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Title: Children and Moral Responsibility

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Children and Moral Responsibility

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In the light of renewed calls in the UK for schools to develop responsible citizens, the paper explores questions related to children's moral responsibility for their actions. It has its roots in a broader concern about children's violence - from instances of bullying to murder - particularly with regard to those cases where peer group pressure is felt to have been a factor. I am particularly interested in the conditions which might make such duress resistible or irresistible. While this might be seen as an empirical question, it is also a logical matter, open to philosophical investigation.

Conventionally, ignorance and compulsion preclude moral responsibility. Children are frequently assumed to be 'ignorant' in comparison with adults, and schooling is presumed to be, at least in part, about the acquisition of knowledge. Thus educating for moral responsibility seems an appropriate task for the teacher. However, I would maintain that it is not on the grounds of ignorance that we can legitimately absolve children *per se* from moral responsibility and that dispelling ignorance will not necessarily aid the development of responsible citizens .

The notion of compulsion may be more significant, but it is rather more complex than might at first appear. Few violent acts are directly, physically forced on us. Compulsion more often, even in the dire circumstances of war, comes in the form of threats. The moral dilemmas presented by certain threats may have no satisfactory solution: the victim has to choose between two evils. There can be no easy parallel with self-defence in a situation where, for example, a life will be forfeit unless one kills or harms a third, innocent party. A more illuminating analogy, on the assumption that killing and allowing to be killed are morally distinct, may be with deflecting and ducking: knowingly deflecting a missile so that the innocent bystander is killed is different from ducking and thereby endangering the person behind. Children, in virtue of being children, may be more vulnerable to duress than adults, but this may relate more to immature character traits than to any confusion about what would count as morally responsible behaviour in response to threats to life and limb.

It cannot be merely that children are responsible to a greater or lesser extent according to their level of ignorance or to the degree of compulsion suffered. That seems completely uncontentious and not peculiar to children. Of course these issues are not simple matters of common sense. Their implications, especially in relation to violence and killing, do need to be understood by children and by those 'teaching' them responsibility, but attention to cognitive learning will not suffice. If schools are to contribute to the growth of moral responsibility they will need to do more than foster knowledge and understanding. Becoming morally responsible surely involves the nurture of virtues, feelings, emotions and strength of will.

