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GETTING OUR ACT TOGETHER

A THEORY OF COLLECTIVE MORAL OBLIGATIONS

Anne Schwenkenbecher



“This book offers a compelling contribution to the philosophical literature on the important topic of collective obligation. It should be on the must-read list of any philosopher working on issues of collective responsibility, collective obligation, and the moral dimensions of any issues requiring a coordinated/cooperative effort.”

– Tracy Isaacs, *Western University, Canada*



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Getting Our Act Together

Together we can often achieve things that are impossible to do on our own. We can prevent something bad from happening, or we can produce something good, even if none of us could do it by ourselves. But when are we morally required to do something of moral importance together with others?

This book develops an original theory of collective moral obligations. These are obligations that individual moral agents hold jointly but not as unified collective agents. The theory does not stipulate a new type of moral obligation but rather suggests that to think of some of our obligations as joint or collective is the best way of making sense of our intuitions regarding collective moral action problems. Where we have reason to believe that our efforts are most efficient as part of a collective endeavour, we may incur collective obligations together with others who are similarly placed as long as we are able to establish compossible individual contributory strategies towards that goal. The book concludes with a discussion of ‘massively shared obligations’ to major-scale moral problems such as global poverty.

Getting Our Act Together: A Theory of Collective Moral Obligations will appeal to researchers and advanced students working in moral, political and social philosophy, philosophy of action, social epistemology and philosophy of social science.

Anne Schwenkenbecher is Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at Murdoch University, Western Australia. She is the author of *Terrorism: A Philosophical Enquiry* (2012). Her articles on collective action and obligations have appeared in *The Monist*, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, *Synthese*, *Ethics & International Affairs* and the *Journal of Applied Philosophy*.

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Getting Our Act Together

A Theory of Collective Moral Obligations

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Getting Our Act Together

A Theory of Collective Moral Obligations

Anne Schwenkenbecher

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Acknowledgements

Philosophical works are often more biographically motivated than scholars may be aware of. It took me a good few years to realise that my interest in collective action and responsibility was closely tied to growing up in a state that cultivated a collective narrative of popular resistance against injustice as its founding myth while also having its own fate sealed through precisely such an act of collective resistance against the injustice it committed against its own citizens. Between 1989 and 1990, through peaceful protests and acts of civil disobedience, the people of East Germany first overthrew their government and finally ended the existence of the very state they were protesting against, the German Democratic Republic (GDR). They took to the streets demanding democratic reforms – with the initial movement being as passionately inspired by a vision of a more humane kind of socialism as it was short-lived. It found an end with German reunification on 3 October 1990 when East Germans became citizens of another country, shortly after Francis Fukuyama (1989) declared the ‘End of History’ over the (then pending) collapse of the socialist block and the perseverance of capitalist societies.

Suddenly, we – who had grown up with the belief that our state was founded upon the ideals of those who fought Fascisms’ injustices and that our socialist society was morally superior to capitalism and imperialism – found ourselves to be the ones in the dock of history. Why had we – or, more precisely, why had our parents and grandparents – not resisted the unjust regime we lived under sooner and more decidedly? Why had they been complicit for so long? Repeatedly, I found myself explaining that the vast majority of people in the GDR had just lived ordinary lives: they complained about problems and performed little acts of micro-resistance among all those acts of social and political conformity, just like people in other societies. Also, it was far from easy to organise resistance, because the stakes were high and surveillance was pervasive. Protests only took off once there was a critical mass of people – just like in any other society. We were probably neither more nor less heroic or complicit than people anywhere else. Or were we?

Over the years, the question I was asked – the question we have been asking ourselves – stayed with me: *when should we ‘get our act together’ to effect change in the world?* As I am writing these lines, protestors of the Black Lives Matter movement across the world are taking to the streets to denounce racial discrimination and demand justice for those who have been and continue to be victims of systemic racism. Runaway climate change continues to threaten our planet and life as we know it. A global pandemic is bringing the collective nature of any successful effort to ward off public health threats into painful focus.

In trying to answer the question of when we should (get our) act together, in this book, I start with small-scale, one-off cooperation problems and ultimately turn to our obligations to collectively combat large-scale systemic injustice. Unsurprisingly, the clear-cut conclusions that can be drawn for small-scale collective action cases are lacking when it comes to complex, large-scale problems. While I will not explain away this – moral and phenomenal – gap, I aim to show why it exists and which – epistemic and other – factors can play a role in strengthening our collective obligations vis-à-vis large-scale injustice.

We cooperate – often spontaneously – on a small scale. But we are also very good at contributing to large-scale collective ventures that we consider morally important. We vote, we comply with public health recommendations in a global pandemic not just because it protects us but because it protects other people and promotes a public good.

Further, the pursuit of knowledge is a collective endeavour. Writing an academic monograph may seem like a quintessentially individual effort, but it is in a crucial sense collaborative. As such, this book is a perfect illustration of the very thought that guides my argument: we are essentially cooperative creatures who rely on each other all the time. Philosophical ideas and concepts materialise and are shaped through engaging with other people’s ideas and views – be they published work or conveyed in conversation. It is through countless discussions with other people that I have been able to develop and continuously improve the ideas in this book. I am extremely grateful to all of those who were willing to engage with me for their intellectual generosity, curiosity and patience. In particular, I would like to thank Valentin Beck, Jelena Belić, Gunnar Björnsson, Olle Blomberg, Sean Bowden, Zlata Bozac, Justin Bruner, David Butler, Simon Caney, Steve Clarke, Stephanie Collins, Garrett Cullity, Niels de Haan, Nenad Dimitrijevic, Ned Dobos, Laura D’Olimpio, Hein Duijf, Daniel Dzah, Lina Eriksson, Toni Erskine, Annika Fiebich, Tim Flanagan, Christina Friedlaender, Alberto Giubilini, Natalie Gold, Henning Hahn, Daniel Halliday, Richard Hamilton, Kendy Hess, Johannes Himmelreich, Violetta Igneski, Tracy Isaacs, Tamara Jugov, Elizabeth Kahn, John Kleinig, Matthew Kopec, Holly Lawford-Smith, Christian Lee, Michael Levine, Alejandra Mancilla, Larry May, Jeff McMahan, Zoltán Miklósi, Seumas Miller, Toby Miller, Andrew Moore, Piero Moraro, Olaf

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Some of the material in this book has been published before in journal articles or book chapters, and I am grateful for the permission to include

extended, revised and updated sections from these previous publications in the book:

- The Introduction contains sections from The Epistemology of Group Duties: What We Know and What We Ought to Do. *Journal of Social Ontology* 2020, published online ahead of print. Published by De Gruyter.
- Chapter 1 was previously published as The Possibility of Collective Moral Obligations. In *Routledge Handbook on Collective Responsibility*, eds. Saba Bazargan-Forward and Deborah Tollefsen. New York: Routledge, 2020, pp. 158–173.
- Chapter 4 contains sections from Collective Moral Obligations: ‘We-Reasoning’ and the Perspective of the Deliberating Agent. *The Monist* 2019(102): 151–171. Published by Oxford University Press.
- Chapter 6 was previously published as Making Sense of Collective Moral Obligations: A Comparison of Current Approaches. In *Collectivity: Ontology, Ethics and Social Justice*, eds. Tracy Isaacs, Kendy Hess and Violetta Igneski: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018, pp. 109–132.
- Chapter 7 contains sections from Structural Injustice and Massively Shared Obligations. *Journal of Applied Philosophy* (2020), first view. Published by Wiley.

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Introduction

Being cooperative is natural to us – we have set up our social world in a way that both presupposes and requires continuous joint efforts. We rely on each other all the time, assuming that others will play their part in these shared endeavours as we are playing ours. From basic coordination when sharing and navigating public spaces, to enjoying social activities with friends and loved ones, to working in a team with others in our professional capacities on complex tasks, “[w]e seem to have a natural capacity to engage in activities with others, which is constitutive of us as social creatures” (Seemann 2007: 217).¹

Cooperation works really well in many if not most situations we find ourselves in. Still, we regularly encounter collective action problems that challenge us: whether these arise because we have arranged the social world in a suboptimal way or whether something unforeseen and socially unrehearsed occurs – we can get stuck with problems that we have not developed (and may not even be able to develop) behavioural patterns or effective joint responses for.

Philosophers have spent considerable energy on analysing small-scale cases of impromptu collective assistance among random bystanders, for instance (Held 1970; Goodin 2012; Collins 2013; Schwenkenbecher 2014b; Aas 2015; Collins 2019; Schwenkenbecher 2019). Not only practically but also conceptually more challenging are large-scale moral problems, in particular structural injustice. Some of these problems could be substantially improved through *distributive collective action* – attending rallies, changing our day-to-day activities and adopting certain collective behavioural patterns.

But for the great majority of collective moral action problems – especially where groups lack organisational structure and where collaboration is ad hoc – things are more complicated. Collective action is as ubiquitous as it is fraught with risks and failure, especially in its initial phase. Individual efforts are often in vain unless (sufficiently many) others cooperate. They will be costly for those acting unilaterally or pioneering new ideas while often producing no benefit for anyone. Worse, uncoordinated action might even stymie collective efforts to produce such benefits.

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In other words, cooperation comes with its very specific set of problems surrounding the uncertainty of others' actions, intentions and motives. This uncertainty may undermine agents' reasons to choose cooperative (multilateral) over non-cooperative (unilateral) options, or their motivation to do so, or even make them fail to perceive of (or frame) a situation as one requiring cooperation at all. Successful communication can be stymied by a variety of factors and even where it works, uncertainties and disagreements concerning the joint goal, its relative (moral) importance, and the individual strategies that will produce that goal will often jeopardise the collective endeavour. In small-scale scenarios with groups of manageable size, continued mutual reassurance is often key to the success of any joint endeavour. In larger, unstructured groups the problem is often in the lack of direct communication between group members and uncertainty regarding group membership.

Philosophy is but one of the academic disciplines trying to illuminate the collective nature of our existence: sociology, psychology, economics and biology – the academic literature on the topic is burgeoning. This book takes a philosophical – and therewith admittedly narrow – perspective on collective aspects of our existence.

More concretely, and more narrowly still, this book is a defence of the idea that people can be *jointly obligated* in the sense of *sharing a collective moral duty*. An intuitive understanding of such requirements regularly surfaces in our actions, yet moral theory has been slow to pick up on them. Take the following case:

Commuters: On a busy weekday morning at Stirling Station in Perth, Western Australia, a man gets trapped between the commuter train and the station's platform. If the train moves he will be crushed. Dozens of people who happen to be on the platform witnessing his predicament join forces in pushing the train to tilt it away from the man and free him.²

None of the commuters could have helped the trapped man on their own; in order to assist him they had to collaborate, and so they did. Consider also the following scenario:

The global pandemic: Early in 2020, a coronavirus that originated in the Chinese province of Wuhan in late 2019, starts spreading across the globe. As it is becoming clear just how contagious and aggressive COVID-19 is, countries across the world adopt extreme measures to stop the spread of the virus. Populations are mandated to stay indoors except for essential trips outside, public institutions, bars and restaurants close, and people are asked to practice social distancing to limit the number of people they come into contact with. Places with high levels of compliance report a rapid decline of infections.

This case is very different from the one presented earlier: the circumstances under which the individual collaborators act differ greatly between the two cases. This is important for our moral obligations, as I will show later. Still, I argue that there is a sense in which the people in either scenario had a collective obligation to assist those in need.

It should be obvious by now that I am not interested in the obligations of organisations and corporate agents here. I believe that a lot of very good and very illuminating work has been done with regard to the agency of such groups and their ability to be addressees of moral demands (French 1984; Erskine 2003; List and Pettit 2011; Tollefsen 2015).

Instead, I am interested in groups of agents who are not organised but which – with either some very basic or no level of coordination and organisation – can willingly bring about outcomes. Such pluralities of agents may be groups of passers-by that are able to spontaneously collaborate to assist someone in danger, or they may be groups of people who collect money to help a friend in need, or they may just be people who unite behind a common cause without knowing each other in person. The reason why they are interesting for me is that they can effect change and they can – in some sense – act in the world. The book is trying to answer the question of *when* we can have obligations to perform a certain action or achieve a particular outcome *together*.

It is fair to say that traditional normative ethical theory has almost exclusively focused on what individuals ought to do and how they ought to act *as individuals*.³ That is, the notion of agency underlying traditional moral theory is individualistic.⁴ According to Neil Levy,

[t]he individual is not merely the primary unit of analysis and bearer of value; for the most part, individualism is taken for granted to such an extent that philosophers are no more aware of their individualism than fish are of the water in which they swim.

(2018: 185)

In this book, I not only try to show how we can expand traditional moral theory to incorporate collectivism but also argue that such an approach better reflects how deeply collectivism is engrained in our everyday thinking and moral practice.

I am interested in finding out when individual moral agents have obligations together with others in cases where they are facing a morally relevant choice and where individual action alone is either insufficient for doing what is morally optimal or even where individual action cannot make a difference to the better at all, leaving aside the substantive question of what makes any particular choice morally optimal.

Collective moral action problems are intriguing because our intuitive or standard responses vary greatly, depending on the specific features of the situation: while we all accept that together with others we have greater

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capacities than on our own and that bundling those capacities will often lead to better outcomes, we regularly feel torn between participating in the collective effort or choosing what is individually efficacious (but perhaps collectively suboptimal). In those cases, traditional moral theory is often at a loss. As yet, we lack the adequate conceptual tools. This book is meant to provide such tools and further our understanding of our obligations in joint-necessity cases. At the same time, I hope that it makes the reader realise that many of our obligations – or the way we perceive of them – are already in an important sense collective; as such I am not aspiring to posit a new type of moral obligation. I see my task more as providing a conceptual account of something that is already part of our moral practice.

In a bid to overcome the individualist blinkers of canonical ethics, one can occasionally observe a tendency in the recent literature to overstretch the idea of *collective* obligations and responsibility. Some authors have – in my view too easily – declared all kinds of complex problems – including global poverty and climate change – to ground collective obligations, often in a crude top-down fashion, which assumes that our moral obligations are merely imperatives to produce what is collectively morally optimal. My book will take a more cautious approach by focusing specifically on the perspective of the deliberating moral agent. As such, it is partly an argument against an unqualified proliferation of collective obligations, partly advocating a refined understanding of what these obligations are.

My views on the subject of this book have shifted over time. In my earlier articles, in particular my 2013 paper in *Ratio*, I opposed the view that we can have large-scale collective obligations. And even though I am still very sceptical of many of the arguments made in favour of such ‘global obligations’, in the final chapter of this book, I give a qualified defence of such a view. Most moral agents will hold a variety of different obligations – individual and collective – to contribute to addressing large-scale collective moral action problems. Many of us will not be in a position to initiate collective action but merely to contribute to existing endeavours. This, too, is a way of discharging our collective obligations.

Ultimately, I am hoping that this theory of collective moral obligations can help us better understand some of the conundrums we are facing in an ever more complex, interconnected world. Despite greater-than-ever exposure to information concerning the impacts of our actions and unprecedented levels of opportunity for collaboration across national and cultural boundaries, we might be growing ever more uncertain about what it means to be doing the right thing.

Notes

1. On how humans may have evolved to be cooperative, see Michael Tomasello (Tomasello, M. (2014). *A Natural History of Human Thinking*. Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press; Tomasello, M. (2016). *A Natural History of Human Morality*. Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press).

2. This happened on 7 August 2014 (www.abc.net.au/news/2014-08-06/man-freed-after-leg-trapped-in-gap-on-perth-train-station/5652486). See a similar case from Japan from the same year: www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/22/tokyo-train-passengers-rescue-woman-trapped and www.youtube.com/watch?v=39i89NJNCRQ (accessed on 22 February 2017).
3. Systematic development of ‘collectivist’ ethical theories did not take place until the last quarter of the twentieth century. Early texts include Held, V. (1970). Can a Random Collection of Individuals Be Morally Responsible? *Journal of Philosophy*, 67(14), 471–481; Regan, D. (1980). *Utilitarianism and Co-Operation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Parfit, D. (1984). *Reasons and Persons*. Melbourne: Clarendon Press; May, L. (1987). *The Morality of Groups*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press; May, L. and S. Hoffman (1991). *Collective Responsibility: Five Decades of Debate in Theoretical and Applied Ethics*. Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
4. Neil Levy argues, “With few exceptions, work on moral responsibility in the Anglophone world is resolutely individualistic” (Levy, N. (2018). Socializing Responsibility. In K. Hutchison, C. MacKenzie and M. Oshana (Eds.), *Social Dimensions of Moral Responsibility* (pp. 185–205). New York: Oxford University Press). Contra Levy, some might think that some ethical theories have been taking collective effects into account in some sense (rule consequentialism, for instance. Here the rule to follow is the one that would produce the best consequences if it were generally adhered to). However, such an approach is still tied to an individualist framework precisely because it does not locate the unit of agency in the collective but in the individual.