Collective Responsibility Should be Treated as a Virtue

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Abstract
We often praise and blame groups of people like companies or governments, just like we praise and blame individual persons. This makes sense. Because some of the most important problems in our society, like climate change or mass surveillance, are not caused by individual people, but by groups. Philosophers have argued that there exists such a thing as *group responsibility*, which does not boil down to individual responsibility. This type of responsibility can only exist in groups that are organized with joint knowledge, actions and intentions. However, often disorganized groups without joint knowledge, actions and intentions are precisely the kinds of groups that cause problems. Therefore, in such cases, it becomes difficult, according to traditional accounts of collective responsibility to attribute responsibility to such groups. This has problematic implications. Therefore, I propose a new way of seeing collective responsibility, which is able to attribute the vice of irresponsibility to such disorganized groups. This involves seeing responsibility not as a relationship between the group and some action, but rather, as a virtue. In cases where it is difficult to establish whether a group is responsible for something, we should ask 'is this group *responsible*, or *irresponsible*?' This line of questioning is likely to be a more productive and philosophically legitimate way of holding groups morally responsible in such cases.

1. Introduction

We often praise and blame groups of people, just like we praise and blame individual persons. Blaming Shell for climate change or a government for war is often as natural as blaming a friend for betrayal (Tollefsen, 2003). It makes sense that we blame groups. After all, wars, environmental degradation and pandemics are never one person's fault. Attributing responsibility to collectives is also often effective in driving change. Because being held responsible is often what drives us to fix the problems we have caused and to demand that others do so. For instance, the oil industry is responsible for much environmental degradation. This is why we may easily feel comfortable demanding that the oil industry take the largest steps to protect the environment. Group responsibility justifies globally

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important group action. But what does it really mean to blame a group?

Philosophers have long discussed what it means for a group to be morally responsible for something. Does it boil down to individuals being responsible for their individual contributions? Or is there something like blaming a group, *as a group*, which is different from blaming individuals? Many theorists agree that group responsibility does not always boil down to individual responsibilities (Gilbert, 2002; Smiley, 2008; List and Pettit, 2011; Björnsson, 2020; Giubilini and Levy, 2018). Groups can be held responsible but only under certain conditions. Generally, what these conditions are depends on which aspects of the group are seen as supervening, or in some way 'over and above' the individual members (Giubilini and Levy, 2018). Supervening characteristics are those which cannot be explained with reference to the behavior of individual members only. Just like the elaborate shapes created in the sky by a flock of birds, many collective human behaviors emerge from many individual actions. These emergent phenomena however have their own characteristics, which are best described at the level of the collective. Some philosophers have argued that a group's actions supervene on the actions of members (Bratman, 2014). Others argue that a group's intentions or beliefs do so (Searle, 1990; Gilbert, 1987). The supervening qualities are what give the group a kind of unity. If this unified part of the group fulfills the conditions of moral responsibility, knowledge, control and moral competence, then it seems intuitive that the group can be held responsible as a group. This means that when one is praising or blaming a group for collective and emergent behavior, then one is praising or blaming the collective as a whole, not the individuals. Philosophers disagree on whether this praise or blame is always shared by individual members too.

Collective responsibility is an important concept to have. Many times, when for example a big corporate scandal is revealed, it is not clear which individuals were responsible for the transgressions. Often, each member may have played a small part, partaking only in a minor transgression or no transgression at all. In such cases, we must blame the collective rather than individuals for the crime. However, exactly these kinds of groups tend to be internally fragmented in the kind of way that renders them incapable of responsibility. Such cases, often referred to as a 'problem of many hands', is a situation where a collective has done something wrong, but no individuals can be blamed. Usually, this is seen as a problem because it

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means we cannot hold individuals responsible. I argue that in such cases, it also becomes difficult to hold the collective responsible.

Should we do away with the idea of collective responsibility completely in such cases? I think that would be premature. I propose instead that we adopt another way to see collective responsibility, which does not run into this problem. I suggest we abandon the idea of collective responsibility as a relationship between the collective agent and the action in question. Instead, we should see collective responsibility as a virtue. A virtue is a long-term and stable positive character trait of an agent, in this case, a group. If we see responsibility as a virtue possessed by a collective then it becomes easier to attribute moral praise and blame to groups. Instead of thinking 'is this collective responsible for x' let us think 'is this a responsible collective? Or is it irresponsible?' Changing our conception of what responsibility means makes it possible to praise and blame groups, even if the group is fragmented, like in the case of an example I treat in section 3, the Deepwater Horizon disaster.

How can a group be responsible or irresponsible? To answer this, I use philosophical literature to show that groups can have a character, much like individuals. A group can be said to be, just like any of us, benevolent, foolhardy, responsible or irresponsible. This means that we can distinguish virtues and vices in the character of groups. According to virtue ethics, vices (bad character traits like foolhardiness or irresponsibility) are inherently blameworthy and virtues (good character traits like benevolence and responsibility) praiseworthy. Virtue ethics can, therefore, give guidance in praising and blaming groups. The guidance of virtue ethics, I will argue, is better than the guidance given by the more traditional philosophical concept of collective responsibility.

What then does a virtuously responsible collective look like? My answer to that is derived from the negative opposite of collective responsibility, which is the vice of collective irresponsibility, of which the problem of many hands is expressive. I outline some causes of the problem of many hands and show how these traits can be categorized as collective irresponsibility as a vice. Collective responsibility is the long-term and stable acquired trait of collectives to avoid these pitfalls.

Section 2 outlines what is needed for a collective to be held collectively responsible for something. Section 3 explains the problem of many hands. In section 4 I show how the notion of collective responsibility runs into problems in cases of problems of many hands, and why an additional way of holding groups responsible is needed. In section 5, I propose an alternative way of holding collectives

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responsible, based on the idea of groups having a character, which can be virtuous or vicious. The concluding remark reflects on the significance of collective responsibility as a virtue.

2. Collective moral responsibility

Let us begin with the question: what is collective moral responsibility? Two questions are important for understanding collective responsibility: 'what is *collective* about collective responsibility?' and 'How is collective responsibility *moral responsibility*?' Let us briefly consider each.

As for the first question, Giubilini and Levy (2018) have provided a coherent answer that summarizes the views of most collective responsibility scholars. Imagine a group of schoolchildren who are directed by their teacher to each draw themselves on one large shared piece of paper. Each enthusiastically picks out colored pencils and soon becomes absorbed in drawing, mumbling to themselves and blissfully ignoring everyone else. Of course, the children are creating something together, namely a collectively drawn class picture. However, if we follow Giubilini and Levy, the pupils are not collectively responsible for the drawing. Rather, the responsibility for the drawing is better explained by saying that the teacher is responsible for the idea and each pupil for their individual drawing. However, if the teacher asked a group of pupils to write a report together, then this would force the pupils to make agreements, form shared intentions and devise their contributions based on what others are contributing. Such an assignment would probably qualify as something the pupils are collectively responsible for.

As for the second question, 'How is collective responsibility *moral responsibility?*' let us take a closer look at what is required for moral responsibility in general. One comprehensive view, which serves our purposes here, and captures well the most dominant intuitions about moral responsibility, is Fischer and Ravizza's account.

Fischer and Ravizza's theory of moral responsibility focuses on the internal mechanism that brings about a certain action. For example: If a person knocks over a glass because of a seizure, then the mechanism that brings about the action is not reasons-responsive. A seizure cannot be reasoned with, it just happens. However, if a person knocks over the glass because they are angry, then this mechanism can be reasons-responsive. Because they may refrain from knocking the glass over if they are told that their behavior is scaring their friends. In the case of a seizure, the person is not morally responsible for

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knocking the glass over, in the latter case they are. The authors also specify an epistemic condition for responsibility, meaning that to be responsible one must have knowledge of what one is doing. For instance, if the person knocking the glass could not have known that it was glass, not plastic, and would break when knocked, then they would not be morally responsible for the glass breaking, although they would be responsible for knocking it over (Fischer and Ravizza, 1998 (The example is my own)). The mechanism by which the person acts must also be 'the agent's own' meaning that the agent: '(a) sees herself as the source of her behavior (which follows from the operation of K [the mechanism]); and (b) believes that she is an apt candidate for the reactive attitudes as a result of how she exercises her agency in certain contexts; and (c) views herself as an agent with respect to (a) - (b) based on her evidence for these beliefs' (Fischer and Ravizza, 1998).

We can distill three important components of moral responsibility from Fischer and Ravizza's account, which also align with other accounts of moral responsibility. Therefore, for a collective to be morally responsible for an action or event, it must be the case that:

- The collective agent has knowledge of what it is doing.[1]
- The collective agent's mechanism of control over the action is reasons responsive.
- The mechanism of control over the action is the collective agent's own in the sense that the agent believes to be in control of it.[2]

Armed with this definition of collective responsibility, let us move to what the problem is with applying this definition.

3. The problem of many hands

The problem of many hands, henceforth PMH, is a morally problematic situation which arises when a collective is morally responsible for something but no individual in that collective can reasonably be held responsible (Poel et al., 2015). For instance, take the Deepwater Horizon disaster, the oil spill that happened in 2010 in the Gulf of Mexico. This is a case that has been described as a PMH (Poel

[1] For a discussion on how a group can know things, see Smith (1982). For a discussion of mutual know-how, see Miller (2020).

[2] For a discussion on how a group can hold joint beliefs, see Gilbert (1987).

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et al. 2015, pp. 1–11). The part of the oil rig that extended into the earth under the sea was not sealed off properly. No one intervened early enough because of various epistemic failures. For instance, British Petroleum's internal tests had shown the cement to be unstable. However, this was not communicated to the contractors implementing the cement seal. The site leaders at the oil rig even dismissed obvious signs of leakage. This was because they accepted a theory held by other oil rig staff, about the signs of leakage being caused by something harmless. The oil rig staff had not been trained properly. The necessary information did not reach the right people, because of a lack of necessary information, protocol and training at other places (Poel et al., 2015).

The PMH is problematic because it seems to cause a responsibility gap (Poel et al., 2015). A responsibility gap emerges when there is an event for which someone should be responsible, like an oil rig disaster, but no one can be held responsible. One could argue that each member of the collective that caused the disaster can be attributed a small amount of the responsibility, which all adds up. However, distributing responsibility in a piecemeal fashion still causes a responsibility gap, because a small piece of responsibility for 'not noticing that one's boss was not properly trained' or 'not taking great efforts to find out what was wrong' is something very different than the heavy responsibility of a disaster involving deaths and pollution (Poel et al., 2015). The heavy responsibility, for which we feel someone should be blamed, disappears, unless we attribute it meaningfully to the collective as a whole.

Groups with PMH can however also not be attributed collective responsibility. To illustrate why, let us consider the definition of collective responsibility from the previous section. To be collectively responsible, a group must fulfill all three conditions of moral responsibility: epistemic condition, control condition and moral competence condition.

The epistemic condition is: 'The *collective* has *collective* knowledge of what it is doing'. Think again of the Deepwater Horizon disaster. Information which could have been knowledge about the impending disaster was distributed in such a way that it was merely distributed information. No common knowledge of the danger was present until after the disaster. Therefore, although the necessary information may be distributed among members, the possibility to form the knowledge is not there in that state. The fact that crucial information is not distributed properly is generally a sign that the group suffers from an underlying collective behavior problem, like a lack of transparency, secretive culture, or insufficient collective attention

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to signaling problems. In such a state, it is group-psychologically impossible for the information distributed among group members to be used in a functional way to improve the actions of the group. Therefore, there is no collective knowledge, meaning that the collective agent does not meet the collective knowledge condition for moral responsibility. We also cannot resort to merely holding the individual members responsible for their lack of knowledge. In such cases, the individuals *do not know that they should know* something. Therefore, they do not fulfill the knowledge condition for individual responsibility either. In this case, the group not fulfilling the epistemic condition is what led to the PMH and the tragedy.

4. Collective responsibility as a concept must be revised

Problems of many hands, make it impossible to attribute a responsibility properly to individuals. They also make it impossible to attribute collective responsibility. We may be tempted to bite the bullet and admit that the concept of collective responsibility is not applicable to cases like climate change or engineering disasters, which involve PMHs. The alternative is to call these cases a combination of some individual fault, and bad luck. Engineering disasters and climate change would then be in the category of unfortunate events, like natural disasters.[3] Then we must argue that only epistemically and structurally well-organized groups can be held responsible for their mistakes.

However, there are good reasons not to bite the bullet. Climate change, corporate scandals and engineering disasters often happen precisely because a group is not a well-functioning collective agent. If we accept that all such cases are nobody's responsibility then we may lose the motivating force of responsibility attributions which is practically very important for remedying such situations. If a theory of collective responsibility fails to attribute collective responsibility in a case like the Deepwater Horizon disaster, then it seems intuitive that we should use another theory to justify the practice of attributing collective responsibility.

[3] This would be different from what van de Poel et al argue in their work on PMH. They argue that in a case of PMH, the collective is morally responsible, but individual responsibility attributions are impossible to make (Poel et al., 2015). This is where I disagree with the authors, because I argue that a group with a PMH cannot be collectively responsible either.

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This does not mean that we must eschew the notion of collective responsibility completely. It works in many collective responsibility cases, after all. However, in cases of PMH, collective responsibility should be attributed differently. Because the traditional way of attributing it is not metaphysically sound for that particular situation.

One way to avoid biting the bullet might be to try to find ways of attributing individual responsibilities to members of the group. Fahlquist has suggested such an account (Fahlquist, 2015). She re-conceptualizes responsibility by viewing it as a virtue, meaning an acquired, stable, long-term disposition of actively taking responsibility. A person with this virtue is a *responsible person*. If each individual in an organization takes the responsibility upon themselves, even when they are not assigned it, then this can fill responsibility gaps that may have been left unaddressed by job descriptions and responsibility divisions. What is important here is that taking responsibility means that one makes it so that one can reasonably be held responsible for something (Fahlquist, 2015; Poel et al., 2015). A responsible person involves themselves with issues in such a way that others can hold them responsible for it, thereby eliminating responsibility gaps (Fahlquist, 2015; Poel et al., 2015).

This approach, however, cannot escape the limitation that it needs to break apart a large responsibility into small pieces, which means that the large responsibility, being of a different nature, disappears. If a group causes deaths, but each member has only contributed to it in a minimal way for which they are hardly blameworthy, then the piecemeal way of distributing responsibility fails in a significant sense. For this reason, I choose to further the concept of collective responsibility, rather than individual responsibility.

My proposal is a collective version of Fahlquist's. I propose seeing responsibility as a virtue, which is *the disposition to make oneself fulfill the conditions for moral responsibility* for important matters. Collective responsibility, therefore, refers to a desirable characteristic of groups. Instead of asking whether a group is responsible *for* something, we can ask whether a group is *responsible*. This provides an alternative possibility for philosophically justifying the praising and blaming of groups.

5. Collective responsibility as a virtue

Groups that regularly meet and undertake joint actions, can be said to have a character. And group characters can contain positive and negative traits. Just like individual character, group character can be developed to become virtuous or vicious. Instead of asking the

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question 'Is Coca-Cola responsible for sugar consumption related health problems?' we should ask a different question 'Is Coca-Cola an irresponsible company?' This kind of thinking is not new in philosophy. Many philosophers have written about collective virtues, or what it means for a group to be, for example, clever, open-minded or benevolent (Fricker, 2010; Palermos and Pritchard, 2013; Pritchard and Palermos, 2016; Lahroodi, 2007; Byerly and Byerly, 2016; Palermos, 2020; Astola, 2021).

My proposal is to create a collectivist version of Fahlquist's argument. We should attribute collective responsibility as a virtue to collectives that act responsibly. Responsibility as a virtue has so far only been characterized as a trait of individual people (Williams, 2008). However, as various authors have argued, virtues and vices can also be possessed by collective agents (Fricker, 2010; Beggs, 2003; Lahroodi, 2007; Sandin, 2007; Astola, 2021). I will argue for a view of collective responsibility which includes the following claims, which I will treat in subsequent subsections:

- A responsible group has a responsible identity, constituted by the practical identities of members
- The problem of many hands is generally expressive of the collective vice of irresponsibility, which is the inverse of responsibility as a collective virtue
- Collective responsibility as a virtue is the long-term and stable, acquired trait of a group to make itself meet the three conditions for collective moral responsibility

5.1 A responsible group has a responsible identity, constituted by the practical identities of members

Collective responsibility must attach to a mechanism of action that is truly collective and does not boil down to actions of individuals (Giubilini and Levy, 2018). What then is this mechanism? I believe Fricker's work on institutional virtue provides an answer. Fricker argues that group membership often entails the development of a *practical identity*. If one becomes a member of a company or an association, then this means that one must sometimes speak and act *as a member of that group*. These practical identities are mutually dependent, because their existence in members depends on the commitment of other members to similar practical identities. When one acts in their capacity as a member, they sometimes act in ways that are different from how they would act if they were not in that capacity.

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According to Fricker, this explains why people sometimes act against their own views in professional, or other membership-related, contexts (Fricker, 2010).

When the streets surrounding a fast-food restaurant are littered with straws and burger-wraps, we tend to hold the customers individually, not collectively, responsible. They are not, after all, organizing and coordinating their littering activities. We might however hold the fast food restaurant (perhaps even the franchise) as collectively responsible in their part in the littering. The restaurant and the chain coordinate their activities so that littering may be reduced, for example by handing out less packaging, providing more bins and reminding customers not to litter. They are, therefore, collectively responsible, because they are more organized and have a unifying group identity consisting of the practical identities of members.

What operationalizes this possibility for coordination, are the mutually dependent practical identities. If the fast-food staff decide that they must take action on this problem, this stance will become a part of every employee's practical identity as an employee of that restaurant. And the mutually dependent practical identities are the object of the responsibility attribution. When groups have practical identities, they also become candidates for blameworthiness if they are not responsible collectively. Because adopting practical identities means making a certain promise, to act in a certain way to internal or external parties.

It should be noted that if we see groups as entities that develop character, we must not judge the character of groups that have had no time to develop their character. If a violent mob bands together randomly in the span of an hour, we should attribute responsibility for the actions of the mob to individual members rather than the mob as a collective. The group is nobody yet. However, groups that exist over a long period of time and establish their own forms of operating, like organizations, can be held responsible as groups.

5.2 The problem of many hands as indicative of the collective vice of irresponsibility

The negative opposite of a virtue is a vice. It will be useful therefore to add some detail to our conceptualization of responsibility as a collective virtue by describing what its opposite is. If we think about collective responsibility as a virtue, we may think of its negative opposite as

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being collective irresponsibility. The problem of many hands is expressive of exactly that.[4]

PMHs should not be seen as mere events of instances where no responsible persons can be found. It is not merely by the unlucky circumstance that the Deepwater Horizon disaster occurs without a clear responsible person. The lack of responsibility was already there for a long time before the disaster. The procedures, attitudes and working practices within the collective were conducive to a lack of transparency, internal communication and perhaps also a lack of care for safety. The PMH was a symptom of this collective irresponsibility. The PMH developed and worsened over a long period of time, and the disaster in turn was a tragic symptom of it. PMHs are then indicative of collective irresponsibility. I propose to treat collective irresponsibility as a collective vice, which often leads to PMHs.

PMHs may not always be a symptom of underlying collective irresponsibility. It is conceivable that a virtuously responsible group fails to take responsibility appropriately for some given object in a specific situation, without doing so structurally. However, in such cases, as soon as the failure is signaled, the group will be equipped and capable of carrying out the correct response. It is in cases where a PMH is signaled but the group fails to take appropriate actions that one sees proof of an underlying collective vice of irresponsibility. An irresponsible group has a character that does not allow them to take responsibility, in the same way that an irresponsible person fails to take responsibility. In both cases, the appropriate response is to blame the agent for having developed an irresponsible character.

A vice is by definition blameworthy. But a collective irresponsibility is not always blameworthy. For group irresponsibility to be blameworthy, it is necessary that the group occupy a role where collectivization is required of them. Not every group needs to be a collective agent. Some groups, however, like companies, governments or other organizations whose members adopt practical identities related to their group membership should be considered collective agents that can have praiseworthy or blameworthy traits. Adherence to law or protocol and prevention of harm to society are generally tasks that require organizations to perform joint actions. These are the kinds of collectives for whom collective irresponsibility is a vice.

The collective vice of irresponsibility, which expresses itself in the PMH, is realizable in multiple ways. There are three distinctive ways

[4] For a discussion on collective vices, see Fricker (2010) and Baird and Calvard (2019).

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in which a PMH can occur, the epistemic, structural and motivational. Each of these categories shows a particular trait, all of which can be categorized as collective irresponsibility, because they culminate in a situation where the collective agent does not meet the three criteria for collective moral responsibility. This generally means that the collective agent generally does not have the disposition to make itself meet the conditions for moral responsibility or even the active disposition to avoid making itself meet the criteria for responsibility. When this tendency is negligent enough, we can speak about a collective vice of irresponsibility. Let us discuss each type of irresponsibility in turn.

5.2.1 Epistemic irresponsibility

Many stories exist of organizations compromising their ability to fulfill the epistemic condition. A group may fall into an epistemic problem of many hands if it begins to exercise collective habits that lead it away from transparency and information sharing, which prevents the collective agent from forming collective knowledge about its responsibilities. Just as an individual can adopt bad habits that compromise their epistemic agency and make them forgetful or ill-informed, a group can adopt habits that similarly compromise their epistemic agency. As in the Deepwater Horizon disaster, where knowledge was not spread efficiently enough for necessary conclusions to be drawn. Such a group fails to be virtuously responsible, because it operates in a state in which it cannot meet the epistemic condition for collective responsibility.

5.2.2 Structural irresponsibility

A PMH can also arise as a result of structural issues. Dysfunctional bureaucracies are an example of this. Inefficient policies or a lack of policies can however also constitute structural collective irresponsibility. Many PMH that have been investigated thoroughly show this kind of trajectory. For instance, the Volkswagen Diesel scandal involved probably a few hundred employees from Volkswagen. This group of people had concealed a portion of the emissions from Volkswagen vehicles. This was done by creating a test-rig setting for the automobiles that would give much lower than accurate emission readings when tested for emissions (Davis 2020, pp. 219–20).

We might say that everyone involved in the creation and implementation of the cheat code was individually responsible for their misconduct. To what extent this holds for the hundreds of people

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involved is unknown. However, the problem of many hands here rests on the rest of the organization not inquiring, signaling and intervening in this illegal practice. It is, after all, quite unusual that hundreds of employees in an organization take part in an illegal and fraudulent activity without anyone intervening. One analysis of why this happened is because of the lack of preparedness for misconduct. There were no internal processes that would allow for whistleblowing. And because of the lack of organizational structure and attention to whistleblowing, no whistles were blown by employees, perhaps out of fear of social sanction (Davis, 2020). VW had a long-standing collective habit of trusting upper management too much and not considering the possibility of misconduct. This eventually created structures which did not support responsible behavior within the organization. This makes it difficult for the company to meet the control condition for moral responsibility.

5.2.3 Motivational irresponsibility

A problem of many hands can occur due to motivational traits. As experience often shows, demotivation is contagious, and it is hard to stay motivated to do a task in groups where this contagion has already spread. One example of a motivational PMH is 'innovation trauma' in organizations. Companies that experience backlash following an innovation, or an attempt to innovate, sometimes develop a pessimistic company culture that is wary of trying anything new. Innovation trauma has been defined in management literature as 'the inability to commit to a new innovation due to severe disappointment from previous innovation failures' (Välikangas et al., 2009). The demotivation caused by a previous failure easily spreads even to those employees who did not experience the traumatic failure. And the pessimism persists even if there is a good reason to innovate (Välikangas et al., 2009). A company may stick to old and inefficient ways for much too long, because of such collective pessimism. This can happen even if the company possesses all the shared knowledge and capabilities to innovate. Such a state of inaction can lead to a problem of many hands, and a purely a motivational one. For example, innovation trauma can discourage members from proposing much needed improvements to the rest of the group, or make it shameful for anyone to get excited about them once they are proposed.

In some cases, motivational irresponsibility can go so far that it becomes irresponsive to reason. In a case of heavy collective trauma, it can become impossible for the collective to change its motivational patterns. In such cases, we can speak of the collective not

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meeting the collective moral competence condition. Because in a case of severe innovation trauma, the mechanism of control over the *joint* action, which is the fear of innovation in this case, does not respond to reason. This means that the collective does not fulfill one of the conditions of moral responsibility, indicating irresponsibility, or at least a lack of collective responsibility as a virtue. One sometimes hears about organizations that are 'beyond saving' because the collective culture is such that no new manager or no voice of reason can inspire change. In other cases, a collective lack of motivation for something can prevent the group from revising epistemic norms, information flows or structures that need revision. This can in turn lead to epistemic or structural problems which prevent the group from fulfilling the epistemic and control condition for moral responsibility, meaning that the group is irresponsible.

5.3 Collective responsibility as a virtue is the long-term and stable, acquired trait of a group to make itself meet the three conditions for collective moral responsibility

Having described the vice of irresponsibility, and how it can emerge in a collective through epistemic, structural and motivational issues, let us again turn to its positive opposite, collective responsibility as a virtue. The virtue of collective responsibility must be a trait to actively avoid the epistemic, structural and motivational pitfalls described in the previous section.

Possessing the collective virtue of responsibility means that the collective avoids vices of irresponsibility. However, it is also useful to characterize the virtue of responsibility in a positive sense, by what it is, rather than only what it avoids. Fahlquist's characterization of responsibility as virtue provides such a positive description, which aligns with avoiding the pitfalls which lead to PMH. Namely, a responsible agent actively takes responsibility (Fahlquist, 2015). A responsible agent acts in such a way that it fulfills the knowledge, control and moral competence conditions.

The collective virtue of responsibility can be defined as:

> *The collective long-term and stable trait of a group to actively make sure that it fulfills the three conditions of moral responsibility. A responsible group makes sure it has collective knowledge of what it is doing, ensures that there is a feeling of collective control over what it is doing, and the process whereby the group acts is reasons-responsive.*

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Virtues are traditionally acquired traits. Some philosophers also specify that a virtue must be acquired through significant effort (Zagzebski, 1996). The same goes for collective responsibility as a virtue. Similar to the way that a PMH is acquired, or created, over a long period of time, it takes time to fix it. It also takes significant effort.

Acquiring the collective virtue of responsibility is not easy and requires time and effort. This can be seen in how complex it is for companies to take on this kind of 'self-improvement' projects. For a company, particularly a big one, to change its personality usually requires many different effortful long-term interventions. Take for example the banana company Chiquita's corporate responsibility plan, which was executed in response to the negative attention on the company, which involved the following actions:

- hiring a corporate responsibility officer;
- selecting an external measurement standard (in Chiquita's case SA8000) to assess performance;
- creating a code of conduct, training employees in corporate social responsibility;
- 'mentoring and coaching managers to build decision-making skills that integrate CR-criteria in evaluating options' (Werre, 2003).

As this plan shows, the required changes are not merely effort-requiring for the top management, but for all levels in the company. Managers need to develop their skills and all employees need to be trained. New structures are created and new collective knowledge and joint action are introduced. The process of becoming a more responsible company can be characterized as effortful joint action based on collective knowledge about the company's goals.

Epistemic, structural and motivational elements can also be found in Chiquita's corporate responsibility program. For instance, epistemic functioning of the collective is improved by providing training for all levels of employees ensures that everyone is aware of corporate responsibility goals and responsibilities. This creates collective knowledge and a collective intention, making it easier for the group to fulfill the knowledge condition. Making corporate responsibility criteria a part of the evaluation of managers is a structural change, which makes it easier for managers to prioritize corporate social responsibility tasks. Motivation towards becoming a more socially responsible organization was also enhanced by training, setting incentives and mentoring programs. A collective that develops itself in this way is more likely to collectively fulfill the conditions for moral responsibility.

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6. Concluding remarks

Whether we can attribute moral responsibility to groups matters. Many of the greatest challenges humankind is facing are in some way caused by groups. Being able to assign responsibility in a manner that is philosophically justified is important for legitimizing action to fix the problem. If it is true that such fragmented groups cannot be held responsible, then this means that we cannot blame groups like British Petroleum and the other partners for a mistake like the Deepwater Horizon disaster at all. Since it is also hard to hold individuals responsible for this disaster, the result would be that we cannot ascribe the responsibility to anyone. This is very counterintuitive and likely to lead to practical impasses where no individual or institution feels compelled to take responsibility for the problem. Our ascriptions of responsibility seem to fail us in such cases, indicating that they may need replacement. Using a virtue-based one allows us to judge that the conglomerate of parties involved at Deepwater Horizon was collectively irresponsible and hence have the duty to develop their collective character to a more responsible one.

Furthermore, groups often commit wrongful acts precisely because of internal fragmentation, disorganization or bad information flows. This means that the problem that applies to the Deepwater Horizon case, is likely to apply to other such problems too. Asking whether a group is responsible, rather than whether it is responsible for x, may also be a more productive way of approaching collective responsibility. Because it focuses on the long term operation of the group and prescribes realistic advice for the underlying cause for problems. Changing the way we think about responsibility as a system and a group character trait is more holistic than seeing responsibility as only *responsibility for x*. It is likely to be the kind of thinking that we need to solve humanity's greatest problems.[5]

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