RESPONSIBILITY AS ARCHITECTURE: PARTICIPATION, *IMAGO DEI*, AND THE LIMITS OF THE SINGLE FOUNDATION

Pablo Dietrich

Fundação Universidade Regional de Blumenau – FURB. Bachelor of Laws; postgraduate student in Religious Studies and in Philosophy and Sociology at Faculdade Líbano; undergraduate student of Theology and Philosophy at Faculdade Estácio de Sá · ORCID 0009-0003-5447-0550 · E-mail: pablodietrichh@hotmail.com

Maurília Gabriela da Silva Dietrich

Centro Universitário Leonardo da Vinci – UNIASSELVI. Bachelor of Laws; postgraduate student in Religious Studies and in Philosophy Applied to Religion and Education at Faculdade Líbano; undergraduate student of Theology and of History (teaching degree) at Faculdade Estácio de Sá · ORCID 0009-0003-2756-6848 · E-mail: mauriliagabriela@outlook.com

Authors' translation. English translation, prepared by the authors, of: DIETRICH, Pablo; DIETRICH, Maurília Gabriela da Silva. A responsabilidade como arquitetura: participação, imago Dei e os limites do fundamento único. *Revista Eletrônica Amplamente*, Natal/RN, v. 5, n. 3, p. 938–946, Jul./Sep. 2026. ISSN 2965-0003. DOI: 10.47538/RA-2026.V5N3-50. The Portuguese text published by the journal is the version of record; this translation is distributed under the CC BY 4.0 licence with attribution to the original publication. Quotations from works consulted in Portuguese translation or in other languages, as well as from the authors' own works, are rendered into English by the authors.

ABSTRACT

This article examines the foundation of the creature's moral responsibility and maintains that the search for a single property capable of grounding it—rationality, consciousness, will, or freedom—is ill-posed, for each is a condition and none is a foundation. An architectural model is proposed as an alternative: responsibility emerges from a chain of dependencies that links the creature's ontological participation to its constitution as a vice-regent *imago Dei*, and from this to normativity and imputation. Three types of necessity are distinguished in the transitions—revelational, analytic, and conditioned. It is argued that vice-regency is a mode of participation, and not a parallel foundation, and that the category is indispensable precisely where compatibilism is insufficient: in the guilt of condition. The conclusion is that obligation derives from position, not from capacity, and that the architecture explains in a unified way what single foundations leave apart.

Keywords: moral responsibility; participation; *imago Dei*; imputation; compatibilism.

INTRODUCTION

The question of the foundation of moral responsibility is one of the oldest and most persistent in philosophical reflection. In its usual form, it asks which property of the creature makes it a legitimate subject of imputation: why this being answers for its acts, whereas the stone, subject to the same physical laws, and the animal, endowed with perception and appetite, do not. The dominant answer of modernity located this foundation in freedom understood as autonomy—

in the agent's capacity to be, in some ultimate sense, the underived origin of its own actions. It is this answer that the present article intends to reject, and not by means of a single argument, but by a reorganization of the way in which the question is formulated.

The thesis defended here is that responsibility is not grounded in any property taken in isolation, but in an architecture of dependencies. The inquiry starts from a negative finding—that each traditional candidate for foundation is, when examined, merely a condition of responsibility, never its foundation—and leads to a positive proposal: that imputability emerges from a chain of links, in which each transition performs work that the previous one did not perform and that the next one presupposes. Above all, it matters to answer the objection that a philosophically trained reader will raise at once—that such an architecture would be merely Reformed compatibilism with a new word added, "participation". To this objection the article responds directly, marking off the exact point at which the category becomes indispensable.

The horizon of the inquiry is that of the Reformed tradition, and its presuppositions are avowedly confessional: the God whom Scripture reveals is presupposed, and there is no attempt to demonstrate him. The contribution does not lie, therefore, in the foundation of faith, but in the conceptual architecture that, given this presupposition, renders the creature's responsibility intelligible. Such a delimitation does not weaken the argument; rather, it honours the distinction—to which we shall return—between what is received from revelation and what is demonstrated by reason.

THE INSUFFICIENCY OF THE SINGLE FOUNDATION

Let each traditional candidate for the foundation of responsibility be considered and submitted to a simple test: is there any case in which the property is present and imputation absent? If there is, the property is a condition, not a foundation—for a genuine foundation cannot be present where what it founds is not.

Rationality does not withstand the test: an artificial system processes information and draws inferences without moral responsibility being imputed to it. Nor does consciousness: to be aware of a fact obliges one to nothing, and there are countless conscious states without imputation. The will does not suffice: animal appetite is volitional in a broad sense and does not answer. And freedom itself, understood as the power to act otherwise, proves dispensable—for, as the compatibilist critique established long ago, responsibility never required the agent's ultimate origination of itself.

This last point deserves to be noted, because it is compatibilism, and not libertarianism, that is the closest interlocutor of this inquiry. Harry Frankfurt showed, in his celebrated cases, that an agent may be responsible for an action even though he could not have acted otherwise; and John Martin Fischer developed from there a theory of responsibility grounded in the agent's control over the action, and not in his power to originate it absolutely. From this debate the present proposal retains a conclusion and refuses a gap. It retains that responsibility does not

require ultimate origination—a point on which it agrees entirely with compatibilism. It refuses to leave unanswered the question that compatibilism does not formulate: why the agent is, in the first place, under the norm that his action fulfils or violates.

The lesson of this survey is not that some candidate remains yet to be examined, but that the form of the question is mistaken. To look for the property that grounds responsibility is like asking which stone holds up the arch: no stone holds it up, for it is the form of the arch—the reciprocal arrangement of the stones—that holds itself up. In the same way, responsibility does not rest on one element, but on a structure of dependencies, the examination of which is the object of the following sections.

THE ARCHITECTONIC CHAIN AND THE TYPES OF NECESSITY

The proposed architecture connects four links by three transitions, and its decisive peculiarity is that the transitions are not of the same type. The honesty of the argument depends on not confusing them, for some are received from revelation, others are analytically necessary, and others still are conditioned by the link that precedes them.

The first link is participation: the mode by which the creature holds, through continuous derivation and dependence, all the reality it possesses, being real as a creature and never as an independent origin. The tradition recognizes in this dependence the very act of existing of the created being; in the words of the apostolic text, it is in him that “we live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28). But participation, taken on its own, is too broad to ground imputation: the stone and the animal participate in being and do not answer. This insufficiency is acknowledged from the outset—and it is this, and not the supposed omnipresence of the category, that makes it philosophically serious.

The first transition—from participation to the condition of *imago Dei*—is of the revelational type. That the human creature is the image of God is not deduced from its receiving being, for the stone also receives it and is not an image; it is a datum that Scripture provides: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Genesis 1:26). Reason organizes this datum, but does not produce it. It is the only transition in the chain that reason receives instead of demonstrating, and to acknowledge this is a condition of the argument’s honesty—for it would be illegitimate to present as a rational deduction what is received from revelation.

The second transition—from *imago Dei* to normativity—is of the analytic type, and in it lies the core of the thesis. The image, in the biblical sense, is not contemplative likeness, but representation: the same text that constitutes man an image constitutes him, in the same act, a lord who is to “have dominion” (Genesis 1:26) over creation, in God’s name. Now, to represent carries the norm within itself, for a representation that owed no fidelity to what it represents would not be a representation. It is at this point, and only at this point, that being becomes duty—that the ontological relation becomes a normative relation. To deny this is not implausible, but contradictory: a vice-regency without an obligation of fidelity is a non-vice-regency.

The third transition—from normativity to responsibility—is of the conditioned type. The creature constituted as representative and measured by fidelity is imputable; but imputation follows only for whoever occupies that position. The stone is under laws and does not answer, because it is not a vice-regent. The transition holds within the architecture, not universally—and this failure outside the condition is not a defect, but proof that imputability derives from position, and not from a universal logical necessity.

The heterogeneity of the three transitions—one revealed, one analytic, one conditioned—is not an imperfection to be corrected in favour of a uniform deduction. It is the real structure of the argument, and declaring it is what prevents the proposal from claiming to demonstrate by deduction what, at the first link, it receives by revelation.

WHY PARTICIPATION IS INDISPENSABLE

It is now time to face the decisive objection. If, as has been admitted, participation is too broad and what does the argumentative work is vice-regency, would participation not be an idle category, replaceable without loss by “created existence”? The answer requires a frank concession and a precise delimitation.

The concession is this: in the domain of the guilt of the act—an agent’s responsibility for what he does voluntarily—participation adds nothing to what compatibilism already explains. There, to say that the agent “participates” or that he exercises “created agency” is to say the same thing, and the more economical category prevails. To insist on the indispensability of participation in that terrain would be to feign a difference that does not exist. The article does not do so.

The delimitation is this: there is a second domain, that of the guilt of condition, in which participation performs work that no category of agency can perform—and it is there, and only there, that it proves indispensable. The Reformed tradition affirms that the creature is imputable not only for what it does, but for what it is: for the inherited condition, prior to every act of its own, which Scripture describes in saying “in sin did my mother conceive me” (Psalm 51:5). Now, a guilt prior to every act cannot be grounded in agency, precisely because there is no act. The category of created agency—and with it the whole compatibilist apparatus—is structurally incapable of imputing what precedes action. Only participation can do so, because participation is prior to agency: the creature participates in nature (receives it) before acting through it.

Here the substitution by “created existence” reveals what it conceals. “Existence” names a state; “participation” names a continuous reception, in such a way that the creature is in solidarity with the nature it receives. It is this solidarity—and not mere existence—that renders the imputation of condition intelligible: I answer for the image-nature deformed in its head because I participate in it, and not because I simply exist. Where compatibilism must resort to an external juridical arrangement to explain inherited guilt, participation explains it ontologically. The category is dispensable in the act and indispensable in the condition—and it is this asymmetry, and not a rhetorical omnipresence, that establishes its necessity.

THE DIFFERENCE FROM REFORMED COMPATIBILISM

The objection that this proposal would be "compatibilism with new terminology" deserves an explicit answer, and the answer is not a denial, but a delimitation. With Reformed compatibilism—represented by Paul Helm and Guillaume Bignon—the present architecture agrees on almost everything: that responsibility does not require ultimate origination, that divine determination does not nullify it, that the manipulation arguments against compatibilism fail. This agreement is broad and sincere. The difference lies not in the conclusions about the guilt of the act, but in the foundation of the guilt of condition.

The point can be observed in Bignon's own work. In defending theological compatibilism, he confronts the objection from consent in Adamic imputation: why would anyone answer for the disobedience of a representative he did not choose? A merely juridical covenant does not bind justly, and Bignon is led to seek a real solidarity between the head and the race (Bignon, 2018). This "something more" that the external covenant does not supply is precisely participation in nature. The convergence is significant precisely because it is reluctant: a thinker who does not start from participation is pushed towards it by the logic of the problem, and not drawn by the category. This suggests that participation is not an ornament on compatibilism, but what compatibilism itself needs at the point where its explanation of inherited guilt proves insufficient.

The difference, therefore, is real, though localized. Compatibilism is sufficient for the guilt of the act and insufficient for the guilt of condition; participation completes it exactly where it fails. It is not a matter of replacing one theory with another, but of showing that the received theory rests, without knowing it, on a category that only the architecture of participation makes explicit.

OBLIGATION ARISES FROM POSITION, NOT FROM POWER

From the architecture follows the determination that distinguishes this proposal both from Arminianism and from every ethics that makes power the measure of duty: obligation does not arise from the capacity to fulfil it, but from the position of the one who owes it. The representative who has disabled himself for fidelity remains obligated, because the norm is addressed to his position, not to his present power.

The thesis withstands the classic objection that ought implies can. The answer rests on the distinction that Jonathan Edwards worked out with precision between natural inability and moral inability (Edwards, 1754, I.4). The first is the absence of the faculty—the blind man cannot see, the infant cannot deliberate—and results from an impediment external to the will; it excuses. The second is the faculty present but held captive by a disposition that is the agent's own. Edwards illustrates it with the drunkard, whom nothing physically prevents from putting down the bottle, and with the man of character, who "cannot" betray what he loves: in both, the impossibility belongs to the inclination, not to the faculty. And moral inability, unlike natural inability, is

consistent with imputation, as Edwards demonstrates with regard to those whom God has given over to sin and to fallen man in general (Edwards, 1754, III.3).

The reason for this consistency is that moral inability is not an impediment to guilt, but guilt itself in the form of captivity; to excuse it would be to absolve sin by pleading sin. Only natural inability excuses, and it is this that reserves to the judgement of God the child and the incapable, whose lack of faculty places them beyond the reach of the imputation of the act. The distinction is not a privilege created for the occasion: the law itself recognizes that whoever incapacitates himself through a culpable disposition answers for what he does in that state, whereas incapacity not brought on by oneself mitigates or exempts.

It is thus understood why responsibility is distributed in two layers. There is the guilt of condition—universal, prior to every act, grounded in the status of image common to all human beings, and imputed through participation in the nature whose head became deformed. And there is the guilt of the act—proportional to the light received, grounded in the exercise of vice-regency, variable in each person. The same structure of representation by which Adam's deformity reaches the race is the one by which the righteousness of the second Adam is imputed to the one who believes, so that the doctrine that condemns and the doctrine that saves share a single form (Romans 5:12–19).

FINAL REMARKS

The aim has been to show that the creature's moral responsibility is not grounded in any single property, but in an architecture of dependencies that links participation to the vice-regent *imago Dei*, and this to normativity and imputation. Vice-regency, far from being a foundation parallel to participation, is one of its modes: it is the participation of the human creature as a representative image, and it is by being this mode—and not another—that it introduces the norm. Participation thus remains the genus of which vice-regency is the specific difference.

The advantage of this architecture over the search for a single foundation is not merely one of elegance. A single foundation leaves apart what the architecture unites. Ontology—the creature receives being—, normativity—the creature is under the norm—, and imputation—the creature answers—appear, in single-foundation theories, as three facts that must be connected afterwards. In the architecture of participation, they appear as a single movement: the creature participates in being as image, and to be an image is to be under the norm, and to be under the norm as a representative is to answer. The architecture explains at once what the single foundation explains in parts and then has to bring together. Herein lies its explanatory superiority, and not in a purported deduction of what is received from faith.

There remain the limits of what has been proposed. The argument does not prove the existence of God, nor does it argue from the gaps in knowledge; it presupposes revelation and shows how, under that presupposition, responsibility is ordered. It does not dissolve every mystery: where Scripture reserves to God's counsel what he has not revealed, the analysis also

reserves it. What it claims is precise: that, given the image of God that Scripture establishes, the creature's responsibility follows through an architecture whose necessity reason can traverse in full—and that this architecture does work that the single foundation does not do, uniting at the origin what the latter keeps apart.

REFERENCES

BIGNON, Guillaume. *Excusing sinners and blaming God*: a Calvinist assessment of determinism, moral responsibility, and divine involvement in evil. Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2018.

CALVINO, João. *As institutas da religião cristã*. Trans. Waldyr Carvalho Luz. São Paulo: Cultura Cristã, 2006. v. 1.

EDWARDS, Jonathan. *Freedom of the will*. Edited by Paul Ramsey. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957. [Original from 1754.]

FISCHER, John Martin; RAVIZZA, Mark. *Responsibility and control*: a theory of moral responsibility. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

FRANKFURT, Harry G. Alternate possibilities and moral responsibility. *The Journal of Philosophy*, v. 66, n. 23, p. 829–839, 1969.

HELM, Paul. *The providence of God*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994.

TURRETTINI, François. *Institutes of elenctic theology*. Translated by George Musgrave Giger. Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1992. v. 1.