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**Collective Responsibility:
Against Collectivism**

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Abstract

The present doctoral dissertation aims to offer an indirect defence of the individualist position in the debate concerning collective moral responsibility. As such it swims against the general tide as it were. However, the individualism defended in the dissertation is of a rather weak kind, allowing a range of collective entities. Basically, the main claim of the thesis is that only human agents qualify as moral agents, and thus moral responsibility, either individual or collective, is to be ascribed to individual agents either individually or collectively.

The dissertation consists of four articles. A major part of my thesis consists of critical evaluations of some available versions of the collectivist position with respect to collective moral responsibility, the position according to which collectives in their own right are, at least in some cases, capable of bearing moral responsibility independently of the individual members of the collective.

My approach in the articles is to argue that collectives in their own right are not capable of bearing moral responsibility and thus the collectivist rendering of collective moral responsibility is not a viable option. I argue herein that collectives, even if acceptable as agents, cannot satisfy conditions of moral responsibility in the way that would make it fair to hold collective agents morally responsible in their own right.

The starting point of ‘Collective moral responsibility: A collective as an independent moral agent’ is Gilbert’s claim that groups can be morally responsible much in the same way as individual persons. This article is an attempt to understand what kind of support Gilbert’s plural subject account provides for such a collectivist claim. The article claims that one cannot successfully support the collectivist notion

of collective moral responsibility in terms of the “plural subject account”. Another main claim of the article is that the account of collective moral responsibility built on the plural subject account has some important counterintuitive consequences that undermine its plausibility.

‘Group action and group responsibility’ (jointly authored with Raimo Tuomela) is an investigation of a social group’s retrospective responsibility for its actions and their consequences. Here we build on Tuomela’s theory of group action and we argue that group responsibility can be analyzed in terms of what its members jointly think and do *qua* group members.

When a group is held responsible for some action, its members, acting *qua* members of the group, can collectively be regarded as praiseworthy or blameworthy, in the light of some normative standard, for what the group has done. The paper aims at giving necessary and sufficient conditions analysis of a group’s responsibility for its actions and their outcomes, and the conditions can be cashed out in terms of the group’s members joint and other actions. This article is an attempt to make a positive contribution to the literature by way of providing at least a sketch of what an individualist and yet not reductionist account of collective moral/normative responsibility could look like.

‘The collectivist approach to collective moral responsibility’ (jointly authored with Seumas Miller) is a critique of the collectivist approach to collective moral responsibility. The critique of the paper proceeds via a discussion of the accounts and arguments of three prominent representatives of the collectivist approach to collective moral responsibility, namely, Margaret Gilbert, Russell Hardin and Philip Pettit. The aims of the article are mainly critical. However, we also advocate an alternative to the collectivist approach, namely an individualist account of collective responsibility according to which collective responsibility is ascribed to individuals. In the view advocated, each member of the group is individually morally responsible for the outcome of the joint action but each is individually responsible jointly with others.

In ‘Collective agents and moral responsibility’ I attempt to identify some significant problems with which I believe the collectivist position is afflicted. These problems have to do with the family of application conditions of moral responsibility typically discussed under such concepts as ownership, autonomy, freedom, and control. Indeed, these problems argued to be serious enough to make the collectivist position untenable at least as long as the notion of moral responsibility employed

presupposes agency. I argue that, due to their constitution, collective agents are such agents that it necessarily would be unfair to hold them morally responsible in their own right. I proceed mainly in respect to Pettit's account of collective agents. However, although the focus is primarily on Pettit's account, I suggest that the idea of this paper is generalizable, as the premises or assumptions on which the critical points are based are widely shared by the proponents of the collectivist camp.

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Pekka Mäkelä

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List of publications

- [1] “Collective Moral Responsibility: A Collective as an Independent Moral Agent?”, *Australian Journal of Professional and Applied Ethics*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2000, 86-101.
- [2] “Group Action and Group Responsibility” (with Raimo Tuomela), *Protosociology*, Vol. 16, 2002, 195-214.
- [3] “The Collectivist Approach to Collective Moral Responsibility” (with Seumas Miller), *Metaphilosophy*, Vol. 36, No. 5, 2005, 634-651.
- [4] “Collective Agents and Moral Responsibility”, *Journal of Social Philosophy*, Vol. XXXVIII, No. 3, 2007, 456-469.

Introduction

The claim of the work

This dissertation aims to offer an indirect defence of the individualist position in the debate concerning collective moral responsibility. As such it swims against the general tide as it were. However, the individualism defended in the dissertation is of a rather weak kind, allowing a range of collective entities. Basically, the main claim of the thesis is that only human agents qualify as moral agents, and thus moral responsibility, either individual or collective, is to be ascribed to individual agents either individually or collectively.

One of the main lines of reasoning in the debate between collectivists and individualists about collective moral responsibility runs roughly as follows: i) moral responsibility presupposes agency; ii) (certain kinds of) collectives have beliefs, form intentions and act on those intentions (in their own right as it were) and as such qualify as agents in their own right, pretty much on a par with individual human beings; iii) thus (certain kinds of) collectives can bear moral responsibility independently of their constitutive members, or, to use the common phrase, in their own right.

A major part of the articles consist of critical arguments against representative accounts employing the kind of reasoning characterized above. One of the papers introduces a sketch of an individualist alternative.

The topic of collective responsibility has been discussed in many disciplines and from various angles over the last seventy years. In the following pages I aim to locate the debate of my dissertation on the more general map of the issues discussed

in the collective responsibility literature. After that I will provide a brief introduction of each one of them.

PART I: Individual responsibility

The arguments developed in the articles of the thesis presuppose that the notion of moral responsibility is the same in both individual and collective contexts. Below I discuss briefly those aspects of the debate on individual responsibility that are relevant for the discussion of collective responsibility in the articles of the thesis.

As a wide range of different ideas can be covered with the expressions ‘responsibility’, ‘responsible’, and ‘responsible for’, it is appropriate to say something about the sense intended here. The articles of this dissertation focus on *retrospective moral responsibility*. Roughly, we can say that an agent is morally responsible for some state of affairs (an action, omission, or consequences of action or omission) if the agent is deserving of praise or blame for that state according to a particular moral norm or an ethical system. The possible objects of responsibility include actions and omissions, and consequences of actions and omissions and possibly also attitudes and emotions.

This sense of responsibility will be distinguished from legal responsibility, causal responsibility, and prospective responsibility.¹

The vast philosophical literature on moral responsibility has until relatively recently been focused solely on the moral responsibility borne by an individual agent. The main themes of the literature have been, and still are: i) the concept of the moral responsibility, ii) the practice of holding agents morally responsible, iii) the conditions under which the concept of moral responsibility is properly applied, and iv) the criteria of a moral agent.

The sense of moral responsibility most predominant in the literature is the backward looking, retrospective sense of moral responsibility that grounds the blame

¹ Moral responsibility in the retrospective sense is backward looking. If an agent is held responsible in the retrospective sense, then what he is held responsible for lies in the past. The prospective sense of responsibility is forward looking, the object of responsibility lies ahead and responsibility is duty – like, for instance, a lifeguard is responsible for seeing to it that no one drowns. Causal responsibility concerns only causal relations, being a cause, and as such does not involve normative aspect. Legal responsibility concerns responsibility ascribed in accordance with the rule of law.

or praise in something the agent has done. A paradigm case for moral responsibility in this sense can be characterized along the following lines:

An agent, A, is morally responsible for performing X if: A intentionally, deliberately, or on purpose performs X, X is morally wrong, A knows that X is morally wrong, and A is not coerced to perform X, or under external pressure to perform X.

Attributions of moral responsibility in this sense can be characterized in terms of the following guiding principles. *Difference principle*: an agent is only accountable for a harm if something the agent did, or failed to do, make a difference to the harm's occurrence; *Control principle*: an agent is only accountable for events over which he or she had control, and whose occurrence he or she could have prevented; *Autonomy principle*: an agent is not accountable for the harm another agent causes, unless he or she has induced or coerced that agent into performing the act related to the harm.

Together these principles of accountability define an individualistic conception of moral agency and the corresponding conception of moral responsibility. This conception of accountability is individualistic in three senses: i) its subject is an individual moral agent; ii) the object of accountability, or the harm or wrong for which the subject is reproached (or praised), is ascribable to that subject alone ("every man for himself"); iii) the basis of accountability, or the grounds for holding the subject accountable, consists primarily in facts about that subject, such as the subject's causal contributions or the content of the subject's intentions. Paradigmatically, individual moral agents are reproached, or reproach themselves, for harms ascribable to them and them alone, on the basis of their intentional actions and causal contributions (see C. Kutz, 2000).

1. The concept of moral responsibility²

One of the most influential accounts of the concept of moral responsibility was introduced in Peter Strawson's classic paper "Freedom and Resentment" (1962/1993). Strawson's view explains moral responsibility in terms of the practice of holding people responsible. The practice, in turn, is cashed out in terms of moral reactive attitudes, like indignation, love, respect, forgiveness, resentment, guilt, and gratitude, (to blame or praise is to express these attitudes). Being morally responsible is to be subject to these attitudes. By "reactive attitudes" Strawson refers to a range of attitudes that "belong to our involvement or participation with others in interpersonal human relationships" (P. F. Strawson, 1962/1993, p. 194). Our attitudes toward other persons appear to be significantly different from those we entertain toward nonhuman animals and inanimate objects. Our adopting reactive attitudes toward other persons evidences that we are engaged with persons in a distinctive manner. Non-persons can be used, exploited, manipulated, or perhaps just enjoyed. We do not take reactive attitudes toward non-persons, we view non-persons from a more detached and

² Here I only briefly discuss two social accounts of moral responsibility. Social accounts of moral responsibility stress the "social" dimension of moral responsibility, the fact that holding someone (else) morally responsible involves deeming that person a fitting target of certain attitudes and practices. Other relevant accounts include at least the following:

Marina Oshana has offered an alternative social conception of moral responsibility (M. Oshana, 1997). On Oshana's approach, being morally responsible for something entails being accountable for it, and "'X is accountable for Y' can be unpacked as 'It is appropriate that X explain her intentions in doing or being Y'" According to Oshana, the accountability idea is more basic than the Strawsonian idea of being a suitable target of the reactive attitudes. On her approach, an agent is not morally responsible because she is an apt target for the reactive attitudes; rather, the agent is an apt target for the reactive attitudes because she is morally responsible, that is, it is fitting to demand that she give a certain sort of explanation of her behavior or her being a particular way. (M. Fischer, 1999.)

As to non-social accounts: Gary Watson (1996) distinguishes between two notions of responsibility: self-disclosure (attributability) and accountability. Self-disclosure or attributability sense of responsibility concerns the action's being attributed to the agent as his own, and as such serving as the basis for moral appraisal. Accountability sense of responsibility is social and involves the reactive attitudes and associated (blaming and praising) practices. According to Watson, in the former sense of responsibility we hold an agent to be responsible and in the latter sense we hold an agent responsible. M. Zimmerman (1988) proposes a ledger view of moral responsibility. On "ledger views" ascriptions of moral responsibility are understood primarily as a form of moral accounting that keeps track of the worth of agents. Here I just mention some metaphors that have been used to express this picture of responsibility: "praising someone may be said to constitute judging that there is a credit in his ledger of life, or a positive mark in his report card of life, or a luster on his record as a person; that his record has been burnished, that his moral standing has been enhanced. On this view, someone is praiseworthy if he is deserving of such praise; that is, if it is correct, or true to the facts, to judge that there is a credit in his ledger, etc. Someone is blameworthy if he is deserving of such blame; that is, if it is correct, or true to the facts, to judge that there is a debit in his ledger, etc." Susan Wolf introduces the reason view, according to which responsibility depends on the ability to act in accordance with the True and Good. The reason view is committed to the curious claim that being psychologically determined to perform good actions is compatible with deserving praise for them, but being psychologically determined to perform bad actions is not compatible with deserving blame. (See S. Wolf, 1990, p. 79.)

objective perspective. In summary, Strawsonian approaches to moral responsibility analyze responsibility in terms of the reactive attitudes and certain associated practices, such as punishment and moral reward.

In his *Responsibility and Moral Sentiments* (1994) R. J. Wallace discusses Strawson's account of moral responsibility at length and then elaborates a Strawsonian view of moral responsibility. We can formulate Wallace's view concisely as follows: "An agent is morally responsible insofar as it is fair to hold him morally responsible. This is then a normative conception of moral responsibility to the extent that normative issues concerning the fairness of the adoption of the stance of holding someone morally responsible and thus applying the reactive attitudes and associated sanctions help to determine whether someone is morally responsible."

Wallace draws a distinction between holding someone morally responsible and that individual's being morally responsible; the latter is defined in part in terms of the former. In Wallace's view, holding people morally responsible involves "being susceptible to reactive attitudes" in dealing with them. Wallace restricts the list of reactive attitudes to resentment, indignation, and guilt, whereas P. F. Strawson, and many Strawsonians, think of reactive attitudes as including the wide array of emotions characteristically present in interpersonal relations (as opposed to our relations with non-persons). In Wallace's view, the attitudes of resentment, indignation, and guilt are linked by related propositional objects. Episodes of guilt, resentment, and indignation are all caused by the belief that a moral expectation to which one holds a person has been breached: "The reactive attitudes are explained exclusively by beliefs about the violation of moral obligations (construed as strict prohibitions or requirements) whereas other moral sentiments are explained by beliefs about the various modalities of moral value" (R. J. Wallace, 1994, p. 38). Not only does the stance of holding someone morally responsible include susceptibility to the reactive emotions, but it also typically involves the application of moral sanctions which serve to express these emotions.

In the articles that follow and together make up my thesis I have employed Wallace's notion of moral responsibility as my starting point in the critiques of the collectivist understanding of collective moral responsibility. However, the arguments do not hang on Wallacian notion of moral responsibility, so that the critical arguments would, I believe, maintain their relevance even if some other notion of moral responsibility were chosen, since the arguments turn on such agency requirements that

are presupposed by all accounts of moral responsibility. Wallace's normative account of moral responsibility is cherished in the articles for a number of reasons: i) it allows for a distinction between holding an agent responsible and agent's being responsible, ii) it leaves conceptual space for a critique of the practices of holding agents responsible and thus improves on Strawsonian accounts, and iii) it takes the practice of holding agents responsible as a central ingredient of the notion of moral responsibility.

2. Conditions of application

An important part of the philosophical literature on moral responsibility has focused on specifying the conditions of application of the concept of moral responsibility. The broadly speaking "Aristotelian" conditions on moral responsibility require that an agent meet certain "epistemic" and "freedom-relevant" conditions. Put negatively, the agent must not be ignorant of certain crucial features or consequences of her behaviour, and she must not be "forced" to behave as she does. Both the epistemic and the freedom-relevant conditions are important, but the discussion in the literature has focused more on freedom-relevant conditions. (M. Fischer, 1999, for epistemic conditions see I. Haji, 1998, and J. Feinberg, 1986, pp. 269-315).

Freedom conditions of moral responsibility have been discussed in terms of such freedom relevant concepts as autonomy, ownership, and self-control.

Traditionally, the most influential view about the sort of freedom that is necessary and sufficient for moral responsibility posits that this sort of freedom involves the availability of genuinely open alternative possibilities at certain key points in one's life. Arguably, without this sort of alternative possibility, one is compelled to do as one actually does. Some philosophers talk in terms of freedom, other prefer to talk of control.

The traditional view here is that moral responsibility for behaviour requires the sort of control that involves genuinely available alternative possibilities at some point suitably related to the time of the behaviour in question. The intuitive picture behind the "alternative possibilities control requirement" is that moral responsibility requires that the agent select one from among various genuinely open paths the world might take. This picture involves two important ideas. One is that there must be

various paths genuinely available to the agent, at least at some times suitably related to the time of the behaviour in question. The other one is that the agent, and not some outside force or mere chance, selects which path will be the path into the future.³

3. Responsibility undermining factors

Perhaps we can get a better grip of the conditions of the moral responsibility by way of looking at the responsibility undermining factors – factors and circumstances that seem to make it unfair or not justified to hold an agent responsible, blame or praise, for what he or she has done. The classic Aristotelian “responsibility undermining conditions” are ignorance and coercion.

In this context J. L. Austin (1979) draws a distinction between justification and excuses. Let us consider a case where an agent, A, apparently does X, and X, on the face of it, is morally wrong. In the case of justification, we admit that A indeed did (or performed) X but X, in general or under the specific circumstances in question, is not wrong but rather it is permissible or even obligatory. Whereas in the case of excuses we admit that X is impermissible or wrong but we argue that A did not (intentionally) do or perform X.

Again, we can make a further distinction between “excusing conditions” and “exempting conditions” along the following lines: The excusing conditions do not refer to the moral agency but more locally to particular actions. Examples of excusing conditions are: Inadvertence, Mistake, or Accident; Unintentional Bodily Movements; Physical Constraint; and Coercion, Necessity, and Duress. (R. J. Wallace, 1996.)

In these cases, the agent did not intentionally perform or omit the action the agent was morally obliged to refrain from doing or to do. Exemptive conditions concern the moral agency. Examples of exemptive conditions are: Mental illness or

³ A good deal of the debate concerning the freedom conditions of moral responsibility boils down to the compatibilism-incompatibilism debate about whether moral responsibility is compatible with determinism or whether moral responsibility requires a stronger notion of freedom which is not compatible with deterministic world. I cannot go into this debate here, I just contend myself to mentioning that in that debate one of the turning points has been Harry Frankfurt’s *Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility* (1969) in which Frankfurt argues that if moral responsibility is not compatible with determinism this is not because of the lack of alternate possibilities because moral responsibility is compatible with lack of alternate possibilities. As a result of this the focus of the discussion, in particular in the compatibilist camp, has been on the control conditions required by moral responsibility, that is on explicating the second idea of the intuitive picture.

insanity, extreme youth, psychopathy, and the effects of systematic behaviour control or conditioning. Here the point is the lack of capacities required for moral responsibility, not the failure to exercise the capacities. For example, according to Wallace, moral responsibility requires what he calls “the powers of reflective self-control” which include for an agent: “1) the power to grasp and apply moral reasons, and 2) the power to control or regulate his behavior by the light of such reasons” (R. J. Wallace, 1996, p. 157).

4. Moral agency

Herein my aim is not to provide a review of the literature on moral agency but very briefly to introduce the agency requirements of moral responsibility that do some work in the argumentation of the articles of the thesis.

First of all, I will take for granted that moral responsibility is an “agential property”, that is, moral responsibility presupposes agency. However, since not all agents qualify as bearers of moral responsibility, or moral duties, then moral responsibility requires more than the capacity to act intentionally. As to the idea of agency, here I follow Alfred R. Mele and employ the notion of an agent according to which “An agent is, by definition, something that acts; and if, at a time, something acts, that thing is an agent then” (A. Mele, unpublished ms). Thus, a dog that acts is a canine agent at the time of its acting. However, we do not seriously ascribe moral responsibility to dogs. Accordingly, the bearer of moral responsibility has to be an agent that satisfies further conditions over and above its capability to act intentionally. In other words, the bearer of moral responsibility has to be a moral agent. A moral agent can be (almost vacuously) characterised as an entity that can have moral obligations and bear moral responsibility. The conditions of moral agency have to do with the agent’s capacity to act freely, the agent’s capacity to understand normative reasons, and the agent’s capacity to execute intentions in a controlled manner.

For instance, according to Peter French, a moral agent must be an actor. To qualify as an actor an entity must: a) display the ability to act intentionally, b) display the ability to make rational decisions and to consider rational arguments regarding its intentions, and c) have the capacity to respond to events and ethical criticism by

altering intentions and patterns of behaviour that are harmful to others or detrimental to its interests. (P. French, 1984, p. 12)

Jay L. Wallace characterises the requirements of moral agency as follows “Being a responsible moral agent ... primarily involves a form of normative competence: the ability to grasp and apply moral reasons, and to govern one’s behaviour by the light of such reasons”. (R. J. Wallace, 1994, p. 1)

Philip Pettit provides us with the following, arguably individually necessary and jointly sufficient, conditions for someone to be fit to be held responsible in a given choice: 1) *Value relevance*: the agent is an autonomous agent and faces a value-relevant choice involving the possibility of doing something good or bad or right or wrong; 2) *Value judgement*: the agent has the understanding and access to evidence required for being able to make judgements about the relative value of such options, and 3) *Value sensitivity*: the agent has the control necessary for being able to choose between options on the basis of judgements about their value. (P. Pettit, 2007.) I do not contest these conditions in my thesis rather I accept them for the arguments sake and use them as premises in the argumentation against the moral responsibility attributed to a collective agent.

From the point of view of my articles on collective moral responsibility the central features of the notions of moral agency are self-determination in relation to, control over and “owner-ship” of action figuring in or entailed by all notions of moral agency known to me. In the articles that follow I have not committed myself to any specific account of moral agency.

PART II: Collective responsibility

The notion of collective responsibility associates blameworthiness with groups, and under some interpretations construes groups as moral agents in their own right, whereas the traditional notion of moral responsibility grounds moral blameworthiness in the wills of discrete individuals who freely cause harm. Hence, the notion of collective responsibility does not fit easily into the prevailing philosophical literature on moral responsibility. Nor has it been accepted by those who are used to construing moral agency in purely individualistic terms.

In the following articles it is argued that the individualistic, or at least anti-

collectivist, understanding of moral agency is correct. However, this is not assumed to undermine the notion of collective moral responsibility as a viable notion. The line of reasoning in this work, roughly, is that there is (and can be) no viable (collectivist) account of collective moral agency and since the notion of moral responsibility both in collective and individual cases presupposes agency, the viable notion of collective moral responsibility is to be explicated along the lines of (irreducible) joint moral responsibility of individual agents. (A sketch of such an anti-collectivist account of collective responsibility is offered in article 2 of this thesis “Group Action and Group Responsibility”, *Protosociology*, Mäkelä and Tuomela)

1. Short History of the study of collective responsibility

Collective responsibility is a topic of growing interest among moral philosophers, philosophers of action and social action, and indeed philosophers of the social sciences more generally. This interest is part of the more general trend of broadening the scope of morality to collectivities and groups, e.g. business corporations. Until recently, almost all Western moral philosophers have approached the subject of responsibility armed with the assumption that the only interesting and important things to be said on this topic must concern individual human beings. If ordinary ascriptions of moral responsibility appeared to be directed sometimes at groups, organizations, or corporate bodies, such claims were taken to be either nonsensical or ultimately reducible to statements about individual human beings. This is no longer the case. On the one hand, the societies of the twentieth and twenty first century have been, and are facing important ethical problems that are extremely difficult to be dealt with by the conceptual tools of a strictly individualistic moral philosophy. Indeed, Peter French (1984), one of the prominent figures in the field, claims that collective responsibility is a central concept, perhaps the most important concept, if we are to understand and deal with a spectrum of claims and ascriptions made by and about various groups in our society about justice, compensation, group guilt, etc., and as we wrestle with global social and environmental problems that could well determine the quality of human life for generations to come. On the other hand, philosophers of the social sciences, of social action in particular, have developed new theories about collective and social action and conceptual tools to deal with the problems of

collective and corporate agency. These can be fruitfully used in dealing with the problems of collective responsibility. Thus, there are both practical and theoretical reasons that explain the growing interest in the topic of collective responsibility amongst professional philosophers. However, interest in collective responsibility is not limited only to philosophers; social scientists, political theorists, and legal theorists are also working on the topic. We might say that collective responsibility is an interdisciplinary topic *par excellence*.

The philosophical literature on collective responsibility is an interesting reflection of social and political turmoil in the world. In the recent past the Nuremberg trials of the 1940's brought on the first wave of analysis of the concept. H. D. Lewis (1948), Karl Jaspers (1961) and Hannah Arendt (1963/1977), focused in their writings on collective responsibility on the question whether or not the German people can legitimately be held collectively responsible for World War II Nazi crimes. Sanford Levinson (1974), Richard Wasserstrom (1971) and others produced their own arguments about collective responsibility in light of the Nuremberg trials. Another wave followed the Eichmann trial of the early 1960s, see, for example, Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963/1977). In the late 1960s, a great surge of interest occurred in response to the race riots, student demonstrations, and the Vietnam War, especially the My Lai Massacre. Two important journals, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* and *Social Theory and Practice*, were founded to give philosophers a forum for writing about the current social and political events such as Vietnam War. In the early 1970s a seminal book of essays on collective responsibility by leading moral philosophers was published, namely, *Individual and Collective Responsibility: the Massacre at My Lai* edited by Peter French (1972). The Kitty Genovese murder and corporate scandals of all kinds influenced much of the philosophical work done on collective responsibility during the 1970s and 80s, including that of Peter French, Larry May, and Virginia Held, see, e.g., P. French's *Collective and Corporate Responsibility* (1984). During the last three decades, the discussion of responsibility of non-organized collectives has revived as well, see, e.g., Larry May, *The Morality of Groups* (1987), G. Mellema, *Collective Responsibility* (1997), and L. May, *Sharing Responsibility* (1992). In addition to pure philosophical interest in the concept⁴, the existence of environmental problems, the oppression of minorities (sexism and

⁴ See e.g. Larry May (1987 and 1992), Howard McGray (1986), Marilyn Friedman (M. Friedman and L. May 1980), and Anthony Appiah (1987).

racism), and corporate crime are issues that, at least partly, helps to explain the interest in the topic of collective responsibility during the last three decades.

2. About the discussion of collective responsibility

The term “collective responsibility” is used in many ways in the literature. Sometimes by saying that several people are collectively responsible for a state of affairs we intend that each of these people is individually responsible for this same state of affairs. For example: suppose several people throw paint at a public mural in an effort to deface it. Then, even though each person contributes in different ways to the defacing of the mural, each comes to bear responsibility for the subsequent state of affairs. In this sense they can be said to share responsibility for the defacing of the mural. Quite commonly in the literature this sense is called “shared responsibility”. A different usage of the term “collective responsibility” assigns responsibility to a *single entity*, the collective, consisting of the various people who constitute it. According to this usage, to say that several people are collectively responsible for a state of affairs is to say that responsibility is borne by the collective consisting of these people. Whether the people themselves are responsible as individuals for this state of affairs is an entirely separate question; all that is asserted is that these people belong to a collective, which is itself the bearer of responsibility. Think of the claim “The club as a whole is to blame for being relegated.” We can interpret this claim as making an attribution to the collective as such but not necessarily to any of its members.

The notion of *collective responsibility* typically refers to both the causal responsibility of moral agents for harm in the world and the blameworthiness that we ascribe to them for having caused such harm. Hence, it is, like personal responsibility and shared responsibility, almost always a notion of *moral*, rather than merely *causal*, responsibility. But, unlike its two more purely individualistic counterparts, collective responsibility, under a collectivist rendering, associates both causal responsibility and blameworthiness with *groups* and locates the source of moral responsibility in the collective actions taken by these groups understood as *collectives*.

Before considering more specific questions and arguments, it is reasonable to say something about the discussion of collective moral responsibility in general terms. The discussion here can be usefully described as a debate between individualists and

collectivists. The setting is, in many respects, analogical and related to the holism-individualism debate in the social sciences.

As already suggested, we are often willing to hold collectivities morally accountable for their actions, yet philosophical theories have tended to restrict moral agency to individual agents. Many philosophers are *ethical individualists* who deny the intelligibility of statements attributing moral responsibility to collectives, except in cases where such statements are semantically reducible, or logically equivalent, to complex attributions of responsibility to individual persons. Furthermore, ethical individualists argue that collective responsibility violates principles of both individual responsibility and fairness. Methodological individualists challenge the very possibility of associating moral agency with groups, as distinct from their individual members. The central issues here are in ethics, semantics, metaphysics, and action theory. *Ethical collectivists* claim that there are intelligible and defensible statements attributing moral responsibility to collectives, which are not so reducible.

The opponents of the notion of collective responsibility usually raise the following two worries. First, if we accept responsibility attributions to collectives the responsibility just fades away – collective responsibility is equivalent in the end to no responsibility whatsoever. Second, if we accept responsibility ascriptions to collectives we are subsequently inclined to hold agents responsible for someone else's action and this seems unjustified according to the critics of collective responsibility. Further in addition to these two concerns there is a third basic worry in trade, namely the ontological worry that by accepting the notion of collective responsibility we commit ourselves to some fuzzy holistic entities.

Defenders of collective responsibility set out to demonstrate that the majority of critical arguments made about collective responsibility are unfounded and that collective responsibility – along with its assumptions of group intentions, collective actions, and group blameworthiness – is both coherent as an intellectual construct and fair to ascribe in at least some, if not all, cases.

The notion of collective responsibility has become the source of three major philosophical controversies by virtue of its nature as a group-based construct. The first controversy focuses on the relationship between collective responsibility, on the one hand, and the values of individual liberty, justice, and non-suffering, on the other. The participants in this controversy ask such questions as: How can we ascribe moral responsibility to groups for harms that only a few of its members directly caused

without violating principles of individual freedom and responsibility? How can we ascribe collective responsibility in such cases without treating those individuals who did not directly cause harm unjustly? What happens in cases where the harm in question is both very serious and genuinely the product of many hands or the group as a whole? How can we *not* ascribe collective responsibility to groups in these cases and still hope to prevent such harm from occurring in the future?

The second controversy concentrates on the metaphysical foundations of collective responsibility and its coherence as an intellectual construct. Here the participants ask: How can we understand the notion of collective responsibility as a matter of moral – and not just causal – responsibility? Is it possible for groups, as distinct from their members, to cause harm in the sense required by moral responsibility? Is it possible for groups, as distinct from their members, in their own right as it were, to be morally blameworthy for bringing about harm? Is it only organized collectives with an internal decision-making structure that can bear moral responsibility? My articles in this thesis aim at contributing to this controversy.

The third controversy is not actually about the moral responsibility of groups at all. Instead, it is about the moral responsibility of individuals who belong to groups in cases where these groups are themselves thought to be morally responsible for particular cases of harm. Here the key questions are: How can we distribute collective responsibility across individual members of such a group? Does it make sense to distribute collective responsibility in general? Is it appropriate to hold individual group members morally responsible for harm caused by other group members? If so, under what conditions and with respect to what particular kinds of groups it is appropriate?

Consider the relation between individual members of a collective and collective responsibility. Here we can distinguish the main positions as follows (see, e.g., Gregory F. Mellema, 1997, p. 5): According to a “blunt individualistic position”, a collective bears responsibility for a state of affairs only if every member of the collective bears responsibility for the same state of affairs (see, e.g., S. Sverdlik, 1987). At the opposing end of the spectrum there is a position which one might call a “strong collectivist position”. According to philosophers of a collectivist persuasion, a central notion of collective moral responsibility is moral responsibility assigned to a collective as a single entity. In their view “collective responsibility” should be understood in the sense of a collective’s responsibility. Whether the members of a

collective, that is, the people who constitute the collective in question, are individually responsible is a separate question. When it comes to collective moral responsibility, the collective itself is the bearer of such responsibility. In David Copp's terminology this claim is equivalent to the claim that a collective can be an independent moral agent (D. Copp, 1980, pp. 147-150). An important corollary of the strong collectivist view is that collectives are capable of bearing moral responsibility for actions and/or outcomes, yet none of their members are in any degree *individually* morally responsible for those actions and/or outcomes. The most prevalent view in the middle of the spectrum is that collectives can bear responsibility for a state of affairs even in situations where one or more of its members fail to bear responsibility for the same state of affairs. (See, e.g., D. E. Cooper, 1968, V. Held, 1970, S. Bates, 1971, P. French, 1984.)

3. Argumentative strategies in the debate

3.1 Critics of collective moral responsibility

The main lines of critique of collective moral responsibility consist of arguments for one of the following claims: a) It is unfair to hold individuals responsible for what they have not done, this claim presupposes a distributive sense of collective responsibility. b) Collectives cannot have intentions in the sense required by moral responsibility. c) Collectives cannot do harm in the sense required by moral responsibility. d) Collectives cannot satisfy the criteria of agency. e) Collectives cannot satisfy the criteria of moral agency and moral responsibility requires moral agency.

For the critics, two claims are of central importance. The first is that groups, unlike individuals, cannot form intentions and hence cannot be understood to act or to cause harm *qua* groups. The second is that groups, as distinct from their individual members, cannot be understood as morally blameworthy in the sense required by moral responsibility.

Both claims stem from a form of methodological individualism of the sort articulated by both Max Weber and H. D. Lewis in their respective rejections of collective responsibility. Weber argues that collective responsibility makes no sense

both because we cannot isolate genuinely collective actions as distinct from identical actions of many persons, and because groups, unlike the individuals who belong to them, cannot think as groups or formulate intentions of the kind normally thought to be necessary to actions (The first volume of *Economy and Society* 1914/1978). In his seminal 1948 paper "Collective Responsibility" H.D. Lewis follows suit and argues in a passionate manner against the concept and more generally against the claims of collective responsibility. Lewis believed that if we were to take collective responsibility claims seriously, the very concept of individual moral responsibility would be eroded. His attack was based on the intuition that no one can be held responsible for the actions of another person. "Value," Lewis (1948, pp. 3-6) writes, "belongs to the individual and it is the individual who is the sole bearer of moral responsibility" and "No one is morally guilty except in relation to some conduct which he himself considered to be wrong." On Lewis's account, the idea of collective responsibility must destroy what is arguably the most central conception of Western ethics, namely the moral accountability of the individual.

Contemporary critics of collective responsibility do not typically go as far as Lewis. They do, however, generally share Lewis' skepticism about the possibility of both group intentions and genuinely collective actions. They, too, worry about the fairness of ascribing collective responsibility to individuals who do not themselves directly cause harm or alternatively who do not bring about harm purposefully. For instance, Stephen Sverdlik (1987, p. 68) writes that: "It would be unfair, whether we are considering a result produced by more than one person's action or by a single person, to blame a person for a result that he or she did not intend to produce."

Thus, the central claims of these critics are that genuinely collective actions are not possible and that it would be unfair to consider agents morally blameworthy for harm that they did not intentionally bring about. Both of these claims build on significant normative assumptions concerning intentions. The first assumption is that actions not beginning with intentions are not actions proper but kinds of behavior instead. The second assumption is that the agent held responsible must have bad intentions or be morally faulty to be morally blameworthy.

The critical line of reasoning from the first assumption runs along the following lines: Collective responsibility, understood in the sense of a collective's responsibility, is not a viable notion because groups, not having minds of their own, cannot form intentions required by actions in the proper sense, as opposed to mere

behavior, and thus groups cannot act (intentionally). As there is no collective action proper, there is no collective responsibility either. Only individuals can act, and thus only individuals can bear responsibility.

In accordance with the second assumption, collective responsibility requires groups or collectives to have the ability to have bad intentions or to be morally faulty. This ability is questioned by the critics: How can groups or collectives, as distinct from their individual members, be understood to have bad intentions or to be morally faulty? How can they be understood as appropriate bearers of moral blameworthiness, guilt, or shame?

One of the critics, Jan Narveson, goes as far as to argue that the bearers of moral blameworthiness *have* to be individuals because only individuals can have moral agency. “Nothing else,” he writes, “can literally be the bearer of full responsibility.” (J. Narveson, 2002, p. 179, for critiques along these lines see, J. W. N. Watkins, 1957, R. S. Downie, 1969, A. Goldman, 1970, S. Sverdlik, 1987, and J. A. Corlett, 2001).

The critique in the articles of my thesis focuses in the main on the moral agency of the groups or collectives.

3.2 Defenders of collective responsibility

Defenders of the viability of the notion of collective responsibility avail themselves of various strategies. Sometimes they draw on linguistic analyses, and at other times they discuss intuitive cases in which both individualists and collectivists must (arguably) be willing to accept that the collective itself is the bearer of moral responsibility, and which are conceptually coherent as well as normatively and metaphysically plausible.⁵ Again, they argue, contrary to the aforementioned critics, that collectives can act and form intentions, and that collectives of a certain kind satisfy the conditions of agency required by moral responsibility in their own right (see e.g. M.

⁵ On the basis of such cases, and the assumption that responsibility presupposes agency, David Copp (2006, 2007) has recently introduced an argument for the need for genuine collectives in our ontology of agents to accommodate the kinds of normative judgments we make about them.

The argument goes as follows:

- (1) We correctly assign blame to collectives in circumstances in which it would be a mistake to assign any (relevantly related) blame to their members.
- (2) If (1), then collectives are genuine agents over and above their members.
- (3) Therefore, collectives are genuine agents over and above their members.

Gilbert, P. French, P. Pettit). They also argue against reducibility of the collective responsibility in terms of the possibility of changing membership collectives,

One of the strategies used by defendants is to point out both that we blame groups all the time in everyday life and that we do so in a way that is difficult to analyze in terms of individualism. For instance, David Cooper writes, “[t]here is an obvious point to be recognized and that obvious point is that responsibility is ascribed to collectives, as well as to individual persons. Blaming attitudes are held towards collectives as well as towards individuals,” (D. Cooper, 1968, p. 258.)

However, the defenders of collective responsibility do not typically content themselves with an analysis of our use of language, which may obviously be wrong. Instead, they acknowledge the need to demonstrate that the responsibility ascriptions to collectives cannot be analyzed in terms of individual responsibility. Cooper explores cases associated with sports clubs and nations. According to Cooper, when we look at how such collectives act, we see that we cannot deduce statements about particular individuals from the statements about collectives. “This is so, because the existence of a collective is compatible with varying membership. No determinate set of individuals is necessary for the existence of the collective.” (D. Cooper 1968, p. 260)⁶

Margaret Gilbert develops what she calls a “plural-subject account” of shared intentions to justify the coherence of collective responsibility (M. Gilbert, 1989 and 2000). She does so in large part by zeroing in on joint commitments. According to Gilbert, group intentions exist when two or more persons constitute the plural subject of an intention to carry out a particular action, or, in other words, when “they are jointly committed to intending as a body to do *A*” (M. Gilbert, 2000, p. 22). Gilbert’s account is discussed at some length in the thesis.

Philip Pettit argues that collectives organized in certain way deserve ontological recognition as agents in their own right, as subjects that are “minded in a way starkly discontinuous with the mentality of their members”. According to Pettit, certain kinds of collectives can satisfy the conditions of moral responsibility, and, indeed, such collectives are as fit as any individual human being to be held

⁶ In a similar vein, Peter French focuses on that class of predicates that, he contends, can only be true of collectives. According to French, “[t]here is a class of predicates that just cannot be true of individuals, that can only be true of collectives. Examples of such predicates abound ... and include ‘disbanded’ (most uses of), ‘lost the football game’, ‘elected a president’, and ‘passed an amendment’. ... Methodological individualism would be at a loss in this context. (P. French, 1998, p. 37.)

responsible for what they do. Pettit's argumentation for autonomous agency of certain kinds of collectives builds on his analyses of the discursive dilemma and collectivization of reason. (See P. Pettit, 2007.) One of the articles of my thesis focuses on arguing against Pettit's account.

Part III Articles of the thesis

In the articles that follow I have defended the view that only individual (natural) agents (either solely or jointly) are proper bearers of moral responsibility. A major part of my thesis consists of critical evaluations of some available versions of the collectivist position with respect to collective moral responsibility, the position according to which collectives in their own right are, at least in some cases, capable of bearing moral responsibility independently of the individual members of the collective.

My approach in the articles has been to argue that collectives in their own right are not capable of bearing moral responsibility and thus the collectivist rendering of collective moral responsibility is not a viable option. I argue herein that collectives, even if acceptable as agents, cannot satisfy conditions of moral responsibility in the way that would make it fair to hold collective agents morally responsible in their own right.

Articles

- [1] “Collective Moral Responsibility: A Collective as an Independent Moral Agent?”, *Australian Journal of Professional and Applied Ethics*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2000, 86-101.
- [2] “Group Action and Group Responsibility” (with Raimo Tuomela), *Protosociology* Vol. 16, 2002, 195-214.
- [3] “The Collectivist Approach to Collective Moral Responsibility” (with Seumas Miller), *Metaphilosophy*, Vol. 36, No. 5, 2005, 634-651.
- [4] “Collective Agents and Moral Responsibility”, *Journal of Social Philosophy*, Vol. XXXVIII, No. 3, 2007, 456-469.

[1] Collective moral responsibility: A collective as an independent moral agent

This paper is the oldest in this thesis. It is therefore somewhat immature and rough, and the papers that follow improve on it in certain respects. The terminology of the title is borrowed from David Copp but the article is an attempt first to understand Margaret Gilbert’s holist or collectivist position and then to criticize Gilbert’s account of collective moral responsibility.

The starting point of the article is Gilbert’s claim that groups can be morally responsible much in the same way as individual persons. Indeed, essentially the same claim, in one form or another, is studied in three out of four articles of this thesis. This article is an attempt to understand what kind of support Gilbert’s plural subject account provides for such a collectivist claim. More precisely the aim of the article is to study whether one can argue in terms of the “plural subject account” for the view that collectives can be independent moral agents such that they can bear moral responsibility independently of the individual moral responsibility of their members. The article claims, to put it bluntly, that one cannot successfully support the collectivist notion of collective moral responsibility in terms of the “plural subject account”. Another main claim of the article is that the account of collective moral responsibility built on the plural subject account has some important counterintuitive consequences that undermine its plausibility. I argue for these claims in terms of a

critical analysis of central notions of the plural subject account such as joint commitment, and through the use of counterexamples.

[2] Group action and group responsibility (with Raimo Tuomela)

This paper I wrote jointly with Professor Raimo Tuomela, my supervisor and very good friend. Other articles in this thesis are mainly critical and their contribution to the literature is, first, the study of the arguments for collectivism with respect to collective moral responsibility and, second, the conclusion that they are not successful. This paper, on the other hand, is an investigation of a social group's retrospective responsibility for its actions and their consequences. Here we build on Tuomela's theory of group action and we argue that group responsibility can be analyzed in terms of what its members jointly think and do *qua* group members.

When a group is held responsible for some action, its members, acting *qua* members of the group, can collectively be regarded as praiseworthy or blameworthy, in the light of some normative standard, for what the group has done. The paper aims at giving necessary and sufficient conditions analysis of a group's responsibility for its actions and their outcomes, and the conditions can be cashed out in terms of the group's members joint and other actions. This article is an attempt to make a positive contribution to the literature by way of providing at least a sketch of what an individualist and yet not reductionist account of collective moral/normative responsibility could look like.

[3] The collectivist approach to collective moral responsibility (with Seumas Miller)

I had the privilege and pleasure to write this paper together with Professor Seumas Miller. This article is a critique of what we call the collectivist approach to collective moral responsibility. This approach is characterized by the commitment to the idea that collective moral responsibility is moral responsibility assigned to a collective as a single entity. The critique of the paper proceeds via a discussion of the accounts and arguments of three prominent representatives of the collectivist approach to collective

moral responsibility, namely, Margaret Gilbert, Russell Hardin and Philip Pettit. We also discuss very briefly a relevant argument by David Copp. The aims of the article are mainly critical. The part on Margaret Gilbert's view repeats to some extent the arguments presented in [1].

However, we also advocate an alternative to the collectivist approach, namely an individualist account of collective responsibility according to which collective responsibility is ascribed to individuals. In the view advocated, each member of the group is individually morally responsible for the outcome of the joint action but each is individually responsible jointly with others. As to the further development of this individualist view we refer to works by Seumas Miller.

[4] Collective Agents and Moral Responsibility

This article develops further the critique of Philip Pettit's view that was briefly discussed in [3]. According to Pettit's account, collective agents of a certain kind are fit to be held morally responsible in their own right. An important corollary of this collectivist view is that collectives are capable of bearing moral responsibility for actions and/or outcomes, even in case where none of their members is to any degree *individually* morally responsible for those actions and/or outcomes.

In [4] I attempt to identify some significant problems with which I believe the collectivist position is afflicted. These problems have to do with the family of application conditions of moral responsibility typically discussed under such concepts as ownership, autonomy, freedom, and control. Indeed, I believe these problems to be serious enough to make the collectivist position untenable at least as long as the notion of moral responsibility employed presupposes agency. I argue that, due to their constitution, collective agents are such agents that it necessarily would be unfair to hold them morally responsible in their own right. I proceed mainly in respect to Pettit's account of collective agents. However, although the focus is primarily on Pettit's account, I suggest that the idea of this paper is generalizable, as the premises or assumptions on which the critical points are based are widely shared by the proponents of the collectivist camp and are not peculiar to Pettit's account.

Typically, the arguments in the debate between collectivists and individualists with respect to collective moral responsibility turn on the issue of whether collectives

can be agents or not. In [4] I opt for a somewhat different tack. I do not aim to deny that collectives of a certain kind can qualify as agents, in the sense of being capable of intentional action. Rather, I take seriously the idea of the agency of certain kind of collectives and ask whether it would be fair to hold such agents morally responsible in their own right. My worry is that even the most plausible accounts of collective agents *qua* distinct agents in their own right can provide us only with collective agents that deserve to be taken into account in considerations of fairness and yet fall short of satisfying the conditions of moral responsibility. Children or mentally ill people are agents, but it is not fair to them to hold them morally responsible—maybe something analogous holds for collective agents?

In what follows I aim to build an argument according to which collectivism with respect to collective moral responsibility is false even if, for the sake of argument, we accept that some collectives can qualify as agents and that collectives of some sort are capable of intentional action. The core of the argument is that collective agents (considered as agents in their own right) necessarily fail to satisfy the application conditions of moral responsibility in a way that would make holding collective agents morally responsible in their own right fair.

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