competition for graduates. The first cohort that entered university under expanded enrollment hit the job market the year before I conducted the bulk of my field research in 2004. Academic inflation was just one of many factors that contributed to the anxieties my informants felt about the future their children faced, seeing how competitive entry-level positions in their own industries had become. While China under Mao valued serving the people and the nation, Reform Era China has rapidly become a society of striving individuals (Yan 2013), generating a sense amongst ordinary parents that success in a stratified society starts with attending the right preschool and 'not losing at the starting line' (*buyao shu zai qipao xian*).

Parents like Zhou Huawei learn this by way of experience, i.e., the uncomfortable realization that she and her spouse had been too lax and that the cruelty of social competition extends right into the primary school classroom in the form of petty classroom politics such as who the teacher likes and who is being mistreated. In such a context, the moral becoming of a young parent consists of the realization that a small trivial misstep could over time give way to a situation that will be much harder to act on in the future. Echoing a logic François Jullien has described in his work on Chinese understandings of efficacy (1995), they came to understand that the discernment of tendency (*shi*) and the timing of action is everything. To influence a course of events, to avoid a particular state of affairs, one must divert a tendency in its incipient stage, otherwise any effort will be insignificant in the face of accumulated force (ibid. 191). Even if it is only primary school, a teacher's impression of your child will have wider repercussions because core curriculum teachers follow their students up to graduation.

Zhou Huawei once ran into Jiajia's homeroom teacher on the street, so she figured she would make some conversation and ask about Jiajia's behavior. The teacher responded haughtily, "Ye-oh! That Zhao Jiajia of yours. *Aiya*, doesn't speak much. It's like she's deeply afraid she's going to do something wrong. Personality is a bit introverted." Although Zhou Huawei was in disbelief that this teacher had already made such a conclusion, she acted deferentially and promised that she would go home and work on her daughter. In her mind, however, the teacher's assessment was unfair. Maybe Jiajia is the type of person who prefers to suss out a situation before she reveals herself. Meanwhile, in the classroom, Jiajia was often picked on and scolded by the teacher, causing her to feel stifled. Influenced by the attitude of the teacher, the other students did not treat Jiajia so well either, no one ever took interest in the toys and things she brought to share. "See, our environment is like this," Zhou Huawei remarked wryly.

The importance of managing a teacher's impression relates to a phenomenon known as 'discrimination in education' (*jiaoyu paichi*), one of the many issues problematized by advocates for education reform critical of China's exam-oriented education system. Because schools and teachers are evaluated according to rates of promotion and student test scores, they inadvertently focus on nurturing the promising students while rejecting the bad ones. Found in both primary and secondary schools, unfair treatment is just one of many modes of 'elimination' (*taotai*), a term I heard again and again in the course of my research. Other more extreme modes may include holding a student back, suspension, or expulsion (Man 1997), and in some cases at the level of secondary school, it may take the form of a subtle pressure to leave 'voluntarily'.

Ironically the risk of elimination is significant at the most elite of schools, which have reputations to protect and records to maintain. In Kunming, primary-level classrooms at reputable schools are easily 70-students large, having attracted families from outside of a school district willing to pay additional fees. Parents seek out good schools out of a concern for effective teaching methods hoping to secure not only academic success but also some modicum of life quality for one's child. Otherwise, your kid will be stuck with poorly skilled teachers who simply drown their students in useless homework assignments. It would be like running on a treadmill that goes nowhere, and you want your child to be in the actual race, even if it means exposing him to the risk of disappearing into the crowd. When this does happen, the fault will be yours, because you failed to notice and catch the emergence of a negative tendency when it was still incipient. The significance of timely action concerns not only what will happen in the course of your child's academic career, but also what will happen in the course of your child's life. Classroom size was one of many numbers that filled a mother's horizon of concerns: one point three billion people living in China, ten million high school students taking the college entrance exam, ninety-eight thousand graduating primary school students in one city, three to four hundred million primary school students, 30,000 *yuan* in additional school fees for a single point below an admission threshold—these were numbers that informants commonly cited to convey the odds, as they perceived them, that their child was up against. The scale of these numbers raised questions such as what can I control as a parent, what is within my sphere of influence, and what am I responsible for?

I met Zhang Xin at an evening class for mothers focused on the 'education of affects' (*qinggan jiaoyu*) in child rearing. She fit perfectly into the profile of a 'good mother'—an avid consumer of the parenting literature, she understood that a parent's responsibility does not end with dropping the child off at school or taking him to an activity class, a common source of teachers' complaints. While her friends and colleagues sometimes took the night off to go out or go to the gym, Zhang Xin would stay home with her son Deng Siwen, seven-years-old when I first met them, to study from his *New Concept English* book.

I eventually learned Zhang Xin didn't always have this kind of time, something she felt agent-regret over. For the first six years of Deng Siwen's life, Zhang Xin was occupied. In her midtwenties, right around 1996 when Siwen was born, she decided to go back to school because expectations for higher degrees at the hospital where she worked as a nurse were increasing. Since she had only a diploma from a vocational high school, she studied the college prep high school curriculum and participated in the national college entrance exam (*gaokao*). Zhang Xin went on to university from there, and then to Beijing for advanced studies. In the meantime, her husband was always out of town for work, so the couple hired a nanny and sent their son to preschool at a very young age.

Zhang Xin attributed Siwen's ill temper to those years of not having had a relationship with him. "Sometimes, his temper is a little, you know . . . really weird. It makes me feel like, maybe it's all because I didn't do a good job guiding him, you know?" Although Zhang Xin recognized that "regret is futile" (*houhui ye meiyong*), she still blamed herself all the same. The painful critical lens Marina Oshana has in mind in describing how the process of atonement ought to work (2006, 369) is for Zhang Xin woven into the fabric of everyday life. She need not "travel the distance" because Regret makes a visit whenever parenting gets tough. Zhang Xin illustrated her disquiet by telling me a story about a physical fight that had occurred between Siwen and his three-year-old cousin, Zhang Xin's younger sister's son. Siwen was sitting on the sofa while his little cousin climbed about. The cousin, who was six or seven years Siwen's junior, started playing rough and accidentally caused the back of Siwen's head to hit the wall. The impact made an audible *thunk*. Siwen flew into a rage.

According to Zhang Xin, Siwen began to kick his cousin relentlessly, accusing him of intentionally wanting to hurt him. Zhang Xin immediately tried to resolve the conflict and reason with her son. But Siwen was unstoppable. Zhang Xin lost her temper and resorted to giving her son a taste of his own medicine. Feeling regret for her reaction, Zhang Xin said to Siwen, who was sitting with us at this point of the conversation, "Mommy shouldn't have been like that either, right? But Mommy had already tried to reason with you. If I didn't adopt some action, there wasn't any way for you to calm down! I felt like I had no other choice." She then turned to me, asked me what she should have done in the situation, and went on to say this: "That's why I feel like it actually isn't easy for a parent to really, *tsk*, well, raise a child to adulthood, *oh*?" Although we had been talking about the past, in relating this incident she began to lay out an array of concerns that were oriented toward an uncertain future and externalities she has very little control over, projecting in imagination a possibility that was near at hand.

The son of a friend, a boy who is close to Siwen in age, a boy who attended the same school as her own son, recently transferred to a different school. "That kid's temper is. . . I feel is. . . It isn't good. *Tsk.* His mother is also very dutiful," she began. The boy was quite naughty in class, "so he didn't give the teacher a good impression. The teacher simply felt like, 'You're *just* that kind of kid. That kind of, you're the *bad* type.' This is the worst scenario." Zhang Xin continued, lowering her voice to a whisper as she spoke, the boy had started to hang out with children of the nouveau-riche who liked to gamble amongst themselves. He may have even joined some 'dime plucking gangs' (*bamaodui*), gangs that bully for money. That this boy had strayed off course, that his relationship with his teacher had deteriorated so much her friend put him in another school, was like a portent of Siwen's near future.

By the same token, the story offered a cautionary tale of the risks a good parent can avoid because this friend's discernment of a negative tendency in a timely manner saved her son from going off course. "The boy was only going along because it was fun, he did not understand it is wrong. But if her son had continued and had gotten deeper (*shenru xiaqu*), then it would have been very dangerous (*weixian*)."[4]

Zhang Xin finished telling this story with an assertion that was clearly directed toward her son, since Siwen, who had been drifting in and out of the living room, was sitting with us once again:

> (*In a sweet voice*) One day, when he is all grown up, I will feel very happy. If things turn out otherwise, and I look back on things, I won't have any regrets. I will feel like I've tried my best. I don't wish that he becomes anything necessarily, just grow up and that's good enough, (*to her son*), right?

With this invitation to join our conversation, Deng Siwen took the opportunity to lodge a complaint: "Your education method really is a failure. You don't even have patience." Zhang Xin laughed, nervously. I laughed too, to dispel the tension. The two had already exchanged gestures of reconciliation after the incident, but clearly not all was forgiven. Rather than admit to her wrong again, Zhang Xin tried to make very clear that she was doing the best she could. While she had expressed feelings of regret over missed years only moments ago, with Siwen sitting with us she insisted on having no regrets:

> The point is, everything Mommy should do, Mommy's done, don't you think? I've done everything I was supposed to. And I haven't wronged you. And I don't have any regrets. Down the line, what you need to put effort into, what you know is important, you ought to put in the effort yourself. Because that's how it is in China, *ah?* Such a big population. Yet so few opportunities. Able persons are as common as air.

3. "SAD TOO"

Where there is mutuality experience is vicarious and the taking of responsibility is near-instantaneous. The moral issue for the mothers I knew was not 'trying to do the right thing' when they realized they had failed to discern what was required of them by the external circumstance. The issue was instead 'doing the right thing by trying.' Let us return to the case of Zhou Huawei and consider her description of her daughter's experience of first-grade to glean something about the dynamics of response in a situation of mutuality:

> She often felt sad over not getting 100 on a test. Would cry. Because everyone else got 100. Because everyone else has learned before! How can you be like someone who has learned before? Right? Of course she's going to be different. So she was very sad. So then I noticed this and I was sad too. Because if she has pressure, I have pressure. This pressure is two-sided. It's not that I give the pressure to the kid and I don't have any pressure. I have pressure too. So I *immediately* spring into action, you know?

Seeing that she could no longer let things run their course naturally, Zhou Huawei started tutoring Jiajia in math, even though she personally hated looking at numbers and had poor methods that rely on memorization rather than technique. It did not matter, for the time being, because the point was less about the math itself but instead social relations that required management. The method was good enough for manipulating the propensity in the situation, as Jullien might put it (1995). Jiajia was one of two students to score 100 points on a first-grade final exam. Zhou Huawei recalled, "I felt like I wanted to show them, to what degree my child was bad. 'You want to insist that I'm so bad, well, I'll show you'."

Scoring 100 on the math exam gave Jiajia the self-confidence she had previously lacked. By the second grade, she had completely transformed her standing in class by publishing compositions in local newspapers—compositions Zhou Huawei sweetened up. One of Jiajia's two compositions was, in fact, unrealistically clever for a second grader. Titled "Memoirs of an Official," it recounted Jiajia's experience of being the world's smallest state bureaucrat (*guan*). The appointment came after some improvement in her academic performance and it was a responsibility she often complained about to her mom. As the world's smallest office-holder, she didn't understand why she had to work so hard while officials above her did nothing. Jiajia complained to her mother about it. So Zhou Huawei encouraged her daughter to express her feelings and taught her the art of social satire: if you have grievances, you can express them indirectly with humour. In the essay,

> The physical education committee members go and climb the jungle gym, for the sake of strengthening one's muscles; the art committee members in the corridor wiggle their necks, wiggle their butts, for the sake of beautifying their physique; the learning committee members take huge gulps of fresh air, for the sake of taking inspiration from nature.

Meanwhile, the author drenches herself in sweat fulfilling her duties as a lowly assistant to the chief.

According to Zhou Huawei, the teacher liked this composition so much she read it out loud to the class, and the entire room roared with laughter because so much of it was true. Couching social critique in the innocence of playground politics, the essay was so good it was published in a local newspaper, earning Jiajia 50 RMB in royalties, points for the homeroom teacher, and 10 seconds of fame for her school. The whole affair dramatically transformed Jiajia's standing in the eyes of her teacher and her classmates, even though Zhou Huawei had committed one of the many transgressions popular experts criticize Chinese parents for being guilty of: 'meddling in the affairs of others'. We may say Zhou Huawei took on *too* much responsibility, responsibility that was not hers to take, as she put it herself:

> Of course everybody is going to say, your kid published something in the second grade, it's actually fake. She can't possibly write something so good! That's true, I can admit that. You think her teacher doesn't know? Of course she knows! Who doesn't know who was responsible? They all know! But this is something very easy for me.

If we imagine that the initial "sad too" grew from the "sound and sight" of a first-grader withering too soon, compelling Zhou Huawei to spring into action just as Wolf's hypothetical husband leaps into the sea, we may also approach the question of moral permissibility from the perspective of a first-person ethics, an ethics that takes the responsibility one has toward a loved one as the most pressing and essential moral demand. Zhou Huawei is a university teacher in the humanities and is thus utterly comfortable with writing and publication. Helping with this composition was a matter of deploying a resource she has at hand—time, energy, and human capital—to exert some measure of influence over the development of a negative tendency. Doing so fell within the core of her agency, an area of responsibility that is embedded in a much larger web of relations over which she exercises little control. It is precisely because there is little one could control that one ought, and one must, take responsibility for what one *could* do. This is the reason why we find a close fellowship between poor discernment and timing on the one hand, and agent-regret and self-blame on the other.

For the mother who responds to regret by taking timely action, for the agent who can take satisfaction in the effects of effort, there is a sense of moral relief and a release from past mistakes. Zhou Huawei felt pleased as Jiajia grew to be "more daring, unafraid to talk back to the teacher." No longer the victim of meanness, she did not have to worry, until the next challenge, that her daughter would disappear into the crowd. Life inevitably oscillates between mutuality and disconnection, and we may not always in every moment be attentive to the risks that threaten the pursuit of first-person goods. Just as "we cannot be expected to be in control of all aspects of our circumstances,"[5] we also cannot be expected to be perfectly responsive to every situation that requires our care and attention in the face of life's competing demands. In a situation of irreversible loss however, namely the death of a loved one, regret for failures to be sensitive may instead get "incorporated" into one's sense of self rather than transformed.

4. SAD FOREVER

The living moral agent who offers the antithesis to the hypothetical walled-off agent who knows nothing of vicarious experience and love in taking on *too much* responsibility becomes hypervisible in mass tragedies consisting of causes that lie far beyond any single person's sphere of control. Look for interviews with survivors of a mass shooting or major disaster such as Covid-19 or the 3.11 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami, and you may very well find an intensification of the theme I have explored in this paper. While my own ethnographic cases are rather banal and mundane, the basic pattern of blame distribution in major misfortunes involving kin remains the same: the taking of responsibility is compelled by the involuntary force of the moral emotion known as agent-regret, which seizes upon the agent, so filling his horizon of concerns that Regret becomes as much a part of him as the other with whom he had shared a conjoined, though not totally fused, existence. The problem of responsibility and luck as lived inverts the one entertained in normative thought.

A BBC report in 2012 serves as an example.[6] In it, we meet a Mr. Suzuki who was still grieving over the death of his wife who was swept away by the tsunami. He believes she would still be alive if only he had not gone to work that day, not unlike the way Zhang Xin believes her son might be a nicer, less troubling kid had she not gone back to school for a higher degree. It so happened to be a day Mr. Suzuki should have chosen not to go to work. "That day was the day of my children's graduation," he is quoted as saying, "I didn't take a day off because I was busy and went to work instead. It's something I regret every day. If I had taken the day off and been here with them, my wife could have been saved." While philosophers work hard to justify their arguments for what, where, and when an agent ought to take responsibility, post-3.11 psychosocial care workers work hard to convince survivors to let go.[7] It was a tsunami triggered by a powerful 9.1-magnitude earthquake that swept Mr. Suzuki's wife away, a force as impersonal as diploma inflation in a society undergoing market transition, and yet he takes the blame for her death because he failed to be a caring father that day. It seems irrational to do so, because the fault, from a third-person perspective, only extends to being an absent father, just as Zhang Xin's fault would only extend to having been an absent mother were her son to commit a grievous transgression one day. But so it goes in a situation of kinship. Where identities run amok by virtue of a "mutuality of being" (cf. Sahlins 2013, 44), other things do too—experience, feelings, blame and responsibility. It is not a question of what is rational or irrational, but instead what sphere of life we find ourselves in where care and love are concerned.

Chronic regret in a situation of mourning devotedly spotlights areas of a relationship to which an agent has not been perfectly attentive and responsive. As if to memorialize what has been lost (cf. Garcia 2010), the agent will engage in self-punishing blame even if she may also concede that much of life is muddled through. What is mourned is not only the loss of a life but also the end of possible action within a given relationship, the end of a dance between mutuality and disconnection, disconnection and mutuality. While Zhou Huawei's transformation of "sad too" gives her story a happy ending, the sad-forever found in postdisaster mourning is as tragic as official death tolls in revealing an agent who is pitiable and admirable. Admirable for the way in which she takes in and responds to her "causal inextricability" (Urban Walker 1991, 17). Pitiable because the turn of fortune is due not to "wickedness" but to "some mistake of great weight and consequence . . ." (Aristotle 1967, 38). This vulnerable, concrete moral agent is an ambiguous and paradoxical figure.[8]

NOTES

1. See Kuan (2017) for a longer discussion of Evans-Pritchard's account.
2. The ethnographic descriptions I present in this paper are not original, having been published in the book-length monograph *Love's Uncertainty* (2015), namely chapter 4. The purpose of the argument there is however very different.
3. The approach I take here draws from Cheryl Mattingly's work on first-person virtue ethics (2014) and Veena Das's argument for an ordinary ethics approach (2012).
4. I have slightly modified the translation of this sentence to fit the narrative here (cf. Kuan 2015, 121).
5. Hallvard Lillehammer's succinct phrasing. Personal communication, July 7, 2020.
6. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-17295912. Accessed June 28, 2020.
7. I am thankful to Isaac Gagne, a Japan anthropologist who studies post-3.11 recovery, for sharing this observation with me.
8. Many thanks to Ben Colburn and Hallvard Lillehammer for their feedback and advice on this manuscript.

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