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Are We Responsible for Our Emotions and Moods?

MICHAEL SCHLEIFER AND MIRIAM MCCORMICK

“For a moment I thought I was going to cry—but I didn’t cry, although I kept on wanting to”
(*Pixie*, Chapter 9, Episode 2, lines 8-10).

Although the Philosophy for Children approach has always emphasized the development of thinking and logic, it has also always acknowledged the importance of children’s feelings. It is only quite recently, however, that there has been more of a concentration on the affective aspect. The importance of a *caring* form of thinking was stressed by the founders of the program from the outset,¹ and some emotions like love, fear, and hope appear in the original novels,² sometimes used as terms by the children, sometimes implicit in the situation, as in the quote about sadness cited above. There are also contexts where empathy is relevant, particularly in *Pixie* and *Lisa*.³ Empathy, let us note, however, is not restricted to feelings; it refers to one’s ability to put oneself in another’s shoes in regards to their thoughts, perspectives, and points of view as well as their emotions, motives, attitudes and moods.⁴ In the original P4C curriculum, there is very little concentration on helping

children understand the emotions themselves. Furthermore, when there is some suggested discussion in the accompanying guides, it often is centered upon the contrast between appeal to emotions and appeal to logic.⁵

The more recent use of P4c to directly impact on emotions has stimulated the creation of new materials,⁶ as well as a theoretical foundation for linking philosophical discussion with emotional intelligence.⁷ This new focus acknowledges the need to talk about feelings with children, to help them reflect upon their own emotions, and those of others. This is needed not only for somewhat complex emotions like hope, pride, guilt, shame, and jealousy, but even for the so-called basic ones of sadness, anger, fear, and joy, disgust and surprise. Research has shown that many children (and even many adults) remain confused about their emotions.⁸ Furthermore, there is an important link between this confusion (particularly in regard to anger, sadness and fear) and acts of violence.⁹ Thus, a concentration on the prevention of violence has been one of the important aspects of recent attempts to educate about emotions. There is some evidence from work that we and others have done, that philosophical discussions with children will help them in their comprehension of at least the four most basic emotions, (sadness, fear, anger and joy) as well as the development of their moral autonomy, judgment, and at least one cognitive component of empathy.¹⁰

The short answer to the question in the title of this paper is “yes.” Our thesis is that we are indeed responsible for our emotions and moods. We want to help children understand that just as they are responsible for what they do and say, or omit to do or say (along with the consequences of these acts), so are they responsible for much of their affective life. What remains is to explain what we mean by “responsibility,” “emotions,” and “moods.”

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What is “responsibility”?

We want our children to be responsible.¹ What do we mean by this? Responsibility is a complicated concept, with moral, legal and psychological components.¹¹ For the purposes of this paper, there is one main question to ask—namely, what is the value we want as parents and teachers to impart to our young children? In order to answer, we will sum up much of the philosophical and legal literature in the following way: *Responsibility is “answering for what we do.”* We can see

this in the roots of the word (“respondere,” “to answer”). To account for our acts is what we have in mind: we want our children to understand that they are the authors of what they do, that when they do things that are bad, it may be appropriate to blame them (i.e., they are blameworthy), and when they do good things, they may deserve credit or praise (i.e., they are praiseworthy). We want them to understand that some things are

done by them, some by other people, and that sometimes the causes are either natural or unknown. At the very earliest age, we identify our children by giving them a name, and then using this name when referring to their space, their possessions or their body (Mary’s room, Mary’s teddy-bear, Mary’s nose), as well as to their actions (Mary is walking, Mary is kissing, Mary is throwing a tantrum, Mary hurt her finger). We are reminding her that it is not daddy or her brother who is walking, kissing, throwing a tantrum or whose finger is hurt.

Personal identity and autonomy, two components of responsibility, make their appearance in very early childhood. The child, even before speaking, is aware of his accomplishments (walking is a great example), and we (and

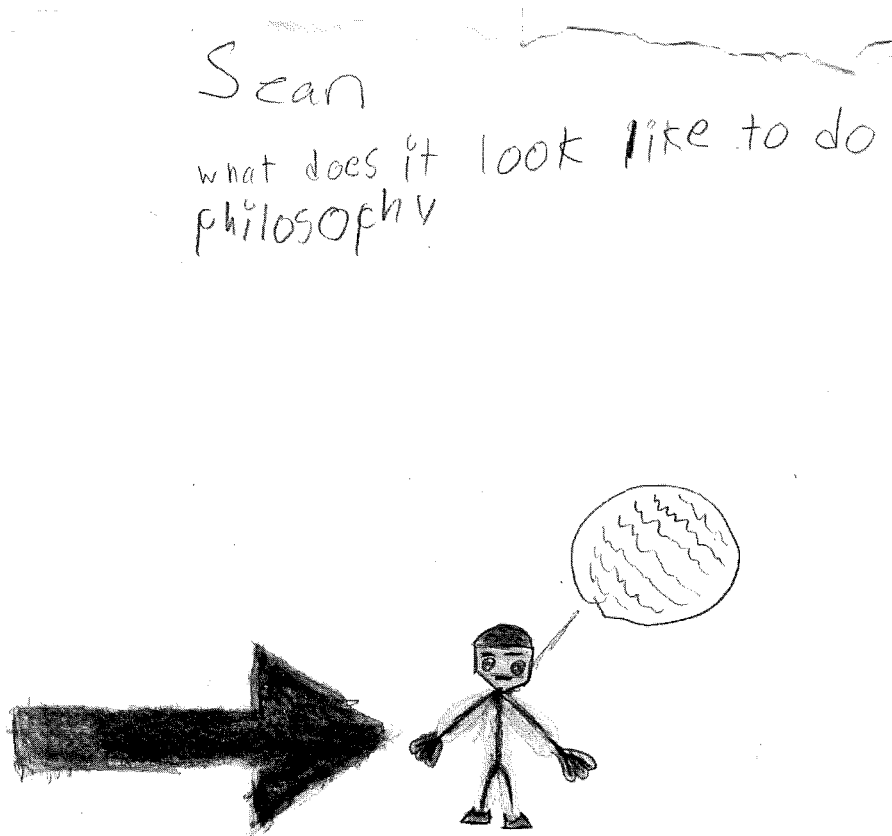
the child) are proud of this developmental milestone. As every parent and early educator knows, the two-year old insists on doing things for himself, and will persevere at a task for a very long time to get it done. It is often frustrating that the young child will refuse assistance in putting on his clothes. As good parents, we have learned to balance our wish to have our child develop this important early autonomy, but also to help him when it is needed—for his safety, or even because we are in a rush and can’t afford the luxury of waiting for him to put on his own shoes. We, of

course, have to exercise our judgment in balancing the competing values, in this case, autonomy versus safety.

We want children to “take responsibility” for what they do. As we, and others, have argued elsewhere,¹² taking responsibility does not entail being able to do otherwise than what one has done. Whether or not one could have done otherwise is irrelevant to *taking*

responsibility, even if it remains crucial in determining aspects of moral and legal responsibility. We can acknowledge that there are things we did (or omitted to do), which we could not have avoided doing (or failing to do). We may regret the consequences of some act, and want to apologize to people we may have hurt. We may, however, be practically certain that in the relevant circumstances, if offered the chance to go back again (perhaps by time-travel) we would still have acted in the same way. The act remains ours forever. Whether or not we are to be blamed (or praised) by others, and to what degree, is one matter. Our sense of being accountable to ourselves for our own acts is another.

The entire area of excuses, both in the law, as well as in morality, is relevant to questions of blameworthiness, and



circumstances may determine degrees of appropriate praise. Although all of this pertains to responsibility in the sense of accountability to others, none of it will determine one's own accountability (we may feel differing degrees of guilt, but that is a separate matter). This is another way of stating our thesis; taking responsibility is independent of whether or to what degree we are morally or legally responsible. For children, "I couldn't help it" or "he made me do it" will have an impact on one issue (that of moral responsibility, including possible blame or punishment) but not on the other (acknowledging that it was their act, for which they must take responsibility).

Four further conceptual points: 1) We are speaking of responsibility as it occurs in its prepositional sense—responsibility *for* something. There are uses of the concept which are subsidiary, as in "drink responsibly" (meaning perhaps, "drink in moderation"), or simply "be responsible" (which often means, "be trustworthy," or "be mature"); 2) Responsibility refers not only to negative acts, as in crimes, bad behaviors, and other aspects for possible blame and punishment. We must include good acts, good consequences, and the entire area of possible praise and reward; 3) Our concept of responsibility is not equivalent to blameworthiness, or praiseworthiness, but is to be defined independently of these. Of course, if a person is judged causally and morally responsible for something, it will make them a prime candidate for further questions of blame, praise, punishment, or reward, if these become relevant; 4) Finally, we are ignoring questions of collective and vicarious responsibility, where either groups of people, in the first case, or perhaps a parent in place of a child in the second, may be judged "responsible." For the purpose of this paper, we are restricting ourselves to the individual person who will be uniquely responsible for the act, the omission of an act, or the consequences of these. What we are arguing is that the same responsibility must be extended to both emotions and moods.

Emotions

What *are* "emotions"? One way of seeing what emotions are, is to say what they are not. They are not just desires, impulses, or motives—the things which may push us to action. They are different also from hunger and thirst, our two main appetites. Hunger is always about food, thirst always about drink. In contrast, emotions like love can have as object any number of people, or by extension pets, books, music and so on. Nor can emotions be reduced to desires and passions, including sexual desire. Emotions are not pleasure and pain, although, of course, they may involve both these sensations. Attitudes, dispositions and moods are all causally and

conceptually tied to emotions, although they have their own unique features (more on moods below). Having said what emotions are *not*, let us try a positive description.

The best way of summing up a vast amount of philosophical and psychological literature of the last thirty years is to say: "Emotions are about something in the world." If we ask ourselves what we naturally call emotions, we would give quite a long list that would include fear, anger, joy, sorrow, grief, jealousy, pity, shame, guilt, pride, hope, wonder, love, hate, and the like. What sort of criterion underlies this selection? The connection is that all these emotions are forms of cognition; they are sometimes called "appraisals." All emotions involve seeing situations under certain aspects which are agreeable or disagreeable and beneficial or harmful in a variety of dimensions. To feel fear *is*, for instance, to see a situation as dangerous. To feel pride is to see with pleasure something as mine, or as something that I have had a hand in bringing about. Martha Nussbaum argues that emotions should be understood as "upheavals of thought." By her definition, "Emotions are judgments in which people acknowledge the great importance, for their own flourishing, of things that they do not fully control—and acknowledge thereby, their neediness before the world and its event."¹³ She reminds us that emotions are "like other beliefs" and can be "true or false."¹⁴ We have defended this point of view elsewhere, and argued that we are responsible for our beliefs.¹⁵

For the purpose of the present paper, we accept the cognitivist analysis of emotion sketched above. The essential point in our view, which follows Aristotle, the Stoics, and Nussbaum, is that emotions are a form of judgment. It is only fair, however, to mention that there is an opposing group of philosophers who insist that emotions should be primarily defined not in terms of cognition, but rather in terms of physiological changes and tendencies to action.¹⁶

There is no consensus about whether emotions are uniquely human, or whether other animals have emotions as well. The Stoics, as Nussbaum points out, were convinced that no animal could have any emotion. Nussbaum herself, along with philosopher and dog-owner George Pitcher,¹⁷ argue (we think persuasively) that some animals display grief, anger and love. There seems also to be a modern consensus among philosophers and psychologists as to the emotion of fear. Every creature seems to have fear built into whatever brain it possesses. It is no doubt for this reason that most of the recent ground-breaking research on the physiology of emotion has concentrated on the emotion of fear.¹⁸ In our view, disgust (often listed along with surprise, anger, fear, sadness, and joy as basic emotions with universal facial expressions) is probably uniquely human. We certainly take emotions like pride and hope to be uniquely human.

This is because there are, we think, elements of thought involved of a kind only humans are capable of. Among other concepts necessary to these emotions are a consciousness of time—of past and future—something only people seem to be capable of. Pride is about things we have judged to have done in the past which we consider due to certain effort, and as an accomplishment. Hope involves expectations about the future, along with certain associated fears.

To illustrate our point of view concerning responsibility for emotions, we will consider two examples. The first concerns gratitude, the second apology and regret. Although some might want to contend that animals have these emotions in some sense, we are using them in a way which is uniquely human. Gratitude and regret are linked to the past, to a history, and thus like pride, shame and hope, require the ability to conceptualize time. The gratitude example (see below) is mentioned by Fischer and Ravissa in their book *Responsibility and Control*. They contend that their analysis of moral responsibility for acts, omissions, and consequences, should in theory be extended to the realm of emotions. They do not provide the extension themselves, but challenge others to provide the demonstration. In brief, their position is that responsibility involves a form of control called “guidance control.” One can have done, or omitted to do something without other kinds of control, and still remain morally responsible, provided that one has been the author of the act. An example of absence of even guidance control would be a person doing something (bad or good) because an electrode has been implanted in their brain, and the acts are controlled by mad scientists in a laboratory. Here the absence of even “guidance control” would eliminate all causal and moral responsibility. These philosophical mind-experiments are stimulating and important, although film portrayals of similar cases (for example *The Manchurian Candidate*) show that the protagonist may continue to have guilt, blame himself, and take responsibility for the violent act, even when the violence seems entirely controlled by the brain implant.

Leaving aside the complexities of their analysis and these science-fiction examples, we want to focus here on the question of emotion. Fischer and Ravissa consider an objection to their thesis by Robert Adams in an article entitled “Involuntary Sins.” In brief, Adams argues, against Fischer and Ravissa, that we are morally responsible for emotions independent of questions of voluntariness, or, for that matter, any form of control. The important example concerns gratitude:

Suppose you have just realized that you are ungrateful to someone who has done a lot for you—perhaps at a great cost to herself. Far from responding to her sacrifices with love and gratitude, you have made light of them in your own mind; and

if the truth be told, you actually resent them, because you hate to be dependent on others, or indebted to them. Surely this attitude is blameworthy.¹⁹

We want to assert, with Adams, that we are morally responsible for our emotion of gratitude (or, as in this case, its absence). There are things that we can do to improve our state of mind; we can acknowledge the lack of relevant emotion, and make some effort towards feeling it appropriately. It is not a question of faking the emotion, nor simply of working on behavior (for example, expressing gratitude). It is directly concerned with the emotion itself. In the sense of responsibility outlined above, we are responsible for our emotion of gratitude, just as we would be responsible for an act, an omission, or a consequence. An important aspect of moral education is to make children aware of when and why gratitude is fitting, and to discuss why one does not have the emotion where it may be appropriate. With Adams, and against Fischer and Ravissa on this point, we are extending the full concept of responsibility to the realm of emotions.

Our second example comes from the area of apology and regret. We have argued elsewhere,²⁰ as have others,²¹ that moral educators must stress *genuine* apologies, which can lead, in turn, to forgiveness by the person who has been wronged. We may, however, reflect about something we have done, and not bring ourselves to feel the regret which could lead to a genuine apology. We may, furthermore, think that it would be more appropriate if we really did feel regret about what we said, did, or omitted to say or do. We can resolve to take steps to work on feeling the emotion of regret, and feeling the need to apologize (not simply mouth the words, or fake it).

With both the gratitude and regret examples, we feel that an important task for moral education (teachers, parents, child-care workers) is to impart the need to take responsibility for one’s emotion. One can find a way, appropriate to the age-level of the child, to discuss the concept, talking about “thank you” in the first example, and “sorry” in the second. One can, and should, begin this discussion at very early ages, certainly during the preschool years (ages two to five). Partly because of Piaget and others, we have seriously underestimated the competence of young children, and their ability to comprehend these matters. Research over the last twenty years has shown that, contrary to Piaget, by the age of five the child is very sophisticated in his understanding of questions of responsibility.²²

The quote from *Pixie* at the beginning of this paper raises the issue of control or regulation of emotion. Pixie is wanting to cry, but cannot. Here we have the fascinating and complex issue of what is voluntary or controllable about one’s sadness, and how this compares with other human activities

and states of mind. Whether or not, to what degree, and in what way, emotions can be controlled is an important matter, not directly relevant to taking responsibility for one's emotions, as we have argued above. Nevertheless, the question of control can and should be talked about. In order to lead discussions on these matters, one has to take into consideration some of the complex and often conflicting information available—much of it quite recent—from brain research.

On the one hand, recent research on the “emotional brain” performed by Joseph Ledoux and popularized by Daniel Goleman,²³ has shown that certain basic emotions like fear and anger are much too rapid to be controlled by any person. The amygdala reacts in 12 milliseconds, independently of any cortical connections. On the other hand, there are techniques which can be used to control duration, intensity, and some manifestations of fear and anger, as Goleman and others have shown. With fear and anger, there is inevitably some part of the process which cannot be controlled by most people (mainly bodily and brain), but there are things one can do about anticipating circumstances, and regulating expressions and manifestations in verbal and non-verbal behaviour. Virtually all of the brain research alluded to here was done with rats, and has concentrated on fear, whereas most of the work on regulation among humans has focused on anger. Whether, and to what degree any of this applies to sadness—or any other emotion—remains a question for further research. We are willing to affirm at the moment that in regard to emotions like gratitude and regret, talking about control may be inappropriate and misleading. In any case, our main thesis is that we are responsible for our emotions, independently of issues of control. We must take responsibility and take control whether or not any kind of control was present at the moment of the original occurrence.

Moods

Perhaps the most contentious of our suggestions is that children are responsible not only for their emotions, but also for their moods. This is in part because there is some

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philosophical consensus, as we have noted above, that emotions are linked to judgments and beliefs. We have argued elsewhere that we are responsible for our beliefs,²⁴ and that argument might help convince some, otherwise doubtful, that taking responsibility for emotions is appropriate. When talking about good or bad moods, however, the argument for responsibility is more difficult. This is because moods (irritability, grumpiness, euphoria, some kinds of depression) are contrasted conceptually with emotions, precisely on the basis that they are often not linked to beliefs, not about something in the world. Martha Nussbaum has highlighted this emotion-mood distinction in her book *Upheavals of Thought*. We accept her distinction, although we have argued elsewhere that emotions and moods are more closely linked—both causally and conceptually—than she allows.²⁵ Two areas where we consider Nussbaum's

analysis to have failed pertain to sadness/ depression, and the effect of music.

"Mood" is defined in Webster's as:

- 1) a conscious state of mind or predominant emotion
- 2) a prevailing attitude ; a disposition
- 3) a receptive state of mind predisposing to action
- 4) a distinctive atmosphere

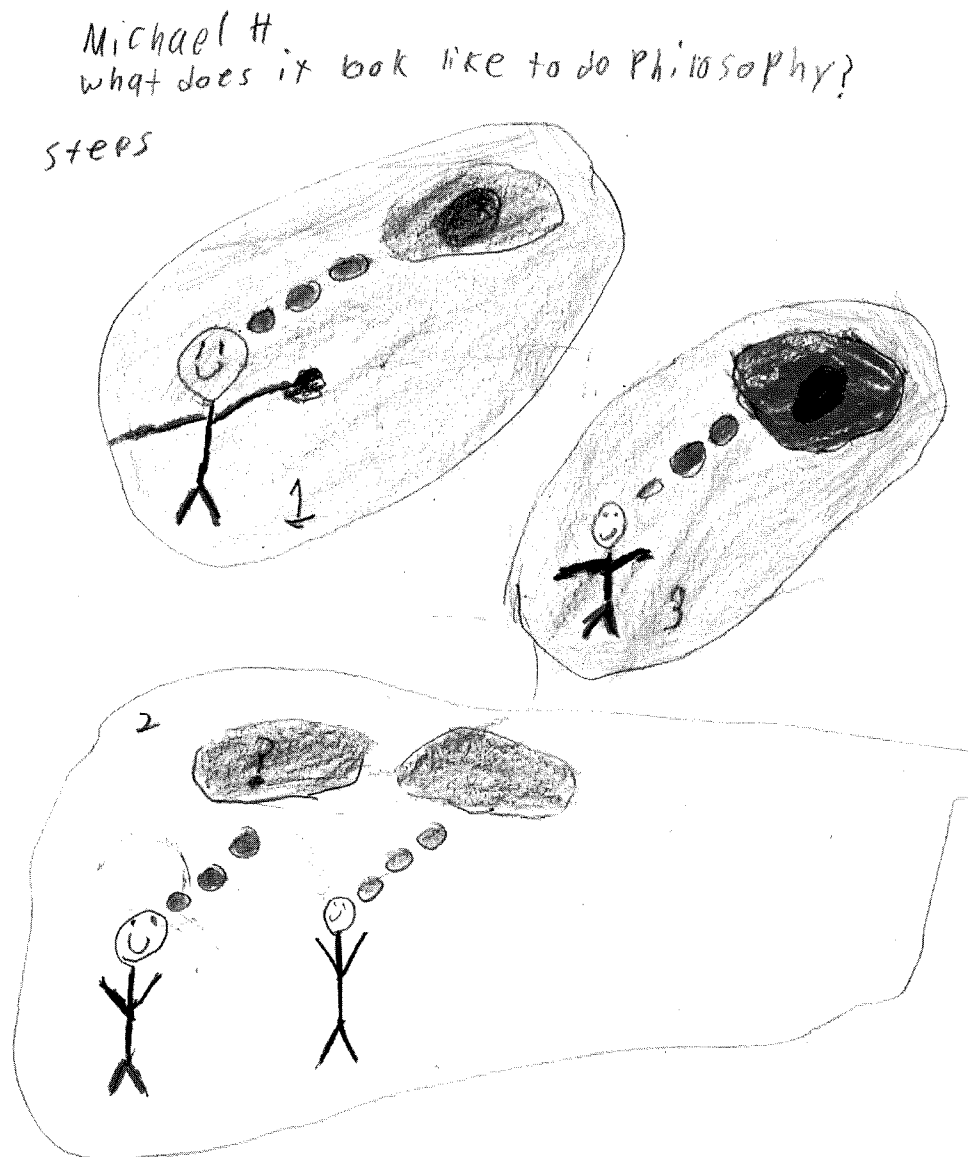
or context ; an "aura."

All four definitions capture some of what we mean by "mood," in everyday language, in our ordinary experience, as well as in the clinical context. 2) refers to the use of the term in such phrases as "Are you in the mood?"; 3) could refer to "Is the boss in a good or a bad mood?"

The first definition actually mentions emotions, which on Nussbaum's analysis would be a mistake. However, as we have argued, emotions and moods are, in fact, part of a special experience, which we can call "affect." Although Nussbaum objects to this suggested term, her objection is on the grounds that it is too wide, encompassing interests, attitudes, and for others, even appetites, desires, and motivations.²⁶ We agree that appetites and desires are, as Nussbaum contends, different from "affect," and that motivation, attitudes, and interests should also, for different reasons, be separated conceptually from emotions. We suggest, however, that emotions and moods be seen as aspects of the same umbrella state of mind. Calling this state "affect" is not too misleading if we take the dictionary definition: "the conscious subjective aspect of an emotion considered apart from bodily changes." This accords well with common usage, and also with what is presently known about the emotional brain.²⁷

We have proposed, therefore, as a conceptual revision of Nussbaum's position, that emotions and moods be seen as somewhat different species of a generic "affect." In this

regard, Nussbaum's term "upheaval" might do the work of "affect," although it is not as widely used, particularly in the clinical setting. We can retain that part of Nussbaum's analysis which reminds us that moods tend to refer to emotional states, often with a vague or undetermined object, whereas emotions tend to refer to something in the world



which we judge and value as important. However, as shown above, the overlap is too great (particularly when one includes the "background" emotions) to insist, as Nussbaum does, that emotions and moods be too sharply separated. We all learn, as children, and later as adults, to notice our moods and those of others. They are invariably intertwined with the

standard emotions. Being in a good mood will necessarily involve the “positive” emotions of joy, wonder, jocularly, jubilation and others. On the other side, our bad moods refer, by necessity, to not only sullenness, grumpiness, irritability, gloominess and the like, but also to anger, indignation, sadness, fear, guilt, resentment, and other specific emotions.

Moods and emotions are in many turbulent lives part of the same roller coaster. Moods may cause emotions and vice versa. On moods influencing emotions, there is an interplay of temperament (how moody people are), how prepared they are for the onset of the moods, and what steps they may have taken, or not taken, to control these moods. If one is in a somewhat depressed mood, one will more likely to react with greater sadness, anger, or fear and anxiety to situations in the real or imagined world. Literature, art and music, along with dramatic events in the everyday world will have more of an emotional effect depending upon the state of mood. In my own case, a book, movie, or play, with themes of death, illness, unrequited love, or loss of memory will awaken strong emotions; these will invariably be stronger if I am in a “down” mood rather than an “up” one.

In the opposite causal direction, emotions can cause moods. For example, when one hears of an event like a suicide bombing, one may very well react with anger, sadness, and fear in various combinations and intensities. These emotions are about something specific. They relate to this situation, and awaken all three negative emotions. They also, however, can influence one’s mood so that one becomes sullen, grumpy, withdrawn, disgruntled, and gloomy. Furthermore, these moods may last much longer than the initial emotive reactions. Research has also shown that ‘positive’ emotions like gratitude can impact upon people’s moods. These effects have been shown to last up to two weeks.²⁸

We want to assert that children (like adults) must take responsibility for their moods, much the same way we have argued that they must take responsibility for their emotions. Furthermore, because emotions and moods are so often intertwined, as we have argued above, we will often need to take responsibility for both together.

NOTES

1. See M. Lipman, “Caring Thinking,” *Inquiry* 15,1 (1995). See also J.C.L. Bernstein, “Caring Thinking,” *Thinking* 16,3 (2003).
2. Love and friendship are discussed throughout the novelettes *Lisa* and *Pixie*. The emotions of fear and hope are in *Kio and Gus*. The discussion here mainly focuses on what is reasonable and what is unreasonable. See page 244 of the *Instructional Manual to Accompany Kio and Gus* and page 30 from the novelette.
3. Lisa and her friends discuss whether one can empathize with animals. See page 13 of the *Instructional Manual to Accompany Lisa* and page 1-2 of the novelette. Pixie uses the same discussion questions in its accompanying manual.

4. See M. Schleifer and C. Martiny, *Talking About Values and Feelings with Young Children: How to Develop Good Judgment and Empathy* (2005, forthcoming, Calgary: Temeron Press).
5. As for example, the discussion about the catfish in the accompanying manual to *Kio and Gus*: “Good Reasoning and Emotional appeal.” See page 402 in *The Instructional Manual to Accompany Kio and Gus*, and p. 55, line 14-16 in the novelette.
6. Material has been created on the prevention of violence by Ann Margaret Sharp and her collaborators as well as by Marie-France. Daniel and our research team. Schleifer, M., Daniel, M.-F., Peyronnet, E. et Lecompte, S. (2003). “The Impact of Philosophical Discussions on Moral Autonomy, Judgment, Empathy and the Recognition of Emotion in Five Year Olds.” *Thinking*, vol. 16, no 4, pp. 1-19.
7. A. Gazzard “What does Philosophy for Children Have To Do With Emotional Intelligence?” *Thinking* 15, 1, (2002) 39-45.
9. N. Alvarado and K. A. Jameson, “Varieties of Anger: The Relation Between Emotion Terms and Components of Anger Expression.” *Motivation and Emotion* 26, 2, (2002), 153-182.
11. See, for example, J. M. Fischer and M. Ravizza, *Responsibility and Control* (Cambridge University Press 1998); M. Schleifer and C. Martiny, *Talking About Values and Feelings with Young Children* (Calgary Temeron Press, 2005), ch.5; R.S. Peters, *Authority, Responsibility and Education*, 3rd edition (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1973); A. Flew, *Crime or Disease* (New York: Macmillan, 1973); J. R. Lucas, *The Freedom of the Will* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970); J. Piaget *The Moral Judgment of the Child* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968); T.-R. Shultz, M. Schleifer, and C. Jaggi, “Assigning Vicarious Responsibility,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 17 (1987), 377-380; T.-R. Shultz, K. Wright, and M. Schleifer, “Assignment of Moral Responsibility and Punishment,” *Child development*, 57 (1986), 177-184; M. Schleifer, T.-R. Shultz, M. Lefebvre-Pinard, “Judgments of Causality, Responsibility, and Punishment in Cases of Harm Due to Omission,” *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* 1,2 (1983), 87-97; T.-R. Shultz, M. Schleifer, I. Altman, “Judgments of Causation, Responsibility, and Punishment in Cases of Harm-Doing,” *Canadian Journal of Behavioral Science/Revue canadienne des sciences du comportement* 13,3 (1981), 238-253; M. Schleifer, “The Responsibility of the Psychopath,” *Philosophy*, 45,173 (1970), 231-232.
19. R. Adams, “Involuntary Sins,” *Philosophical Review*, 94,1 (1985), 3-31.
20. M. Schleifer, “To Speak or to Keep Silent.” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the British Society for Philosophy of Education, Oxford, April 2005.
21. P. White, “What Should We Teach Children About Forgiveness?” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 36, 10 (2002), 57-67.
22. Shultz, Wright, and Schleifer (1986) “Assignment of Moral Responsibility and Punishment,” op. cit. See also P.E. Bryant, “Piaget, Teachers and Psychologists,” *Oxford Review of Education* 10, 3 (1984), 251-259.
23. Goleman, op. cit. p. 23. Ledoux op. cit.
24. See note 15 above.
25. M. Schleifer, “Moods Emotions and Morality.” Paper presented at the Western Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Pasadena, 2003. See also, Schleifer and Martiny, op. cit., chapter 7.
26. Nussbaum, op. cit., p. 61.
27. Ledoux, op. cit., see note 18 above.
28. R.A. Emmons and M.E. McCullough, “Counting Blessings Versus Burdens: An Experimental Investigation of Gratitude and Subjective Well-Being in Daily Life,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 84, 2 (2003), 377-389.