

COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

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I

PHILOSOPHERS constantly discuss Responsibility. Yet in every discussion of which I am aware, a rather obvious point is ignored. The 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. (It should be noted that I am discussing that sense of Responsibility—moral or social—in which Responsibility is related to attitudes of blame, praise, indignation, remorse, reward, and punishment; not that sense of Responsibility in which even material objects can be responsible, and which is broadly equivalent to ‘causally operative’.) Responsibility is often ascribed to nations, towns, clubs, groups, teams, and married couples. ‘Germany was responsible for the Second World War’; ‘The club as a whole is to blame for being relegated’. Such statements are not rare.

Now this may, or may not, be relevant to the proper understanding of the concept of Responsibility. It must not, though, be hopefully assumed to be of no relevance. Faced with the fact that we do ascribe responsibility to collectives, there are several alternatives open to us.

(1) We may take the tough line, and regard such ascriptions as misuses of the term ‘responsible’. Or, if not as misuses, as merely rhetorical ways of stating what is more literally and clearly stated by making reference to individuals.

(2) Second, we may say that while such ascriptions are neither mistaken nor rhetorical, that they are, nevertheless, reducible to statements ascribing responsibility to individuals. This would be the answer of the ‘Methodological Individualist’. It is faith in the rightness of this answer, no doubt, that has encouraged the neglect of Collective Responsibility. For, if statements of Collective Responsibility are equivalent to statements of Individual Responsibility, then any account of the latter will, *ipso facto*, be an account of the former.

(3) Finally, we may decide that Collective Responsibility is not reducible, in any sense, to Individual Responsibility. If so, then theories of Individual Responsibility either are, or are not, easily amended to cover Collective Responsibility. If they are not, then we may treat Collective Responsibility either as a different type of

Responsibility—so leaving intact our theories as theories of Individual Responsibility; or as showing that our theories are false as comprehensive accounts. We may decide that they should be altered, perhaps radically, so as to yield an overall account of Responsibility, both Individual and Collective. Indeed we may do more than this. We may see in Collective Responsibility not merely something that is recalcitrant to explanations in terms of our theories, but signals that these theories are false even *qua* theories of Individual Responsibility. We may, that is, treat cases of Collective Responsibility as salient, but not the sole, examples of the falsity of some theories of Responsibility.

The purpose in the following pages is two-fold. In section (II), I ask the question whether statements ascribing Collective Responsibility are reducible, in some sense, to statements ascribing Individual Responsibility. If, as I believe, the answer to this question is No, section (III) is devoted to analysing the relevance of Collective Responsibility to two current, and favoured, theories about Responsibility.

II

Are statements ascribing Responsibility to collectives reducible to statements ascribing Responsibility to individuals? I ignore the views that Collective Responsibility statements are mis-statements, or merely rhetorical. I see no reason whatever to suppose that 'responsible' is misused in 'the team is responsible for its own defeat'. As for such statements being rhetorical, I can see that sometimes they may—but hardly always. A person may say 'Patagonia is responsible for so much of the world's misery', and he may admit that this was simply a flamboyant and effective way of saying 'three Patagonian industrialists are responsible for the world's shortage of penicillin'; that no blame is meant to attach to Patagonia as a whole, nor indeed to anyone but the three corrupt industrialists. Equally, this might not be what he meant to convey by 'Patagonia is responsible for so much misery'. He may not be willing to single out individuals at all; and, if he is, he need not think that blame should be confined to them.

The 'Methodological Individualist', nevertheless, will insist that such a statement is reducible to statements about individuals. But what is meant by this claim? A schoolmaster saying 'The Third Form is responsible for my grey hair' may be using 'The Third Form' as a summary reference to Johnny, Mike, Charlie, and so on, all of whom are partially responsible for his grey hair, and all of whom happen to be in the Third Form. But, very often when Collective Responsibility is ascribed, the position is not at all like that. Very often the person who ascribes Responsibility is not willing or able

to mention, explicitly, individuals. Nor, if he could, would his statements mentioning individuals be equivalent in meaning to his statement about the collective. This is because the identity of a collective does not consist in the identity of its membership. The local tennis club is the same club as it was last year, despite the fact that new members may have joined, and old ones departed. The expression 'the local tennis club' does not, except in rare circumstances, refer to a determinate set of individuals. So it is absurd to equate the meaning of a statement about a collective with the meaning of a statement about a number of individuals. This would have the bizarre consequence that, had one of the individuals belonging to the collective not been a member, the meaning of the statement about the collective would have been different.

The 'Methodological Individualist' may reply that the statement 'the local tennis club is responsible for its own closure' should be treated as a propositional function of the form, 'if anyone is a member of the tennis club, then he is partly responsible for the closure of the club'. Sometimes the maker of the statement will be willing to accept this interpretation—but he need not. For one may, in general, hold collective X responsible for Y without thinking that each member of the collective bears responsibility. In that case, it will be replied, we may treat 'the tennis club is responsible' as meaning 'if anyone is a member of the tennis club, and is not A, B, or C, then he bears responsibility'. But this is impossible, for this analysis lends a determinacy to the original statement that it does not possess. Once again we should be forced to accept the absurd conclusion that, had one of the 'innocents', A or B or C, not been innocent, then the meaning of 'the tennis club is responsible' would have altered.

The problem so far is as follows; whether we regard statements about collectives as propositional functions or not, we cannot deduce from them statements about particular individuals. This is so because the existence of a collective is compatible with a varying membership. No determinate set of individuals is necessary for the existence of a collective.

The 'Methodological Individualist' may alter his position. He may agree that no set of statements about particular individuals is necessary for a statement about a collective, but he will insist that some such set of statements would be sufficient for making a statement about a collective. We could, that is, deduce the statement 'the tennis club is responsible for its own closure' from a number of statements describing the actions, or whatever, of several particular individuals, though not vice versa. This is, perhaps, all that is claimed in the 'Psychologism' of J. S. Mill.

What can we say of this claim? Undoubtedly, some of the motives behind this claim are shaky. 'Psychologism' is sometimes thought to be necessary in order to avoid the postulating of super-organic entities. Or it may be thought that it is justified because it is only individual humans, rather than collectives, that are 'directly' observed. These fears are unfounded. It is true, too, that there are several well-known objections to such reductionism. It is claimed, for example, that one can only deduce statements about collectives from statements about individuals if it is specified that the individuals are members of the collective. Statements about the banking-system cannot be deduced from statements about individuals unless it is made clear that we are speaking of the activities of the individuals *qua* bank-clerks, or *qua* writers of cheques. And making this clear involves reference to the whole banking-system. So we have not succeeded in eliminating reference to the collective.

I am not sure that the above objection holds against 'Methodological Individualism'. All it shows, I think, is that the set of statements about individuals from which we could deduce a statement about a collective must be infinitely more complicated than some advocates of 'Methodological Individualism' have supposed. For it will be necessary to analyse the rules and conventions binding men together in collectives into statements about individual behaviour, attitudes, and dispositions. We cannot deduce that a person is signing a cheque from a description solely of that person's physical movements and intention. For these will only amount to signing a cheque in circumstances which rules and conventions demand to be present. But I see no reason, in principle, why the existence of the rules and conventions themselves should not be deducible from a highly complicated set of statements about individuals, past and present.

Let us assume, anyway, that it is possible to deduce statements ascribing collective responsibility from statements about individuals. Does this solve our problem? Does it show that collective responsibility is reducible to individual responsibility? I think that it does not.

We agree that a set of statements referring to individuals, 'S₁, S₂, . . . S_n', does entail a statement 'C', referring to a collective, and ascribing responsibility to that collective. But it is not clear that 'S₁, S₂, . . . S_n' must be ascribing responsibility to individuals. It may be that they do not ascribe responsibility to individuals, and that the responsibility ascribed to the collective in 'C' is, say, 'supervenient' upon the characteristics mentioned in 'S₁, S₂, . . . S_n'.

This is important and requires clarification. When a person says 'My stamp collection is very old' he may well agree to the set of statements, 'stamp X is old; stamp Y is old; stamp Z is old . . . etc.'. Here we may say that the predicate used to describe the collective

is 'divisible'; that is, it is applicable to the members of the collective taken singly. Contrast the above case, though, with the following; A person states that the stew is delicious, but he certainly does not think that any of the ingredients, taken singly, are delicious. The stew's being delicious is, of course, the result of the ingredients having the qualities they do; but not one of them need be delicious. Here we say that the predicate used to describe the collective is 'indivisible' over the field of its members.

Now, it seems to me, that ascriptions of responsibility to collectives are sometimes divisible, as in the stamp-case, and sometimes indivisible, as in the stew-case. The important point is this; if collective responsibility is ever indivisible in the above sense, then ascriptions of it cannot be reduced to ascriptions of individual responsibilities. It cannot be so reduced, just as the description of the stew as delicious cannot be reduced to descriptions of each ingredient as delicious.

Let us consider a case where ascription of responsibility to a collective is indivisible. A man says, 'The tennis club is responsible for its own closure'. He may, it is true, be willing to single out various members of the club for blame, but he need not be. Consider how the speaker (B) might explain his position in the following conversation:

(A) Whom do you blame for the closing-down of the club?

(B) No one in particular. It was just the club as a whole one has to blame.

(A) Do you mean that each person, or almost each of them, is partly responsible?

(B) No. Not if by that you mean that I blame any of them. It's hard to explain if you weren't a member of the club yourself. The committee certainly tried. People were prompt to pay their subscriptions. In the early days everyone played a lot of tennis, and came along to the 'socials'. You can't blame them for not continuing to come; for they were always miserable failures. Everyone tried hard, for sure. There was just something missing—*esprit de corps*, if you like. People tried to be friendly, but it all seemed artificial. There was always a certain tension. No, I can't honestly say that any person failed to do what was expected of him. It was just a bad club as a whole. There was nothing for it but to close down.

(A) You mean that the characters of the members were to blame?

(B) Only in the sense that if they have been different people, the club might have survived. But this doesn't mean any of them can be blamed. I can't really say I hold any of them responsible. After all, if I was nine feet tall, I wouldn't need step-ladders. That doesn't mean I hold myself responsible, or to blame, for the expenditure on the step-ladders we've just bought. Not in the way that I would if I'd broken the old pair through carelessness, or something.

The viewpoint of (B) is not an uncommon one. It is often thought correct on the one hand to hold the collective as a whole responsible and to blame, and on the other to withhold ascribing responsibility to any members as individuals. For to hold particular individuals responsible would be to hold them blameworthy—and to refuse to ascribe responsibility to the collective might be taken to imply that some outside agency could be held responsible, and this might not be so. And it would fail to bring out that the collective has fallen beneath some standard expected of such collectives. Nor is there anything puzzling about this once we cease to assume that the standards used for judging individuals should be the same as those we use for judging collectives. A collective's falling below an expected standard might be quite different from an individual's falling below a standard expected of him. Certain things may be expected of a collective, and if it fails to live up to expectations then it will incur blame. This may occur without any individual failing to live up to what is expected of him.

This may be the position when a schoolmaster blames a boarding-house for its lack of spirit; or a captain blames the team for its lack of 'guts'. Individuals are not to blame for an individual cannot be expected, in the atmosphere of the boarding-house, or of the team, to do any more than he is doing. How can we expect a person to display spirit in a spiritless community? 'There's no *esprit de corps*'; 'there's some sort of malaise present, you know'; 'There's something about the whole atmosphere that's wrong; can't you smell it?' 'the best of individual intentions can come to nought'. These may be some of the ways, loose as they are, in which we describe such situations.

It can only be an *a priori* insistence that where there is collective responsibility there *must* be individual responsibility that can make us deny the existence of such situations. But if we actually look; if we observe what is said; if we realise that people do employ different standards for judging collectives and individuals, we should free ourselves from this *a priori* insistence.

To conclude this section: I am not claiming that statements ascribing responsibility to a collective cannot be deduced from statements referring to individuals. It may well be that from a detailed enough set of descriptions of the behaviour, attitudes, dispositions, and so on, of the members of the tennis club, we could have deduced that the club would fail; that it would be a bad club. These descriptions of the individuals, however, need contain no ascriptions of responsibility to them. If this is so, then there is a practice of ascribing responsibility to collectives over and above the practice of ascribing responsibility to individuals. In the next section we will consider the implications of this conclusion.

III

Do the conclusions of section (II) show that there are two senses of Responsibility? There is no reason to suppose this. The fact that a stew's being delicious is not the same as each of its ingredients being delicious, does not tempt us to postulate two senses of 'delicious'.

The conclusions may, however, show that certain analyses of Responsibility are mistaken. To take an analogy: Professor Hart has shown how concentration on the Criminal Law alone has made at least one legal theory, the Command Theory, seem more plausible than it would have seemed if examples from the Civil Law had been considered too. Indeed, had Civil Law been taken into account, theorists may never have put forward a Command Theory at all. Similarly it seems to me that two commonly accepted pieces of analysis of Responsibility lose plausibility in the light of Collective Responsibility.

Someone may, of course, take the hard line and deny that such 'marginal' cases as I have discussed should have any bearing on theories which are adequate for explaining Individual Responsibility. But, in the first place, I do not think that the cases I have discussed are marginal—if by 'marginal' is meant 'rare' or 'fishy'. So, if such cases could be accommodated within an overall theory, this would be some conceptual gain. Second, as I shall argue later, I do not think the notions of Responsibility I wish to reject are to be rejected simply because they fail to cover Collective Responsibility. I think they fail as analyses of Individual Responsibility also. Cases of Collective Responsibility, therefore, may be regarded not simply as cases recalcitrant to certain analyses, but as salient examples of the failure of those analyses.

The two notions about Responsibility that lose plausibility in the light of our earlier conclusions are:

- (A) The notion that 'X is responsible for Y' entails 'X could have avoided Y'.
- (B) The notion that 'X is responsible for Y' entails that Y is an example of a type of behaviour, or state of affairs, which people may be deterred from performing or creating by blame or punishment.

Let us consider (A). When we held that the tennis club was responsible for its own closure, did we necessarily imply that it could have avoided the closure? I think not. For we are not attributing the closure of the club to any particular actions, or acts of negligence, on the part of the members. It is not the case that the club closed as a result of particular free decisions made by people. It is, therefore, unclear in what sense the club could have avoided closure. Quite what are supposed to be the avoidable happenings that 'could have

been otherwise', and which resulted in the closure of the club? Of course, had the members been different ones, or the same ones with different characters, then the club may have survived. But if we make this uninteresting point by saying that, in some sense, the club could have avoided closure, we must realize that it is not the same sense as in 'John could have avoided upsetting his parents', where we do not mean simply that John might have been a different person. Rather we are implying that John made a number of unforced decisions which upset his parents. He could, while retaining his character, have chosen differently. The trouble with the tennis club, it will be recalled, was lack of *esprit de corps*, natural conviviality, and communal feeling. It is difficult to see where the question of avoidable decisions can enter into the account.

What is implied, I think, in the claim that the club was responsible for its own closure is that *not* closing, under similar circumstances, is what can be expected from most or many clubs. (By 'similar circumstances', I mean such factors as finances, state of the clubhouse and courts, and so on. I do not, of course, include the level of *esprit de corps*.) Staying alive is what most clubs can do, given favourable circumstances. Failure, avoidable or not, only belongs to sub-standard clubs.

Now I doubt that any more than this is implied when we speak of Individual Responsibility also. Consider Mr Kenner's example (*Mind*, April, 1967). We may agree that a certain driver could not have avoided a smash—given his lack of skill, bad nerves, the condition of the road, etc. We may, though, still hold him responsible for the accident. For avoiding the smash, given the condition of the road, is what we could rightly expect from most drivers. Our driver possesses sub-standard skill, and the accident was due to this lack of skill; and he is to blame for the accident. In general, when most A's can avoid B, then it is possible to hold a particular A responsible for an instance of B, even though he could not have avoided doing it at the time. Cases of Collective Responsibility are salient examples, but not the only examples, of this.

Let us consider notion (B). The notion that responsible actions are those amenable to blame, praise, punishment, and reward has been accepted from Bentham, through Bradley, to Nowell-Smith. According to Bradley 'we need make no distinction between responsibility . . . and liability to punishment' (*Ethical Studies*, O.U.P., 1962, p. 4). However, when a collective is held responsible, it is very often completely unimportant, and irrelevant consideration as to whether blame or punishment would be effective in altering the behaviour of collectives. Let me give two examples to illustrate this claim.

First, the example of our tennis club again. We blamed the club—as far as we could discover—for lack of *esprit de corps*, of spontaneous warmth in the club-room, of natural conviviality and comradeship, and so on. Now blaming the club for such a state of affairs, chastising it by scrubbing its name off the official list of acceptable clubs, or whatever, is the last thing to improve the state of affairs, and the last thing to encourage other clubs to avoid such a state of affairs. Natural conviviality, for instance, is that last thing to be induced by threats. Those tyrannical jollificators at Holiday Camps only succeed with those who are already jolly. When it is the party as a whole's fault that each new arrival becomes gloomy after a few minutes, it will hardly help matters for someone to stand up and say, 'This is a terrible party. People must boycott parties like this one in the future.' Nor is the unspirited school boarding-house likely to have its spirit revived by being pilloried in front of the whole school on speech-day in the headmaster's speech, or by being kept in over half-term.

These considerations are even more obvious if we turn to a different type of example; that of ascribing responsibility to nations. We certainly do hold nations as a whole responsible; and we need not be ascribing responsibility to any particular individuals, and if we are, this may not exhaust our ascription of responsibility. For we may hold the nation as a whole responsible for supporting its evil public figures, without thinking that particular people have fallen below standards expected of them as individuals. We might, say, condemn the nation for its lack of spirit; its lack of principle; its lack of concentrated, concerted effort. We may do this in a way analogous to our condemnation of the tennis-club for its lack of *esprit de corps*.

The relevance of this is as follows: I am not even sure that it makes sense to speak of punishing nations. At least, this would hardly make sense in a world of national sovereignty. But even if it does make sense, it can hardly be claimed that the practice of 'blaming' or 'punishing' nations is of effect in altering the behaviour of nations, or their attitudes and internal structures. Censure and retribution have been notably ineffective in the cases of Turkey, in its 'sick man of Europe' days, and Germany over the last century.

Admittedly, the claim that Responsibility is analytically tied to the efficaciousness of blame and punishment does not require that blame and punishment should be effective in every case. This is so even when we are dealing with individuals rather than collectives. But surely the claim does require that the actions, states of affairs, and so on, for which we hold collectives or individuals responsible, should have a strong tendency to be effected by blame and punishment. Now in the case of nations at least, the examples of immunity

to censure are so frequent that it is false to speak even of a tendency to be effected by blame and punishment. That is, we frequently hold nations responsible for X's (events, states of affairs, internal dissensions, etc.) where there is not even a presumption to the effect that nations may be deterred from X's by blame or punishment. If so, I can see little point in trying to explain responsibility in terms of the efficaciousness of blame and punishment.

As in our discussion of notion (A), this point can be generalised to cover Individual Responsibility also. That is, cases of Collective Responsibility are not the only cases recalcitrant to an analysis in terms of notion (B). As Professor Brandt has pointed out, Parricide is condemned more heavily than ordinary Homicide; yet evidence shows that Parricide is less amenable to blame and punishment than ordinary Homicide. In general I see no reason to suppose that A's being held responsible for B entails that B is the sort of action that is amenable to blame and punishment.

IV

If I am right, there is such a thing as Collective Responsibility that is not reducible to Individual Responsibility. And if there is—though not only if there is—then at least two notions about Responsibility must be rejected. Therefore an analysis of Responsibility should be preferred which covers all ascriptions of Responsibility. However, such an analysis should also show why it is easy to have regarded notions (A) and (B) as part of the real analysis of Responsibility. The correct analysis, that is, should allow us to see why the points falsely expressed in notions (A) and (B) are nevertheless important.

What I wish to do is to agree with Brandt's definition of Responsibility. His is a definition which, unlike others, is easily amended to cover cases of Collective Responsibility. According to him, to say 'X is morally accountable on account of Z' means: 'Some trait (or set of traits) of X's character was responsible for Z in the sense that some trait (set of traits) was below standard, and all other traits of his personality having been the same, Z would not have occurred but for this fact; and it is on this account fitting or justified in itself for X to have some blaming attitudes, including . . . remorse towards himself, and for many other persons Y to have some blaming attitudes including retributive indignation towards X, and to express them in behaviour' ('Blameworthiness and Obligation' in *Essays in Moral Philosophy*, ed. A. Melden, p. 16-17).

This account can easily be amended to fit the example of the tennis club. The club's *esprit de corps* was below standard, and it was because of this that the club closed. It is thought quite fitting for

members of the club to feel some shame, and for other clubs in the league to feel indignant towards the club for letting down the game of tennis.

The account also shows the importance of the points misleadingly expressed in notions (A) and (B). If it is for something 'below standard' that one is blamed, then it must, in general, be possible for the standard to be met. If nobody, or virtually nobody, could attain the standard, we would not speak of there being a standard so meet or fall below. So, while it is false to say that 'X is responsible for Y' entails 'X could have avoided doing Y', it is easy to see why the question of capabilities is relevant to Responsibility.

Even more obviously, Brandt's account shows the relevance of blame and punishment. These are 'fitting' and 'justified' where responsible actions are concerned. Now, presumably, blame and punishment are often effective. So it is easy to see why, in many cases, responsible actions are those belonging to a type amenable to discouragement via blame and punishment. Once again, though, there is no reason to suppose that 'X is responsible for Y' entails that Y is an example of a piece of behaviour, or state of affairs which people may be deterred from performing or creating by blame and punishment.

To conclude: It may be that my examples of Collective Responsibility have failed to convince. Someone may insist that there is only Individual Responsibility. It seems to me doubtful that the reduction could be carried through, however; and I feel that the failure to be convinced would be due to unwarranted preconceptions. But even if the reduction could be carried through, this would not effect the conclusions of section (III). Certain notions about Responsibility are false, with or without Collective Responsibility.

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