

Summary

“Auf wen oder was antwortet ,Verantwortung’? – Zur Genealogie (und Pathologie) des Verantwortungsdenkens “

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This essay focuses on the current boom of the notion of ‘responsibility’ and asks for what reasons it has emerged. Nowadays, we use the term if we want to express that a person causes an effect, as in the case of an action, or far-reaching repercussions, and is therefore responsible for these. Philosophers of the 20th century refer back to an apparent Kantian notion of responsibility – others refer back to Aristotle. Thus one can get the impression that one elaborate systematic meaning of that notion has been underlying all its theoretical and political uses for hundreds of years. By contrast, the following argument will take the position that ‘responsibility’ is a rather young name for something that had no philosophically systematic meaning until the second half of the 19th century. That is to say, it was not initially linked to fundamental modern notions like ‘subject’ or ‘freedom’. Even if one can find its semantics in the notion of ‘imputatio’, i.e. liability, as used by Kant and others, it will be outlined that he uses liability in a strictly juridical sense differing from the broad use of today. This will be shown in a short genealogy of the notion and the term. Then, the claim will be defended that there nevertheless exists a deep relation between the – pretended and inflated – modern idea of the sovereign subject and the contemporary notion of responsibility, which has to compensate its – apparent – defects. This will be proved by pointing out the Kantian distinction between intelligible ideas and empirical problems, which theorists are advised to take seriously – at least as long as we have created another notion of sovereign subjectivity which depends on responsibility instead of constituting it.