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Essentially Shared Obligations

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1. INTRODUCTION

Consider:

> The Lake: Alice, Bertha, and Claudia live around Forest Lake, at some distance from each other. The ecosystem is sensitive, in particular to the solvent they have been using when painting their boats, and the lake is faring badly. Until recently, they had no way of knowing that the solvent would have this effect, but they just learned that it is in fact killing the fish in the lake, and that the fish would survive if the amount of solvent entering the lake were sufficiently decreased. Alice now thinks that she might be able to make a difference if she takes on the minor hassle of disposing of the solvent in a safe way. Bertha and Claudia each think similar thoughts. As a matter of fact, the fish would not be saved if only one of them stopped polluting, but it would be if at least two of them did.

Faced with a case like this, many would think that Alice, Bertha, and Claudia have an obligation to save the fish. They can do it, and if the fish die, it would be because they (or at least two of them) cared insufficiently. However, as far as the case is described, it is not clear that any *one* of them has an obligation to save the fish. Suppose that none of them will in fact stop polluting. Given that two of them continue polluting, it cannot be that the third has an obligation to save the fish, for she cannot save the fish. Or suppose instead that all will in fact stop polluting.

Given that two of them will stop polluting, it is unclear how the third could have an obligation to save the fish, as the fish will survive whether she stops polluting or not. (Set to the side notions of *an obligation to φ* that do not imply *an ability to φ*. Also distinguish an obligation *to save the fish* from an obligation *to stop polluting*. Each agent might have an obligation to stop polluting even if the others make it impossible for her to save the fish.)

Judging from cases like this, there seem to be *essentially shared* obligations. *Together*, Alice, Bertha, and Claudia seem to have an obligation to save the fish; *individually* they might not have, depending on what the others do.[1] Obviously, The Lake is a simplistic case—a toy example—but attributions of shared obligations, or shared prospective moral responsibility, are legion in folk morality. It is said, for example, that it is the responsibility of citizens to vote bad politicians out of office, that people witnessing violent assault ought to intervene if they are many enough to do so safely, or that the rich nations have an obligation to stop catastrophic climate change. One might object to some of the above attributions of shared obligation, or to ones that I assume later in the article. Perhaps nations cannot have obligations (perhaps they don't count as moral agents), and perhaps voters only have obligations to express their own preferences or conceptions of a good society, rather than obligations to achieve some outcome. Whatever one thinks about particular cases, however, it is clear that attributions of shared obligations are part of common sense, and these attributions raise a number of foundational or conceptual puzzles that might cast doubt on the very notion of shared obligation: puzzles about the nature of the groups that can share obligations and about the relation between shared and individual capacities and obligations.

The purpose of this article is twofold: to spell out some of these puzzles and to propose an analysis of obligations that suggests solutions. In Section 2, I raise four crucial questions for our understanding of shared obligations. The first question concerns to what extent or in what way individuals who share an obligation to secure some outcome with other individuals must be able to contribute, individually, to the securing of that outcome. The second concerns the possibility of a mismatch between shared obligations and individual obligations or reasons to contribute. The third concerns the principles determining whether some individual is a member of group sharing an obligation. The final question concerns the relation between shared obligations and agency, given that many groups, like the trio around the lake, do not themselves seem to constitute agents. In Section 3, I note that similar questions arise for the case of shared *retrospective* responsibility (or shared blameworthiness), and sketch a strategy that I have used elsewhere to answer those questions (Björnsson 2011). In brief, the strategy is to employ an account of moral responsibility designed to make sense of attributions of *individual* responsibility and to show how it could make sense of issues of shared responsibility too. In Section 4, I briefly motivate a similarly structured account of

1. One might think that a case like this violates the deontic distribution principle that if a conjunction ought to be the case, then each conjunct ought to be the case. However, to reach that conclusion we have to conflate the proposition that *A and B φ* and the proposition that *A φs and B φs*.

moral obligation, before applying it to the case of shared obligations in Section 5, explaining how it would answer the questions raised in Section 2.

A few clarificatory remarks will be helpful before we proceed. First, it should be noted that the discussion will rely on what I take to be commonly shared, theoretically untutored intuitions. In the end, one might conclude that such intuitions are conceptually or metaphysically confused, but that conclusion should only be drawn following a serious effort of charitable interpretation. Readers are asked to reserve objections until the proposed account of these intuitions has been presented.

Second, it should be said that the notion of obligation that concerns me here is one with intimate ties to notions of blameworthiness: If P has an obligation to φ in the relevant sense, then if P does not φ, P is blameworthy for not φ-ing. So if citizens fail to vote bad politicians out of office, bystanders fail to prevent an assault, or rich nations fail to stop catastrophic climate change, the claims that they had an obligation to do so imply that the continued corruption, assault, or climate change is *their fault* in such a way that they are to blame for this.[2]

Finally, note that my primary concern here is conceptual rather than substantive. The task is not to spell out what individuals ought to do in situations where it is unclear whether others will contribute towards a desired ideal, or clear that they would not (see e.g., Cohen 2000; Regan 1980; Zimmerman 1996, chap. 9). Rather, it is to understand how attributions of shared obligations can be intelligible, in spite of raising what might seem like intractable questions.

2. SOME QUESTIONS CONCERNING SHARED OBLIGATIONS

In this section, I canvas a number of interrelated questions raised if we assume the soundness of everyday attributions of shared obligations, briefly discussing some tempting but ultimately flawed answers, and make a few initial suggestions.

2.1 The Question of Individual Influence

For the species of obligation that concerns us here, an obligation to do something presupposes a capacity to do it. In particular, obligations to ensure a desirable outcome or prevent one that is undesirable typically rely on the possibility of influencing the outcome, or of making a difference. The same seems true for shared obligations: people share an obligation to ensure something only insofar as they can ensure it through some appropriate combination of (non-)actions. At the same time, however, the actions and dispositions of the individuals sharing an obligation are often such that some or all of the individuals lack the power to ensure, either on their own or by initiating coordinated action with others, the outcome that the

2. Blameworthiness is frequently connected to the blameworthy party's "quality of will" and knowledge of consequences; so is the relevant notion of obligation and corresponding notion of moral wrongness. Notions with such connections are well entrenched in ordinary parlance. Studies by Fiery Cushman (2008), for example, show that ordinary attributions of wrongness or permissibility are sensitive to just such aspects rather than to outcomes.

group has an obligation to ensure. In many cases, the outcome is a major event and individual agents can at most slightly influence its timing or scope, and not always for the better. This lack of influence is clearest in cases of what Jonathan Glover (1975, 173) called "absolute thresholds," where a certain number of contributions are needed to make a major difference to outcomes but where extra contributions under or over the threshold make no significant difference. Voting procedures provide some of the more striking examples—because of the voting dispositions of other citizens, any given citizen might be unable to affect the outcome of a referendum by her own voting or by influencing the voting of others. The Lake provides another.

While a shared obligation to ensure φ apparently does not require that any individual has the capacity to ensure φ, it seems to require some weaker or more indirect form of individual influence. At the very least, the way we characterize the group that has a shared obligation to ensure something seems to be sensitive to this. Part of the reason that one might think that stopping catastrophic climate change is primarily the obligation of *rich* countries, rather than countries in the Northern Hemisphere, say, is that one thinks that rich countries are in a better position to ensure this given their resources. Similarly, part of the reason that one might think that it is the obligation of *citizens of a state* to vote bad politicians in that state out of office is that they, and only they, can do so. The question of individual influence concerns *what sort* of influence is in fact required.

One might be tempted to think of influence in terms of potential to *facilitate* the process that would lead to or constitute the outcome in question (cf. Petersson 2004). But this does not seem to be required. Consider:

> Delayed Recovery: Just like The Lake, but the recovery of the fish would be a little slower if all three agents stopped polluting than if only two did. (The more sudden drop in pollution would require more radical adaptive adjustments in the ecosystem.)

Suppose that all three agents will in fact stop polluting. Then given what the others will do, no one agent would facilitate the process by stopping. But it still seems that Alice, Bertha, and Claudia have an obligation to save the fish.

While facilitation is not required, it is also clear that potential individual influence needs to be stronger than mere causal involvement in the process. Consider Debra, a fourth person around the lake who had not been pouring solvent into the lake and is thus unable to cut down on the pollution. Suppose that she could add a nontoxic chemical to the lake that would change the exact chemical pathway by which the solvent killed the fish *without facilitating (or hindering) the process*. She would not thereby seem to have the right kind of influence over the outcome to be part of the group whose obligation it is to save the fish (cf. Björnsson 2011, 183–84).

Another tempting way to think about individual influence is the following. Whether a group of agents share an obligation to φ depends on whether they *can* φ, which would seem to depend on whether they *would* φ if enough of them wanted to. Perhaps, then, an agent is a member of a group with a certain obligation only if there is some possible combination of wills in that group given which the agent's

will would determine whether the group fulfills the obligation or not.[3] This would make straightforward sense of The Lake, including the variation with Debra. It is true for each of Alice, Bertha, and Claudia that her decision will make a difference if only one of the two others decides to stop polluting, but whatever these three decide, Debra's contribution cannot make a difference. Similarly for the voting case. At the time of a procedurally fair election or referendum, there is typically some distribution of wills of eligible voters such that adding one more vote for or against a certain alternative determines whether that alternative wins. By contrast, there is no distribution of wills such that the will of someone not eligible to vote determines the outcome.

While promising, it is not clear that this suggestion handles cases where the outcome is just too coarse-grained or vaguely defined for one individual to make a difference. For example, inhabitants of a city with limited water supply might seem to have an obligation not to cause a severe water shortage. And this might seem so even though any individual inhabitants would be unable to make a difference as to whether there is such a shortage or not, independently of what the others do. There just is no sharp enough divide between what is and what is not a *severe* shortage (for discussion, see. e.g., Kagan 2011). (One might reject the metaphysical possibility of vagueness of this sort—perhaps there has to be a perfectly sharp divide—but the point here is that *conceiving* of the inhabitants as sharing an obligation to prevent severe water shortage does not require conceiving of the notion of severe water shortage as sharply delimited.)

2.2 The Question of Individual Reasons to Contribute

The case of The Lake illustrated how a shared obligation to φ does not require effective individual capacity to ensure φ-ing. Since individual obligations to φ require such capacities, the shared obligation cannot be understood as a mere aggregation of such individual responsibilities. And there is nothing unique about The Lake in this regard. Suppose that the rich countries do indeed have an obligation to stop catastrophic climate change, but that they are unwilling to do what is required. This does not seem to undermine their shared obligation—in general, unwillingness to fulfill an obligation does not void that obligation—but it might straightforwardly undermine the claim that one individual rich country, such

3. An idea of this sort is articulated by Alvin Goldman's (1972) analysis of social power, along roughly the following lines:

> An individual agent, A, has *some power* with respect to some alternative outcomes, O and ~O, if and only if: (i) there is some group, G, that can determine at will whether O or ~O happens (i.e., O would happen if each member wanted O and ~O would happen if each member wanted ~O), and (ii) A is a nondispensable member of G with respect to O and ~O (i.e., a member such that a group consisting of the members of G apart from A could not determine at will whether O or ~O happens independently of whether A wants O or ~O). (For some reason, Goldman's formulation on p. 240 only takes this to be a sufficient condition.)

Peter French (1984, chap. 5) relies on Goldman's suggestion in his discussion of the power of people in groups and corporations. A related account of (*retrospective*) moral responsibility has been proposed by Braham and van Hees (2012). For criticism, see Björnsson (2011), 184–85.

as Sweden, has an obligation to stop catastrophic climate change. Because of the unwillingness of the other rich countries, Sweden would be incapable of doing this, however willing it would be. Similarly, if Swedish citizens have an obligation to deny parliamentary representation to the violently anti-immigrant right, this does not mean that any one individual citizen has an obligation to do this, as it might be beyond his or her power given the wills of other voters. And so on.

Lack of individual influence makes for a mismatch not only between shared obligations and the obligations of individuals, but also between the reasons underlying the shared obligation and individuals' reasons to *contribute* toward its fulfillment. In many cases, the existence of a shared obligation seems to imply a *prima facie* reason for individuals to contribute. In The Lake, for example, it seems that Alice, Bertha, and Claudia each have some *prima facie* reason to stop polluting. But consider the following two variations:

> Known Reluctance: Just like The Lake, but each of the parties know that the others refuse to stop polluting, and knows that at least two need to stop in order to save the fish.

> Known Reluctance and Hastened Demise: Just like Known Reluctance, but each of the parties also knows that if she were to stop polluting, this would hasten the death of the fish somewhat (an insufficient drop in pollution would fail to prevent the deadly processes but would instead cause adaptive stress).

At least in Known Reluctance and Hastened Demise, it seems possible that a given individual not only lacks an obligation to ensure the outcome (because the individual cannot ensure it), but also lacks an obligation or even a normative reason to contribute or to do what would have contributed toward fulfilling the obligation had others cared appropriately. Indeed, it might seem that the individual has an obligation not to act in such a way. Moreover, this could be the predicament of all, each individual knowing that everyone else will in fact refuse to do their part, and that her contribution would only make things (a little) worse. So no individual might have an obligation or reason to stop pouring solvent into the lake, and might even have an obligation or reason not to stop, given what they know about the others. The upshot would be that while it is the shared obligation of the individuals around the lake to save the fish, none of them, taken individually, has any reason to contribute, let alone an obligation to do so. In the end, I will argue that this is a coherent set of judgments, but at a first glance it carries at least a whiff of paradox.

2.3 The Grouping Question

A question related to the questions of individual influence and contribution concerns the extent to which the parties need to be related to each other to share an obligation. To *share* an obligation, it seems, it is not enough that the parties each

have obligations to ensure the same outcome. For example, suppose that, independently of each other, Joe has promised Eve that someone will meet her at the station, and Jill has promised Adam that someone will meet Eve at the station. Joe and Jill might each have an obligation to ensure that someone meets Eve at the station, but they do not thereby *share* an obligation to ensure this. Joe can fail to fulfill his obligation while Jill fulfills hers.

One initially tempting way to account for shared obligations is with reference to shared or collective agency or action; perhaps a set of agents share an obligation to φ insofar as these agents ought to jointly perform φ. This suggestion would lack substance if a jointly performed action were understood as nothing but an aggregate or mereological sum of individual actions, or the effect of such an aggregate. But substance can be added if the notion of a joint action is itself given substantive content, and a variety of interesting analyses has been offered lately. Some appeal to an interpersonal or joint commitment by members of a group (Gilbert 1989); others to various forms of intention to perform a joint action (Bratman 1999), or to intentions to act that are openly conditional on the intentions of others (Sadler 2006); still others appeal to a less theory-of-mind-laden understanding of coordinated teleological action (Petersson 2007). On none of these accounts do Joe and Jill share an obligation just because each has an obligation to ensure that someone meets Eve at the station.[4]

An appeal to joint agency seems tempting for at least three reasons. First, it seems to allow for a relaxed requirement of influence, as not everyone participating in a joint action (understood in any of the above ways) might have a real chance to substantially affect the outcome of that action. Second, an appeal to joint agency might seem to stay at least partly true to the commonplace assumption that moral obligations pertain to moral *agents*. Perhaps the parties have not yet engaged in joint action, but if they are capable of doing this, they at least constitute a *potential agent* (in some suitably weak sense). Third, an appeal to joint agency points to a way in which the paradox of contribution could be explained away. Since the shared obligation is an obligation of a (potential) agent with capacities logically distinct from those of the individual agents, it should be no surprise that there might be a mismatch between its obligations and reasons, and those of its constituting members.[5]

While the suggestion is tempting, I think that it is too restrictive: shared obligations are not essentially obligations to perform joint actions. While accounts of joint action differ in details, they all require that the individual agents participating in the joint action understand themselves as so doing, or understand how their individual contributions are joined. By contrast, it seems that a shared

4. Another form of collective responsibility discussed in the literature, beginning with French (1984), understands certain collectives—in particular certain corporations—as agents in their own right, with beliefs and plans independent of the beliefs and plans of members of the collectives (cf. Hess 2014; List and Pettit 2011; Rovane 1998; Tollefsen 2002). Though I think that there are such corporate agents, the examples considered here are not plausibly understood along such lines.

5. Compare David Copp's (2007) argument that collectives can have an agential moral property that no member of that collective has. For criticism, see Miller (2007).

obligation can be fulfilled without any sense of coordinated or shared agency among the parties. Consider:

> Coinciding Clean Hands: Just like The Lake, but in response to the news about the fish, each of Alice, Bertha, and Claudia thinks that the fish will die whatever she does but (independently) decides that she does not want to further contribute to the death of the fish—she wants to keep her hands clean from now on. Independently, they all stop polluting and the fish survive.

Though the fish were saved, and saved by the trio's actions, no agent intended to act together with the others; if anything, they intended *not* to act together with others. Nevertheless, it seems that the people around the lake saved the fish, thus avoiding the blame for the death of the fish that would have accrued to (at least two of) them if they had not saved the fish. If this is correct, shared obligations are not necessarily obligations to perform joint actions.

In fact, one might even wonder whether the agents in fact sharing an obligation need to think that others *can* play a role in fulfilling the obligation. Consider:

> Solipsistic Polluters: Like The Lake, but each of Alice, Bertha, and Claudia is unaware that the others had also been polluting. Each thinks that she is the only one who can do anything to save the fish, and that she would be successful if she tried.

It still seems that they would be to blame for the death of the fish if they failed to save them, and that they would avoid blame for the death of the fish if they each (independently) decided to stop polluting, thus saving them.

Some might want to resist the claim that the group fulfilled their obligation to save the fish. In the absence of some kind of coordinated or joint effort, one might perhaps prefer to say that Alice, Bertha, and Claudia removed the grounds for their obligation, rather than say that they fulfilled it. But we should not in general take the fulfillment of obligations to φ to require coordinated efforts to φ. In fact, very few fulfillments of our strongest obligations result from such coordinated efforts. In satisfying obligations not to kill or steal, we are rarely considering the possibility of killing or stealing. Instead, the work is done by habitual focus on opportunities that do not involve killing or stealing, perhaps in conjunction with concerns to satisfy weaker demands, such as demands not to invade someone's physical space, or not to use someone's property against their wishes or without their permission. Of course, while we rarely engage in coordinated efforts to fulfill these strong obligations, it is no accident that such habits and concerns lead to their fulfillment. But it is similarly nonaccidental that the actions in Coinciding Clean Hands result in the survival of the fish: If agents independently refrain from practices that threaten to have bad effects when sufficiently common, this will often avoid such bad effects even in the absence of coordination.[6]

6. Obviously, to deny that shared obligation has to be obligation to perform a joint action is not to deny that a group of people might have a shared obligation to act jointly, in a coordinated fashion—to form a political party, say, or search systematically for a lost child.

2.4 The Question of Agency

I have denied that agents sharing an obligation to φ must have an individual obligation to φ, or even an individual obligation to contribute toward φ-ing, and I raised the possibility that, taken individually, *each* party might lack the relevant obligation. This raises a skeptical worry: How can there be an obligation to φ if no agent is obligated to φ? And, relatedly: How can there be an obligation to φ if there is no agent that *can* φ? Notice, too, that it does not obviously help to say, contrary to what I argued above, that shared obligations are obligations to perform joint actions, and that they are thus restricted to groups capable of performing such actions. The problem is that a group whose members could (given suitable motivation) come together so as to perform a joint action does not thereby seem to be an agent in any qualified sense *before* they have organized their actions.[7] While it might be natural to say that "the people around the lake can save the fish and are thus obligated to do so," the obligation and capacity are thus not attributed to the individuals in the group, nor, it seems, to any existing agent constituted by the group. Perhaps, then, intuitions of shared prospective obligations in such cases are illusory, based on confused assignments of agency or a confused grasp of what individuals are capable of.

2.5 Looking Ahead

Rather than proceeding piecemeal trying to answer each of the questions canvassed here, I will mimic a strategy that I have employed elsewhere to make sense of shared retrospective moral responsibility (Björnsson 2011). The strategy was to rely on an independently motivated account of attributions of *individual* retrospective moral responsibility and blameworthiness, and to argue that this account makes good sense of attributions of *shared* responsibility. Since that account answered questions analogous to those discussed here in Section 2, and since there are close links between retrospective responsibility and moral obligation of the sort that concerns us here, there is *prima facie* reason to think that an analogous strategy might help us to understand shared obligations. It is of course possible that we employ different notions of obligation when we consider individual and group obligations, but the conservative hypothesis is that the concept is the same in both cases, and the successful subsumption of individual and shared retrospective responsibility bolsters that assumption.

I begin to pursue this strategy in Section 3, where I briefly explain how the questions were answered in the case of retrospective responsibility. In Section 4 I

7. One way to try avoiding this difficulty is to claim that any group of unorganized people is itself an agent. Taking this route, Torbjörn Tännsjö (2007, 302–03) suggests that such a group qualifies as an agent because its behavior is explained by the beliefs and desires of (the members of) the group, and furthermore that it is capable of acting wrongly because it has a weak form of compatibilist free will, that is, because the behavior of the group depends on its preferences (i.e., the preferences of its members). However, since the collective lacks the hallmark of agency—coordinated goal-directed action—this suggestion is hard to take seriously, except perhaps as a proposal for conceptual reform.

motivate a general analysis of the notion of moral obligation that I take to be at play in many ordinary judgments of individual obligation. In Section 5 I argue that this concept of obligation provides the keys to answering questions of individual influence, contribution, grouping, and agency. If the argument is correct, attributions of shared obligations, just like attributions of shared retrospective responsibility, can be as intelligible and clear-headed as attributions of individual obligations.

3. A SOLUTION TO RELATED PROBLEMS OF SHARED RETROSPECTIVE MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

If Alice, Bertha, and Claudia continue polluting out of sheer laziness and the fish die, it seems that they are (retrospectively) responsible, and to blame, for the death of the fish. They knew that the fish were dying, and if they had cared sufficiently they would have stopped the pollution and saved the fish. But such attributions of responsibility and blameworthiness raise the same questions as attributions of shared obligations. Given the actions of the others, there was nothing any *one* of them could have done to prevent the death of the fish, and so it seems that they cannot individually be blamed for that outcome.[8] Elsewhere, I have argued that this mismatch between individual and shared responsibility is not well understood on standard accounts of collective responsibility (Björnsson 2011). However, I also argued that this sort of responsibility *is* straightforwardly understood on the basis of an analysis developed for individual retrospective responsibility. Here is a simplified version of that analysis:

> The Explanation Hypothesis: We take P to be retrospectively morally responsible for a morally significant event E insofar as we take it that the right sort of motivational structure of P is part of a normal significant explanation of E.[9]

A *motivational structure* is a structure that guides behavior in relation to circumstances. The *right sorts* of motivational structure are ones that tend to respond appropriately to our practices of holding each other responsible (sets of values and preferences say, as opposed to mechanisms driving compulsive behavior). A motivational structure of type M is part of a *normal* explanation of E only if E is a type of event such that type M structures have a sufficiently general tendency to explain this type of event in this way. Intuitively, and in typical cases, we hold an agent responsible for some bad outcome when it is explained by the agent's ill will (or lack of appropriate concern) in the way bad outcomes tend to be explained by such ill will. Similarly, we typically hold an agent responsible for some good outcome when it is explained by the agent's exceptionally good will in the way good outcomes tend to be explained by such good will.

8. Perhaps even more clearly than in the case of prospective shared responsibility, the parties need not even know of each other's existence.

9. For elaboration and defense, see Björnsson (2014); Björnsson and Persson (2012, 2013).

The Explanation Hypothesis, I have argued, accounts for a wide variety of both well-known and surprising features of our thinking about moral responsibility (Björnsson 2014; Björnsson and Persson 2009, 2012, 2013), including notorious skeptical worries about moral responsibility elicited by thoughts about determinism or luck. What is important here, however, is that the Explanation Hypothesis provides a straightforward account of essentially shared retrospective responsibility. First, it makes sense of our unwillingness to attribute ordinary individual, un-shared, responsibility and blame in our retrospective version of The Lake. Intuitively, we do not think that the fish died because *Alice* didn't care appropriately about their fate; after all, her lack of concern made no difference to the outcome. Second, it makes sense of our willingness to attribute shared responsibility to *Alice, Bertha, and Claudia* for the death of the fish. We naturally think that *their* lack of appropriate concern is part of a normal significant explanation of the death of the fish. The fish died because they didn't care enough, and this is just a special case of the common phenomenon that something valuable is harmed because people care too little about it to take insufficient precautions to protect or avoid harming it.

The Explanation Hypothesis also suggests answers to questions corresponding to those raised for shared obligations in Section 2. In explaining how we can attribute responsibility for an outcome to groups without attributing responsibility to some particular agent for that outcome, it answers *the question of agency* for retrospective responsibility. It also explains why we can find a group of people responsible and to blame for an outcome even in cases where each of them had good normative reasons not to help prevent that outcome, thus providing an answer to the question about the lack of connection between *individual reasons to contribute and shared responsibility*. If Alice, Bertha, and Claudia each knew that the others were too lazy to dispose of solvent in an appropriate way, and knew that if they alone stopped polluting, the fish would die even more quickly (as in Known Reluctance and Hastened Demise), each might well have good reason not to stop polluting (even if they do not in fact care about such reasons). But according to the Explanation Hypothesis, we can still see how they might share responsibility for the outcome. It might still be that the fish died *because they cared insufficiently*: If they had all cared appropriately, they would have known that the others would be likely to contribute, and so would themselves have cut down pollution enough to ensure the survival of the fish. The Explanation Hypothesis also directly suggests an answer to *the grouping question* and *the question of individual influence* for retrospective responsibility: a group of people share retrospective responsibility and blame for some event insofar as that event has a straightforward normal explanation in terms of the lack of proper concern of that particular group.[10]

10. An explanation appealing to the fact that *they didn't care enough* might be understood in two ways. On the one hand, it can be understood as collectively invoking the lack of sufficient care of each of the parties: the death of the fish is explained by the fact that each of A, B, C, and so on did not care appropriately. Under this (distributive) understanding, the explanatory requirement of the Explanation Hypothesis is applied to each of the parties; the upshot is that the attribution of shared responsibility to a group implies that each member of that group lacked the appropriate concern. On the other hand, it can be understood as invoking lack of appropriate concern more holistically: The death of the fish might be explained by the fact that there was too little concern

The Explanation Hypothesis promises to make good sense of attributions of retrospective responsibility and blame, solving puzzles about individual influence, agency, and grouping. The suggestion in the rest of the article will be that a parallel account can be given of our attributions of shared obligations. To make this suggestion plausible, I will first need to say something about the notion of obligation that is at play in many ordinary attributions of individual obligation, and which I think gives rise to the puzzling sets of intuitions canvassed in Section 2.

4. MORAL OBLIGATION

The concept of a moral obligation involved in the judgments that concern us here is the concept of a *practically relevant moral demand*. As a first stab at spelling out what practical relevance here amounts to, we might say that practically relevant demands are ones that *can be fulfilled by the subjects of the demands in appropriate response to the demands*. This distinguishes the kind of moral obligations that we are concerned with—the sort intimately connected to blameworthiness—from some other kinds of obligation. For example, it is a common experience that, through no fault of our own, we find ourselves in situations where we are unable to keep a promise we have made and so unable to fulfill an obligation to the promisee. Failure to fulfill this sort of possibility-insensitive obligation does not make us blameworthy.

The requirement that subjects of the demands in question be *able* to fulfill the demands must be taken in the right way. The requirement of practicality is not satisfied by *a mere chance* that the demand would be met if the subject were appropriately responsive. When there is a mere chance of success, what is demanded is at most that one *tries*. Rather, the requirement is (at least) that appropriate responsiveness to the demand would *ensure* that the demand is met. Moreover, it would have to be ensured in the right way. For example, consider:

> Misinformation: Dr. Albert has medical information that she mistakenly but through no fault of her own thinks would alleviate the terrible pain of a former patient if she got it to him before leaving for the day. Suppose also that if she were appropriately responsive to the situation, she would head over to the ward to give the patient the information in person, as the ward cannot take incoming calls. But suppose further that the patient is about to call her to ask for the information. If she were inappropriately responsive and did *not* head over to the ward, the patient would call her and she would provide the incorrect information over the phone. If she decided to

for the environment in that group *as a whole*. Under this (nondistributive) understanding, individual members of that group might well have the appropriate concern, but their concern fails to make up for the lack of concern of other members. On the former understanding, each member is necessarily morally implicated in the outcome; on the latter, some members might not be. In neither case is it puzzling that a group can be retrospectively morally responsible for an outcome over which no individual had significant control. In Björnsson (2011), I looked primarily at the first sort of explanations, as the examples discussed there involved small enough groups for us to represent each individual. To simplify matters, I adhere to the same restriction here.

> head over to the ward, however, another doctor would take the call, a doctor who would give him the correct information.

In Misinformation, it is true that if Dr. Albert were to respond appropriately to the situation, the patient would be saved from terrible pain. But it is not true that Dr. Albert morally must save the patient from terrible pain in the relevant sense. If she does not respond as seems to be morally required and the patient suffers the terrible pain, she still cannot be blamed for the pain the patient experiences. She had every reason to think that the information she offered was correct, and it is only by luck that the patient would have received the correct information if she had been appropriately responsive. One might think that what goes wrong in this case is that the end is achieved in a way other than that intended by the agent. As noted in Section 2, however, appropriately responding agents often fulfill obligations without forming intentions of the relevant sort—intentions not to kill or harm, say. But the requirement that the relevant outcome is achieved in the intended manner can be generalized: What seems to be required for a practically relevant demand to φ is that a proper response to the demand would ensure φ-ing *in a normal way*. In the special case when the proper response involves an intention or plan to φ, φ-ing is ensured in a normal way when it is ensured according to plan.[11]

Thus far I have said that the practical relevance of a demand requires that appropriate responsiveness to the demand would ensure that the demand is met. The relevant notion of correct, proper, or appropriate responsiveness to a demand also needs clarification, with regard to what it means to *respond* to a demand, and to what it means to be *appropriately* responsive.

First, *responding* to a demand does not necessarily involve believing or knowing that one is subject to the demand. Rushing to catch a train, I have an obligation not to shove people who stand in my way as I make it around a corner, and I have this obligation even if time is too short to form the belief that I have the moral obligation. It is enough that various subpersonal perception-action routines of mine can respond to features associated (though not necessarily identical) with the core reason that grounds the obligation—that the others are sentient beings, say—by initiating nonaggressive solutions to the problem. What practical relevance requires, it seems, is only that if I were appropriately responsive to those features, this would ensure, in a normal fashion, that the demand is met. Moreover, as noted in Section 2, we fulfill most of our most serious obligations without any thoughts on our part that we have these obligations.

Second, to be *appropriately* responsive to features associated with the reasons that ground the obligation is to have a motivating sensitivity to these

11. A proper response should *ensure* that the demand is met, but need not *explain* why it is met. Most of the time we meet all sorts of obligations, especially negative duties, because we have no reason not to. In those cases, coming to think about having the obligations would have no effect on our behavior. Moreover, it is not required that the subject of a demand *knows* that the demand would be met if the subject responded appropriately. I can sensibly think that I have an obligation to save a person *if I can*. I then understand my obligation as conditional upon the possibility of saving the person, but not upon my knowledge of it.

reasons *of a sort that can be reasonably morally required*. What sensitivities can be reasonably morally required is of course a vexed issue, intricately related to issues in metaethics and normative ethics, as well as questions about what sort of free will is required for moral obligations. The account of moral obligations provided here is meant to be abstract enough to be compatible with most views in these areas.[12] Luckily, some things are relatively uncontroversial. Most agree that in order to be subject to moral demands, an agent must have a general capacity to grasp and act on the nature of these demands. For this reason, we think that small children and people with sufficient mental deficiencies are less appropriate subjects for moral demands, or at least subject to less stringent or sophisticated demands of this sort.

Summarizing the considerations discussed in this section and hypothesizing that they tell the full story (given suitable precisification of the admittedly vague terms involved), we get:

> Moral Obligation: P has a moral obligation to φ in C (is morally required to φ in C) if, and only if, were P in C to have the sort of motivational sensitivity that can be reasonably morally required of P, this would ensure, in normal ways, that P φ in C.[13]

12. Arguably, the account does not fit well with versions of act-consequentialism that identify our moral obligations with what would actually have the best consequences (rather than what has the highest expected value, say). At least if what can be reasonably morally required is a matter of what we can reasonably demand of each other on moral grounds, it often cannot reasonably be required that we should be sensitive to facts about what actions have the best actual consequences. But incompatibility with such forms of consequentialism is no objection to the current proposal, as these forms are antecedently implausible when understood as accounts of the sort of blame-related moral obligations discussed here.

13. Given this account of moral obligation, the following analysis of (blame-related) moral wrongness is tempting:

> Moral Wrongness: It would be morally wrong of P to φ in C if, and only if, were P in C to have the sort of motivational sensitivity that can be reasonably morally required of P, this would ensure, in normal ways, that P does not φ in C.

One might worry that Moral Obligation (and Moral Wrongness) is circular, defining obligations in terms of what can be reasonably morally required. However, the obligations in questions have activities as their objects, whereas the requirements in questions concern dispositions. The definition does not tell us what requirements are, but it does reduce obligations (or requirements) concerning actions to requirements concerning motivational sensitivities.

One might also worry that this account fails for various cases involving agents lacking sensitivities that could reasonably be demanded of them. Consider a version of an example from Gary Watson (1975), utilized by Michael Smith (1995) to illustrate a similar problem: I'm furious after losing a game of squash in a humiliating fashion. I consider shaking hands with my opponent, because this is what one normally does to show respect, but because I'm ill-tempered and self-centered, if I were to approach the opponent I would perhaps shake his hand, but not without insulting him or getting into an argument. Sensing this, it might seem that I have an obligation to take a minute or two to cool down before interacting with my opponent. But Moral Obligation might seem to imply that I had a moral obligation to shake hands with my opponent after the game. After all, this might be what I would have done if I had been less self-centered, and perhaps it can be reasonably demanded that I be less self-centered. Exactly what to say in response to apparent counterexamples like this—examples where the falsity of the antecedent of the conditional in our analysis of obligation itself seems morally relevant—is a difficult and complex matter that goes beyond what can be fully discussed here (for a discussion of the analogous "conditional

5. SHARED MORAL OBLIGATIONS

Given the requirement of practical relevance, one might think that subjects of moral obligations must be special kind of *agents*: entities capable of systematically meeting moral demands through a motivating sensitivity to the reasons grounding the demands, a sensitivity that can be reasonably morally required of them. This, of course, is exactly what seemed problematic when we looked at putative cases of shared obligation. For example, though it seemed that the trio around the lake had an obligation to save the fish, they were not required to act *as one agent*, and the agents, taken individually, lacked the capacity to ensure that the demand would be met. However, as I will now suggest, Moral Obligation allows that P is a plurality of agents, rather than an agent in its own right.

Recall first that P's φ-ing does not have to be a coordinated action directed at fulfilling the obligation; as noted in Section 2, it is rare that our strongest obligations are met via such coordinated efforts. Furthermore, when P is a group—Alice, Bertha, and Claudia, say—the sensitivities required need not be sensitivities of the group, understood as something beyond the three individuals, as opposed to sensitivities of the individuals in the group. What is required is merely that the subject of the obligation—*they*—can respond in the required way to the reasons grounding the obligation. Finally, it seems eminently plausible that the sensitivities required of the members of the group can be part of a normal explanation of why the group does something. Many or most of the sensitivities that can be required of individual agents are dispositions to facilitate or contribute to important outcomes that sometimes require the input of other agents, through an aggregation of actions (if enough people treat the environment well, important ecosystems survive; if enough people vote for one alternative, it wins) or through joint actions where people coordinate their efforts to produce the outcome.

If what I have said is correct, it provides the key to answering the questions outlined in Section 2.

First, it answers the question of agency. The full moral agency required for shared obligation is merely that of individual agents. However, the *capacity* to fulfill the obligation is one that pertains to the group as a whole, as the antecedent of

fallacy" problem for certain virtue ethical accounts of rightness, see Johnson 2003). But let me mention two natural (complementary) ways of modifying or clarifying Moral Obligation to handle cases like this. The first is to say that obligations to φ are, strictly speaking, restricted to "maximal" φs, that is, φs that are not themselves part of some more complex activity that would be ensured by the relevant motivational sensitivities. In this particular case, it would mean that I do not have an obligation to shake hands with my opponent, period, as the relevant motivational sensitivities would guarantee that I do so *in a polite manner*. (If you think that this would make the requirements too detailed, remember that motivational sensitivities that can be reasonably required might fall way short of full virtue, or full rationality.) The second thing to say is that what can be reasonably morally required is restricted to sensitivities that are in some relevant sense up to the agent. Perhaps I cannot shake my opponent's hands in a polite manner given my self-centered bad temper. But if my disposition to insult my opponent is not under my control in the relevant way, then if I were sensitive to this and other features of the situation in a way that could be reasonably required of me, I would refrain from shaking my opponents hand, knowing as I do that it would take an ugly turn.

the conditional in Moral Obligation is one that encompasses the sensitivities of all its members.

Second, Moral Obligation provides an account of the requirement of influence as pertaining to shared obligations, or rather an account of the absence of any strict requirement. What is required for a shared obligation is that if the members of the group were sensitive to features of the situation in ways that can reasonably be morally required, this would ensure, in normal ways, that the obligation is fulfilled.[14]

Third, the account makes it intelligible that a group has an obligation even though no individual agent has any obligation to contribute. Consider Known Reluctance, the variation of The Lake in which (1) all parties of the putative shared obligation lack the appropriate motivational dispositions and refuse to contribute toward the shared obligation; (2) all are known by all to do so; and (3) there is no way for one individual to make any significant difference without the contributions of one of the others. Under such epistemic circumstances, it seems highly plausible that, for each party, that party has no individual obligation to contribute: even with the appropriate concern, it would not contribute. But the mere fact that each member of a group is unwilling to contribute to a goal and knows that the others are equally unwilling should not be enough to remove their shared obligation to bring about the goal. Moral Obligation accounts for this: it might well be that *if* the members were appropriately responsive, they would each realize, or consider likely, or at least possible, that the other members of the group would be willing to contribute, and would then themselves do their part. The situations in which beliefs that others are unwilling to contribute most plausibly would undermine shared obligations, then, are situations where, *even if the parties all had the appropriate motivational structures*, they would believe that others were unwilling. But such situations might be quite uncommon, given the plausibility of something like the following principle:

> Signal Willingness: When people in a group would more likely achieve some important end if they were aware of the extent to which members have the motivational sensitivities that could reasonably be morally demanded of them, a member of the group has a *pro tanto* obligation to make others aware of her readiness to contribute toward that end (perhaps by explicit offer, or by some modest first contribution).

Given Signal Willingness, the existence of appropriate responsiveness among members of a group would typically ensure that when it is known that an important end can likely be achieved through and only through efforts by suitably motivated members, members know about the motivation of other members.

Fourth, Moral Obligation begins to answer the question of group membership. For the required sensitivities to explain the fulfillment of the obligation *in a normal way*, there must be a certain degree of *unity* to why and how members of the group would contribute if they were suitably motivated. Focusing on the case

14. Here it is important to bear in mind that a *normal* explanation of how an outcome is ensured is likely to be fairly programmatic, allowing for variations in various details.

of The Lake, the normal way in which appropriate sensitivities to possible damage from cumulative impact (cumulative pollution, wear and tear, pressure, etc.) prevent such damage is through sufficient actions that decrease the impact. Consequently, we would naturally think that the appropriate sensitivities of Alice, Bertha, and Claudia would ensure the survival of the fish in a normal way. By contrast, we would not naturally think that the appropriate sensitivities of Alice, Bertha, Claudia, *and Debra* would ensure the survival in a normal way (Debra, recall, was the character who could change but neither help nor hinder the process by which the fish were being killed). Whatever action or nonaction would be triggered by Debra's appropriate sensitivities would not be of the sort that decreases the impact (i.e., the pollution). Similarly in the case of Joe, Jill, Adam, and Eve. Here Joe and Jill might each have an obligation to see to it that someone meets Eve at the station, as there are normal ways in which appropriate sensitivities to existing promises ensure that the promise is kept. But there would be no *one* explanation of how someone would meet Eve pointing to Joe's *and* Jill's sensitivities, only two similar and parallel explanations.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although Moral Obligation makes sense of shared obligations and indicates answers to the questions raised in Section 2, the discussion in this article leaves a number of issues untouched, not least among which are issues concerning what can reasonably be demanded of people given various prospects of contributions from others, and issues concerning the importance or usefulness of focusing on shared rather than merely individual obligation. By explaining how essentially shared obligations are possible and no more mysterious than individual obligations, I nevertheless hope to have provided some tools for thinking more clearly about those issues.[15]

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