

# 19

## INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION

*Michael Skerker*

### 19.1 Introduction

This chapter will develop standards for assessing individual moral responsibility for collective action. In some cases, these standards expand a person's responsibility beyond what she or he would be responsible for if performing the same physical behavior outside of a group setting. I will argue that structural differences between two ideal types of groups—organizations and goal-oriented collectives—largely determine the baseline moral responsibility of group members for the group's collective action. (Group members can be more or less responsible for collective action beyond that baseline due to personal qualities like knowledge of the intended collective outcome.) The same individual physical behavior can make the member of a goal-oriented collective responsible for the entire collective action to an equal degree with her fellow group members, whereas the typical organization member is only responsible for his contributory action.

I will proceed with a culpability standard of responsibility in mind when I discuss individual responsibility. Many agree that culpability is the most morally satisfying standard of individual responsibility because actors are fully able to control the behavior for which they are deemed responsible. It follows that people can be instructed how they ought to behave; they can intentionally aim at that behavior; and they take conscious steps to reform if they miss the mark.

After the problem of assessing individual responsibility for collective action is exemplified with a thought experiment in section 19.2 and some key definitions are provided in section 19.3, the heart of the argument about individual responsibility in goal-oriented collectives and organizations will be presented in sections 19.4 and 19.5, respectively.

### 19.2 Problem Statement

Assigning individual responsibility for collective action can be a challenging proposition. I am going to use a thought experiment involving collective violent action, juxtaposing the actions of a service member and a militia member, to discuss the ideas of this chapter, but these ideas could be expressed by juxtaposing formal and informal groups in any arena, e.g. hospital employees vs. Good Samaritans rendering aid, fire-fighters vs. neighbors cooperating to put out a house fire, etc.

## *Individual Responsibility*

Country A is fighting an unjust, aggressive war against country B while also conducting peace-keeping operations in nearby country C, which has been wracked by tribal violence.

Archer is a mechanic in country C who fixes vehicles for one of the tribal militias. He eagerly volunteered to participate in its genocidal campaigns against rival tribes and was assigned to fix the militia's vehicles.

Baker is a helicopter mechanic serving aboard country A's aircraft carrier, which is off the coast equidistant from B and C. He (with others) is responsible for daily maintenance on four of the squadron's attack helicopters, # 601–604. He is never informed about the missions of the various helicopter crews and performs daily maintenance on the copters regardless of their missions. A given copter may perform very different missions day to day.

On a given day, copter 601 attacks enemy troops in country B; 602 bombs a hospital in country B; 603 supports troops protecting villagers from a militia in country C; and 604 is grounded, in need of spare parts.

It is at first difficult to assess Archer and Baker's responsibility for the collective actions they help to causally advance. It is not plausible to think that any level of causal contribution makes a contributor fully morally responsible for any ensuing unjust collective action. Through minute causal connections, nearly everyone in the world would be responsible for nearly every collective unjust act. It is similarly implausible to exonerate all except the direct perpetrators of unjust collective action, since all the violent actors in the above case depend on support personnel in order to be effective. Further, a slightly different argument exonerating all who act in complex collectives to perpetrate unjust acts would implausibly imply that all one needs to do to avoid blame for an unjust act is to bring an accomplice. Clearly, it is absurd to assert that an assault victim could blame her single assailant but could not blame anyone if beaten by a group of three people (Cooper 1987: 140; Erskine 2003: 21).

Having set aside the two most extreme arguments let us consider the two mechanics' contributions. Archer made possible some of the genocidaires' transportation. Is he then morally responsible for everything they did after they left his garage? He knew they planned to murder villagers, but Archer did not kill anyone; all he did was fix trucks. There were other mechanics working for the militia too, and the militia could have gotten to its destination eventually with different vehicles. If Archer is responsible or partly responsible for genocide, is he also responsible for things he (and maybe the other militia members) did not know they planned to do? If one of the genocidaires in Archer's truck also decides to desecrate a religious shrine while he is in the village, is Archer responsible for that "deviation" from the mission as well? Where does Archer's responsibility terminate? Is Archer responsible for child abuse if a genocidaire returns to his home village on Archer's truck after the massacre and beats his son?

Baker seems even farther removed from wrongdoing. Like Archer, all he did was fix some engines. Yet unlike Archer, he did not know any of the missions the helicopters were executing; as such he could not have intended his causal contribution to be in furtherance of a particular mission. Further, he did not have Archer's evil motive of contributing toward an unjust collective action. He was acting under orders, in an organization dependent on obedience for efficient functioning, which he plausibly believes is a good and vital institution. Yet helicopters cannot fly unless they are maintained by aviation mechanics. So is Baker responsible for a) his repairs alone, b) the lawful, but possible immoral, killing of enemy troops, c) the unlawful and immoral bombing of a hospital, d) the unjust war as a whole, e) saving villagers from a militia; or e) combinations of the above? Generally speaking, are members of groups responsible for

their immediate individual actions, the proximate joint actions they advance with the help of their immediate sub-group, the ultimate large-scale action resulting from the coordinated action of the entire group, or all or two of the above? Further, how does the level of their personal knowledge or intentionality regarding the proximate and ultimate actions affect their responsibility for them?

### 19.3 Two Types of Groups

Distinguishing between two kinds of groups, organizations and goal-oriented collectives will help assess Archer and Baker's moral responsibility for the collective actions they help to causally advance. As we will see, differences in these two ideal-type groups' internal structures will permit a theorist to ascribe the injustice of the collective action the group perpetrates in different ways to the group members.

Organizations are long-standing, formally-constituted groups with stable roles and rotating personnel, like companies, the military, religious orders, and government departments. The structure of organizations will typically determine what their members know, and therefore can intend, with respect to the collective actions the organization performs. *Atypical* organization members will know or intend things about the collective actions, in a sense, in spite of the organization's structure.

A key aspect of organizations important for us to address in order to understand the role played by organization members' individual intentions and motives is what some theorists call a corporate intention (French 1987; Isaacs 2011; Pettit 2003). Corporate intentions are not simply an aggregate of the group's members' intentions, for two reasons. First, individuals cannot intend complex collective actions. If an intention is a kind of mental event that directs a specific, deliberate action, then an individual person cannot, strictly speaking, intend to win a baseball game; build a cruise ship; or win a war. These ends can only be accomplished through the collective action of groups (as we will see, a person can intend to do something to *contribute* to a collective end and can be motivated to see the fulfillment of the collective end).

Second, something functionally similar to an individual's intention is created through the organization's unique protocols, irreducible to any one organization member's intention. These protocols are what Seumas Miller calls "joint mechanisms" or Peter French calls "corporate internal decision structures" (Miller 2001: 174; French 1987: 143; Pettit 2003: 182; Isaacs 2011: 68) sets of interlocking behaviors such as a decision-making procedures or protocols for transmitting orders used to coordinate actions and bring about certain types of outcomes within organizations. Joint mechanisms allow for variations based on the participants' varying desires and inputs. For example, company bylaws might indicate that certain decisions are to be made by a board of directors through a vote, but each board member is free to vote as she wishes (Miller 2006: 174–6). It follows that the mechanism's output (a subordinates' carrying out orders, the outcome of a vote, etc.) can be contrary to some of the participants' preferences. Importantly, the resultant corporate intention may not reflect the personal intention of any of the participants (Isaacs 2011: 30).

Corporate intentions are functionally identical with human intentions in the sense that they have the same relation to corporate actions as individual intentions do to individual actions (Isaacs 2011: 30, 37; Pettit 2003: 179, 182–3). They lead the collective to act. A business's corporate intention, set by a planning team, such as "Model 4032 of item X will be produced in time for the third quarter" directs employees to engage in specific actions which will interact in such a way that the business produces model 4032 in the third quarter (described further below). The term "policy" might be profitably substituted for "corporate intention" but I will

defer to received usage. To be clear, organizations are not super-persons with corporate urges, corporate emotions, and the like. Whatever we wish to call them: these intentions, “intentions,” or policies are corporate in the sense that they are irreducible to the human intentions of any one group member.

Apart from organizations, much group action takes place in another kind of group relevant to our concern with group responsibility since it is a group voluntarily formed in order to accomplish some goal. A “goal-oriented collective” is an ad hoc group assembled by its members for the accomplishment of a particular shared goal—like a group of campers, picnickers, or bank robbers (Isaacs 2011: 24). Unlike organizations, characteristic members in goal-oriented collectives know the collective end the group exists to bring about and intend to make causal contributions in order to bring about that end because they are motivated to see its fruition. Whereas typical organization members have their knowledge of, and intentions toward, the organization’s collective actions framed by the structure of the group, the influence between members’ subjective states and the group structure flows in the other way in goal-oriented collectives. Such groups get their characteristic features from their founding members’ (and similarly disposed entrants’) horizontally coordinated, meshing intentions to perform actions contributing toward the commonly identified collective end (Bratman 1999) and their identical motives to bring about the collective end that constitutes the group’s *raison d’être*. There may be ambiguous cases where ad hoc groups become more formalized over time and take on more of the qualities of organizations. I will refer to goal-oriented collectives in what follows as an ideal type. I do not claim that these are the only two types of groups but these two clearly cover much of the collective contexts for action.

#### **19.4 Responsibility for Ultimate Collective Actions in Goal-Oriented Collectives**

Having discussed the difference between organizations and goal-oriented collectives, the next task is to ask if members of these groups can be individually responsible for their collective action and if the different structures of the group make a difference for member responsibility. For example, is Archer responsible for genocide, for the murders perpetrated by the genocidaires ferried on the particular trucks he fixed, or merely for fixing some truck engines? Is Baker responsible for fixing engines (his individual action), for airstrikes (a proximate collective action), or for the war (the ultimate collective action)?

We need to consider if the collective actions of organizations and goal-oriented collectives can be scaled down in such a way that the full moral weight of the collective action is present in the contributory action. I will discuss goal-oriented collectives first. The assassination of Julius Caesar is a familiar and easily imagined example of a goal-oriented collective action. I will use it as a reference for what follows. The collective action of a group of senators stabbing Caesar can be scaled down for the purpose of moral consideration to a single contributing action of one senator stabbing Caesar. We have no problem assessing each member’s culpability for the collective action when we can scale down a collective action like this one that is the aggregate of largely identical actions. A culpability standard for individual action looks at the actor’s power, knowledge, intention, and motive. Specifically, a culpability standard considers the actor’s power to plan, commit, and complete an action; his knowledge (or awareness) of his action and its likely outcome; his personal intention to commit the action; and his motive to bring about the associated end. Such a standard finds sufficient material to analyze in the person of each senator to deem him culpable for the assassination. We come to the same conclusion of culpability for assassination whether we analyze a senator acting in concert with others or a senator

assassinating Caesar on his own. Each Roman senator voluntarily performs a physical action in concert with others' identical performances—an individual action sufficient on its own to kill Caesar—fully aware that stabbing can lead to death; intending to stab him; and hoping he dies as a result.

It is important to note for what follows, that it is not the case that each senator would be culpable for assassination only in the event that each senator's contributory action was a lethal blow. Due to the nature of the collective action, each conspiring senator is culpable for murder even if his contributory was a non-lethal action, either for it being a non-lethal stabbing or it not being an act of violence at all. Had one of the conspirators acted alone in these cases, he would be culpable for assault, attempted assassination, or no crime at all. Yet operating as part of a cabal, he is culpable for assassination even if his sword thrust only grazed the dictator or if he only smuggled the swords into the Senate since he knowingly and intentionally joined a group that intended to kill Caesar and which did kill Caesar. While the case is intuitively clearer when the constituent physical behaviors are identical, culpability is equally shared even when members contribute diverse physical behaviors to the collective end.<sup>1</sup> When a person who wishes to achieve an outcome that is only possible through group cooperation knowingly joins a group expressly dedicated to the singular achievement of that end, he is using that group as a kind of instrument to achieve an end he values. Other group members act with him and in his name even when he is not directly contributing to a joint project since they would not be acting but for the existence of the group and the contributions of all its members. He should thereby be held responsible for everything the group does that is in line with the features that commended themselves to his membership—even if he did not know about the specific joint action in question (Kutz 2000: 122, 144, 155, 157; Bazargan 2013: 124; Narveson 2002: 191–2; Feinberg 1991: 62; Mellema 2006: 171; Runciman 2003: 47; Sadler 2006: 139; Fain 1972: 80).

Let us return to our thought experiment involving the mechanics. Archer wants to destroy the hated ethnic group; joins a militia he knows is bent on that end; and intends to fix engines as a contributory action furthering genocide. He does not necessarily know where the truck he fixes will go tomorrow, but knows they will serve the militia's purpose. To anticipate the argument to follow, Archer cannot claim to be ignorant of his group's actions in the way that someone in a large organization can reasonably claim ignorance of his group's action. Whereas an organization like a corporation or military may be engaged in activities broadly characterized as “generating profits” or “serving the state,” the size, complexity, and compartmentalization of organizations blind most participants to the specific collective actions the organization performs. The breadth of the organization's general mission also prevents the theorist from assuming that participants' motives for contributing their work product is morally dubious since the broad corporate mission does not have the obvious negative moral status like that of a more narrowly-tailored group like a genocidal militia. It thus seems important to follow Isaacs in limiting a charge of complicity to entrants/recruits to goal-oriented collectives, excluding entrants/recruits to organizations (cf. Kutz 2000: 157; Bazargan 2013: 187).

Is Archer more or less responsible for genocide than the other members of the militia? It may be descriptively helpful to categorize different types of complicity within a group (e.g. recruiter, facilitator, encourager, etc.) (Mellema 2006). Yet I think it is appropriate to assign equal moral responsibility to all causal contributors rather than identify different levels of responsibility with different job descriptions in a goal-oriented collective. Responsibility for the collective action of a goal-oriented collective can be assigned in this way because all the traditional markers of culpability for individual immoral action are met on the part of each group member. While the behavioral aspect of their contributory action may be morally trivial unto itself, the participant's motive to bring about the unjust collective action and participatory intention to do anything

to support the group's characteristic activity makes the participant "the inclusive author of the group's actions" (Bazargan, quoting Kutz 2013: 186). Thus, his motive and participatory intention change how we should identify Archer's action, from "fixing the engine" to "participating in genocide." Not only does the collective action depend on Archer's material contribution, but Archer is only fixing engines, rather than doing something more obviously problematic, because he volunteered to do whatever he was best suited to do in order to contribute to the end he shared with others. He joined the militia because he wanted to contribute to its characteristic work of genocide. Had there been enough mechanics, he might have been handed a machete and told to get after it. Archer is equally morally responsible for genocide and can be punished with an equal sentence alongside those who directly killed people.

An exception to this argument about equal responsibility would occur in a scenario where a goal-oriented collective lost some of the transparency that gives it the moral character highlighted here. Imagine a group is formed to support a political candidate: they hand out flyers, make phone calls in his support, etc. A faction within that group begins to engage in violent actions on behalf of the candidate. A member of the group who, reasonably, really had no idea what some of the members were doing would not be responsible for the political violence. It is conceivable that a goal-oriented collective might take on more of the aspects of an organization in this way.

### 19.5 Responsibility for Ultimate Actions in Organizations

By contrast, the characteristic collective action of organizations, what some call "irreducibly corporate actions," do not scale down to the individual contributory actions retaining the moral character of the macro action (Isaacs 2011; Erskine 2003; Runciman 2003; Fain 1972; Pettit 2003; French 1991; Copp 2006; Cooper 1972). In irreducibly corporate actions, very different contributory actions performed by actors with varying levels of knowledge about the wider enterprise are combined by means of a corporate intention to form a collective action. Bearing in mind a comparison with the scaling down of assassination-by-group to assassination-by-individual, the morally interesting aspects of an organization's actions and its component actions are often lost when we look at a member's contribution to that collective action. The moral character of the collective action is lost amongst its component actions because of the typical member's fractional causal responsibility for collective action, his blinkered epistemic position, and his compelled adoption (explained below) of the organization's corporate intention and motive.

For example, we can see Baker's control over, knowledge of, and intentions with respect to the helicopters' operations are negligible. While his helping to fix the engines is materially necessary for the airstrikes to happen, the repairs do not directly contribute to the airstrikes. He performs daily maintenance on the helicopters whether they are conducting airstrikes, performing patrols, rescuing shipwreck survivors, engaging in training missions, or sitting below deck. Baker does not know anything in particular about the airstrikes. He forms an intention to tighten certain bolts; lube certain valves; and perform computer diagnostics merely because he was ordered to do so. Absent the actions of thousands of other people, his engine maintenance would have absolutely nothing to do with an airstrike.

One might suspect Baker's intention to fix the engines offers grounds for responsibility for the collective action, which the engine repairs make possible. Individual intentions offer grounds for responsibility for collective action in the case of goal-oriented collectives like the militia. In goal-oriented collectives, the actor forms the intention to perform a contributory act as a conscious contribution to a collective action he joined the collective to see occur. The



group may have assigned him a specific task but he joined wanting to do *whatever* he could to contribute to the collective end. As argued in the previous section, this participatory intention is inculcating. In the case of military action and other irreducibly corporate actions though, the service member's intention to perform a contributory action is usually not a self-generated intention but a person-sized segment of the group's corporate intention impressed by others for actions contributing to still other agents' broader ends.

Why can we not claim that Baker is fixing the engine purely of his own volition like a typical member of a goal-oriented collective? Military actions are definitionally those actions consequent to orders passed down through the chain of command (e.g. a Marine playing a video game after returning from patrol is not performing a military action). Baker makes his commanding officer's interpretation and application of the corporate intention of winning the war his own insofar as he is acting as a professional (Isaacs 2011: 29). When people act *qua* professionals, they act according to their institutional procedures, which in the military context, means following the lawful orders of superior officers in one's chain of command. A civilian who snuck aboard the ship and started repairing the helicopter engine simply because he enjoyed tinkering with engines would not be acting as a professional and would not be performing a military action. Thus, the corporate intention of fighting the war does not scale down to a participating service member's individual intention because Baker does not and cannot intend his contributing action as a military professional absent the larger chain of command compelling him to adopt its intention. He would not have the intention to fix the engine were he not in the military and would not have the intention to fix the engine as part of a collective military action were he in the military but not ordered to fix the engine.

This argument about transference of intentions requires further elaboration. How exactly does the corporate intention to win a war get translated into service members' individual intentions to perform specific actions? Given this broad corporate end of winning a particular war set by the president, subsidiary corporate intentions to accomplish subsidiary collective actions like neutralizing the country's air defenses are determined through joint mechanisms in planning cells, wherein a staff of flag officers and their advisers determine the war plans. These decisions are then imposed and communicated throughout the organization according to a particular procedure, at which point group members are institutionally obliged to act according to these directives, which is to say, to act as if the corporate intention was their own. Seumas Miller introduces some technical vocabulary regarding intentions that is helpful here (Miller 2001: 64). Type a) intentions are for the actor's own actions while type c) intentions are for someone other than the intending agent to do something, as when a teacher tells a student to complete an assignment. So the president has a type c) intention that the military defeat the enemy regime. In response, an admiral develops a type a) intention to give an order to move the carrier strike group into position; he also has a type c) intention that the rear admiral in charge of the relevant carrier strike group obeys his command. The rear admiral derives a type a) intention to give orders about particular headings and speeds of the strike group's ships to his subordinates based on his boss's type c) intention. Far down the chain of command, Petty Officer Baker derives a type a) intention to fix an engine consequent to his Senior Chief's type c) intention that he do so.

Not only are the agents' intentions the vicarious vestige of their superiors' intentions, rather than their own, the vector of transmission of these intentions and ends is "pushed" rather than "pulled" it is characterized by compulsion rather than voluntary choice. This vector means that the theorist has no grounds for assuming service members would have intentions for their contributory actions absent the institutional framework of the chain of command. The theorist cannot assume the service member natively has the intention to perform the action causally

linking him to the collective action. Shortly, I will address atypical situations where the service member really does have the relevant intention.

A debate between individualist and collectivist philosophers on the subject of social ontology is relevant to this point regarding collective responsibility.<sup>2</sup> Collectivists look to some centralized, top-down structure like a corporate intention to give form and direction to a group whereas individualists see only individuals as having intentions and so whatever “thing” binds together and animates a group must be an abstraction, an aggregate of individual intentions, ideas, or actions. Individualists in short, see *all* groups as animated in the manner of goal-oriented collectives, even if some collectives have more formal structures, hierarchies, and longevity. The morally interesting elements of a group’s knowledge, intention, motive, and actions can always be reduced down, without remainder, to the contributing actions of the group’s members.

The individualist picture is correct in the case of goal-oriented collectives like the genocidal militia in country C; the members create and drive the group. We have a sufficient picture of what is animating the collective action if we add up all the sentences describing the individual actions of those within the groups. There is no pre-existing executive command structure shaping and directing the members.<sup>3</sup> In the case of organizational action however, the individualist account does not account for the fact that the military, say, is oriented toward certain ends, and collective decision-making and communication structures like planning cells and chains of command are embedded in the organization before any recruits fill the barracks. Further, a popular political and social theory has inculcated recruits with values that lead them to privilege military role-based reasons over their personal intuitions. Therefore, that which drives service personnel to act on certain reasons is not accounted for when we add up all the sentences of the form “Petty Officer Baker did X after he chose to see his orders as action-guiding.”<sup>4</sup> The structure producing the orders and the common reason personnel feel it is compulsory to make those orders action-guiding are not accounted for with this individualist account.

So now having clarified that the full moral weight of the collective action is not necessarily present in the organization member’s contributory actions, we need to determine how far someone like Baker’s responsibilities do extend. Differences between organizational and goal-oriented collective action set what I will call “the horizon of responsibility” at the *contributory action* for an irreducibly corporate action and at the *collective action* for a goal-oriented collective action for the same physical behavior. The horizon of responsibility is the demarcation of what action the actor might be culpable for. We have already discussed how Archer is equally morally responsible for genocide with the rest of the militia members because of his individual action. Yet Baker’s contributory action *on its own* is insufficient to deem him culpable for an unjustified collective action if he is in an unjust war. His contributory action has to be referred to the collective action in order to discern if his material involvement with the unjust war makes him responsible for an unjustified action. For the purpose of assessing culpability, a service member is not committing an individual unjustified action but *contributing to an unjust collective action*. Baker is not performing an “unjust repair” (which would be possible if he deliberately neglected some crucial task out of animus towards the pilot), but “fixing a helicopter’s engine in an unjust war.” Such an individual contributory action may be morally trivial on its own since the full moral gravity of an irreducibly corporate action is not present in its contributory actions. The contributory action instead gets its moral weight in *reference* to the collective action, dependent on the agent’s knowledge of and intentional state with respect to the collective action.

Again, this reference to the collective action contrasts with an individual or goal-oriented collective action in which the individual or contributory action is unjustified by itself. Archer and Baker are performing the same physical behavior but Archer’s is richly morally capitalized



from the start as “participation in genocide”—and his charge sheet in a court might state as much. Baker is only performing a discrete action of engine repair. The theorist is precluded from making a summary judgment about the culpability of an organizational actor like Baker but instead needs to consider his power, knowledge, and intentionality with respect to the unjust irreducibly corporate action in order to assign culpability for a contributory action. One must ask questions like the following. Does Baker have the freedom to avoid contributing to the unjust war? What does he know about the collective action? Does he intend his contribution to advance the collective action because he wants to see its fruition? How does he interpret the corporate intention of his organization?

With respect to that final question, an organization member’s actions are typically more “the organization’s” instead of their own, but organization members still have to interpret their orders and exercise discretion in the execution of their role obligations. Therefore, when we look to the individual responsibility of organization members for their contributory actions, we may have occasion to magnify the moral importance of their individual actions beyond the immediate impact of their physical behaviors. We need to take into account both the member’s individual attributes and her role responsibilities in order to discern how she occupied the role and executed the task differently than other people in her position. In other words, we should not judge a general in the same way we would a civilian urging a group of people on to violence, but compare her to other generals in similar situations in order to see how she personally interpreted the corporate intention of the army and what creativity and wisdom she brought to her role. Typically, the individual actions of low-ranking organization members will not be morally rich because they are relatively banal unto themselves and because there is little room for the introduction of personal creativity. Higher ranking members’ personal actions may be morally weightier because there is more room for the individual’s personal moral qualities to play a role interpreting the corporate intention. Giving orders is especially significant as order-givers often have a lot of discretion to convert broad corporate intentions into specific action-guiding directives that in turn create the conditions for subordinates to engage in morally upright or morally defective actions (Skerker 2014: 220). Immoral or negligent orders make the order-giver responsible for what subordinates do pursuant to those orders.

Finally, an organization member *can* be individually responsible for the specific joint projects to which she contributes and/or the broader collective actions of her organization if she atypically knows about the specific unjust actions and contributes to them while motivated to see their fruition. All the requirements of culpability are here met, with participatory intention to be part of a group contributing to a specific collective outcome doing the inculcating work done by individual intention in fraught individual actions. So, for example, Baker can be equally jointly responsible with other knowing members of the crew of helicopter #602 for bombing a hospital if he knows about the effects of his contributory actions and is motivated to bring about the specific unjustified action. He is also equally jointly responsible with other similarly-motivated service members if he intends to contribute to bombing a hospital but does not know that his specific individual action is currently furthering that action. Baker is also equally responsible with other knowing or similarly-motivated personnel for the entire unjust war if he knows it is unjust and is motivated to bring about its unjust ends. In these cases, the organizational member effectively is using the organization like a goal-oriented collective, like an instrument for his personal unjust agenda, doing whatever he can to link his efforts with others to bring about unjust ends he favors.

In conclusion, our attention is drawn to the same potential components of culpability, like power, knowledge, intention, and motive in analysis of irreducibly corporate actions as in analysis of individual actions, but the different features of irreducibly corporate and individual actions

or contributions to goal-oriented collective actions indicate different horizons for determining what the individual is responsible for. A close causal connection to the morally fraught action is less important for being deemed responsible for it in goal-oriented collective action than in individual action. We are also less likely to find the requisite levels of knowledge and intentionality to deem someone responsible for irreducibly corporate actions than for individual actions expressed in superficially similar physical behaviors. The contributor to an unjust irreducibly corporate action is potentially responsible for a much greater harm than if he committed an unjustified individual action but is also less likely than an individual actor engaging in identical physical behavior to be liable for *any* unjustified action.

## 19.6 Conclusion

Organizations are irreducibly responsible for their collective actions. Within an organization, each actor in the chain of command is individually responsible for his unique interpretation of the collective intention and unique contribution to collective action(s). Often, the actions of lower echelon organizational members will tend to be more fully defined by their roles, with higher echelon members freer to add more of their personal expertise and creativity. This account of responsibility is geared to the “ideal” circumstances of an organization in which the member is non-culpably ignorant of the collective action in question and not motivated to see its fruition. The member is morally responsible for the action in the way described in the last section if he actually does know about the specific collective action he materially advances (be it a proximate joint project or the organization’s ultimate collective action) and intends his contribution to further that collective action because he is motivated to see its fruition.

A member of a goal-oriented collective is fully morally responsible along with all other members of his group for the collective action, regardless of the extent of his causal contribution or his knowledge of the specific action so long as it is consistent with the general purpose for which he joined the group. It follows that there is a heavier burden on entrants into goal-oriented collectives than into organizations to understand the scope of the group’s actions.

## Notes

- 1 Bratman (1999), Tuomela (1984), and Gilbert (1989) discuss how group members’ intentions mesh in an interdependent manner since one person forms an intention for a component of the collective action only because she knows her comrades are forming intentions to perform other components of the collective action.
- 2 Individualists describe collective action in terms of individual contributory actions, so that a tango, for example, is understood to consist of the lead dancer doing X and his partner doing Y. At its root, a tango can be fully described using sentences describing one dancer at a time. By contrast, collectivists argue that collective members’ behavior can only be intelligibly understood in the context of their collective affiliation, so in this case, each dancer would be described as dancing a tango.
- 3 A goal-oriented collective might have a hierarchy though it is established by its like-minded members in order to accomplish a particular goal. In country C, tribe members who had come to see a neighboring tribe as an existential threat perhaps decided to “do what had to be done” and nominated some among them, military veterans, to lead the attacks.
- 4 Jeff McMahan argues that putatively collective actions can be reduced to individual actions with this reasoning, personal communication.

## References

- Bazargan, S. (2013) “Complicitous Liability in War,” *Philosophical Studies* 165, 177–95.  
Bratman, M. (1999) *Faces of Intention*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Cooper, D. (1972) "Responsibility and the System," in P. French (ed), *Individual and Collective Responsibility*, Rochester, VT: Shenkman Books, 133–50.
- Cooper, D. (1991) "Collective Responsibility," in L. May and S. Hoffman (eds), 35–46.
- Copp, D. (2006) "On the Agency of Certain Collective Entities: An Argument from Normative Autonomy," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XXX, 194–221.
- Erskine, T. (2001) "Assigning Responsibilities to Institutional Moral Agents: The Case of States and 'Quasi-States,'" *Ethics and International Affairs* 15(2), 67–85.
- Fain, H. (1972) "Some Moral Infirmities of Justice," in P. French (ed), 77–92.
- Feinberg, J. (1991) "Collective Responsibility," in L. May and S. Hoffman (eds), 53–76.
- French, P. (1987) "The Corporation as a Moral Person," in L. May (ed), *The Morality of Groups*, Notre Dame University Press, 133–49.
- Gilbert, M. (1989) *On Social Facts*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Isaacs, T. (2011) *Moral Responsibility in Collective Contexts*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kutz, C. (2000) *Complicity: Ethics and Law for a Collective Age*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- May, L. (2006) "State Aggression, Collective Liability, and Individual Mens Rea," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XXX, 309–24.
- Mellema, G. (2006) "Collective Responsibility and Qualifying Actions," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XXX, 168–75.
- Miller, S. (2001) *Social Action: A Teleological Account*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Miller, S. (2006) "Collective Moral Responsibility: An Individualist Account," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XXX, 176–93.
- Narveson, J. (2002) "Collective Responsibility," *The Journal of Ethics* 6, 179–98.
- Pettit, P. (2003) "Groups with Minds of Their Own," in F. Schmidtt (ed), *Socializing Metaphysics: The Nature of Social Reality*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 167–93.
- Runciman, D. (2003) "Moral Responsibility and the Problem of Representing the State," in T. Erskine (ed), in *Can Institutions Have Responsibilities? Collective Moral Agency and International Relations*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 41–50.
- Sadler, B. (2006) "Share Intentions and Shared Responsibility," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XXX, 115–44.
- Skerker, M. (2014) "Seeking a Variable Standard of Individual Moral Responsibility in Organizations," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 17, 209–22.
- Toumela, R. (1984) *A Theory of Social Action*, Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishers.