

University of Dayton Review

Volume 15
Number 2 *Proceedings of the 8th Annual
Philosophy Colloquium*

Article 5

December 1981

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Recommended Citation

Sefler, George F. (1981) "Elements in a Theory of Collective Responsibility," *University of Dayton Review*.
Vol. 15: No. 2, Article 5.
Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/udr/vol15/iss2/5>

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Elements in a Theory of Collective Responsibility

George F. Sefler

"Collective responsibility" is a term subject to various interpretations. Some seemingly pose philosophical problems; whereas, others are more readily acceptable. For example, assume that all the students in a classroom each cheated on an examination; collectively, then, the class is held responsible for cheating. Or, suppose three people decide to rob a bank. One masterminds the crime, another executes the robbery, and a third drives the getaway car. Here also, these men are collectively responsible for wrong-doing. These instances provide little room for dispute; no one would question the group responsibility in either case. In both, collective responsibility is viewed as an aggregate of individual responsibilities.

More questionable philosophically is the notion of collective responsibility which holds a group answerable when only some or even none of its members has done something overtly blameworthy, and yet the group as a whole is viewed as collectively responsible. This latter notion of collective responsibility has received minimal attention in philosophical circles. One conceptually resists group responsibility of this kind; it seems unfair to hold people responsible for something they did not do. Such reasoning, however, I argue is too restrictive and based upon certain theoretical misunderstandings.

Principally, reasons for the sparse appearance of discussions on collective responsibility in philosophical literature are twofold. First, a theory of collective responsibility necessitates a notion of the collective; whereas contemporary western man has shied away from this view, emphasizing instead his individuality. Second, -- and not unrelated to the first -- is the misconception philosophers have about responsibility in general. They have consistently zeroed in upon a certain notion of *individual* responsibility whereby individual free beings are specifically performing acts which are either meritorious or blameworthy. Despite its value, this notion is simply inadequate to generate a comprehensive theory of responsibility. As philosophers, we have been unknowingly living on what Wittgenstein calls a one-sided diet; we think we have intellectually digested a well-balanced notion of responsibility, when in fact we have been feeding on only a partial concept.

Let us review, then, what can be called some of the necessary elements of a traditional theory of responsibility and discuss their insufficiency for grounding a theory of collective responsibility.

Responsibility and Causation

Fundamental to traditional views of responsibility are the notions of free agents and a theory of causality as the bases in determining for what actions or events free agents are responsible. If someone is responsible for something, this means he freely caused it. The armed robber was responsible for the storekeeper's death means that he freely committed the murder. Summarizing, Rem Blanchard Edwards maintains that "the minimal thing which is being said when we are told that a man was responsible for his evil deed is that he is the cause of that deed and of the consequences which follow upon it. 'To be responsible for' always seems to *mean* 'to be the cause of' . . ."¹

This model, while helpful and workable within certain contexts, is inadequate for developing a theory of collective responsibility. The terms "causal" and "collective," while interrelated, cannot be defined in terms of each other; or more specifically, causal responsibility is not the *sine qua non* of collective responsibility. To understand this, let us review a few examples.

Assume that a parent constantly warns his child of the dangers of skateboards. Yet, his son breaks a neighbor's window during some skateboard maneuver. Here the parent can be held responsible for damages to the neighbor. There is no causal connection between the parent and the broken window; the parent even warned the child of the dangers. Still the responsibility exists, even in a moral sense.

Or, assume someone operates a restaurant and while sick in the hospital, a fire breaks out in his restaurant. The losses in property and life were staggering. When the fire marshalls inspected the area, they found that a busboy *caused* the fire by lighting a match in the course of his duties. Yet, given the numerous fire code violations also discovered, the hospitalized restaurant owner would be responsible for the damages.

To use another example, think of the notion of agent. I appoint person B to act as my agent. B is the cause of various actions -- signing contracts, setting up schedules, and so on -- and yet I am responsible for the terms of these agreements. Or think of the captain of a ship; he is responsible for the safety of his crew which means that he is responsible for actions of those subordinate to him. In all these cases there is a clear divorce between causality and responsibility. One person caused something to happen; another is held responsible. Under certain conditions, the parent is responsible for his child's behavior; the ship captain, for his crew's actions; the individual, for his agent's commitments. And, despite the differences in these examples, the kind of responsibility which is being discussed is for actions they did not cause, at least not in any traditional understanding of the term. Instead, the examples shift from responsibility as causality to responsibility as accountability. It is quite proper to say that individuals because of special arrangements are accountable for the actions of others.

Once this non-causal notion of responsibility is accepted, then the door is opened to the possibility of a collective responsibility whereby a group is considered responsible for some action, event, or attitude which it did not aggregatedly effect. This also leads to the question whether there is something special about the role of professional persons such that a special kind of accountability can be demanded of them collectively as members of a profession.

The Notion of a Profession

Certain characteristics of collectives do shape the nature of individual actions. Out of vengeance, I might decide to kill someone who has wronged me individually. This action, obviously, is illegal. Yet in a war time situation, where the wrong is directed against the state, such an action is legitimized. Groups do affect the character of actions, and the character of a profession has specific features which likewise affect the notion of responsibility.

Professions are occupations which for the most part have a monopoly on some task or skill which is considered to be very difficult and complex to achieve or attain. At times, it is even considered to be esoteric. Consequently, the non-professional has no adequate

understanding of the issues internal to the profession, he is primarily dependent on the members of the profession for their services. To this extent the profession is largely free from outside control and in effect it has a unique command over the course of its activities. Any such arrangement requires greater internal control to maintain a quality character to its actions. Obviously, this must be the case -- at least theoretically -- for the viability of the profession.

If we assume such a model, then the notion of internal responsibility becomes heightened. Collectively, the burden of quality becomes internally generated, controlled, and policed. Whether or not this seems a good way of doing things, it in fact is inherent in the complex character of a profession. Such being the case, the burden is placed collectively upon the group to maintain high standards of excellence. A character of collective responsibility seems more apropos to professions than to other sectors of society, or perhaps I should say collective responsibility takes on a distinctive character in the professions. This kind of collective responsibility is to be distinguished from the aggregate notion of individual responsibility which I discussed at the beginning of this essay. Yet, this does not mean there is a complete gulf between the two. Individual and collective responsibility are distinct, yet they are also internally related in a complex way.

Individual vs Collective Responsibility

One could say that politically the past administration was the cause of today's economic problems. One does not single out any individual nor some specific decision as the cause of these problems; rather, an underlying attitude of a group is pointed out. Or one could say that a lack of team spirit is responsible for the little league baseball team losing every game this year. Again, no specific actions are singled out; rather, an all-pervading attitude is mentioned. A similar situation exists through the notion of collective responsibility. A reason for urging collective accountability in the professions may or may not be any specific events. Rather, it is an attempt to call attention to a possible or real attitude within the profession which does not seem conducive to the effective performance of the activities of that group.

H.D. Lewis disputes the ethical notion of collective responsibility unless it is viewed as an aggregate of individual responsibility. This kind of summational notion is for him the only viable notion of collective responsibility, at least from an ethical viewpoint. "No one can be responsible," he maintains, "in the properly ethical sense, for the conduct of another. Responsibility belongs essentially to the individual."²

I question Lewis' position, even from an ethical viewpoint. It seems to be predicated upon the mistaken notion that in no way is a whole different from the sum of its parts. What is said of the whole collectively is likewise said of its parts individually. This position is blatantly false. Anyone who has studied logic immediately recalls the fallacy called division. It is committed when one assumes that an attribute of a collection of elements is attributable also to the elements themselves. Thus a ton of nails is very, very heavy, yet no one of those nails might individually weigh more than a fraction of an ounce.

Punishment and Collective Responsibility

Since the notion of collective responsibility which I have been developing is different from individual responsibility, then the characteristics of individual responsibility likewise are not necessarily part of the collective notion. For example, individual responsibility is

closely tied to the notion of punishment. One has done something; therefore, his action is reprehensible and deserving of punishment. Such an interrelation does not exist in collective responsibility. Nor should such a relation be developed. A collective responsibility or judgment was the justification used by the Nazis to justify the holocaust. Collectively a group was judged as culpable; individually, they all were punished. This is an erroneous use of collective responsibility. Such a collective blame is retrospective in character. It is used to justify some atrocity done under the guise of retribution. If, however, as I suggest, collective responsibility is not immediately connected with retribution then the positive value of this notion surfaces. Collective responsibility is not a justification of retrospective retribution, but a tool of futuristic reform.

Collective responsibility in the professions is not an attempt to propagate punishment for past actions. Rather, it is an initiating concept; it is a consciousness raising activity which uncovers some latent duties and obligations not immediately recognized by society or by a specific group in society. It is a notion which does not look backward to spread guilt and shame; it is a forward looking activity which creates in people an awareness of the commitments created because of their role as members of a group which in this case is a profession. Collective responsibility is a societal mandate to a group to clarify its societal role and more specifically to recognize its accountability. Once, however, this collective duty is recognized and internalized, then the group responsibility is transformed into individual responsibility. Violation of these duties results in individuals being held responsible for actions in terms of guilt and punishment.

The Collectivity of Responsibility

One final element which surfaces in the notion of collective responsibility is that man is a member of a collective. Contemporary western man has avoided the character of collectivity. He has stressed his individuality. We live in a world of great change and with change comes diversity, not uniformity; in this way we have lost a sense of community. This is unfortunate. As human beings, we need other people to live and develop our humanity. Man is, as Jacob Bronowski states, a "social solitary"; in that sense he is different from other animals. The latter either live solitary lives or they group together. Man does both. He is curiously individual, yet he develops this individuality in collective settings. People group their needs and interests. And, they satisfy their interests and cure their needs likewise through the actions of groups. We tend to reap the benefits of these group activities, without acknowledging our dependence upon the group. Once this group effect is recognized as existent and as essential to our human existence, then our responsibility to (and therefore for) others surfaces more clearly, and we recognize that both the members of a profession and those serviced by it are beneficially affected by collective responsibility. The latter, as I have defined it, is ultimately justified in terms of a utilitarian perspective.

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NOTES

¹Rem Blanchard Edwards, *Freedom, Responsibility and Obligation* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969), p. 59.

²H. D. Lewis, "The Non-Moral Notion of Collective Responsibility," in *Individual and Collective Responsibility*, edited by Peter A. French (Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman Publishing Company, 1972), p. 121.