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How Might Collective Duties be Grounded in Individual Duties?²

Some philosophers hold that unstructured groups themselves, as opposed to the members of these groups, can have moral duties. There are different accounts of how such collective duties might be grounded in facts about individual duties of the group members. In this paper, I highlight and discuss some questions for these accounts that seem to warrant more exploration than they have received so far. First, if there is a collective duty to ϕ that is grounded in individual duties, how does ϕ -ing feature in the individual duties? The accounts that ground a collective duty to ϕ in individual duties specify these individual duties with reference to ϕ -ing. But if a collective duty to ϕ is grounded in individual duties, then, on pain of circularity, the individual duties cannot be specified in terms of a collective duty to ϕ . Second, are the individual duties that ground collective moral duties themselves also moral duties? Or are the individual duties, rather, rational duties? I will suggest that the individual duties should be classified neither as purely moral nor as purely rational, but rather as rational duties of moral agents. Finally, are the grounding individual duties perspective-dependent, i.e., do they depend on the epistemic situation of the members, as several philosophers have suggested? I argue that accounts of collective obligations should not commit themselves to an answer to this question, but rather leave the question to general ethical theories that do not focus on contexts of collective duties.

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1. Introduction

Can groups have moral duties? Attempts to answer this question are well advised to distinguish between two kinds of groups. On the one hand, there are structured groups, such as companies and universities. Having their own decision procedures, structured groups seem to resemble individual persons in important ways, which suggests, at least initially, an affirmative answer (e.g., French, 1979; List & Pettit, 2011). On the other hand, there are unstructured groups, such as married couples, the passengers on a bus, customers in a supermarket, voters, and consumers. Such groups lack decision procedures, at least the kind of formal, easily recognizable and well established decision procedures that characterize structured groups. This paper focuses on unstructured groups. Can unstructured groups have moral duties that go above and beyond the individual moral duties of their members? Can, for example, the group of all consumers itself have a moral duty to avoid consumption that leads to climate change and the harms associated with it?

There are different ways of arguing for the claim that unstructured groups can have moral duties. Two types of accounts can be distinguished for the purposes of this paper based on whether the account grounds the collective moral duties of a group in facts about the individual duties of the group members. This paper deals exclusively with accounts that involve such a grounding suggestion, leaving aside accounts that argue for the existence of duties of unstructured groups without grounding them in individual duties (e.g., Jackson, 1987; Rosenqvist, 2019; Tännsjö, 2007; Wringer, 2010).

Following Gunnar Björnsson (2020: 132–3, footnotes omitted), we can distinguish four accounts that ground collective duties in individual duties:

It has [...] been suggested that a group's obligation to ϕ is grounded in the fact that the group would ϕ , or would be sufficiently likely to ϕ , if members discharged their individual obligations to:

take steps to collectivize: to transform the group into a group agent that has its own obligation to ϕ (Collins 2013; cf. Hindriks 2019; Isaacs 2011: 144–54 on “putative obligations”);

we-reason: to identify ϕ -ing as the optimal solution to a problem that group members cannot solve individually and to deduce their own individual actions based on this (Schwenkenbecher 2018; 2019);

be prepared to do their part in ϕ -ing should they be sufficiently certain that others would as well (Aas 2015); or

care to the right extent about what is morally at stake, in the sense of being disposed to (i) pick up information about what reactions and actions tend to promote what is morally important and (ii) be moved by such information when opportunity arises (Björnsson 2014, Forthcoming).³

All these accounts, I think, raise some questions that, to the best of my knowledge, have not received much attention yet and that I will highlight in the next three sections. Section 2 examines the moral status the group's ϕ -ing has when it features in the individual duties that ground the group's duty to ϕ . Section 3 discusses if the grounding individual duties are moral or rational in nature. Section 4 deals with the question of whether the grounding individual duties depend on the perspective of the individuals that have these duties.

2. The Moral Status of Obligatory Collective Behavior in The Grounding Individual Duties

The collective duty to ϕ , on the proposals under discussion, is grounded in individual duties of group members to do something or to be a certain way. Moreover, this doing or being is specified in the proposals with regard to the group's ϕ -ing. The problem is that the group's ϕ -ing cannot be classified as obligatory in the grounding individual duties. That would be circular. But what, then, *is* the moral status of ϕ -ing as this collective behavior features in the specifications of the grounding individual duties?

Suggestions are easy to come by, as some are involved in Björnsson's very definitions of the accounts quoted earlier. According to the collectivization account, a group's duty to ϕ is grounded in individual duties to *transform* the group into a group agent that has its own *obligation* to ϕ . This suggests understanding the group's ϕ -ing as *conditionally obligatory*. According to the we-reasoning account, a group's duty to ϕ is grounded in individual duties to identify ϕ -ing as the *optimal* solution to a problem that group members cannot solve individually and to deduce their own individual actions based on this. This suggests understanding the group's ϕ -ing as optimal, i.e., in terms of value. According to the caring account, a group's duty to ϕ is grounded in individual duties to be disposed to (i) pick up information about what reactions and actions tend to promote what is *morally important* and (ii) be moved by such information when opportunity arises. This suggests understanding the group's ϕ -ing as *morally important*.

Let us consider the suggestions in reverse order, starting with the idea to characterize the group's ϕ -ing as *morally important*. A problem suggesting itself is that not every

³ Björnsson, like other participants in the debate, speaks of collective *obligations*. I use the concepts *duty* and *obligation* interchangeably.

morally important joint action should come out as all-things-considered obligatory. For example, it might be morally important for a group to save people from starvation but more morally important not to achieve this by fraud. The distinction between pro tanto and all-things-considered duties suggests that the group's ϕ -ing, insofar as it features in grounding individual duties, should better be characterized in terms of being *most morally important*.

However, this characterization is not yet satisfactory either. For it remains unclear how saying that a group's ϕ -ing would be *most morally important* is different from saying that the group's ϕ -ing is, or would be, morally obligatory. But if this is actually meant, then we should better be clear about this.

Saying that the group's ϕ -ing is obligatory is different from saying that it *would be* obligatory. If the group's ϕ -ing is characterized in the individual duties as (actually) obligatory, we are thrown back to the circularity problem elaborated at the outset of this section. If instead calling the group's ϕ -ing *most morally important* is meant to express that the group's ϕ -ing *would be* obligatory, this suggestion is indistinguishable from stating a conditional duty of the group to ϕ , a suggestion that we shall consider below.

Neither interpretation is helpful. But perhaps something else is meant, and characterizing the group's ϕ -ing as *most morally important* is neither to be understood in terms of actual duty nor in terms of conditional duty. But then it remains unclear how we *should* understand the characterization.

Let us then turn to the suggestion of understanding the group's ϕ -ing in value terms. Should the group's ϕ -ing feature as *optimal* in individual duties? The problems facing this suggestion are familiar from the literature on consequentializing (Portmore, 2022). In what follows, I will highlight some of the problems. My point, however, is not that the problems are insurmountable – perhaps they can eventually be solved. Rather, I suggest that it would be problematic to characterize the group's ϕ -ing as *optimal* in the description of the underlying individual duties because this suggestion invites problems associated with consequentializing, problems that it would be better to avoid (until it has been demonstrated that the problems can be solved, which I take it has not been achieved yet).

First, how does this suggestion deal with constellations in which the group's ϕ -ing would be *optimal* yet not obligatory? An account of collective duties will probably want to leave conceptual space for *supererogatory* collective actions. But it is unclear how the suggestion can achieve this.

Second, certain moral theories, like rule-consequentialism, have built into them assumptions about the relation between duties and values that cause problems for the suggestion. In particular, rule consequentialists might want to say that a group has (hasn't) a duty to ϕ only if it would (wouldn't) have the best consequences if groups

in relevantly similar circumstances ϕ -ed. But this doesn't mean that this group would (not) bring about the best consequences by ϕ -ing on a particular occasion.

Third, Kantian theories are often characterized as assuming that the right is prior to the good. This does not sit well with the suggestion to characterize the group's ϕ -ing as optimal and then deduce, via individual duties, that the group has a moral duty to ϕ .

These problems appear serious. However, let us consider one natural modification of the suggestion (if only to show that it is problematic too). Instead of characterizing the group's ϕ -ing as *optimal*, we can say that it would be deontically optimal. This is modelled on the suggestion of some consequentializers (e.g., Zimmerman, 1996).

This modified suggestion still raises objections, as two examples shall illustrate. First, "deontic value" is a term of art and as such not connected to everyday moral talk and thought. Therefore, the suggestion has a hard time getting support from ordinary intuitions (consider the parallel problem for the concept of agent-relative value discussed in Schroeder, 2007). This will indirectly affect the overall plausibility of an account of collective moral duties.

Second, while the modified proposal might allow us to accommodate collective supererogation, it remains doubtful how referring to deontic value as something that partly *grounds* moral duties coheres with the explanations of moral duties suggested by moral theories. Does it really fit with Kantianism, say, if we do not say that a group's ϕ -ing is obligatory because it is the only way of acting in accordance with the Categorical Imperative but instead that the group's ϕ -ing is obligatory because it is deontically optimal, and then add that it's deontically optimal because it is the only way of acting in accordance with the Categorical Imperative?

Having dealt with the "moral importance" and "optimality" suggestions, let us finally consider the suggestion that the group's ϕ -ing features as conditionally obligatory in the grounding individual duties. The problems I see with this suggestion concern the grounds of the individual duties. While it is easy to see how individual duties with regard to a group's ϕ -ing could be based on the fact that the group's ϕ -ing would be optimal (after all, it is a natural thought that individuals have reasons to promote good states of affairs), the same is not true if the group's ϕ -ing is merely conditionally obligatory. On the collectivization account, it would be natural to wonder why individuals should take steps to turn a merely conditional duty into an actual duty. What speaks in favor of taking these steps from a moral point of view? (An analogy: By making a promise I can bring it about that I have an obligation, namely to keep that promise. But this do not by itself suggest that I should make a promise.)

The same kind of question suggests itself on the other accounts if they are combined with the suggestion that the group's ϕ -ing features as conditionally obligatory in the respective individual duties. Why should one care about a merely conditional

collective duty? Why should one we-reason about merely conditional duties? Why should one be prepared to play one's role in collective behavior that is merely conditionally obligatory?

To summarize, according to the accounts of collective duties on offer, a group's duty to ϕ is grounded in individual duties of the group members, whereby the individual duties concern individual behaviors or personal characteristics that are specified with regard to the group's ϕ -ing. In this specification, on pain of circularity, the group's ϕ -ing cannot feature as being a collective duty. But what then is the moral status of the group's ϕ -ing insofar as it features in the grounding individual duties? I have discussed three suggestions, which classify the group's ϕ -ing as morally important, optimal, or conditionally obligatory, respectively. I found all three suggestions, including some modifications that came to mind, wanting. The result is that I am not aware of any convincing answer to the question of what moral status the group's ϕ -ing has insofar as it features in the grounding individual duties.

3. Are the Individual Duties Moral or Rational?

We have considered four accounts of grounding collective moral duties in individual duties: the collectivization, we-reasoning, preparedness, and caring proposals. The question I want to consider next concerns the nature of the grounding individual duties. Are the individual duties themselves moral duties, or are they more plausibly categorized as rational duties? The question is relevant if we try to formulate a comprehensive theory of collective duties, because moral theories do not necessarily coincide with theories of rationality and we need to know how to categorize the grounding individual duties in order to decide how best to account for them, with a moral theory or rather with a theory of rationality.

But how can we approach the question, how can we find out if the grounding individual duties are themselves moral duties or not? My approach will be based on a desideratum for accounts of collective moral duties. The desideratum is that an account of collective moral duties should be compatible with as many (*prima facie* plausible) ethical and meta-ethical positions as possible. This desideratum, I shall argue, speaks in favor of the view that the grounding individual duties are neither purely moral nor purely rational in nature.

Let us begin with the natural view that, since the collective duties we are concerned with are moral, the grounding individual duties are moral as well. The problem with this view is that it carries controversial commitments when combined with the accounts of collective duties under consideration. The desideratum that an account of collective moral duties should be compatible with as many ethical and meta-ethical positions as possible thus speaks against this view.

The problem is most easily recognized when the view that the grounding individual duties are themselves moral is combined with the caring, we-reasoning, and preparedness accounts. Can there be moral duties to think (we-reason) in certain ways? Can there be moral duties to have certain dispositions (be prepared, care)? Traditionally, moral obligations are understood to range over actions rather than dispositions or thoughts. The traditional view fits with the fact that human persons have a kind of control – volitional control – over actions that they do not have over dispositions or thoughts. Over dispositions and thoughts, people (arguably) merely have what can be called rational control. To illustrate, you can decide to say that the earth is flat, but you cannot decide to believe that the earth is flat; rather, you form, maintain, revise, or abandon beliefs in response to (what you perceive to be) epistemic reasons. The traditional view can be strengthened by pointing out that we seem to hold each other morally responsible in more severe ways (blame, punishment) for performing morally wrong actions than we do for having bad dispositions or thoughts.⁴

The traditional view is, of course, controversial. I am not defending the traditional view. My point is merely that the accounts of collective duties under consideration, when combined with the view that the grounding individual duties are moral, is committed to rejecting the traditional view. This seems to be a high cost, at least if we are looking for an account of collective moral duties that is compatible with as many (prima facie plausible) ethical and meta-ethical positions as possible.

The we-reasoning, preparedness, and caring accounts should thus better not be combined with the view that the grounding individual duties are moral. At least not if a more attractive alternative is available. It is less clear how much of a problem this is for the collectivization account. This is because it is less clear what exactly it takes to transform an unstructured group into a group that has its own moral duties. Does it take certain dispositions or thoughts, or is the performance of certain actions sufficient? I will not try to answer this question here as this would lead us too far afield.

The next suggestion to consider is that the individual duties that ground collective moral duties are themselves not moral but (merely) rational duties. This suggestion has the advantage of being compatible with the traditional view that moral duties range over actions but not over dispositions or thoughts.

The problem with the suggestion, though, is that it comes with meta-ethical commitments regarding the relation between morality and rationality. (I here use *rationality* as synonymous with what is often called *practical reason*, as referring to what one ought (simpliciter) or has reason (simpliciter) to do, whereas morality is concerned

⁴ On the traditional view and the debate surrounding it, see Portmore, 2019 and Clarke, 2023.

with what one ought morally or has moral reason to do.) Is it always rationally required to be moral? Some meta-ethical views (e.g., many versions of naturalist realism) answer this question in the negative. However, the individual duties in question ground, and are thus closely connected to, collective moral duties. Accordingly, the contents or phenomenology of the grounding individual duties suggest that these duties have a moral character. This does not sit well with meta-ethical views that detach morality from rationality.

My suggestion is a hybrid account. The individual duties that ground collective duties are rational duties of those persons of whom it is rationally required to be moral (in general or at least in the relevant situations). This hybrid account seems to have many advantages.

First, unlike the first suggestion, the hybrid account is neutral regarding the issue of whether moral duty ranges over dispositions and thoughts. If we reject the traditional view according to which moral duty ranges only over actions and instead assume that moral duty also ranges over dispositions and thoughts, we can just add that the grounding individual duties are not merely rational but also moral. On the other hand, proponents of the traditional view can agree that the grounding individual duties are rational and reject the additional claim that the duties are also moral.

Second, unlike the second suggestion, the hybrid account is neutral regarding the issue of whether it is always rationally permitted or even required to be moral. On an extreme view, we can just assume that all moral requirements are also rational requirements. Then the hybrid account simply yields that every person has the grounding individual duties.

Third, unlike the second suggestion, the hybrid account accommodates (like the first suggestion) the seemingly moral contents and phenomenology of the grounding individual duties. The hybrid account achieves this by stating that the grounding individual duties are rational duties of persons who are rationally required to be *moral*.

4. Are the Individual Duties Perspective-Dependent?

Several proponents of accounts of collective duties have committed themselves to the view that the individual duties that ground collective duties are perspective-dependent, i.e., roughly, that they depend on the individuals' epistemic situations. In this section I argue that such a commitment is mistaken.

Let us begin by looking at what Anne Schwenkenbecher (2021: 17–18) says about the issue:

The notion of collective obligations defended here aligns best with what Zimmerman (1996) calls “the prospective view of moral obligation”. [...] This

means that our moral obligations depend on our reasonable, justified (but not necessarily true) beliefs concerning the problem at hand.

The prospective view of moral obligations makes better sense of the intuition that agents have no collective obligation to address a joint-necessity problem [a moral problem they can solve only together but not individually] where they reasonably believe an individually available option to be superior to an only collectively available option; or where they reasonably disagree on which collectively available option is best and they therefore cannot agree on a course of action; or where they are unlikely to figure out the collectively optimal solution in the time available to them. These kinds of complications, where they cannot easily be resolved between willing agents, can cancel collective obligations.⁵

I share the intuition highlighted by Schwenkenbecher. But should the intuition be accommodated in our theories of collective duties? I don't think so.

Intuitions (based on cases as well as other considerations) have also been put forward in areas of moral theory that do not concern collective but individual obligations (e.g., Jackson, 1991). The intuitions there are arguably not weaker than the intuition under consideration in the context of collective duties. Nonetheless, objectivists – those who claim that moral duties do not depend on the agent's epistemic situation – have defended their position against such intuitions (Graham, 2021). Such defenses do not only include attempts to accommodate or, alternatively, debunk intuitions supporting the prospective view of moral obligation, henceforth “prospectivism”. Objectivist arguments also include attempts to reveal intuitions that support objectivism.

The important point is that it is currently an open question which side is correct. Accordingly, just as it would be desirable to have a theory that is neutral regarding the objectivism/prospectivism debate in the case of individual morality (say, in the ethics of promising), it would also be desirable to have a theory of collective duties that is neutral regarding the objectivism/prospectivism debate. This demand is based on the same desideratum that was employed in the previous section. Other things being equal, an account of collective duty should be compatible with as many (prima facie plausible) ethical and meta-ethical positions as possible.

This suggests that if we can formulate our accounts of collective duty in ways that are neutral regarding the objectivism/prospectivism debate, then we should choose such formulations rather than trying to adjudicate between objectivism and prospectivism. In the remainder of this section, I shall suggest that the accounts of collective duties considered here can be formulated in neutral ways.

⁵ The reference in Schwenkenbecher's text is false. A fitting reference would be Zimmerman, 2008.

Let us consider again Björnsson's (2020: 132–3, footnotes and references omitted) definitions of the accounts:

It has [...] been suggested that a group's obligation to ϕ is grounded in the fact that the group would ϕ , or would be sufficiently likely to ϕ , if members discharged their individual obligations to:

take steps to collectivize: to transform the group into a group agent that has its own obligation to ϕ (Collins 2013; cf. Hindriks 2019; Isaacs 2011: 144–54 on “putative obligations”);

we-reason: to identify ϕ -ing as the optimal solution to a problem that group members cannot solve individually and to deduce their own individual actions based on this (Schwenkenbecher 2018; 2019);

be prepared to do their part in ϕ -ing should they be sufficiently certain that others would as well (Aas 2015); or

care to the right extent about what is morally at stake, in the sense of being disposed to (i) pick up information about what reactions and actions tend to promote what is morally important and (ii) be moved by such information when opportunity arises (Björnsson 2014, Forthcoming).

It is possible, I think, to state all this in an objectivist view. Here is a preliminary attempt. On the objectivist versions of the approaches, a group's obligation to ϕ is grounded in the fact that the group would ϕ , or be sufficiently likely to ϕ , if members discharged their individual obligations to

- *take steps to collectivize*: to transform the group into a group agent that has its own obligation to ϕ ;
- *we-reason*: to (correctly) identify ϕ -ing as the optimal solution to a problem that group members cannot solve individually and to (correctly) deduce their own individual actions based on this;
- *be prepared* to do their part in ϕ -ing if others would as well; or
- *care* to the right extent about what is morally at stake, in the sense of being disposed to be moved by facts about what reactions and actions promote what is morally important when opportunity arises.

Of course, if we constantly worked with both objectivist and prospectivist versions of accounts of collective duties, this could make our texts messy. But this is a practical problem that merely concerns how we present our thoughts. This problem cannot justify stating our thoughts merely in a prospectivist framework.

5. Conclusion

I have considered three issues arising from ethical theory for accounts that ground the moral duties of unstructured groups in individual duties. The first issue concerns the moral status of the collective behavior that is meant to come out as obligatory on the accounts. Since the individual duties grounding the collective duty are specified with regard to the collective behavior, we need to clarify the moral status of the collective behavior as it features in the individual duties. After elaborating that the collective behavior better not be categorized as obligatory in the individual duties, I have argued that none of the suggestions made so far – categorizing the collective behavior in terms of moral importance, optimality, or conditional duties – is satisfactory.

The second issue concerns the nature of the grounding individual duties. After raising objections to views that understand the individual duties exclusively as moral or as rational (but not moral), I have suggested a hybrid view. According to the hybrid view, the individual duties that ground collective duties are rational duties of those persons of whom it is rationally required to be moral (in general or at least in the relevant situations).

Finally, I have argued that accounts of collective moral duties should remain neutral on the question of whether the grounding individual duties depend on the individuals' respective perspectives. I have suggested that it is possible, though perhaps cumbersome in terms of presentation, to formulate the accounts in both way. Moreover, I have indicated that there is a large and complex debate between objectivists and prospectivists and argued that it would be a mistake for theorists of collective duties to commit themselves to either position.

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