

Moral Responsibility and Virtue in Organizations

Abstract:

Our lives are deeply enmeshed in corporations, churches, governments, and other complex organizations. Can these groups—sometimes called collectives—possess moral qualities over and above those of their members? Some have recently argued that they can; for example, BP might be morally responsible for the Gulf oil spill in ways that transcend the responsibility of any individual. Others claim this is a dangerous mistake. My dissertation develops a mixed view on which collectives are capable of some moral qualities, including virtues, but are not capable of independently possessing everything that we might mean by “moral responsibility.”

In chapter 1 I present an account of collective virtue. Individuals typically possess virtues and vices partly on the basis of their mental lives, but collectives lack minds. How then can they possess moral virtues and vices? Despite the fact that they lack genuine minds, collectives can possess close analogues of individual moral and intellectual virtues and vices. These traits are analogues in that they are similar both in functional structure and in their intentional content. I argue that collectives sometimes hold these traits in an irreducible way (for example, a collective can have a virtue or vice even if none of the collective’s members have the analogous individual trait), and I defend my view from recent criticisms of collective virtue.

In chapter 2, I consider collective moral responsibility. As with virtue, individual moral responsibility typically has a mental component, and collectives lack minds. Yet real-world cases of collective wrong-doing make irreducibly collective moral responsibility plausible.

To address this puzzle, I draw on David Shoemaker's work distinguishing between three things that one might mean by the term “moral responsibility.” Two—attributability and answerability—are within the reach of collectives: collectives can be irreducibly attributable in that their actions can stem from their virtues and vices, and irreducibly answerable in that they can reasonably respond to moral criticism. But I argue that collectives cannot be

irreducibly accountable: they are not apt targets for moral anger. I give two arguments for this conclusion. First, their lack of phenomenal consciousness prevents them from experiencing the sort of response moral anger is supposed to elicit. Second, I draw on a recent movement in the philosophy of mind—what Uriah Kriegel calls the phenomenal intentionality research program—to argue that collective accountability is inconsistent with plausible views about the nature of collective intentionality.

In chapter 3, I defend my mixed view against some arguments in the literature. Some argue that collectives can be morally responsible *tout court*, while others argue that collectives cannot be morally responsible in any sense. Both arguments present apparent problems for my view that collectives can be answerable but not accountable. In response, I argue that proponents and opponents of collective moral responsibility have often argued past each other by assuming different senses of moral responsibility. In particular, proponents of collective moral responsibility have offered arguments that, at best, establish only collective answerability. Their opponents, meanwhile, have implicitly taken collective accountability as their target. Thus, neither sort of argument offers problems for my view, and appreciation of the answerability/accountability distinction can defuse much of the debate.

Moreover, examining the collective moral responsibility controversy in this way can help us evaluate Shoemaker's own theory of individual moral responsibility. Shoemaker argues that we should distinguish between three different senses of moral responsibility because this distinction helps us make the most sense out of “marginal cases”—cases in which we are torn between thinking agents are and are not responsible. Shoemaker appeals to cases involving individuals with a variety of mental health disorders as examples. Expanding our gaze to collectives as additional marginal cases provides further tests of his theory, and so examining collective moral responsibility can contribute to wider debates in ethics.

In my conclusion, I briefly explore some upshots of my arguments for social and legal punishment for collectives. The desire to vindicate (or condemn) such punishment has played a large role in motivating research into collective moral traits, and I argue that while their lack of accountability precludes some motivations for collective punishment, answerability and

attributability justify a forward-looking system of punishment. When constructed properly, such a system can avoid the moral objections to collective punishment while fulfilling the social goals of collective moral responsibility theorists. A nuanced account of the moral responsibility and virtue of collectives can therefore help us make progress on practical questions about how to best treat the organizations that play such important roles in our world.