

Responsible

To be responsible is to be answerable for your behavior, thought, or statements. Answerable means, literally to be able to give an answer, to reply meaningfully if someone asks you what you mean or think or did. If you ask me what I am doing these days I should be able to give you a coherent answer. 'I went to Joe's for supper on Saturday, then on Sunday I helped him clear brush.' 'I'm in love and can't seem to remember anything.' These answers are responsible so long as they are genuine efforts to tell the truth. What if my answers are lies? Am I still being responsible when I provide these answers? No, a responsible answer needs to spring from an effort to tell the truth.

Examples

1 Responsibility

A few weeks ago I scraped the back of my car, when backing out of a narrow drive. I got out to look at the damage. The scrape on the other car was hairline, barely visible (I told myself), and only clear in certain lights at certain angles. Did I need to report this 'accident' to my insurance company? I knew there would be consequences—reports to file, decisions to make, possibly a payment to make—and I was tempted to keep my mouth shut. I drove around the block a couple of times. I thought a little. If the victimized car's owner discovers the scrape, he/she will expect a note from me or a call from my insurance company. I had been in this situation myself. Finally I decided to leave a note on the 'damaged' car, giving my phone number and insurance contact. My insurance company paid out a few hundred dollars and my premium rose. I had acted responsibly.

2 Anticipatory responsibility?

My wife frequently asks me on Monday night to take the paper trash, from my two wastebaskets, to the garage in time for the weekly pickup. (Pickup is at 8 or 9 on Tuesday morning.) Of course I comply, usually extending my effort to the upstairs wastebaskets, too. I like being in compliance, and doing a little more than what is required. Sometimes, though, I decide to *anticipate* my wastebasket responsibility, and to take the paper trash to the garage before I am reminded. I like to surprise the compliance officer in that way. In sum, I like to comply with a request, I like to manage my affairs with only internal requests, but most of all I like to *anticipate* a request coming from others. In that anticipation lies the feeling of working-doing within society, but also of choosing to work and do there, half freed, half compelled.