FUTURES GLOSSARY

Responsibility

English

1. Futures definition

Responsibility is a state that is involved, explicitly or implicitly, in all futures activities. Today's actions have consequences later that must be considered. Likewise, all statements about responsibility involve the future and vice versa. Relevant responsibility may relate towards oneself, participants, partners, those who are not in the room, etc. In each case, a responsibility of someone for something toward somebody exists.

2. General definitions

Responsibility can be defined as a state or a quality someone has or can build. This state requires being able to act towards what is expected, asked, or required. The person who is, becomes, or is able to be responsible has a moral, legal, or mental responsibility for something towards somebody (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-d).

Someone can be asked by somebody else to be responsible. Alternatively, the person can take, have, or accept responsibility. Or they can simply be, become, feel, or be trusted to be responsible (The Britannica Dictionary, n.d.-b). In each case, a responsibility of someone for something toward somebody exists. Being responsible comes down to being able to react, to respond to someone, or being able to promise something. A difficult issue to parse is whether somebody's responsibility refers to expectations of concrete and attributable actions or to the results of those actions, which may arise as a result of other influences.

Responsibilities in certain professions or sectors may be summarized in codes of ethics, such as those for journalists, lawyers, accountants, or futurists. The concepts of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) or Responsible Management Education (RME) are two examples in which responsibilities and responsible parties are clearly defined. In the case of CSR, companies must consider the societal and environmental impact of their activities. In the case of RME, business schools are responsible for educating "people who will help their organizations create inclusive prosperity while promoting freedom, justice, and peace within regenerative and resilient natural ecosystems" (United Nations Global Compact, 2023).

For the futures field, Wendell Bell (1993) suggested that a code of *Professional Ethics for Futurists* should be developed that includes the responsibilities of futurists towards different stakeholders towards different ends. A few years later, Slaughter implied that responsibility plays a role because high-quality futures work cannot be based on ego but must be "an expression of shared transpersonal aspirations" and has to "open out productive 'mind spaces'" (Slaughter, 1999, p. 845).

3. Etymology

The noun *response* traces back to the Latin *respōnsum*, an answer or reply. Relatedly, *responsus* is the past participle of *respondēre*, which connects *re-* (back) and *spondere* (promise) (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-c). Somebody is responding, replying, or giving a promise about something to someone. The German term for responsibility is *Verantwortung*, where *antworten* also means to respond or answer. The English *responsible* is similar to the French *responsable*. Importantly, responsibility links to the French noun *responsabilité*, which includes the idea of the ability to respond. *Sorumluluk* in Turkish is similar as well, meaning to take over the response to a need.

4. Field of terms

Several terms are close in meaning to responsibility, but not equivalent. For example, a *duty* is narrower in meaning as the term implies obligation and respect, while being mostly directed at somebody by a superior person or structure (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-a). Relatedly, *obligation* is similar to duty: I am obliged to do something. On the other hand, the term *accountable* is narrower than responsibility as it focuses more on accounting, keeping records, or being able to provide a statement.

The obvious antonym to responsible is *irresponsible*, which refers to the "lack of a sense of" or to actions taken towards responsibility, but possibly also to the mental or financial inability to bear responsibility (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-b). Being irresponsible is not the same as not being responsible; rather, irresponsibility is about being without a sense of responsibility, which implies that responsibility is lacking if one is not capable of being responsible.

5. Theoretical foundations

Responsibility has deep roots in philosophy and is a topic in many disciplines and professions. Immanuel Kant, in his categorical imperative of 1785, suggests that rational human beings should "act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time desire that it become a universal law" (Johnson & Cureton, 2025). The idea that to be responsible one must be free and to have alternative paths of action is also expressed, for example, by Harry Frankfurt (1969) with his "principle of alternate possibilities," whereby

responsibility can only be assigned to those people who could have done otherwise.

Schmidt (2021) summarizes her perspective: “Responsibility is a practice that must be realized time and again in our actions. It arises from the deeply felt human need to respond and to align ourselves with what is good—focused on a future that does not have to do anything for us to make us care about it.” Hans Jonas in “The Imperative of Responsibility” (1984) was among the first to express the idea of an inherent human responsibility to care for future generations and the natural world.

Responsibility typically includes a time dimension: somebody commits today to something that may only be realized later. “All ethical thinking necessarily contains some futures thinking. For example, such as when considering consequences, which occur in the future in a time later than the action” (Bell, 1993, p. 59). However, in complex adaptive systems, there is always uncertainty about what will happen in the future. We may try to be responsible or to take actions that can be normatively seen as ethical, but we cannot be certain. When discussing the relational view of existence, Tuomi (2018, p. 20) refers to Bakhtin’s question that asks, “what is action, agency, and responsibility in a world where the future is not determined by the subject or by its environment but constitute elements of the same dialogical relation.”

Similarly, Fuller and co-authors (2024, p. 259) suggests that “responsibility is for something and/or to other beings. Hence ‘responsible futures’ as a term covers the ethical quality of actions regarding something or someone that has an effect on the future. More generally, the term could also mean a future state in which the normative and usual behaviour of beings was ‘ethical’ and reflected obligations to other beings.”

In complex systems we cannot be certain about what will happen in the later-than-now. Therefore, we must rely on our *imagination*. Adam Smith’s 1759 book *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (2010) includes the concept of "moral imagination,” defined as the “mental capacity to create or use ideas, images, and metaphors not derived from moral principles or immediate observation to discern moral truths or to develop moral responses” (The Britannica Dictionary, n.d.-a).

In *Anticipatory Systems* (Rosen, 2012, p. 370), ethics, and therefore responsibility, are posited to be essential in anticipatory systems because “the character of a predictive model assumes almost an ethical character, even in a purely abstract context.”

6. Use in practice

Thinking about the future and considering consequences in the ‘later than now’ is a core part of responsibility in any decision-making process. In specific futures processes, somebody is usually responsible for the design of an activity that invites plurality and imagination, and that allows participants to ask new questions and explore novelty. A responsibility exists toward the people convening the activity, to the participants, to

oneself, and even to those not in the room. Such responsibilities apply regardless of the futures method chosen or the design principles that are selected.

In *Transforming the Future*, Miller states that "futures exercises conducted by professionals and futures teaching require forms of accountability that may be inappropriate for the field of FS as a whole—such as responsibility towards clients and students, and basic research" (Miller, 2018, p. 55). Critically, the case studies in *Transforming the Future* turn to issues of individual responsibility or agency (p. 150), the responsibility of authorities (p. 157), or social responsibility (p. 207).

Terminologist: Lilly Herde

This English text is the original entry for this term. No LLM model has been used in the generation of this entry.

References

Bell, W. (1993). Professional ethics for futurists. *Futures Research Quarterly*.

Frankfurt, H. G. (1969). Alternate possibilities and moral responsibility. *The Journal of Philosophy*, *66*(23), 829. https://doi.org/10.2307/2023833

Fuller, T., Roubelat, F., Ward, A. K., Heraclide, N., & Marchais-Roubelat, A. (2024). Responsible futures. In R. Poli (Ed.), *Handbook of Futures Studies* (pp. 259–279). Edward Elgar Publishing. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781035301607.00026

Johnson, R., & Cureton, A. (2025). Kant's moral philosophy. In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2025 Edition). https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2025/entries/kant-moral

Jonas, H. (1984). *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (1st ed). University of Chicago Press.

Merriam-Webster. (n.d.-a). *Duty*. Retrieved https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/duty

Merriam-Webster. (n.d.-b). *Irresponsible*. Retrieved https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/irresponsible

Merriam-Webster. (n.d.-c). *Response*. Retrieved https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/response

Merriam-Webster. (n.d.-d). *Responsibility*. Retrieved https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/responsibility

Miller, R. (2018). *Transforming the Future: Anticipation in the 21st Century*. Taylor & Francis. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351048002

Rosen, R. (2012). *Anticipatory Systems: Philosophical, Mathematical, and Methodological Foundations* (2nd ed.). Springer. https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-1-4614-1269-4

Schmidt, I. (2021). *Die Kraft der Verantwortung: Über eine Haltung mit Zukunft*. Edition Körber.

Slaughter, R. A. (1999). Professional standards in futures work. *Futures*, *31*(8), 835–851. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0016-3287(99)00039-7

Smith, A. (2010). *The theory of moral sentiments*. Penguin.

The Britannica Dictionary. (n.d.-a). *Moral Imagination*. Retrieved https://www.britannica.com/topic/moral-imagination

The Britannica Dictionary. (n.d.-b). *Responsibility*. Retrieved https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/responsibility

Tuomi, I. (2018). Ontological expansion. In R. Poli (Ed.), *Handbook of Anticipation* (pp. 1–35). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-31737-3_4-1

United Nations Global Compact. (2023). *PRME: The 2023 refresh of the Principles for Responsible Management Education*. https://www.unprme.org/what-we-do

CITE THIS ENTRY

Herde, L. (2026). Responsibility. In S. Bergheim, & C. Fraser (Eds.). Futures Glossary. ZGF. https://futuresglossary.net/term/responsibility/en

futuresglossary.net · 2026 · Futures Glossary © 2026 by Bergheim S. & C. Fraser – CC BY-NC-SA 4.0