

Faculty of Philosophy
James Martin Advanced Research Seminar Programme (TT09)

Venue: James Martin 21st Century School, Seminar Room 1, Old Indian Institute, Broad Street

Date: 1st Week ~ Wednesday 29 April, 3.00 – 5.00 pm

Speaker: Dr Nicole A Vincent (Department of Philosophy, Delft University of Technology)

Title: "Cognitive Enhancement and Increased Responsibility"

Abstract:

It can be argued that the degree of a person's responsibility is reduced when their mental capacities are reduced. This, after all, is presumably why we often think that young children, the senile, those suffering from certain kinds of mental retardation and the insane are less than fully responsible for what they do - i.e. because they are thought to lack- or have significant deficits in the requisite mental capacities that are required for responsible moral agency. One might perhaps generalize that on the "capacitarian" approach - an approach that has recently been advocated, among others, by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, Walter Glannon, and myself, and which is arguably consistent with such compatibilist theories of responsibility as that proposed by John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza - the degree of a person's responsibility depends on their mental capacities. Admittedly, the precise nature of this "dependence" relationship is somewhat complex, however complexities aside, on the capacitarian approach reduced capacity entails reduced responsibility.

But how about increased capacity - does increased capacity entail increased responsibility? There are various reasons to offer a positive answer to this question. For instance, we often express our deep disappointment when a particularly bright young child (a "precocious developer") fails to meet the higher standards which we had previously held them to, and we may subsequently hold them responsible for more things, precisely because we think that it was legitimate to expect more of them in the

first place on account of their greater capacities - it is not uncommon to say to them "I expected more of you". Secondly, a person who becomes more highly educated and trained often acquires new responsibilities, and when they subsequently fail to discharge those responsibility we hold them responsible for things for which previously we would not have held them responsible. Finally, as Stephen Morse has argued, a person who suffers from hypomania may actually be more rather than less responsible at some stages of their illness - they may be "hyper responsible" - on account that they may actually possess greater capacities than others (increased clarity of thought, etc). Thus, given that in all of these other walks of life we are already prepared to hold people more responsible when they possess greater capacities, perhaps more generally it is also true that increased capacity entails increased responsibility.

If this is right, then would a person of previously average intelligence whose mental capacities were artificially enhanced through (e.g.) taking psychoactive cognitive enhancement drugs or through some other means become "hyper-responsible"? Would they acquire new responsibilities on account of now having increased capacities, and could they be held responsible for things for which previously they could not have been held responsible? Might this otherwise advantageous situation (becoming cognitively enhanced) have some unforeseen moral disadvantages for them too (i.e. that with greater capacities come greater responsibilities and greater responsibility)?

This paper will address these and similar questions in order to flesh out some further details of the capacitarian position, and specifically to determine whether the capacitarian position can legitimately be characterized by the claim that responsibility co-varies with capacity.