

Collective Responsibility and Entitlement to Collective Reasons for Action¹

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What are the implications for agency – and in particular, the idea of acting for reasons – if we are to take seriously the notion of *collective* responsibility? My thesis is that some cases of individuals subject to a collective form of responsibility and blame will force us to make sense of how it is that an individual can be *entitled* to collective reasons for action, i.e. entitled to a reason had in the first place by a plurality of individuals together rather than any one of them alone. This entitlement makes it possible for the collective reason to be a reason for which one acts, even if one's contribution on its own makes little or no difference in the collective effort. Although a full defense of this entitlement cannot be undertaken here, I will gesture at how this might work by suggesting that intentions function to preserve reasons for action.

1. Retrospective responsibility and prospective reason for action

When is it appropriate to blame someone? (We could of course consider occasions for praise – but I will tend to dwell on the negative.) Let S be a condition or state of affairs that is a candidate occasion for blame. For example, someone nearby just off shore is in distress and drowns. Am I to blame for not rescuing him? Without attempting an exhaustive account of responsibility, we might identify one important condition for responsibility by considering a particular sort of excuse to deflect blame. Specifically, I'm interested in the following schema:

- (1) *Do something about it*: An agent is not responsible for S if he or she is never in a position reasonably to do something about it.

If one is to do something about S, and this requires one to ϕ , then one thing we can say is:

- (2) *Capacity*: An agent is not responsible for S if he or she is never able to ϕ .²

A farmer, for example, is not responsible for the loss of her crops if in conditions of sudden and unforeseeable extreme drought she is unable to irrigate her fields. And I am not responsible for saving the drowning individual if I cannot swim, or am not trained, or there is no life-ring to toss, etc.

¹ Some material in this paper benefited from presentation to audiences in the philosophy departments at Davidson College, Ohio State University, Bowling Green University, and at the ENSO conference in Lund, Sweden. Thanks also to the editors for their comments.

² We might wonder why someone is unable to ϕ . Presumably we should add that the incapacity was non-culpable. This suggests that spelling out conditions for this sort of excuse will not yield a reductive account of responsibility, for the concept of non-culpability presupposes that of responsibility.

Even if this much is clear, our schema is likely to prompt a number of questions, and it will not be helpful for someone without some day-to-day familiarity with the notion of blame and responsibility. The schema for example won't inform us of what exactly counts as reasonable when it comes to doing something about S; how much sacrifice would it be reasonable to make in one's efforts? There is also the worry about the vagueness of the notion of *doing something about*. Presumably, to do something about some problematic S would be to act in such a way as to prevent S, or to ameliorate its effects. Or at least to act in such a way as to have some chance of doing these things. We are not given in (1) anything that says what sort of likelihood of success is needed, or the extent of amelioration, for one to count as doing something about S.

Though the schema leaves much unanswered, it does draw a connection between the largely retrospective notions of responsibility and blame on the one hand, and the more prospective notion of reason for action on the other.³ At least, it does this so long as we maintain (I think quite plausibly) that to do something about S is to act *for* S-related reasons – such as avoiding or preventing S, or ameliorating the badness of S. Taking ϕ -ing again to be such a doing, the schema would be

- (3) *Look-back-look-ahead*: An agent is not responsible for S if she is never in a position reasonably to ϕ for the S-related reasons.

Note that blamelessness with regard to S doesn't necessarily require that the agent ϕ *for* those S-related considerations. One might ϕ for other reasons; but so long as ϕ is performed, the problematic consequences are averted and no blame is called for.^{4,5} Still, I suggest that the possibility or capacity at some point of acting for S-related reasons seems to be relevant for responsibility: blame in the matter of S entails some capacity on the part of the agent to act for or in light of those considerations.⁶

Why think so? I take (3) as a plausible understanding of the uncontroversial thought in (1) that one cannot be blamed for S if one simply can't do anything about it. It is, of course, a part of the idea of being in a position to do something about S that one have the ability in (2) simply to perform the requisite ϕ -ing. But beyond this, one must have some capacity to ϕ *for the relevant reasons* – even if, as just noted, the ϕ -ing one in fact does is not done for those reasons. What is it, after all, *to be in a position to do something about S* but to have the occasion to act in light of the S-related reasons? Without such a capacity one would not be able to perform the relevant ϕ appropriately; one's ϕ -ing would be haphazard with respect to the S-related considerations. If that's the case, then this is not really to be in a position to do something *about S*; one wouldn't be responsible in *this* matter. Similarly, if one is incapable of making sense of their ϕ -ing in terms of the S-related considerations, to grasp the *significance* of their ϕ -ing in light of S, then this too puts

³ The importance in the collective context of forward-looking notions of reason, duty, or obligation, has been emphasized more recently for example in Isaacs (2014, 40), Wringe (2014, 474-5), Schwenkenbecher (2013, 2), and Dietz (2016, 958). Important earlier discussion includes Parfit 1984, and Jackson 1987.

⁴ Although Kant would say that the S-ing has no moral worth.

⁵ Sometimes ϕ won't preclude S. But if ϕ is really all one could have reasonably expected to do about S, then even if S comes about because of bad luck, it seems that one should not be blamed for S. And I would add that one is not to be blamed even if the ϕ -ing one did do was not done to avert S, but for some other reason.

⁶ Culpable ignorance might pose a worry. Due to the ignorance, the agent was never in a position reasonably to do something about S. We might nevertheless want to blame him.

in question one's responsibility for S.⁷ So it's not merely the ability to ϕ that is a condition for responsibility for S; it's also the ability to ϕ for *S-related considerations*.⁸

In light of this, let's work with the idea that the possibility reasonably to act for certain S-related reasons is a condition for responsibility and the appropriateness of blame (and praise) for S. If the agent has conducted themselves faultlessly; if there simply was no obligation or reason with respect to S, then the agent cannot be blamed for it. Or if there was a reason to act with respect to S, but it simply would be unreasonable for the agent to undertake it given other demands she faces, then here too it is unclear how they can be blamed for it.⁹

Thus, with *Look-back-look-ahead*, the backward-looking notion of responsibility is connected with the forward-looking notion of acting for reasons. What implications might this have for collective responsibility?¹⁰

2. Collective responsibility: against monolithic agency

Sometimes one is responsible and blamed for something, alongside others. Consider the following case due to Björnsson.

Humiliation: After the last class of the day, a group of high-school kids grabs the classmate lowest in the pecking order, successfully preventing him from catching the bus, leaving him with a long and humiliating walk home.¹¹

Responsibility and blame here seem to be collective. The *bullies* are responsible for the student's humiliating walk. But how should this be understood?

One suggestion is to take seriously the idea of the group as itself an individual agent, albeit a *monolithic* one comprising a number of lesser individual agents. The group is something that acts for reasons, is responsible for what it does, and is subject to blame. Applied to the example, the bullies constitute an agent, and *it* is responsible for the kid's long and humiliating walk home. There is something *it* can do about this – viz., refrain from grabbing the kid, or stop individuals from doing so. The group could act on considerations related to (preventing) the humiliation of someone. But it doesn't do so, and thus is to blame.¹²

⁷ I am assuming that this is not due to some morally culpable ignorance or insensitivity on his part.

⁸ Does this make selfishness an excuse? The worry, I take it, is that the selfish individual might think they have no reason to act in light of S-related considerations if those considerations don't bear on his own interests. But this by itself doesn't mean that the individual is incapable of acting for such reasons – unless the selfishness is pathological.

⁹ These remarks should be qualified in light of important considerations stemming from phenomena of moral luck and agent regret (Nagel 1979; Williams 1981). See Kutz 2002 for a discussion that is sensitive and accommodating to these considerations (perhaps overaccommodating to my taste). Nelkin (2019) also provides a very helpful overview.

¹⁰ *Look-back-look-ahead* is related to a reasons-responsive picture of moral responsibility. But it is more minimal as a thesis. First, the suggestion is only intended as a condition on responsibility; not as the makings of a complete compatibilist account of responsibility. Second, reasons-responsiveness is often thought of as involving a counterfactual condition (regarding what reasons the agent would be responsive to) that has a bearing on what actually prompts the action in question (e.g. McKenna (2013: 154) discussing Fischer & Ravizza (1998)). But I'm not taking a position on what sort of counterfactual reasons-responsiveness has to be true for someone to count as acting for a reason. Indeed, Frankfurt style cases (Frankfurt 1969) suggest that one can act for a reason (arguably even do so responsibly) while lacking reasons-responsiveness, as McKenna notes. It is a substantive question whether one could act for a reason even if one lacked a counterfactual sensitivity.

¹¹ Björnsson, "Shared Responsibility Refined", delivered at Society for Agency and Responsibility, Pacific APA, 2017. See also the firing squad example from Parfit 1984, §26.

¹² Collins (2017, 578) describes such a view, though doesn't endorse it.

Seeing the group as an agent and a locus of responsibility in this way has the benefit of ensuring a straightforward version of *Look-back-look-ahead* – the connection between responsibility and reason for action noted above. The group’s responsibility for the child’s humiliating walk is linked to the possibility that it could have done something about it – namely, acted so as to prevent this from happening, i.e. for that reason.

Furthermore, there is the suggestion that it’s *only* by thinking of the group as an agent that we can make sense of the sorts of considerations that matter in important cases of collective responsibility – such as our responsibility for large-scale environmental damage. Averting environmental disaster is not something about which any ordinary individual agent normally can make a difference. So it’s not clear that this sort of consideration can count as a reason for an ordinary individual. Only something very big and quite extraordinary will be up for this challenge – something in the realm of the monolithic. At the same time, we might hold an agent constraint on reasons: a consideration is a reason for action only for something that is an agent.¹³ If averting some large-scale disaster is a reason for action, it is only a reason for a monolithic agent. If that’s right, and we also want to maintain *Look-back-look-ahead*, then collective responsibility must, in turn, be understood in terms of the reasons of this monolithic agent.

But invoking monolithic agency has its drawbacks. First, many find implausible the thought that the group itself really is an agent.¹⁴ It might be thought an ontological extravagance to think of groups as agents, over and above the constituent individuals. There is the temptation to try to understand action ascribed to the group reductively, in terms of the agency of the constituent individuals. Whether or not such a reductive project can succeed, there is a further worry that many groups seem not – at least not stably – to satisfy the conditions that are often thought necessary for group agency, such as some sort of decision procedure, or an executive/authority structure. Even when a collective is not structured in this way, we might nevertheless want to assign collective responsibility. For example, a collection of passersby might be collectively blameworthy if they didn’t get their act together to move heavy debris to aid an accident victim. But on the current proposal, since the passersby do not constitute an agent, there is no possibility of acting on a reason, and thus no collective responsibility (Held, 1970).

Another concern with the monolithic agent view is that it is not clear how we are to connect the responsibility of the monolithic agent with that of the constituent individuals, in such a way that each of the latter is implicated in what the collective does (Collins 2017: 578-9). For example, one might be employed as a low-level administrator in a gigantic corporation or educational institution, with little sense of the actual purpose of the institution. Such a *nine to five* might not share the aims of the collective, and is only involved so as to make a living and maybe pay for his children’s education. And yet, he might be performing actions that are important for the functioning of the larger institution. His duties (maybe it involves security, or low-level administration, classroom instruction, or publicity) could be executed in ignorance of the real purposes of the institution. Indeed, it might be part of his selection and training that he not be in a position to understand the higher-level aspects of the organization and its function.

This case suggests that there is a sense in which one might be a part of a group in that one serves merely as a human resource for the group or organization’s pursuit of its ends, without genuinely and wittingly *participating* in what the group does. I’m not suggesting that individuals who play a role in the functioning of some monolithic agency are generally exonerated when it

¹³ For discussion in favor of the agent condition, see Collins (2017, 584); Lawford-Smith (2015); Isaacs, 2011; 23-70). Against: Schwenkenbecher (2013, 8; 2018, 111); Wringe (2014, 484ff; see his 2010).

¹⁴ But see Copp 2006, Pettit 2003, Rovane 1997, French 1979.

comes to the blameworthy actions of the monolith.¹⁵ However, the fact that such monolithic agency is compatible with constituent individual agents whose tasks are so narrow and regimented, and who are so ill equipped to understand what the larger entity is up to, suggests that locating an individual as a constituent in some larger agency is not yet to give an account for how he or she is subject to a form of collective responsibility and blame. This is to say that for cases of collective responsibility that can implicate a constituent individual, we need to secure some form of *Look-back-look-ahead* at the level of the constituent individual.

Indeed, the worry might be pressed further with the suggestion that the robustness of the agency attributed to the monolith or group points toward a dampening of the responsibility of the individuals; that is, it might be that robustness of agency at the group level might preclude a form of *Look-back-look-ahead* at the level of the individual. It is partly the lack of responsibility at the individual level that is a central component of Copp's case for taking seriously the idea that some group of individuals is an agent.¹⁶

In general, it seems possible that a group agent might have individuals who are human resource components – even components that are vital for its functioning as an agent – which (or who) do not figure as intentional or full-blown *participants* in the group's action. Thus, it's unclear what implication we are to draw about the responsibility of constituent individuals from the proposition that the group or collective is an agent in its own right. It could very well be that the individuals do not, or even cannot, exercise agency in a way that implicates them with respect to whatever it is that the group or monolithic agent might be responsible for. For all we know, when a monolithic individual is responsible for some S, the constituent individuals are exonerated with respect to it. That would be quite the opposite of what we were looking for. It would seem advisable for our purposes, then, to set aside monolithic individual agency. I do not mean to suggest that monolithic agency has no role to play in any case of collective responsibility. Sometimes there will be a story about how constituent individuals are implicated in what the monolith does. But in many cases there is no monolith. And even if there is a monolith, an important part of the story of how individuals are implicated is left out. I think that to get a handle on collective responsibility, we need to ensure not merely the constituency of the relevant individuals, but the possibility of their *participation* as well. To that end, we need to look to collective action and shared agency.

3. Joint action and participation

A familiar distinction is that between joint action where the group is a structured collective and arguably counts as a novel agent (over and above the constituent individual agents), and joint action of an unstructured collective where the agents are the individuals and there is no novel group agent (Schwenkenbecher 2013: 3; Pettit & Schweikard 2006). It seems promising that by invoking the idea of collective action (joint action in the latter sense), we secure participation by constituent individuals in a way that appealing to the notion of a novel, monolithic individual agency need not.¹⁷

¹⁵ For a view that holds that such individuals are not exonerated, see Kutz (2000b, 156ff).

¹⁶ Copp (2006, §5). Copp imagines cases where individuals playing their roles act in morally unproblematic ways, and yet because of how their decisions are aggregated, the group behaves in a criticizable way. And this commits us to the group's responsibility – precisely because there is no responsibility to be assigned to the individuals.

¹⁷ See Schwenkenbecher's (2018: 117) discussion of Erskine (2014):

...if there is a duty to rescue the child and the passersby can come together to do so, then they each have an obligation to contribute to establishing the kind of group needed for rescuing it...this view requires a certain kind of group to be formed – not a group agent but a goal-oriented collective. Erskine thinks that all that is

But recall that we were interested in understanding participation in order to make sense of the idea that the individual is in a position to act for the relevant reasons. That is, we need to secure *Look-back-look-ahead* at the level of the individual participant. It is not yet clear how the notion of collective or joint agency is supposed to do this. As it turns out, for some cases it seems straightforward how an individual might be in a position to act for the relevant reason, and so the case of being held responsible is clear. Other cases are more challenging and will require us to reconsider some assumptions about the nature of agency and acting for reasons.

First the straightforward cases. Consider an amusing case described by Wringer.

Office: Two people share an office. Due to bad weather the roof starts to collapse. The person who needs to be informed has to be informed by email. A has the technical expertise necessary to describe the damage to the roof in an informative manner, but doesn't know how to use email. B is a computer wizard who doesn't know the first thing about roofs. Between them, they can pass an informative message to the right person. Individually, neither of them can. (Wringer 2014: 479)

A and B are collectively responsible for informing someone of the roof damage, and they can do something about it by sending the email with the relevant information. But at the individual level it's also clear what each can do: A can compose the message, and B can send it. Neither satisfies something like *Capacity* (2) with respect to informing the relevant party. But together they do. And each is capable of performing the actions that would be required for the joint effort.

But recall that the capacity to perform the relevant action is not enough for responsibility. There is, in addition, the question whether one has reason to. Now, in this case, it seems that each participant *does* have the relevant reason. The need to inform the relevant party is a reason to compose a message in A's case and serves as a reason for what A does. Even if A can't accomplish the entirety of the task by himself (because the message must be sent by email and he doesn't know how to do that), he has a relevant reason for his part (composing the message) and thus can do something about the matter. Barring other considerations, it seems then that A satisfies *Look-back-look-ahead* and can be held responsible (alongside B) in the matter. Likewise for B with regard to sending the message that he himself cannot compose.¹⁸

But other cases, such as that of over-determination, pose a challenge for understanding how an individual can act *for the relevant reasons*.¹⁹ We can get to a problematic case by stipulating in the Humiliation scenario that whether or not an individual participates in the bullying makes no difference for the humiliating outcome; the others will engage in bullying irrespective of what the individual does. Given that it makes no difference whether one joins in the bullying – that refraining or attempting to intervene won't change the humiliating outcome – it's not clear how one has a reason to do anything to stop the bullying. The principle is something like this:

required of the individuals here is to act jointly. They need not form a – structured – group agent. This difference is reflected, for example, in the different way in which the coalition of the willing can be held responsible: responsibility ultimately distributes between the members of the group but does not sit at the level of the group as such...

¹⁸ Schwenkenbecher (2013: 9, 11), says something similar discussing Held's case of bystanders lending aid at the scene of a car accident, and attributes this view to Collins (2013). The bystanders have a duty to engage in joint action to prevent some assault, and that this duty can hold of each individually. (Held 1970: 479.)

¹⁹ Schwenkenbecher (2013: 17) notes this, but doesn't address it.

Makes no difference: Sometimes a morally significant outcome S results from the contribution of multiple individuals, and S would result irrespective of the actions of any one of the individuals. In that case, the individual has no reason in light of S to act one way or another.²⁰

If something like this is true, then we lose our grip on a reason that figures as a condition for responsibility. In what sense, then, can one (along with others) be blamed for humiliating the child?

One reaction to the *makes no difference* worry is to reject *Look-back-look-ahead*, allowing for responsibility and blame, even in the absence of the relevant forward-looking reason to act on. Kutz (2002: 563) seems to defend a position like this. He describes these cases as involving a “mediated relation to harm, where injury is brought about through the actions of others...many of them are cases where what any one individual does makes no difference; only together do individuals cause harm.” He adds that

It’s a familiar fact of our moral and legal practices that we blame, punish and demand compensation from complicitous agents even though what they did made no difference...The puzzle arises because, if causal contribution is necessary to responsibility, then no one is responsible, for no one makes a difference...What complicitous responsibility centrally challenges is an appealing, intuitive principle of responsibility, that someone can only be responsible for events over which he had control. (Kutz 2002: 563)

Kutz says that “Once we have an analytical understanding of co-operation, a normative account of complicity follows suit...” (2002 563). On this view, an individual counts as “inclusive” author of actions performed by another agent when each has a participatory intention that joins them in a single collective endeavor; responsibility tracks this inclusive authorship.²¹

Seeing how responsibility tracks authorship is not controversial so long as we’re talking about each author really contributing and making a difference. But what happens when we *don’t* make a difference? Kutz (2002, 564) insists that the point still holds: “...in cases of full over-determination, when no individual really does make a causal difference, blame...may still fairly lie.”

How does this work? Take Kutz’ case of the picnic. (2000: 154; see Nefsky 2015: 250-1 for insightful discussion.) We are setting up a picnic together. While I go to fetch a cooler from the car, you carelessly spread the blanket in such a way as to destroy a flowerbed. There is nothing that I could reasonably have done to make a difference to avoid the consequence; I did everything right – in particular, I can’t keep a constant eye on you; you’re not a child and have

²⁰ See Nefsky 2015, also Parfit 1984, Glover 1975.

²¹ Collins (2017, 580) objects to Kutz, saying,

If each of A, . . . , N intends to ‘w together,’ then there are N intentions, each held by a different individual. Nothing is implied about any of the individuals having any significant relation to any of the others or their intentions, such as a relation of control or influence or emulation between the intentions. So authorship for what the others do—if this is understood as implying individual remedial duties for what the others do—receives insufficient justification.

For Kutz, a *participatory intention* is an instance of the familiar notion of an intention had by an individual. But he *does* impose conditions on it: it has a distinctive content, and is had only when individuals in question are strategically responsive to each other, mutually open about their interaction, and committed to shared goals (Kutz 2000a: 7). So it’s probably not fair for Collins to say that on Kutz’ view there are no significant relations between the respective intentions of the individuals.

no record of reckless disregard for landscaping. And yet, Kutz suggests, I am partly accountable for the damage – though much less so than you, of course. Some support for this assessment might come from comparing my culpability as a participant in the joint action with that of some other picnicker on the other side of the park who had nothing to do with me and my careless picnic partner. That individual on the other side of the park seems not to be at all implicated in the damage to the flowerbed, whereas my culpability, though attenuated, is real. At least, that is the intuition. Thus Kutz concludes:

Whatever the ultimate account of complicitous responsibility...will have to go at least partly by way of the participatory intentions of the agents – their will, independent of its effect, to join in a collective act that does injury. For in the absence of any salient individual causal contribution, surely it is the co-operation itself that explains responsibility. Implication follows participation. (Kutz, 2002, 564)

Kutz is making the point that a lack of control need not preclude responsibility; but the point would seem to extend to our concern – the idea of acting for reasons that amounts to doing something about S. As one of Bjornsson’s bullies, I am implicated as a participant in the activity. But because I can’t make a difference, there is nothing really for me to do about the bullying and humiliation; there is no reason for me to act.

If we accept Kutz’ intuitions about the picnic case, then we do seem to have an instance of accountability and responsibility without having the relevant reason grounding it – without, that is, the reason that figures in doing something about the matter. Regarding Parfit’s famous case of the harmless torturers, Kutz (2002: 564) says “Parfit himself struggles to accommodate consequentialist ethics to a form of responsibility that seems, on its face precisely independent of individual consequence.” For our purposes the moral would seem to be that we don’t need to secure *Look-back-look-ahead* at the individual participant level, so long as we have joint or collective agency.

Now, it may seem that Kutz has identified a way of thinking about responsibility without reason for action (assuming that his intuitions about the picnic case are compelling). But it is troubling to concede that for many of the cases where an individual makes no difference whereas a collective effort does address the matter, that the individual participant in the collective effort is not acting for any relevant reason and so doesn’t count as doing anything about the matter. On contrary, it seems that the individual who is doing her part of some collective effort is very much doing something about the matter, and acting for the relevant reason.

This concern becomes clearer and more pressing when we recognize that the possibility that one might not be a part of the collective effort. For all that Kutz has said so far, it seems that when one is not a participant in some collective effort to address some environmental problem, one is not accountable for not making an effort. Kutz might then suggest that in this case one should *join* in such an effort. But what would be the motivation or reason for doing so? It can’t be the consideration that we would have thought would generate the reason to do something, such as averting environmental disaster or preventing the kid’s humiliation as the case may be. After all, the worry was that the individual has no such reason in these *makes no difference* cases (Nefsky 2015:261-3). But if we ask why one might have a reason to join a collective effort, it would be precisely the sort of consideration like addressing climate change. The central reason one would have thought one has for participating in a collective effort is undermined. I may have other reasons – like enjoying the company of people who share my concerns and values. But it might be more fun to play video games by myself; or maybe the company of other people

who are more carefree and oblivious would offer greater prospect of enjoyment. Of course, I may *care* about the environment much more than video games. But the point is that that concern doesn't seem to translate into a reason for action when one's contribution doesn't make a difference.

Thus, even if we set aside the concerns about how to establish joint action, it seems that Kutz' proposal doesn't get right the reason that one takes oneself as having for doing one's part in the collective activity. It's not as if there is no reason that one might try to locate in Kutz' view. One might, after all, be concerned with accountability and blame. And if Kutz is right that one has accountability in this situation – and indeed there are views where mutual accountability is constitutive of joint action (Gilbert 1990, 2009) – then such a concern will generate reasons to act. But, though a possibility, this is not the sort of reason one naturally has for doing something in these sorts of cases. Accountability was not one's concern; doing something to avoid environmental disaster was (Nefsky 2015).

I suspect that the challenge raised for Kutz' approach points to the idea that accountability is not fundamental; the rightness of the action, or the reasons that make the action right are what really matter.²² *Look-back-look-ahead* connects backward looking responsibility and accountability with forward looking reasons for action. But the important thought underlying *Look-back-look-ahead* is that this isn't merely a connection or correlation; the forward-looking reasons that make the act the right thing to do (partially) explain or ground facts about blame and responsibility. The sort of pure accountability that Kutz has in mind for complicitous responsibility is problematically ungrounded.

That being said, I think that there is something right in Kutz' invocation of intention. This, after all, is what secures the individual participation needed for the individual agent to be implicated in collective responsibility. But we also need the access to reasons for action that make sense of what one is doing in participating.

4. Linking and Transmission

We are imagining in the *makes no difference* cases that it's the individual who doesn't make a difference, so it's unclear what reason he or she has for doing something about the matter. Whereas, the collective might have the wherewithal to get something done, so the *makes no difference* consideration doesn't speak against the collective having a reason. It follows that if we can make sense of how an individual could act on the collective reason, then we might be able to see how an individual is subject to (collective) blame. That is, we could use a version of *Look-back-look-ahead* that connects an *individual* participant to a *collective* reason. We've seen that this is straightforward when the individual's contribution is necessary or significant for the collective outcome. But what about cases where it makes no (significant) difference what the individual does?

I hope enough now has been said to suggest to motivate making sense of the idea of an individual acting on collective reasons in *makes no difference* cases. It's quite another thing, however, to show *how* one can act for collective reasons in *makes no difference* cases. Although I won't be able to provide an adequate defense of that claim here, I will gesture towards the view that I think has some promise.

We should note, first, that there must *be* collective reasons if it's going to be possible for an individual to act on them. I took their existence for granted earlier, when discussing Wringe's case of the collective (A and B) reporting the damage to the roof. Wringe introduces the example

²² Again, I'm bracketing complications arising from moral luck. See note 9 above.

as part of his effort to establish that there are collective reasons.²³ And some might want to resist that there really is a collective reason here, insisting that fundamentally each of A and B has an individual reason to contribute to a collective effort that has a good outcome. And, if that's the case, then all we have to say is that each is individually responsible for making a contribution. That might be an acceptable position to take in this case.²⁴ But then it's not clear what to say about other cases like over-determination where a participant doesn't make a difference and where it is harder to make sense of individual responsibility in a way that doesn't depend on collective responsibility.

For example, take an overdetermination case due to Parfit – that of the firing squad (Parfit, 1984), or take *Humiliation* described above. The contribution of each member of the squad makes no difference for the bad outcome, given what the others do. So no one has a reason not to shoot and, given *Look-back-look-ahead*, no one is responsible for execution. But, assuming that the execution should not take place, there seems to be reason *for the squad* not to shoot. It's not just that it would be nice for the squad not to. There is a reason for action, albeit not one that is to be understood individually, independent of what other individuals have reason to do.

Reflection on such cases and others suggests that we cannot make do simply with individual reasons/obligation. I will be taking for granted that there are collective obligations or reasons in what follows.²⁵

I turn to the normative significance of collective reasons for the individual – specifically, the question of whether it's possible for an individual to act on collective reasons in *makes no difference* cases. It seems that we would need something like the following:

Linking Principle: If I am (or could be) acting with others, and we have a collective reason to ϕ , I am *entitled* to our reason for ϕ -ing; and when I do my part in our ϕ -ing, I am acting for that collective reason.

A couple of provisos would help to make this principle more compelling, one addressing cases where the collective effort is hopeless, and another where one's contribution would be superfluous. When the situation is hopeless, there is no collective reason to address the problematic S because there is simply nothing to be done. In the example of working against environmental disaster, perhaps too much damage has been done, and there aren't enough of us to remedy the situation so that it won't make a difference even if we all exerted ourselves to the utmost. As for the superfluous: knowing that enough people have already contributed would also preclude one from acting on the collective reason. Here there is a collective reason, but it wouldn't make sense of one's efforts since others have already acted on it.²⁶

There may be other sticking points with the Linking Principle, even when supplemented with the provisos concerning the superfluous and the hopeless. One source of reluctance has to do with making sense of an individual's *part* or *contribution* in a collective act in the *makes no difference* cases. What counts as doing one's part, given how miniscule one's contribution is in

²³ Wringer (2014, 79) suggests that collective obligations explain the corresponding individual obligations.

²⁴ Although Schwenkenbecher has her doubts (2018, 114-5) and favors the idea that the individuals are jointly obligated.

²⁵ Another case that has generated substantial discussion is that of Hi-Lo. See Bacharach 2006, Gold and Sugden 2007, Hurley 1989. For useful related discussion sympathetic collective reasons, see Parfit 1984 §26, Jackson 1987, Wringer 2014, Dietz 2016, Schwenkenbecher 2018.

²⁶ See Nefsky 2015 on superfluity, and Björnsson forthcoming for discussion.

some very large collective endeavors, or given that it makes no difference whether one performs the relevant? In reply, I should say that I am not attempting to give an account of the metaphysics of aggregates; so I concede that I am taking for granted that we can make sense of what it would be to contribute to or be a part of some collective effort even in cases of overdetermination or other forms of *makes no difference*. So, for example, we can make sense of the idea that one is doing one's part in the collective act of getting someone elected by, say, casting a vote (or canvassing, or making a campaign contribution, etc). Whereas, one is not (at least not in normal circumstances) doing one's part in that collective electoral effort if one is sitting on the couch twiddling one's thumbs or buying beer at the convenience store – even though in the *makes no difference* scenarios these latter acts have as much of a chance of making a difference on the electoral outcome as the former. Still, supposing we take for granted the notion of contribution here, we can go on to ask about its normative or moral significance. The question that is our concern, then, is how it is that when one is casting a vote, one's reason for doing so is to get someone elected – even if from some individual perspective it makes no difference whether one casts a vote.

A fundamental issue with the Linking Principle concerns the nature of the practical cognition involved in the cases it describes, where one is entitled to collective reasons and can act on them, even in the *makes no difference* circumstances. That is, even where it seems that the justificatory force of the reasons would seem not to be immediately accessible to the individual. A promising approach to explaining how this might be possible invokes the reason preserving function of intention (Roth 2017).²⁷ Intentions play a role in preserving the reasons that figure in deliberation and decision-making, so that when the agent subsequently acts on the intention that issues from the decision, the agent acts for the reasons that went into that decision. For example, I might for various reasons decide and thereby intend to go to a party on the weekend. When it comes time to attend, I do not consider *whether* to attend. After all, I have already decided to go. I don't have to reconsider the reasons; nothing has come up to warrant revisiting the decision. I just straightaway act on the intention and head over (or perhaps think about how to get there, not whether to go). Nevertheless, when I go to the party, the reasons for which I go are the ones that went into my original decision and which I didn't reconsider (or need not have reconsidered) at the time of action.

The proposal is that something like this might apply to the collective case. Imagine, first, that one undertakes to decide whether to act on a collective intention to ϕ . One would have to consider the reasons that support ϕ -ing. But notice that in the *makes no difference* cases many of relevant reasons are not the individual's own; only the collective really has those reasons – precisely because what the individual would do doesn't make a difference. So if the individual qua individual must make a decision as to whether to act on a collective intention, she will be stymied; she can't act for the reasons that make best sense of the collective effort. The point, however, is that to think that an individual must decide on *whether* to act on a collective intention is not to appreciate how intentions function in one's practical thought. Thus, when it's time to act, one doesn't consider whether to act; rather, one acts *directly* on the intention (barring defeaters). And in doing so, one acts for the reasons that went into the decision and intention formation in the first place. So, in applying this idea to the case at hand: the individual acts *directly* on the collective intention without considering whether to do so, and thus without having to consider the reasons. But in executing the intention, the individual is entitled to and acts for

²⁷ Compare Burge 1993 on how working memory might preserve the warranted status of beliefs throughout an episode of reasoning.

the reasons that went into the collective decision. At least, that would be in keeping with the idea propounded in the previous paragraph that intention plays a reasons-preserving role. This would secure *Look-back-look-ahead* at a level that is appropriate for collective responsibility bearing on individual participants.

So, Kutz is right that intention matters, as was suggested earlier. But it matters not because it directly secures accountability/responsibility in a way that circumvents *Look-back-look-ahead*. Intention matters, rather, because it's a way of showing how *Look-back-look-ahead* applies in this case – by securing entitlement to forward looking reasons that are otherwise not available for the individual to act upon.

The picture is one where what I am doing is just a part of what we're doing. In executing the collective intention, the relevant reasons for so acting are the collective reasons; one is entitled to and relies on the collective reasons. And what one is doing makes sense in those terms – the terms that we had thought were proprietary to the entire collective, and not the individual.

One's access to the collective reason is by way of acting directly on the intention. What happens when one considers oneself as an individual agent, acting on one's own? Then the force of the collective reason might be counteracted, and the *makes no difference* considerations could very well have a role to play in this undermining (but see below). But part of the idea of intention, be it collective or diachronic within an individual, is that of a rational stability that can resist revision. Sometimes, a proffered intention should be resisted – such as when the deliberation or values that led to it are confused or misguided, or the assumptions that were in place are no longer relevant, or conditions of communal trust sufficiently eroded. But these sorts of concerns hold for intentions generally, and are not peculiar to the intentions that serve to provide access to collective reasons.

Again, my remarks here are meant only as a gesture at how we might think about what it would be for an individual to act on collective reasons in the *makes no difference* cases. A fuller account would have to defend further the proposal about intentions playing a reason preserving function, not to mention the idea that this sort of reason preservation and entitlement can work not only diachronically within an individual, but between collective and individual levels.²⁸

Also needed is a story about who or what *issues* the collective intentions for one to act on. We can imagine that in the case of structured collectives – institutions etc. – there might be conventional procedures by which decisions are made on the basis of collective reasons, and the corresponding intentions issued. But I think that even when there is no structured collective it is possible for an individual to form the relevant intention. The intention would not be (just) for the intender to act up, but for a collective. No doubt there will be externalist conditions on whether one succeeds in issuing such an intention. It might depend, for example, on whether sufficiently many others are like-minded so as to take up or issue the intention as well. Just when it might be possible to issue such an intention is something that demands further investigation.

I want to turn, finally, to an argument that suggests that the collective reason in the *makes no difference* cases, if there is one, cannot be a reason for the individual to act because it has no normative force for the individual in the first place. We need to identify where this argument goes wrong if we're to make sense of the idea of an individual acting for a collective reason. I think that the following captures how the argument is supposed to proceed:

²⁸ I see the project here as related in interesting ways to certain non-reductive treatments of epistemic warrant in cases of testimony. See also the discussion of identification in Anderson (2001, 31ff).

1. Suppose that there is a collective reason to ϕ . E.g. someone's life will be saved if adequate funds are raised from numerous individuals for the purchase of some very expensive medication.
2. The person is saved whether or not some one individual joins the collective effort. In particular, it makes no difference whether I am a part of the collective effort.
3. So, there is no point for my being a part of the collective effort.
4. Thus, I am not subject to the collective reason. The collective reason puts no normative pressure on me or any particular individual to make a contribution.²⁹

I think that the proper response to the argument is to resist the step from 2 to 3. That is, from the fact that for any individual it makes no difference whether they participate, it does not follow that one person in particular – such as *I, myself* – can be excluded from the collective and not be subject to the normative force of the collective reason.

The diagnosis of what goes wrong with this step of the argument is that it mistakenly introduces a distinct, individual element in order to resist a collective line of practical thought. Thus, reasoning from one's own point of view, one might think: there is no point for me to make a contribution, since I don't make a difference; I may as well do something else, like go off and have a beer with a friend, or take a pleasant drive in my SUV, etc. I don't deny that one's interests (be they egoistic, altruistic or whatever) can come into conflict with some collective goal. But the argument was meant to show that there was no normative force to the collective reason in the first place, not that there was some distinct point of view from which one might resist the normative force of the collective reason. If we start with the collective reason, then the recognition that not everyone will need to make a contribution entails not that I will not have to but rather that *some individuals* or *some one* of us will not have to. It takes more than the thought that I don't make a difference to get to the conclusion that *I* am amongst those who have no reason to contribute.

The thought is that there is a collective reason, and for all that's been said, it is a reason for which I can act by acting directly on the relevant intention. My earlier objection to Kutz was that he wanted to secure responsibility while, in effect, conceding that the responsible agent has no reason. He was thereby ditching *Look-back-look-ahead*. I think that Kutz is too concessive to the *makes no difference* worry. Although the agent doesn't have the relevant individual reason for contributing, I am suggesting that there is a collective reason to which she's entitled, and for which she may act.

In this paper I have investigated the *Look-back-look-ahead* principle that draws a connection between responsibility and reasons for action. If we are to apply this principle to cases of collective responsibility in which an individual might be implicated, it would help to make sense of the idea of an individual acting for a collective reason. My very preliminary suggestion as to how this might work draws on the thought that intentions might preserve and transmit reasons of a collective so that an individual acting on the intention is entitled to the collective reasons and acts for those reasons. The idea is modeled on how intentions function within an individual over time. In acting directly on a previously acquired intention, one acts for the reasons that went into so deciding. If this provides a suitable model for the collective case, then we might be able to preserve the connection between responsibility and reasons for action in those collective cases

²⁹ Related arguments are rehearsed by Nefsky (2015: 249) and Dietz (2016: 979).

where *makes no difference* considerations make it hard to see what individual reason one has for doing one's part.

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