

Moral Projection and the Intelligibility of Collective Forgiveness.

by

Harry Bunting¹

University of Ulster.

ABSTRACT.

The paper explores the philosophical intelligibility of contemporary defences of collective political forgiveness against a background of sceptical doubt, both general and particular. Three general sceptical arguments are examined: one challenges the idea that political collectives exist; another challenges the idea that moral agency can be projected upon political collectives; a final argument challenges the attribution of emotions, especially anger, to collectives. Each of these sceptical arguments is rebutted. At a more particular level, the contrasts between individual forgiveness and collective forgiveness gives rise to various problems and the 'desiderata' for their resolution - authority, specificity and temporal proximity - are briefly explored.

1. Introduction.

Forgiveness has traditionally been viewed as a process which involves an offender and a victim; it is viewed as a process in which the victim, in response to the repentance and apology of the offender, relinquishes the justified indignation previously directed at the offender. On such a construal forgiveness is *moral* because it involves the exercise of, or some approximation to the exercise of, a traditionally recognised moral virtue, the virtue of forgiveness; it is *individual* because it involves relations between two individuals, an offender and a victim; and it is *temporally bounded* because it might reasonably be expected to occur within the lifetime and within the living memory of offender and victim.

More formally expressed: traditional forgiveness (F) involves three temporally distinct sequences of events (ti, tii, tiii) featuring an offender (O), and a victim (V).

Thus:

A victim (V) forgives (F) an offender (O) if and only if:

- (1) at ti O wrongs V, at which point warmth, respect and good will between O & V are replaced by justified resentment and indignation)
- (2) consequent upon (1) V experiences justified anger towards O and a breach in the hitherto cordial relations between O and V takes place
- (3) at tii O repents of the wrong; that is, O recognises the wrongness involved, displays sincere contrition and makes restitution to V
- (4) at tiii V forgives O
- (5) reconciliation between O and V occurs; that is, because of (3) and (4), O ceases to feel indignant and resumes warm personal relations with O.

¹ This article is based on a paper read to the 2009 Conference of the Irish Philosophical Society at NUI Maynooth in May 2009. I wish to thank all who contributed to the discussion on of the paper on that occasion.

Note, firstly, that the reconciliation which occurs at tiii has emotional and volitional implications for both O and V. For V it means the cessation of, the lifting of, justified anger against O and the resumption of cordial relations with the person who has wronged them. For O it involves the acknowledgment that a past action, for which they accept responsibility, was wrong; the forswearing of the performance of such actions in the future, and the grateful acceptance of renewed cordial relations with V on the basis of those understandings.

Note, secondly, that sincere repentance - based reconciliation means that O and V now share, and know that they share, the same emotional and motivational attitude to the kind of behaviour that is exemplified by the wrong that occurred at ti.

In recent decades this traditional conception of forgiveness has been challenged by radical conceptions of forgiveness which seek to expand the rather austere traditional understanding of forgiveness in a number of ways.

Firstly, it has been argued that forgiveness, both direct and mediated, can occur between collectives as well as between individuals. Individuals can wrong other individuals, but collectives such as states, or nations, or communities or families also can wrong other individuals or collectives. Individuals can experience justified anger when contemplating wrongs which they have suffered, but so also can collectives. Thus estrangement can occur not only between individuals but also between collectives, opening up the possibility that, granted appropriate repentance and reparations, forgiveness and reconciliation can occur. Collectives, as well as individuals, therefore can engage in wrongdoing and receive forgiveness.

Secondly, and flowing from the first point, it has been argued that collective forgiveness can be understood as a *political* concept as well as a moral concept. Aggrieved states, nations, communities and other collectives can identify past political wrongs which they have unjustifiably suffered and, in appropriate circumstances, can forgive offending collectives for the suffering, destruction and death that has flowed from their political actions and inactions.

Thirdly, collective political forgiveness can transcend the temporal restrictions that constrain individual forgiveness because states, nations and communities enjoy collective political memories which span centuries. This is because aggrieved collectives view the sufferings of past generations as being, in some intelligible sense 'their sufferings', even though decades or centuries divide them from the living experiences of those who were originally wronged and the bonds of political identity which unite them to those who have suffered wrongly in the past remain alive and strong.

Thus, it is argued, to view forgiveness as exclusively moral, as exclusively the preserve of individuals and as bounded by temporal restrictions is to ignore other important possible uses of the concept, thereby limiting its scope and power. Not only is the conceptual expansion intelligible, it is also of great importance: it can contribute to post - conflict reconstruction by creating more constructive

relationships between old enemies and to the development of peace – building by healing the wounds that the sufferings of past generations have caused.

The relationship between individual moral forgiveness and collective political forgiveness forms the central subject matter of this paper. I will try to construct a plausible account of collective political forgiveness, explore the philosophical integrity of crucial underlying concepts and reach tentative conclusions about whether or not political forgiveness is a sustainable concept.

Sceptics have been quick to dismiss the extension of forgiveness which I have described in these opening paragraphs. They have typically argued that collectives do not exist in any philosophically interesting sense; that, even if collectives exist, they are incapable of moral agency; that, even if they exist and are capable of moral agency, they are incapable of experiencing the emotions which are necessary for the granting of and receipt of forgiveness. In short, collective forgiveness is a piece of moral fiction which, whatever ends it may serve, should be rejected.

In this paper I will construct a plausible account of collective political forgiveness, explore and attempt to overcome the sceptical challenges that it generates and try to reach tentative conclusions concerning the feasibility of the concept.

2. Some examples.

Up to this point in the paper I have talked in the abstract about collective political forgiveness and it is now time to focus the discussion by introducing some examples of the issue under discussion.

Example 1: In the 1960s Martin Luther King urged American Africans to forgive white Americans for their sufferings under slavery and for the legacy of discrimination that continued through the 20th century.

Example 2: On December 7th 1970 German Chancellor Billy Brandt knelt on the ground at the Warsaw Ghetto Memorial and asked for forgiveness on behalf of the German people asked for forgiveness for the suffering caused by the German suppression of the Warsaw uprising of 1944; again in 1994 President Hertzog asked for forgiveness.

Example 3: In 1994, in Christ Church Cathedral in Dublin, the Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, asked for forgiveness from the Irish people for centuries of British wrongs against the people of Ireland; in 1995 Cardinal Daly visited Canterbury Cathedral and asked the British people for forgiveness in relation to Irish anti-British terrorist attacks in the late 20th century

Example 4: In 1995, in post-apartheid South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was set up to encourage forgiveness and reconciliation between the different racial groups in the new South Africa.

These thumb – nail sketches constitute only a few of the many cases that have received detailed attention in the literature of political forgiveness. They are sufficient, however, to intimate how very attractive the concept of political forgiveness has become. Political forgiveness extends a familiar moral concept to wider contexts in striking and unusual ways, it promises to contribute to post-

conflict political reconstruction, it offers both solace to individuals and comfort to races, nations and states.

In spite of these points we should recognise that the idea that a nation or a state or a community forgives another nation, state or community gives rise to a cluster of problems: sceptical doubts, both general and particular, stand in the way of the idea that collectives can grant or receive forgiveness.

We should note, firstly, how greatly the examples differ in character: example 2 relates to relations between states, whereas example 1 relates to relationships within a state; the experience of living under apartheid still lives vividly in the memories of many present day South Africans whereas there can be few who have personal experience of being a black American slave. These differences may or may not prove to be significant.

We should note, secondly, that the idea that collectives - nations or states or communities - can wrong each other, and, having repented, can forgive and be reconciled to each other - encounters widespread sceptical reactions which are both general and particular. Most generally we may worry about issues in ontology: do collectives exist or must reference to collectives simply be understood as complicated ways of referring to individual persons? Meta-ethical issues also arise: can moral agency be sensibly ascribed to collectives and the 'decisions' which collectives supposedly make? Finally, even if the first two questions are settled in the affirmative, we must ask whether collectives can experience the emotions associated with moral anger, repentance and reconciliation which are presupposed when political forgiveness is attributed to them?

All of these are rather abstract philosophical questions. However, they are questions which inevitably arise in the mind of any philosophically trained student of contemporary discussions about peace and reconciliation; and since they are questions about the framework within which discussions of political forgiveness are conducted they need to be addressed before discussions of the significance of particular acts of political forgiveness can properly be addressed.

It is to these sceptical challenges that I shall now turn.

Sceptical challenges i: the intelligibility of collective moral agency.

A crucial issue in the great debate between collectivists and individualists concerns their respective ontologies: do collectives exist? and if they exist, can moral agency be intelligibly ascribed to them? Familiar sceptical arguments relating to the ontological issue are well known. Rugby teams exist. However although each team consists of fifteen players sceptics argue that there is no entity, the team, which exists over and above the players who make it up. Anyone who thinks that there is a distinct ontologically viable entity, the team, has a poor grasp on the nature of reality; and anyone who thinks that the team has responsibilities over and above the responsibilities of the individual members has a poor grasp on the nature of moral agency. So it is with nations and communities: they are nothing over and above the people who make them up. So

the idea that nations or communities forgive each other is a conceptual confusion.

It might seem natural to commence with the ontological question concerning the existence of collectives and proceed to meta-ethical questions as to whether moral agency can be ascribed to them. For reasons which will shortly become clear, however, I propose to reverse that order and commence by examining the ascription of moral agency to collectives.

3. Attributing moral agency to collectives.

One context in which the intelligibility of attributing moral agency to collectives arose was in the context of the business corporation and it was in that context that sceptical questions about its intelligibility were very clearly expressed. As citizens, businessmen have moral duties but as members of the executive boards of corporations they do not. The philosopher John Ladd expressed the argument thus:

“It is improper to expect organisational conduct to conform to the ordinary principles of morality” he wrote², “ _ _ _ we cannot and must not expect formal organisations or their representatives acting in their official capacities, to be hones, courageous, considerate, sympathetic, or to have any kind of moral integrity. Such concepts are not in the vocabulary, so to speak, of the organisational language game.”

In this section I will develop three arguments, in ascending order of philosophical sophistication, which defend the projection of moral agency to collectives, in each case first developing the argument in a general form and then enquiring as to its relevance to the specific case of political forgiveness.

The argument from particular instantiations.

The first argument draws attention to the structural similarity between judgments which ascribe moral agency to individuals and to collectives. In lots of easily recognised contexts – I will draw upon examples from business, from medicine and from international affairs - a range of basic moral distinctions, both deontic and aretic, will be shown to be applicable to collectives in ways which parallel the ways in which they are applied to individual moral agents. These include the distinction between behaviour which is permitted (ie. what is not morally wrong) and that which is forbidden (ie. that which is morally wrong), between behaviour which is forbidden and that which is obligatory (ie. failure to do which is morally wrong) and between behaviour which is obligatory and behaviour which is morally good (ie. which displays virtue fo character). So there is prima-facie evidence to suggest that moral agency is attributable to collectives; the burden of proof, I will suggest, is on the sceptic to show why moral agency should not also be attributed to collectives granted that our pre-theoretical judgments are as I have shown them to be. It is to these examples that I now turn.

² John Ladd: “Morality and the ideal of Rationality in Formal Organisations” in *The Monist* October, 1970.

Consider business contexts. Here distinctions between the forbidden, the permissible, the obligatory and the good are commonly made in relation to the collectives which are called 'corporations'. It is morally forbidden that a corporation should seek competitive advantage by deceptive advertising; it is obligatory upon corporations to attempt, through fair employment practices, to improve race relations in large cities with a history of racial tension; it is recognised that corporations should ensure that patterns of virtuous ethical conduct are instilled into the workforce and embedded in business practice.

Consider next the profession of medicine. Most people know little of medical science and so are at the mercy of the medical profession in matters which are of grave personal concern. Over the centuries, therefore, clearly understood ethical guidelines have developed concerning the treatment of patients and these are normally implemented, in different countries, by a national medical council. For example, the British Medical Association is responsible for overseeing the activities of the medical profession in the United Kingdom. As such, it is a collective body which exercises a form of moral agency. It identifies practices which are morally forbidden such as _____; it identifies practices which are morally obligatory such as _____; it inculcates professionally relevant and virtuous character traits such as _____

My final example is drawn from the field of international relations, specifically from the relationships which hold between the free and sovereign members of the community of states and nations. The United Nations is a collective organisation which exercises moral agency in relation to members of the international community. Thus it outlaws aggression between member states in times of peace and attacks on non-combatant populations in times of war; it identifies practices, such as the giving of economic aid or the sharing of scientific research findings, as being morally obligatory; it encourages virtuous character traits such as co-operation in all of the fields which come under its jurisdiction.

The argument from the nature of responsibilities.

Our central concern is moral projection: the rebuttal of scepticism and the defence of the ascription to collectives of moral agency. A second line of defence involves considering the central concept of moral responsibility and inquiring as to the conditions under which responsibility is attributed in its central cases. If it can be shown that attributions of responsibility can be attributed to collectives then this will provide strong grounds for defending projection in political contexts. To this task I shall now turn.

Responsibility is typically ascribed in one or all of the following contexts. Issues of responsibility arise in contexts involving the ascription of praise and blame for past actions. Answering the question 'who was responsible?' involves tracing an event to its origin in the intentions, plans and decision of the person who initiated the sequence which culminated in the event in question. Responsibility, in this

sense, involves identifying who is causally answerable for the action and assigning praise or blame to them.

Responsibility ascriptions also arise in contexts where what is at stake relates to role playing; it consists in identifying the person or persons who should have roles assigned to them. 'Who is responsible?' here is answered by pointing to the relevant persons and explaining their role. It is parents who are responsible for their children, it is lawyers who are responsible for their clients.

Finally, responsibility considerations feature in character evaluations. To simplify outrageously, people are responsible if they are reliable and trustworthy. A responsible person is a person that you can depend on. 'Is he a responsible person?' is answered by the simple response: 'Well, I would / would not welcome them taking charge of my affairs.'

It should be noted that the roles which I have assigned to responsibility ascriptions presuppose some underlying value system and that they are consistent with a variety of different conceptions of value. A utilitarian will have a distinctive understanding of responsibility ascriptions, a neo-Kantian will have a different understanding, an intuitionist will have yet another understanding. However, all are consistent with the basic understanding of responsibility ascriptions which I have characterised.

It should also be noted that we commonly ascribe responsibility to collectives in all of the contexts in which I have suggested that responsibility is at home. Thus we sometimes hear governments or large business corporations or professional group praised or (usually) blamed for their policies or actions; we sometimes hear it said that it is the responsibility of this or that government or corporation or professional group to decide what is to be done; we hear governments, business corporations and professional groups described as responsible or irresponsible depending on their track record in relation to a particular sphere of activity.

These considerations lend support to the idea that moral agency is attributable to collectives.

The argument from conflicting obligations and responsibilities.

We may commence our third and final defence of moral projection with an example.

Jones is a member of a government - appointed committee overseeing the restructuring of medical provision in an area of the country which has experienced significant demographic change. The evidence provided to the committee strongly suggests a case for closing geriatric provision in a particular hospital and relocating it in a hospital some distance away. Similar closures in other areas have led to job loss in departments affected by the rationalisations and it seems that the impending closure of geriatrics will be no exception. Jones' daughter is a doctor in the threatened geriatric department and so, although he is convinced of the reasonableness of the case for closure, family loyalties cause him to abstain when the vote is finally taken. He explains his decision by saying to himself: 'there are some circumstances in which family comes first.'

In a recent article³ David Copp has argued that examples such as this support what he calls the 'Collective Moral Autonomy Thesis' (CMA for short). According

³ Copp, David: 'The Collective Moral Autonomy Thesis' in *Journal of Social Philosophy* (2007).

to this thesis collective can have moral properties when some of the members of the collective do not have them; conversely, members of a collective can have moral properties when the collective does not have them.

CMA holds that collective moral agency is defensible provided that we accept a distinction between 'pro tanto' obligations and responsibilities and 'all things considered' obligations and responsibilities. Thus as the example illustrates we correctly assign obligations and responsibility to collectives in circumstances in which it would be a mistake to assign similar obligations and responsibility to specific members of the collective and vice – versa.

Furthermore, since this is true, collectives are genuine moral agents to whom obligation and responsibility can be ascribed over and above the obligations and responsibilities of the collective members.

Clearly the first step is the crucial one: why does Copp accept it?

Copp's reason is that collectives and the individuals who comprise them are distinct agents and face different moral situations. It might be the case, therefore, that a collective has an 'all-things-considered' obligation to do A and a member of the collective not have an 'all-things-considered' obligation to do A. Family loyalties, promises made before becoming a member of the collective, or other special responsibilities get in the way. The precise reason is immaterial: the collective has an all-things-considered' duty to do A and the member of the collective has no such duty.

We may commence our third and final defence of moral projection by examining an interesting account of collectives, developed recently by David Copp which, if successful, meets both of the general sceptical arguments that I have just outlined.

CMA holds that collective moral agency is defensible provided that we accept a distinction between 'pro tanto' obligations and responsibilities and 'all things considered' obligations and responsibilities. Thus as the example illustrates we correctly assign obligations and responsibility to collectives in circumstances in which it would be a mistake to assign similar obligations and responsibility to specific members of the collective and vice – versa.

Furthermore, since this is true, collectives are genuine moral agents to whom obligation and responsibility can be ascribed over and above the obligations and responsibilities of the collective members.

Clearly the first step is the crucial one: why does Copp accept it?

Copp's reason is that collectives and the individuals who comprise them are distinct agents and face different moral situations. It might be the case, therefore, that a collective has an 'all-things-considered' obligation to do A and a member of the collective not have an 'all-things-considered' obligation to do A. Family loyalties, promises made before becoming a member of the collective, or other special responsibilities get in the way. The precise reason is immaterial: the

collective has an all-things-considered' duty to do A and the member of the collective has no such duty.

Before proceeding to such issues, however, an important preliminary clarification concerning the nature of collectives needs to be made.

In his writings on collective responsibility⁴ Peter French distinguishes between aggregative and conglomerate collectives and argues that the latter qualifies as a moral person whereas the former does not. His distinction turns on identity conditions and is as follows. The identity of an aggregate collective consists in the sum of the identities of the persons who comprise the membership of the collective; it is the sum of the individual persons making it up. Every change in the membership of the collective is, therefore, a change in the identity of the collective. The identity of a particular collective rules out changes in its membership. Thus if one member of an aggregative collective AC had not been a member component of AC, the meaning of statements about AC would have been different. Consider, as examples of aggregative collectives, such groups of people as 'the people who travelled on the 9am bus from Glasgow to Edinburgh on 1st August, 2009' and 'the people who witnessed the accident on the M8 motorway'. Such expressions are merely shorthand devices for referring to conjunctions of proper names and definite descriptions.

By contrast, a collective is a conglomerate collective if the identity of the collective does not consist of the identity of the persons who are members of the it; that is to say, the same collective can exist even if the members change, even if they change continuously. This if statement Si is true of CCi at ti, then it would still have been true of CCi even if one or more of the members of CCi had been different from what they were at that time. For example, the expressions 'the Board of Executive of Coca-Cola' and 'the Senate of the University' refer to collectives which continue to exist, which act and which preserve their identity even though their membership changes over time.

Conglomerate collectives have internal organisational, decision – making roles through which collective policies are formed and collective action is taken, aggregative collectives have not; conglomerate collectives invest internal power and responsibility in positions and not in people, thus allowing specified people to exercise power by virtue of occupying those roles, aggregative collectives do not; conglomerate collectives have standardised ways, peculiar to specific collectives, by which people become members of the collective, aggregative collectives do not;

⁴ See P.A.French: 'Types of Collectivities and Blame' in *Personalist* 1975, 'The Corporation as a Moral Agent' in *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16, 1979 and, especially, *The Scope of Morality* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1979) p. 24 – 29.

and, finally conglomerate collectives recognise standards of conduct for the collective this allowing the development of collective traditions and collective character, aggregative collectives do not.

As a consequence of these features, some statements about conglomerate collectives, involving saying that C_i did action A_i and that A_i was not performed by any individual member of C_i, are true. Furthermore, conglomerate collectives have decision structures, methods of policy formulation and recognised rules of procedure. And neither of these points applies to aggregative collectives.

These points of clarification having been made, we can now proceed to the defence of the view that moral agency is attributable to at least some collectives, namely conglomerate collectives. I will advance three arguments in defence of this claim and return, in the light of them, to the issue of the ontological status of collectives.

Sceptical challenges ii: attributing moral agency to collectives.

Three arguments for attributing moral agency to conglomerate collectives.

In this section I will develop three arguments, in ascending order of philosophical sophistication, which defend the projection of moral agency to conglomerate collectives (henceforth by 'collective' I will mean 'conglomerate collective'). In each case I will first develop the argument in a general form and then enquire as to its relevance to the specific case of political forgiveness.

The argument from particular instantiations.

The first argument draws attention to the structural similarity between judgments which ascribe moral agency to individuals and to collectives. In lots of easily recognised contexts – I will draw upon examples from business, from medicine and from international affairs – a range of basic moral distinctions, both deontic and aretic, will be shown to be applicable to collectives in ways which parallel the ways in which they are applied to individual moral agents. These include the distinction between behaviour which is permitted (ie. what is not morally wrong) and that which is forbidden (ie. that which is morally wrong), between behaviour which is forbidden and that which is obligatory (ie. failure to do which is morally wrong) and between behaviour which is obligatory and behaviour which is morally good (ie. which displays virtue fo character). So there is prima-facie evidence to suggest that moral agency is attributable to collectives; the burden of proof, I will suggest, is on the sceptic to show why moral agency should not also be attributed to collectives granted that our pre-theoretical judgments are as I have shown them to be. It is to these examples that I now turn.

Consider business contexts. Here distinctions between the forbidden, the permissible, the obligatory and the good are commonly made in relation to the collectives which are called 'corporations'. It is morally forbidden that a corporation should seek competitive advantage by deceptive advertising; it is obligatory upon corporations to attempt, through fair employment practices, to

improve race relations in large cities with a history of racial tension; it is recognised that corporations should ensure that patterns of virtuous ethical conduct are instilled into the workforce and embedded in business practice.

Consider next the profession of medicine. Most people know little of medical science and so are at the mercy of the medical profession in matters which are of grave personal concern. Over the centuries, therefore, clearly understood ethical guidelines have developed concerning the treatment of patients and these are normally implemented, in different countries, by a national medical council. For example, the British Medical Association is responsible for overseeing the activities of the medical profession in the United Kingdom. As such, it is a collective body which exercises a form of moral agency. It identifies practices which are morally forbidden such as ; it identifies practices which are morally obligatory such as ; it inculcates professionally relevant and virtuous character traits such as .

My final example is drawn from the field of international relations, specifically from the relationships which hold between the free and sovereign members of the community of states and nations. The United Nations is a collective organisation which exercises moral agency in relation to members of the international community. Thus it outlaws

aggression between member states in times of peace and attacks on non-combatant populations in times of war; it identifies practices, such as the giving of economic aid or the sharing of scientific research findings, as being morally obligatory; it encourages virtuous character traits such as co-operation in all of the fields which come under its jurisdiction.

The argument from the nature of responsibilities.

Our central concern is moral projection: the rebuttal of scepticism and the defence of the ascription to collectives of moral agency. A second line of defence involves considering the central concept of moral responsibility and inquiring as to the conditions under which responsibility is attributed in its central cases. If it can be shown that attributions of responsibility can be attributed to collectives then this will provide strong grounds for defending projection in political contexts. To this task I shall now turn.

Responsibility is typically ascribed in one or all of the following contexts. Issues of responsibility arise in contexts involving the ascription of praise and blame for past actions. Answering the question 'who was responsible?' involves tracing an event to its origin in the intentions, plans and decision of the person who initiated the sequence which culminated in the event in question. Responsibility, in this sense, involves identifying who is causally answerable for the action and assigning praise or blame to them.

Responsibility ascriptions also arise in contexts where what is at stake relates to role playing; it consists in identifying the person or persons who should have roles assigned to them. 'Who is responsible?' here is answered by pointing to the

relevant persons and explaining their role. It is parents who are responsible for their children, it is lawyers who are responsible for their clients.

Finally, responsibility considerations feature in character evaluations. To simplify outrageously, people are responsible if they are reliable and trustworthy. A responsible person is a person that you can depend on. 'Is he a responsible person?' is answered by the simple response: 'Well, I would / would not welcome them taking charge of my affairs.'

It should be noted that the roles which I have assigned to responsibility ascriptions presuppose some underlying value system and that they are consistent with a variety of different conceptions of value. A utilitarian will have a distinctive understanding of responsibility ascriptions, a neo-Kantian will have a different understanding, an intuitionist will have yet another understanding. However, all are consistent with the basic understanding of responsibility ascriptions which I have characterised.

It should also be noted that we commonly ascribe responsibility to collectives in all of the contexts in which I have suggested that responsibility is at home. Thus we sometimes hear governments or large business corporations or professional group praised or (usually) blamed for their policies or actions; we sometimes hear it said that it is the responsibility of this or that government or corporation or professional group to decide what is to be done; we hear governments, business corporations and professional groups described as responsible or irresponsible depending on their track record in relation to a particular sphere of activity.

These considerations lend support to the idea that moral agency is attributable to collectives.

The argument from conflicting obligations and responsibilities.

We may commence our third and final defence of moral projection with an example.

Jones is a member of a government - appointed committee overseeing the restructuring of medical provision in an area of the country which has experienced significant demographic change. The evidence provided to the committee strongly suggests a case for closing geriatric provision in a particular hospital and relocating it in a hospital some distance away. Similar closures in other areas have led to job loss in departments affected by the rationalisations and it seems that the impending closure of geriatrics will be no exception. Jones' daughter is a doctor in the threatened geriatric department and so, although he is convinced of the reasonableness of the case for closure, family loyalties cause him to abstain when the vote is finally taken. He explains his decision by saying to himself: 'there are some circumstances in which family comes first.'

In a recent article⁵ David Copp has argued that examples such as this support what he calls the 'Collective Moral Autonomy Thesis' (CMA for short). According to this thesis collective can have moral properties when some of the members of the collective do not have them; conversely, members of a collective can have moral properties when the collective does not have them.

⁵ Copp, David: 'The Collective Moral Autonomy Thesis' in *Journal of Social Philosophy* (2007).

An interesting account of the existence and moral status of collectives has recently been developed by David Copp which, if successful, meets both of the general sceptical arguments that I have just outlined.

CMA holds that collective moral agency is defensible provided that we accept a distinction between 'pro tanto' obligations and responsibilities and 'all things considered' obligations and responsibilities. Thus as the example illustrates we correctly assign obligations and responsibility to collectives in circumstances in which it would be a mistake to assign similar obligations and responsibility to specific members of the collective and vice – versa.

Furthermore, since this is true, collectives are genuine moral agents to whom obligation and responsibility can be ascribed over and above the obligations and responsibilities of the collective members.

Clearly the first step is the crucial one: why does Copp accept it?

Copp's reason is that collectives and the individuals who comprise them are distinct agents and face different moral situations. It might be the case, therefore, that a collective has an 'all-things-considered' obligation to do A and a member of the collective not have an 'all-things-considered' obligation to do A. Family loyalties, promises made before becoming a member of the collective, or other special responsibilities get in the way. The precise reason is immaterial: the collective has an all-things-considered' duty to do A and the member of the collective has no such duty.

The particular sceptical argument.

One may accept Copp's argument, or others like it, and recognise the existence of collectives and the intelligibility of collective moral agency but still refuse to accept the intelligibility of collective forgiveness. One's reasoning might be as follows. Forgiving is an emotionally complex process and its inner workings – for example whether it requires repentance or whether it necessarily issues in reconciliation – are the subject of considerable controversy. One aspect of forgiveness on which there is widespread agreement is the thesis that forgiveness involves the renunciation of anger. However, whatever else they may have, collectives do not have emotions: their constituent members may experience emotions but communities, nations, states do not have emotions. Consequently they cannot experience the emotion of anger; and consequently they cannot renounce anger, which it is the essence of forgiveness to do. Collective forgiveness is impossible. It will not do to reply, as Glenn Pettigrove replies, that the emotions

felt by a significant minority, or even a majority, of a collective is sufficient for the ascription of the emotion to the collective. The whole point of Copp's defence of collectives is that there is no necessary connection between what can be said of the collective and what can be said of one or all of the members of the collective.

I think that there is a convincing response to this objection.

Although the renunciation of the emotion of anger is perhaps the primary evidence of forgiveness it is not the only one. Hostile behaviour is also a token of resentment and anger; and the removal of hostile behaviour, the replacing of hostile behaviour with friendly and co-operative behaviour is also a form that forgiveness can take. Now collectives can display different forms of behaviour and so can display shifts of behaviour from one form to another. It is here at the behavioural level, therefore, that collective forgiveness manifests itself. So collective forgiveness is no less real than individual forgiveness, though it may manifest itself in different forms.

3. Assessing collective forgiving.

I have defended the moral standing of collectives against some of the more obvious objections. In spite of this, qualms remain. To explore these a little further let us return to Mr. Blair and Cardinal Daly. It goes without saying that Cardinal Daly was not responsible for the acts of Irish terrorists that have caused so much heartache in recent times; it goes without saying that Mr. Blair was not responsible for the Irish Famine and the irresponsible British policies of the 1840s. So the sceptic about collective forgiveness is always at hand to query the intelligibility of the forgiveness which they grant and receive. Forgiveness involves the lifting of a sanction on a person upon whom the sanction properly rests for an offence committed. If the person who receives forgiveness is not responsible for the offence that is forgiven then, however skilfully we may defend the status of collectives, it will always seem as though the wrong people are acting in the drama. This, I think, is the point that the sceptic has grasped and is using to undermine collective forgiveness.

Note that the issues raised by our two cases are different. The difficulties that Mr Blair's case presents is the difficulty of seeing how forgiveness is possible across such enormous lengths of time; the difficulty that Cardinal Daly's case presents is the difficulty of seeing how a person so remote from the deeds can take responsibility for them. Consider then how different these two cases are from the case of forgiveness being sought and granted in connection with the treatment of African blacks by white in the USA. Here the problem relates not so much to the constraints imposed by the passage of time or to the constraints imposed by moral distance but to the problem of how representative is the person who gives and receives the forgiveness. All three cases involve collective forgiveness on behalf of very large collectives and it worth noting that another significant distinction between forms of collective action, including collective forgiveness, can

be made by reference to issues of scale. Families are collectives; and closely related families sometimes quarrel over perceived wrongs that one family has inflicted on the other in the past. Subsequent collective forgiveness in such cases is very different from the forms of collective forgiveness that we have been considering up to this point in the paper. So cases of collective forgiveness differ due to the different ways in which constraints of time, constraints of moral distance, constraints of democratic accountability and constraints of scale shape the collective forgiveness; and the kind of sceptical questions that we want to ask in connection with each kind of case differs considerably from the kinds of sceptical question which arise in the others. This throws light on the different ways in which collective forgiveness can fail, the different forms of criticism that it may be subjected to.

NOTES:

Formally expressed, therefore, traditional forgiveness (F) involves three temporally distinct sequences of events (ti, tii, tiii) featuring an offender (O), and a victim (V).

Thus:

A victim (V) forgives (F) an offender (O) if and only if:

- (1) at ti O wrongs V, at which point warmth, respect and good will between O & V are replaced by justified resentment and indignation)
- (2) consequent upon (1) V experiences justified anger towards O and a breach in the hitherto cordial relations between O and V takes place
- (3) at tii O repents of the wrong; that is, O recognises the wrongness involved, displays sincere contrition and makes restitution to V
- (4) at tiii V forgives O
- (5) reconciliation between O and V occurs; that is, because of (3) and (4), O ceases to feel indignant and resumes warm personal relations with O.

The reconciliation which occurs at tiii has implications for both O and V:

for O it means the lifting of, the cessation of justified anger, and the resumption of cordial relations with someone who has wronged him; for V it involves, both emotionally and volitionally, a shift of attitude to the kind of action exemplified by the wrong which occurred at ti; it also involves the restoration of the cordial relations with V which were damaged by the wrongdoing which occurred at ti.

Even more importantly, however, reconciliation means that O and V now share the same attitude, emotionally and motivationally, to the kind of behaviour that is exemplified by the wrong that occurred at ti.

