Accountability as a Meta-Problem

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Grasping at holographs

Those engaged in the study of accountability often feel as if they are dealing with a holographic illusion. On the one hand, the subject of our attention seems present everywhere we turn, as a normative standard of political and social life and the focus of considerable attention no matter where one looks. On the other hand, despite the many efforts to define or describe it -- to get at its conceptual essence so that we might grasp it in order to get its measure -- the object of our obsession eludes us, leading us to accept its attribution as “murky” (Gormley), a “will-o-the-wisp” (F. Mosher), “ever expanding” (Mulgan) and "chameleon-like" (Sinclair) (see Behn 2001, p. 4).

Despite the conceptual challenges accountability poses for those committed to its study, its perceived importance in the governance, design and operations of public, private and third sector organizations begs for a more coherent elaboration of this elusive object. The current framings (e.g., Romzek & Dubnick 1987; Kearns 1994, 1996; Bovens 1998; Koppell 2005), while establishing some common ground for analysis or a thread linking our fragmented endeavors, fall short in providing the much needed commensurability required to generate a theoretically fruitful scholarship (see Dubnick 2002).

Notwithstanding our collective failure to define the term to the satisfaction of all, decades of focused attention on accountability have at the least made us aware of those conditions that have made our task so challenging. What we have learned about our subject can be summarized as follows:

- Accountability is **multifunctional**
- Accountability is **polymorphic**
- Accountability is **situated**
- Accountability is **promiscuous**

In what follows I will briefly consider each of these "features" of accountability and conclude by offering a radically different approach to our subject that might help us emerge from the intellectual rut of typologies and cases that we now seem to occupy. I argue that by refocusing our view of accountability – by seeing it in the broader historical context of what I term "meta-problems" – we will be able to take the study of accountability to a different and more fruitful level. As a demonstration of the "meta-problem" perspective's potential, I offer a retelling of one watershed historical episode. I conclude with some brief observations.

The Many Functions of Accountability

For sake of presentation, we begin our survey by positing a relatively simple and widely cited working definition of accountability that highlights its social and performative nature: "accountability is a relationship in which an individual or agency is held to answer for performance that involves some delegation of authority to act" (Romzek & Dubnick 2000: 382).

This definition, like most others, is subject to criticism for errors of commission and omission, but it provides a launching point for considering each of the characteristics we will discuss here. The two major factors it highlights are that accountability (1) involves a social relationship between at least two parties (2) in

which the demand or obligation for account-giving (answerability in this case) is accepted and expected by both parties.

Implied in that simple definition is the idea that the accountable relationship exists for a reason or purpose – i.e., that it has a "function" in the overall scheme of social relations that sustains it over time. While we might argue over the teleological premise that underpins functionalist views (see Pettit 1996; Wouters 2005), they do allow us to address the question of just what purpose accountability serves. And it is here where we run into our first major obstacle to understanding our subject: as a social relationship **accountability is multifunctional**.

To highlight the problem, rely on Mahner and Bunge's (2001) elaboration of the various ways functionality emerges in discussions of social life. They note at least five possibilities. Applying the logic[1] of their typology to account-giving actions, we can easily find examples in which accountability:

- Is part of the normal internal workings of a specific, relatively closed (i.e., buffered from external interference) social relationship between at least two parties (*"internal"* functionality); in this sense, accountability would be perceived as a mechanism that constitutes and/or sustains the specific relationship.
- Operates as a means for connecting the narrower relationship to its surroundings (*"external"* functionality); that is, accountability as a mechanism that defines its link to other entities in the task environment.
- Constitutes a meaningful component of a more general organized effort (*"role"* functionality); that is, accountability serves a constitutive or sustaining purpose in the overall system of relationships within which it is located.

[1] In adapting the Mahner/Bunge typology to this analysis I have taken some liberties with their terminology. For example, I have avoided using the "aptive-adaptive-exaptive" distinctions which are not merely awkward but also somewhat controversial among students of functional analysis.

- Contributes in a positive or negative (i.e., “dys”-functional) way to the performance of that organized effort (*“value”* functionality); that is, accountability treated in terms of the consequences it has for that overall system of relationships.
- Contributes to the continued viability of that system of relationships as an ongoing social endeavor (*“adaptive”* functionality); i.e., accountability as an existential component of the more general organized endeavor of which it is a part.

In short, accountability as a simple social relationship can (and often does) perform different functions at different levels of social activity.

For example, most of the literature on democratic governance would posit accountability as functionally adaptive, asserting that it would be difficult to imagine a democratic system that was not sustained by some effective form of accountability (e.g., Held 2004, 2006). But it is also clear that not all forms of accountability play a positive role in promoting democracy. In fact, some forms (e.g., bureaucratic) are often perceived as effectively dysfunctional in democratic settings (e.g., Hayek 1944; Scott 1998; Adams & Balfour 2004). Nevertheless, there is a substantial argument to be made for the necessity (i.e., role function) of seemingly non-democratic forms of accountability if democratic regimes are to succeed over time (e.g., Redford 1969; Eltzioni-Halevy 195; Pollitt 1986; Richardson 2002). The literature is also replete with ironies and paradoxes (Michels 1999; Diamond 1990) that highlight the role played by oligarchic relationships and (in the case of ancient Athens; see Samons 2004) even slavery in the history of supposedly democratic organizations and regimes.

The point here is not to question the possible link between democracy and accountability, but to highlight the analytic and empirical challenge posed by the multi-functional nature of account-giving behavior and relations. It is a challenge that can only be resolved through a process of defining and operationalization that focuses and narrows one’s view of the object under study. As a result, in

exchange for the ability to apply the tools of systematic thought and empirical analysis to an aspect of account-giving behavior, one knowingly (and necessarily) surrenders access to alternative views of accountability as well as the broader and more complex phenomena that makes this aspect of governance so significant.[2]

The Many Forms of Accountability

The challenge posed by accountability's multi-functionality is magnified several times over by the wide range of structural and operational forms associated with account-giving actions. These are so numerous, in fact, that any attempt to inventory them would prove fruitless. Consider, for example, the vast inventory of mechanisms (passive and active) associated with rendering an individual or organization accountable. From legal sanctions to monetary rewards, from detailed job descriptions to empowerment, from oversight to assessments, from audits to rankings, from instructions to management-by-objectives, from reporting to responding, from ethical constraints to broad grants of discretion – the list of mechanisms seems endless. The reality is that no particular mechanism or set of mechanisms define accountability, not even the actions associated with the act of "accounting".

It is not surprising, therefore, that we often rely on typologies of such mechanisms based on some general characteristic. In some cases the mechanisms are associated with an arena of accountable action. Romzek and Dubnick (1987), for example, offer a scheme often used to sort mechanisms into four types depending on whether they are derived from legal, political, bureaucratic/organizational or professional spheres. At other times it is the

[2] The "necessary" nature of this trade-off is analogous to the choices physicists and others make under the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. From a critical perspective, the question is whether this rises to the level of a Faustian bargain. I think not; for me the insights generated by conceptually and empirically narrow studies have proven invaluable in broadening our perspective on accountability.

organizational and social context that provides the logic. Grant and Keohane (2005) set out seven types in their analysis of mechanisms relevant to global affairs, for based on the use of delegation (hierarchical, supervisory, fiscal and legal) and three on forms of participation (market, peer and reputational). Still others derive their categorization of mechanisms from observation of practices in specific arenas. Emanuel and Emanuel (1996), focusing on health care, provide a three-fold typology of mechanisms at a very general level: professional, market and political. Ebrahim (2003; cf., Kearns 1994) derives his five "categories of accountability mechanisms" (reports and disclosure statements, performance assessments and evaluations, participation, self-regulation, social audits) from the observed practices of NGOs.

Given the **polymorphic nature of accountability** – that is, its manifestation in a range of different "forms" and "mechanisms" – there is little choice for analysts but to cast conceptually porous typological nets on their subject matter. This is made necessary by the various "language games" involving the term *accountability*, something that becomes quite clear when one considers the various synonyms associate with it. Answerability, liability, responsibility, fidelity, responsiveness, obligation – each frequently used interchangeably with accountability, and each linked directly to different forms of account-giving mechanisms (Dubnick 1998; 2002).

But there is a challenge here, for form can easily replace substance in the study of accountability, and in the process divert our attention to some of the more significant issues related to our subject. It is commonplace for a tautological logic to take hold and transform mechanisms of account-giving from empirical examples into measures of accountability. Once on that slippery slope, the "measures" of accountability develop into the evaluative standards of just how "accountable" a government or official is – but in the process we lose sight of the more fundamental and unanswered questions about the nature and role of accountability in governance. Just as the study of democracy has been

transformed into the comparative study of voting, deliberation and various institutional forms, so the study of accountability has been narrowed to the examination of mechanisms that seem to assure answerability, liability, control, etc.. We benefit from learning a good deal more about those mechanisms and their implementation, but that body of work does not advance the project of furthering our understanding of accountability.

Context Matters!

Whatever the variation in form, accountability will also vary by context. In that sense, accountability is not merely a "social" relationship. It is also cultural, temporal and spatial. While we can reasonably develop generally applicable statements regarding the functions and forms of accountability from our studies, we can do so only contingently. In short, **accountability is situated**.

Depending on one's research objective, this particular characteristic of accountability might be regarded as either problem or opportunity. On the problematic side, the contingent and embedded nature of accountability in governance (see Bevir 2004; also Granovetter 1985, Farmer 1995; Farmer & Farmer 1997; Fox & Miller 1995) will make generalizations and formal theory construction related to accountability challenging at best.[3] The opportunity to create empirical strategies and innovative conceptual/theoretical approaches to contend with these challenges can be (and has been; see Simpson 2002) a driving force in the social sciences in general and in the study of accountability in particular.

Consider, for example, the case of the Challenger accident. The Romzek and Dubnick 1987 analysis highlighted the possible role played by multiple, diverse and conflicting accountability mechanisms in the launch decision, and the lessons drawn from that analysis have been applied analytically and heuristically

[3] However, see March and Olsen 1989, 1995 and March 1994. Also Montgomery 1998.

to a wide range of contexts and situations (e.g., Kearns 1996, Gormley & Balla 2004, Radin 2002, 2006). But it was Vaughan's detailed examination of the decision a decade later that not only supported and elaborated on that basic theme but contributed to an emerging theory of accountability relevant to high reliability organizations (Vaughan 1996).

General typologies and frameworks are fine for certain purposes, but *credible* theories of accountability must of necessity be contingency theories. Accepting that fact will do much to shape the future of accountability studies, forcing researchers to design their empirical studies with care and analysts to qualify the conclusions they draw from observations of account-giving behavior.

Of course, the implications of accountability's "situatedness" are not confined to the impact of contingencies on how we study the functions and forms of accountability. An acceptance of the contingent nature of accountability fosters an examination of the role that accountability has played in different historical contexts, from its use in ancient Athens (e.g., Roberts 1994; Elster 1999) to the role it played in the most sinister operations of Nazi Germany (e.g., Hilberg 1992; Browning 1992; Seibel 2002; Russell & Gregory 2005). It can also help us understand the historical emergence and development of the constitutional and democratic forms of accountable governance that stand as our contemporary global ideal. As is recounted later in this paper, accountability as a desired characteristic of modern governance emerged in 11th and 12th century England under given conditions that required an oath-based commitment to Norman rule. In this sense, accountability as we know it today was Anglo-Norman at its roots (Dubnick 1998, 2002). For several centuries it was nurtured and sustained in England (and parts of France) through the adaptation of institutions that had originally performed estate-management functions for the royal courts in both countries (Strayer 2005/1970; cf. Bourdieu 2004). Historically, the forms and functions that we identify today as accountability reflect the legacies of that developmental context. In other countries and regions, functionally and

structurally similar institutions developed, but their emergence followed distinct paths (see Bendix 1978).[4] One can view the contemporary dominance of the English-based form as a byproduct of Anglo-American hegemony on the world stage.

No doubt, context matters, But over time, accountability has lost its functional and structural ties to its origins. It is now less an identifiable institutional form rooted in specific legal and political traditions, and more a global cultural phenomenon – a world-wide icon of good governance (Dubnick 2002; Dubnick & Justice 2004). In many respects, accountability has become what some would classify as a "keyword" in our global culture (Williams 1985), one with a positive valence and universal appeal that is applied (casually -- almost thoughtlessly) worldwide in the daily rhetoric of politicians of every ideological stripe as well as the mass media that covers them.

Promises of Accountability

In recent years this rise in the cultural status of accountability has created still another challenge for students of the subject. The desirability of accountability-focused solutions to governance problems has reached the level of fostering an almost indiscriminate reliance on the use of the instruments associated with the polymorphic accountability tool box. It is from this view of its indiscriminate application that we derive the fourth feature that makes the study of accountable governance problematic: **accountability is promiscuous**.

This indiscriminate use of accountability approaches is not without historical precedent. For most of the twentieth century – from at least the 1920s through the early 1970s -- various forms of "planning" were proffered by policy experts

[4] This contention is supported by the fact that the term "accountability" as a term of art in governance was unique to the Anglo-American-Australasian world until recently. For example, there was no equivalent term in the vocabulary of EU nations (outside the UK sphere) or Latin America. See Dubnick 1998.

and political elites as *the* basic solution to a wide range of social and economic ills plaguing modern industrial states. "Planning is like motherhood," noted Aaron Wildavsky in a 1973 critique; "everyone is for it because it seems so virtuous" (p. 149). While there were notable critics (e.g., Hayek 1944, Popper 1962), by the start of World War II planning had achieved its status as a cultural icon supported by a "secular faith" (Wildavsky 1973, p. 151-1153) that was ubiquitous and seemingly immune from attacks. Every problem in every sector seemed susceptible to solutions derived from the logic of action inherent in the amorphous collection of policy tools that came under the umbrella of "planning."[5] Wildavsky analysis is worth quoting at length on this point:

> The concept of planning stands between actors and their societies. It conditions the way they perceive social problems and it guides their choice of solutions. Their understanding of planning helps them to choose the questions they ask and the answers they find. It leads them to evaluate their experience, including their attempt to plan, in certain ways rather than others. The difficulties they experience in society are related to their understanding of the mechanism--planning--they believe will help them solve its problems.
>
> Men think through language. They can hardly conceive of phenomena their words cannot express. The ways in which men think about planning affect how they act just as their attempts to plan affect how they think about it. The problems they have with the word mirror their problems with the world. (pp. 127-128)

We need only substitute the term “accountability” for “planning” in those passages to grasp the nature of problems posed by the promiscuous use of accountability solutions to governance problems.

Figure 1 can help us comprehend just how pervasive the promiscuity problem is by framing the different “promises” implied in the application of accountability-based solutions to problems associated with the operations and governance of an organized effort. Each of the cells in the matrix can be regarded as a problematic situation defined by the stage in the effort at which it is perceived to

[5] For a critique of the “general theory” underlying planning, see Rittel & Webber 1973.

occur (input, process, outcomes) and the value the problem solving agent assigns to the solution (i.e., does the accountability-based solution instrumentally valued as a means to an end, or is the solution itself intrinsically valued for its own sake). The result is six major "promises of accountability" that tend to drive the adoption of (and shape the implementation of) different accountability mechanisms.

	Accountability solutions valued:	
Focus on:	A. Instrumentally	B. Intrinsically
1. Inputs	**A1. The Promise of Control**	**B1: The Promise of Integrity**
2. Processes	**A2: The Promise of Ethical behavior/choices**	**B2: The Promise of Legitimacy** .
3. Outcomes	**A3: The Promise of Performance**	**B3: The Promise of Justice**

The Six Promises of Accountability

At the input stage, accountability mechanisms are viewed (and valued) instrumentality as appropriate (i.e., "promising") solutions to issues requiring "control" in the broadest sense of the term. Organized endeavors – whether public programs, corporate operations or nonprofit activities – require the effective (and perhaps efficient) use of scarce resources, and a common problem is how to structure, manage and monitor the problematic situation that results (Ouchi 1977, 1979). Here the *promise of control* (cell A1) draws upon some of the most basic mechanisms associated with accountability – textbook approaches from the design of hierarchical and lateral reporting structures to establishing production metrics, record keeping procedures, auditing standards and procedures, oversight and supervision protocols, communications networks, and so on.

The input stage is also the point at which accountability may be called upon to facilitate and foster responsible, trustworthy and virtuous behavior – that is, to achieve the *promise of integrity* (A2). In the public sector, stories of "moral exemplars" and "unsung heroes" (Riccucci 1995; cf. O'Leary 2006) among public service professionals is complemented by laws, rules and norms that serve to protect the integrity of their actions. Mechanisms as basic as ethics codes, civil service and whistleblower protections, HR practices and policies fostering professional commitment are designed, in part, to support the promise of integrity in public agencies. Market rules and legal regulations (e.g., Sarbanes-Oxley; Dubnick 2007) related to the behavior of high level corporate executives and directors are intended to punish both malfeasance and misfeasance, as are mounting pressures emanating from both within and outside the firm for corporate social responsibility (Vogel 2005). Donor demands for transparency as well as hos government (e.g., IRS) regulations work to the same effect for third sector organizations (Brown and Moore 2001; Jordan & van Tuijl 2006).

At first view, the *promise of ethics* (B1) seems redundant with that of integrity. After all, those who act with integrity are likely to be ethical by definition. There is, however, an important difference to be highlighted between that behavior which is valued for its own sake ("doing the *right* thing", for which we use the label integrity) and behavior that is based on "doing the *correct* thing" as far as one's role or job in an organizational is concerned (Phillips & Margolis 1999; Weaver et al 1999; Barker 2002). In relation to the latter, how does one assure that those engaged in such an effort act (or decide) correctly or appropriately in an instrumental sense? This is the problematic that was central to Barnard's The Function of the Executive (1938/1968) and was at the core of Herbert Simon's throughout his career (1947/1957, 1987).[6] As a source of means for dealing with this set of problems, accountability has taken a variety of forms – from the

[6] Interestingly, in his correspondence with Simon regarding the publication of Administrative Behavior, Barnard made reference to the minimal coverage of "responsibility" in the book – and urged him to expand on that in the next edition. See Wolf et al 1995, p. 96.

articulation and sanctioning of standard operating procedures to the fostering of norms stressing rule-following, loyalty and other forms of organizational citizenship behaviors (Padsakoff, et al 2000). In the public sector, an example of a more direct link with ethics is found in the work of Rohr (1989) and Rosenbloom (1983, 1987; Rosenbloom et al 2000) who call for the adoption of regime values and the nurturing of constitutional competence among public administrators.

The *promise of democracy* (B2) is related to view that accountability is a core, if not defining, characteristic of democratic regimes (Held 2004, 2006; O'Donnell 2004). Just as divine designation or inspiration once determined the legitimacy of any governance arrangement, today "democraticness" is a requisite to any claim to govern in the public sphere (Buchanan 2002; also see Matheson 1987), and quite often in the private and third sectors as well. Given the identity of a range accountability mechanisms with democraticness – from representation to election to transparency to participation – the application of these is regarded as intrinsically warranted. It is a perspective that underlies the "transparency agenda" pursued by government reformers at every level of governance, from local to global (see Hood 2006; Florini 2007; Fung et al 2007). It is also central to the "democratic deficit" critique that has generated national and global calls for more accountability (Durant 1995; Cerny 1999) and effectively put the brakes on efforts to expand the authority and jurisdiction of the European Union (Dahl 1994, Majone 1998; Schmidt 2004).

Perhaps more than any of the six types highlighted here, the *promise of performance* (C1) has had the greatest impact on the practice of public administration. Driven by the assumption that accountability is instrumentally linked to improved performance (see Dubnick 2005), this promise has had global impact and launched literally thousands of projects and programs designed to secure the hoped-for benefits. Long applied in the private sector as mechanisms designed as much for control purposes as for enhancing productivity, the

approach has been advocated for third sector organizations (Kaplan 2001) embraced by the public sector worldwide with an ideological fervor rarely seen.[7] Assessments of these efforts are starting to emerge (e.g., Radin 2006, Frederickson and Frederickson 2006, Propper & Wilson 2003), but for the moment it has the power of a movement that seems unstoppable.

The idea that the very act of "bringing to justice" is a form of justice itself is increasingly central to viewing accountability as the *promise of justice.* This promise has deep roots in beliefs regarding the basic value of retribution and restitution in the law (see Hibbert 2003; also Hart 1968, Foucault 1977), but those are beliefs that would regard accountability as a means to the traditional ends of criminal or civil law. In those legal regimes that have established a high degree of legitimacy – that is, where most of the population assumes that the justice system is capable and likely to handle cases in a fair and just manner (se Tyler & Huo 2002) – the value of bringing someone to justice (to be held "accountable" in the juridical sense) becomes highly valued for its own sake.

Since at least the mid to late 1980s, the role of accountability as the promise of justice has become a core issue in several of the most prominent cases involving "transitional justice" as regimes the world over "democratized" and sought to deal with past abuses of authority and human rights violations (see Minow 1998; Bass 2000). The stark choices typically ranged from collective acquiescence (e.g., Portugal, post-Pinochet Chile) to harsh legal justice meted out by the victors (e.g., post-invasion Iraq, following what is known as the "Nuremberg Paradigm") (see Park 2001).

But in several jurisdictions both political realities and moral leadership resulted in the applications of alternative approaches, from "Truth Commissions" that

[7] As noted previously, the exception may be the fascination with planning that dominated policymaking discourse from the 1920s into the 1970s. An argument can also be made for the enthusiasm associated with the "privatization" movement of the 1970s and 1980s; see Savas 1987.

focused on establishing a record of what took place under the prior regime, to various forms of reconciliation mechanisms that stopped short of juridical sanctions (e.g., the Garaca process in Rwanda), to combinations such as the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission that offered amnesty in return for confessions of involvement. While few of these generated outcomes that proved satisfactory to victims and others seeking more severe punishments for violations of human rights and dignity, in most instances they did satisfy accountability's promise of justice in the sense described here (Sarkin 2000; Roche 2005; Syring 2006).

Whether in fact accountability in this (or any sense) actually delivers real justice is an (perhaps unanswerable) empirical question. The point here is that the cathartic value of the notion of accountability has significance and a utility tied to the concept's promiscuousness. These is the case locally as well as globally, for all firms and agencies (public and private) have developed a variety of mechanisms to foster the sense that misbehavior or malfeasance can be brought to account. The very existence of such mechanisms is often perceived as a measure of accountability, even in the absence of evidence that complaints and concerns are actually addressed.

Which brings us back again to the multifunctional, polymorphic and contingent nature of accountability, for it seems the various promises of accountability provide the vehicle through which this key concept of modern governance makes its way into our collective political psyche. But despite its pervasive presence in almost any discussion of governance, we are left with the fact that we still lack a sense of what accountability entails. It remains holographic, easy to see but impossible to grasp. And thus we are left with a central point somewhat similar to Wildavsky's commentary on planning: if accountability is the solution to everything, perhaps it is the solution to nothing.

Accountability as Meta-Problem: A Contentious Thesis

After nearly three decades of attempting to make sense of accountability, I can hardly be expected to accept the implication that accountability is in fact merely an empty concept, an iconic symbol manipulated for both rhetorical and analytic purposes to help us rationalize or make some sense of our political world. Driven by a belief that there is more to it than that, I've increasingly turned to historical and philosophical approaches in search of insights that we are unable to generate through applying existing theory or examining current practices associated with accountability. The result is a somewhat contentious thesis that posits **accountability as the meta-problem of modern governance**.

By using the concept of "meta-problem," I intend to associate accountability with one of a small group of issues that have defined and shaped social theory and practice for centuries – a class of general problems often lurking in the background that continuously challenge the basic assumptions and institutional arrangements of social and political life at any particular time and place. By way of example, consider two such meta-problems – the "problem of evil" and the "problem of free-will" – that have for centuries defined (and continue to define) issues and debates in fields as diverse as theology, philosophy and the sciences.

The *problem of evil* reflects a controversy that grew from the dilemma posed by efforts to sustain a belief in a benign and omnipotent god in the face of a reality that generated perceived evil. It is a problem that has challenged religious authorities for centuries, that gave birth to its own area of study ("theodicy"; see Leibniz 1985; Kremer and Latzer 2001), but as significant, in a more secularized form it was at the center of concerns that prompted and nurtured modern philosophy (Neiman 2002).

Likewise, the "problem of free will" has preoccupied scholars for centuries, and its various in its various formulations (e.g., determinism and non-determinism,

compatibilism and incompatibilism) have continuously informed and shaped debates among and between theologians, philosophers and scientists.[8]

In one sense, these meta-problems are the stuff of high-level philosophical analyses, the focus of analytic logic and scholasticist argumentation. In another sense, however, they are the grist for those engaged in reconciling ideas and ideals with realities and contingencies. Such meta-problems share three characteristics.

- First, they are historically transcendent or, in Michel Foucault's terms, historically *a priori*. While part of human history and subject to local and temporal variation (in the form of *problématiques*[9] or what Foucault (1997) terms "problematizations"), these meta-problems are not bounded by time and space.
- Second, meta-problems are ultimately intractable – they are dilemmas that cannot be "solved." Even when rendered more approachable when "problematized," there are no simple or easy solutions, and those that are applied are likely to prove incomplete or ineffective in the long term.
- Third, meta-problems and the *problématiques* they generate are "wicked" in the sense of being "messy" and often inviting solutions that require choices and actions that will themselves prove problematic or even make matters worse (see Rittel & Webber 1973; also Ludwig 2001 and Durant 2006).

Posited as a distinct meta-problem, the problem of accountability is transcendent in reflecting the centuries old dilemma defined by the need to reconcile human potential for autonomy with the requirements of social order. Viewed in this light,

[8] The relevant literature on the free-will vs. determinism problem is vast; see Watson 1982 for an excellent collection of relevant readings. Also see Dennett 2003.

[9] The term is most often associated with the work of French philosopher Louis Althusser, and especially his intellectual biography of Karl Marx (2005). It was also famously applied in the famous Club of Rome studies and by other general systems analysts; see Warfield & Perino 1999.

both the history of political thought (e.g., from Plato's Republic to Rawl's Theory of Justice -- and beyond) and analysis of political practice (through the historical examination of various governance arrangements) can be understood (and assessed) as efforts to specify ("problematize") and deal with the "intractable and wicked" meta-problem of accountability.

It goes without saying that this "meta-problem" thesis begs for elaboration as well as application – two tasks that are likely to preoccupy several academic lifetimes for anyone with the wherewithal to take on such a project. But in lieu of the intellectual power and other resources such an undertaking might require, I offer the following "analytic narrative" (see Bates et al 1998, 2000, 2000a) about the foundations of modern governance as an example of the insights the accountability-as-meta-problem might provide.

The Norman Conquest of Governance

While the meta-problem of accountability is an ancient one (e.g., Roberts 1982; von Dornum 1997), in its modern form it first emerges in the major transformations of governance taking place in eleventh and twelfth centuries in Europe, especially in England, France and Sicily. Although rarely acknowledged in the narratives we apply to the historical development of governance, the social and technological transformations that occur at that time laid the foundations of modern government as we know it. Faced with general conditions and specific situations that effectively loosened and altered the religious and familial bonds that characterized medieval society and sustained earlier regimes (see Taylor 2004; Strayer 2005), a new class of rulers in these regions found it necessary to develop the rudimentary mechanisms and institutions that formed the basis for today's governance structures. Driven by the meta-problem of accountability and the need to reconcile the demands of individual autonomy with the requirements for collective order and action, different regimes at different times developed distinctive responses to the meta-problem of accountability.

A specific case in point is the somewhat well known story behind the establishment of accountable governance in early modern England.[10] At the outset I should stress that the story I am about to present regarding the emergence of the problem of accountability is necessarily interpretive given the dearth of direct evidence regarding the views and motives of the central actors in the narrative. Fortunately, however, the general narrative is well known to many since it relates to the onset of Norman rule after the conquest of 1066 – a story that is found in many history books covering England and the rise of western civilization.

The narrative is often told with few details, but in addition to the Battle of Hastings one highlight of the Norman rule that followed was the initiation of the Domesday Book census by William I twenty years after the conquest. Some of those details, however, transform the events of the period from a story of conquest to that of a watershed era in the creation of modern governance.

One such detail relates to the Normans themselves and the circumstances of their emergence as conquerors whose ventures included incremental conquests of Sicily and much of southern Italy throughout the 11th century, eventually leading to consolidation of Norman rule of the Kingdom of Sicily in 1130. Thus the Normans (including several of William's sibling and cousins) had already been engaged in developing means for governing-at-a-distance by the time of the 1066 invasion. This included the exercise of authority (in the form of imposing taxes and extracting the resources they required to support their ongoing ventures in Italy) while allowing local Muslim officials to retain their control over the administration of local government. It wasn't until 1127 that Roger II would replace the Arab governors with Norman officials.

[10] The narrative presented here is drawn from a number of sources, including Maitland 1897; Douglas 1927, 1939, 1964; Hollister 1961, 1968; Hollister & Baldwin 1978; Poole 1993; van Houts 1995; Daniell 2003; Thomas 2003. On the Norman rule of Sicily, see Morongiu 1964, Matthew 1992 and Takayama 1993.

Another factor that distinguished the Normans from other European rulers of the time was the relatively politicized relationship they had with Rome. The history of the Vatican during the last half of the 11th century reflects a low point in the Church's capacity to assert any significant moral authority over Europe's fragmented ruling class, and this was especially the case for the Normans who more often than not exercised dominant and direct influence over the incumbent Popes due to their proximity to Rome. While dedicated Christians, the Normans were not deferential to the Church or its claim to moral authority – thus creating an early form of secularized governance where the authority of the ruler trumped that of religion.

Still another detail was the pull of Normandy on William's attention. Despite the considerable time and effort that William had to devote to consolidating his kingship (the final major resistance ended in 1072), a good portion of his time and energy afterwards was spent in Normandy defending his home duchy against both internal and external challenges. While in Normandy (historians note that he spent 11 years there from 1072) much of his rule in England was conducted via writs and surrogates.

When William returns to England, he finds that disputes over Church land and related questionable claims over ownership of the pre-conquest holdings were making administration of his kingdom difficult. It was not merely the conquered Anglo-Saxon population that seemed to be circumventing his claims when they could, but also the Norman elite that he had rewarded with titles and land in exchange for their support. Calling together his council in 1085 at Gloucester to deal with the resulting problems of governance, he commissioned a survey (*descripto*) seeking a "reckoning" (i.e., accounting) of all land holdings and other property in his domain. Over the next year the records of those surveys

(collectively called the King's Roll, and a century later referred to as the Domesday Books[11]) would be delivered to the royal household in Winchester.

More than any other part of this historical narrative, it is the motivation behind William's ordering of survey that remains open to interpretation. The semi-official view (as expressed by the British National Archives) is that William was preparing to raise and support an army to defend his realm from an anticipated invasion from Denmark. Realizing his need for troops and resources, he called for the survey to enhance the king's capacity to lay and collect taxes by determining the holdings (and value) of his subjects.

But this view of the survey as merely a reassessment of taxable value of manorial assets tells only part of the story. It does not explain the inconsistency of the data collection (there was no uniformity in the valuation system) nor its incomplete coverage of the realm (various parts of William's domain went unsurveyed, including several large towns and entire counties). Nor does this narrow "reassessment" interpretation explain the depth of detail and sweeping coverage of the census, for the information sought by the king's commissioners demanded a detailed accounting that drilled much deeper into manorial holdings than what was traditionally regarded as the taxable base. As famously described in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, in the census "'there was no single hide nor a yard of land, nor indeed (it is a shame to relate but it seemed no shame to him [the king] to do) one ox nor one cow nor one pig which was there left out, and not put down in his record." In a process clearly designed to circumvent the authority and rights of manorial lords, the survey reached down to tenants and sub-tenants, even to the listing of their names.

[11] The Latin word for "reckoning" is *dom* and is the etymological root of doomsday as a "day of reckoning." Initially the King's Roll from the survey (also called the Winchester Roll given its location) was a composite of the various survey reports from the William's commissioners and sat in the Royal Treasury. In the 1180s these records were transcribed into a single record and given the title "Domesday Books".

A broader interpretation of the Domesday Books survey would view it as an effort of William to solve a much more significant problem than enhancing his ability to meet short-term fiscal needs. He also required a means for resolving his governance problem – a problem created by the breakdown of the traditional social and political order brought on by his successful invasion and two-decade old occupation. The Norman conquest involved more than the replacement of one monarch with another; it included the extensive use of coercion and confiscations that impacted on all regions of England, often leading to the replacement of Anglo-Saxon lords with Normans who had a claim on William rooted in their support of his controversial decision to invade in 1066. The result was that this conquest reached into the local areas of England to an extent that disrupted what Charles Taylor (2004) terms the old "social imaginary" based on an organic hierarchical (i.e., feudal) order and generated considerable governance problems throughout the realm. Over the two decades since the invasion, William had tried to offset the subsequent breakdown of the old order by issuing writs dealing with disputes or requiring that the legal traditions of Anglo-Saxon "Ancient Law" be followed where possible. But when combined with his long absence from England these efforts did not suffice.

The situation William faced required that he find a way to deal with the governance problems created by the empowerment and autonomy of individual lords and tenants unleashed through the shattering of the traditional social and political order. In this sense, William was among the first rulers to face the distinctively modern problem of establishing legitimate governance in situations in which individuals were no longer regarding themselves as subjects within a set "moral order", but rather had begun to sense themselves as empowered and somewhat autonomous actors whose allegiances – if any – were increasingly local and familial. Nor was William's situation unique. As greater attention is paid to social and political life in eleventh and twelfth century Europe, there is growing historical evidence to support the view that in general this was a watershed period in the transition from the pre-modern (*Gesellschaft*) order of feudalism to

the early modern era (*Gemeinschaft*). Applying a somewhat cotemporary term now being used by many of our colleagues, William's subjects had become (or increasingly began to perceive themselves as) "agencified". The essence of the problem of accountability is the issue of how you bridge the gap between the growing fact of agent empowerment and the moral claims of governance. With the agency genie out of the feudal bottle, William required a mechanism for reestablishing a moral order – a means of resolving the meta-problem of accountability by reconstituting a link between empowered subjects and their sense of moral agency.

William was able to accomplish this in part through the Domesday census, for the very act of counting and recording the holdings of his subjects was an active assertion of a Crown's claim to authority over the realm and everything – and everybody – in it. Viewed in a narrow way, William was not only measuring his fiscal capacity through the survey, but also ascertaining and asserting his fiscal rights as the sovereign.

But there is one additional detail indicating that more was involved. As the census neared completion in 1086, William convened a meeting of "landowning men of any account" (that is, not merely the manorial lords, but the leading tenants and property holding merchants – 170 in all) to Salisbury where they would acknowledge his claim and swear an oath of fealty to him. As they did so, they had before them the written evidence substantiating the Crown's claim – essentially and effectively an accounting (in the "reckoning" sense) of William's domain that they held as **his** agents. And in the Oath of Salisbury they acknowledged his moral claim on them individually and directly for their use of King's domain.

In some respects, this episode represents merely a variation and extension of feudal and pre-modern governance arrangements, especially in its reliance on sworn oaths of fealty. But in important ways it marks a significant break from

those traditions. The oath taken by those at Salisbury is more than a ritualistic reassertion of moral authority based on some assumed natural order of things. On the one hand, it is an acknowledgment by William that much of his domain was in the hands of many agents who were increasingly capable of acting autonomously given the growing distance between them and the Royal Court. On the other hand, it was an acknowledgment by those same agents of the Crown's moral claim (one that could be backed up through the use of force) on their actions and obligations.

Given this interpretive narrative, it is not mere coincidence that from the governance milieu of the Norman Conquest emerges two basic tools of modern governance: the charter and the creation of the administrative state. The use of royal charters, of course, can be traced to earlier times in various contexts – most typically as gifts or means for supporting loyalty and service to the king. But with the growth of commerce and trade in towns and embryonic cities outside the old feudal orders during the 11th and 12th centuries, the new class of merchants and craftsman felt vulnerable and sought the sanctuary and protection of the Crown through charters in which they acknowledged a royal claim of authority over their actions and possessions in exchange for a degree of agential autonomy that was to be guided by an explicit or implied moral obligation (see Richardson 2004). Thus the power and moral force of oath-taking made its way into charters and contractual arrangements that would form the basis of modern governance solutions to the problem of accountability.

The seeds of the administrative state also emerged from this early effort to solve the problem of accountability. The very act of conducting the Domesday census was an administrative function initially carried out by commissioners organized into seven circuits, and these officials approached their tasks by mobilizing existing local manorial and church officials who would present their geld records and church rolls for examination. A common set of questions was asked, and procedures were established for the verification and assessment of the

information provided.[12] In the years that followed, local officials serving the Crown were to maintain and update the records, thus creating a domain-wide system of royal administration that scholars of the period (1200s to the 1300s) have terms the first "administrative kingships" (see especially Hollister & Baldwin 1978).

Making it "Real"

At the outset of this paper I posited an image of accountability-as-holograph – a concept that we can "see" all around us but cannot "grasp" analytically. The difficulty is manifest in the very things our collective research endeavors have uncovered about accountability and its role in governance: it is multifunctional, polymorphic, situated and promiscuous. In the face of such findings it is tempting to assume a position similar to Wildavsky's view of planning; or, to borrow from Gertrude Stein's famous declaration about her hometown of Oakland, we need to acknowledge that "there is no there there…."

My reluctance to dismiss accountability as a meaningless construct, to be valued only as merely a cultural artifact – a "keyword" with little more than symbolic and rhetorical value – has led to my positing a different perspective on the subject. The "accountability as meta-problem" thesis transforms the subject into a core – if not THE core – dilemma that shapes and drives modern governance. It is no doubt a contentious thesis, and in some respects a bit outrageous in what it implies about accountability. Nevertheless, the shift in perspective might prove fruitful.

[12] For example, each survey included historical as well as current information on individual holdings. The census was to ascertain holdings (1) at the time of the death of King Edward the Confessor, (2) at the time of the Norman invasion, and (3) at the current time. The commissioners were to selectively verify the information, and a jury comprise of Normans and Anglo-Saxons was to assess the report that emerged from each jurisdiction.

For one thing, it implies that there might be credible explanations and theories (beyond mere "family resemblances") for the many functions and forms that come under the rubric of accountability. There are all sorts of ways to "problematize" a meta-problem, and the multiple functions and mechanisms can be regarded as a reflection of those potential variations.

The meta-problem viewpoint also enhances our capacity to understand how those functions and forms relate to specific conditions (i.e., accountability's "situatedness"), which in turn can provide some insight into (1) why certain types of accountability mechanisms are adopted or rejected in a given program or jurisdiction and (2) the reasons for the relative success or failure of the mechanism(s) under a given set of conditions.

As important, the meta-problem view allows us to "make sense" of the various "promises" that have drawn on the different account-giving mechanisms associated with accountability. The dilemma central to the meta-problem – that of finding some means for reconciling the demands autonomy and the need for authority – is shared by almost all our institutions, from the family and work place to the nation-state and beyond. The solutions that emerge form the core of the more general phenomena we call governance. In that sense, the study of accountability as a meta-problem is the study of governance.

Having posited the meta-problem thesis, I offered a "test" of its usefulness (if not its validity) by applying it to the history of how the Normans converted their conquest into governance. At minimum, this involved a reinterpretation of a well known historical narrative. In the process, however, it may also have provided insight into the roots of *modern* governance, for the actions of William and his successors was in some important respect unprecedented and foundational. This narrative implies that the operational foundations of modern governance were established well before (at least five centuries!) they were articulated in the works

of those theorists (e.g., Hobbes, Locke) who are often credited with formulating the rationale for the modern state.

The “bottom line” of the present effort, however, was not to reinterpret history or offer a theory of accountability (although I hope that will be the eventual result) but rather to take us one step closer to providing a meaningful and “real” conceptualization of accountability that we can grasp firmly as we continue our study of modern governance.

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