

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rajp20>

Getting Our Act Together: A Theory of Collective Moral Obligations

Schwenkenbecher, Anne, New York: Routledge, 2021, pp. xiii + 174, US\$160 (hb).

Maike Albertzart

To cite this article: Maike Albertzart (2021): Getting Our Act Together: A Theory of Collective Moral Obligations, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, DOI: [10.1080/00048402.2021.1978514](https://doi.org/10.1080/00048402.2021.1978514)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00048402.2021.1978514>



Published online: 19 Sep 2021.



Submit your article to this journal



Article views: 52



View related articles



View Crossmark data



Schwenkenbecher, Anne, *Getting Our Act Together: A Theory of Collective Moral Obligations*, New York: Routledge, 2021, pp. xiii + 174, US\$160 (hb).

Anne Schwenkenbecher's *Getting Our Act Together* offers an in-depth and timely account of how our ability to act jointly can create so-called joint moral duties. *Getting Our Act Together* not only contains a thorough discussion of the current philosophical literature on collective obligation, as well as compelling answers to some of the debate's most difficult technical questions; it also has insightful implications for pressing practical issues such as world poverty, anthropogenic climate change, and systematic racism. Schwenkenbecher aims to answer the question of when we can have moral obligations to perform various actions together. In doing so, she sees her theory of joint duties not as positing a new type of moral duty, but rather as providing a conceptual analysis of something that is already part of our moral practice: When faced with collective moral problems, naturally we think about what we should do.

The book is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter introduces the notion of joint obligations. According to Schwenkenbecher, joint obligations arise in so-called joint-necessity cases—that is, cases where it takes at least two agents to produce the morally optimal outcome. The agents are thus jointly, but not individually, able to achieve a specific morally desirable result. Joint obligations are neither an aggregation of individual obligations, nor are they meant to be obligations of some group understood as a collective agent. Instead, joint obligations are obligations that jointly attach to two or more agents. Agents hold these together rather than individually. Schwenkenbecher argues that 'to jointly hold an obligation' is a plural predicate. Just like other plural predicates such as 'playing a duet' or 'walking past one another', joint obligations can only meaningfully apply to two or more agents.

However, unlike 'playing a duet' or 'walking past one another', moral duties are not obvious candidates for the category of plural properties. No individual agent can play a duet on her own. By contrast, moral duties might seem to be something that an agent can hold only on her own, because moral duties can only extend to those aspects of the world that are within the control of the respective subject of the duty. If joint duties were understood as plural properties, no one individual would be in full control. Schwenkenbecher addresses this concern in the form of the so-called agency principle and the capacity principle in chapters 2 and 3, respectively. The agency principle states that only agents can hold moral duties. Are joint obligations compatible with the agency principle? According to Schwenkenbecher, there are two ways to answer this question. First, one might grant that the notion of joint obligations violates the agency principle, and follow collectivists like Bill Wringe [2010] in arguing that non-agents can hold moral obligations. Although Schwenkenbecher appears to sympathise with this strategy, it does not seem to sit well with her definition of moral obligations 'as moral requirements on agents to perform actions or pattern of actions' [26, my emphasis]. The second possible strategy for a duty collectivist is to claim that the agency principle is satisfied because it is the individual group members who hold the

respective moral duties, albeit in a joint mode. This presupposes that there are different modes in which agents can hold duties—the individual mode and the joint mode. As Schwenkenbecher acknowledges, some readers might find this answer at least unorthodox.

The concept of joint obligations requires not only a potentially unorthodox interpretation of the agency principle, but also a creative reading of the capacity principle. According to the latter, an agent can only hold a moral duty if she is capable of fulfilling that duty. Joint duties are, by definition, duties that cannot be fulfilled by an individual agent. Schwenkenbecher tackles this challenge by introducing (in chapter 3) a collective version of the capacity principle. In its collective version, that principle is satisfied if agents *can jointly* discharge the respective duty. Even for those who may ultimately remain unconvinced by Schwenkenbecher's collective capacity principle, chapter 3 offers an elaborate and systematic discussion of the idea of joint ability. Although the idea of joint ability is frequently used to argue for the existence of irreducible collective duties, the concept itself has hitherto received relatively little detailed attention (for notable exceptions, see Pinkert [2014], Stemplowska [2016], and Miller [2020]). Schwenkenbecher's treatment of the matter has the potential to become a canonical reference point for future debates about what, exactly, it means to say that agents are jointly, but not individually, able to achieve a certain outcome.

The fourth chapter lays down the conditions under which two or more agents are bound by a joint obligation. Schwenkenbecher argues that we have joint obligations when we have reasons to ‘we-frame’ a collective action problem, where we-framing is an individual’s cognitive act of perceiving a joint-necessity scenario as a problem for a group. She develops her conception of we-framing, we-reasoning, and team-reasoning in contrast to standard game-theory. She also addresses the difficult question of what kind of individual and collective knowledge is required for joint obligation. She concludes [98] that a plurality of agents has a joint duty to do x if it is the case that a reasonable person who has conscientiously availed herself of the evidence would come to the conclusion that jointly doing x is the best option available to them.

According to Schwenkenbecher, joint obligations are conceptually and explanatorily prior to our individual duties in joint necessity cases. Chapter 5 explicates the individual contributory obligations and forms of blameworthiness which follow from her account of joint obligations. Schwenkenbecher emphasises that joint obligations give rise to individual contributory obligations for all agents in the respective group, even for those who need not take action. This has interesting implications with regard to the fair distribution of individual burdens within such groups. Moreover, Schwenkenbecher argues that agents may be collectively blameworthy for failing to fulfil a joint obligation, even if not every agent in the group is individually blameworthy.

The sixth chapter offers an overview and careful discussion of existing alternative accounts of collective obligations. Schwenkenbecher highlights the merits of her own account by means of a helpfully detailed list of meta-criteria that a theory of our moral duties in collective contexts should fulfil.

While Schwenkenbecher focuses primarily on small-scale scenarios, such as two hikers encountering a man trapped under a fallen tree, the seventh and final chapter explores the possibilities of joint obligations in the face of large-scale collective action problems. In contrast to some other collectivists, Schwenkenbecher is careful to acknowledge that the conclusions which she draws from small-scale collective actions cases cannot simply be extended to complex large-scale problems. She



points out important normative differences between small- and large-scale collective action problems. Moreover, by focusing on the perspective of the individual deliberating moral agent, she explains which factors can play a role in strengthening our collective obligations with regard to large-scale injustices.

As Schwenkenbecher herself notices, both collectivist and individualist accounts of our moral duties in collective contexts have their respective downsides. Collectivists struggle especially with the agency and the capacity principle. According to Schwenkenbecher, the advantages of her collective approach outweigh these disadvantages. In the following, I would like to offer some reason for believing that the disadvantages of having to tamper with the agency principle and the capacity principle are more substantial and more relevant to our moral practice than Schwenkenbecher makes them look.

Schwenkenbecher draws a close link between the notion of duties and the notion of blameworthiness: other things being equal, if *A* has a moral duty to do *x*, then, if she fails to do *x*, she is morally blameworthy for not doing *x*. On Schwenkenbecher's account, a plurality of agents can have a duty to do *x* if they have the non-distributive joint capacity to do *x*. If a plurality of agents fails to fulfil their joint duty, then they are jointly blameworthy for this failure. However, what, exactly, does it mean to say that a group of agents is jointly blameworthy? Defenders of joint duties seem to have three equally unattractive possibilities for answering this question.

First, they could argue that joint blame is just as non-distributive as joint capacity: it extends only to the plurality of agents as such (see Björnsson [2014]). Even if one ignores the fact that such ascriptions of blame would violate widely accepted requirements of blameworthiness, it is problematic because there seems to be no point in blaming non-agents. Non-agents cannot react to punishment, and they cannot be reformed.

According to the second alternative, collective blame is the sum of the blame that each individual group member deserves for her individual wrongdoing. Such an understanding of joint blame would leave us with cases where a plurality of agents fails to fulfil a joint duty, but where no one can be blamed for this failure because no individual agent had the ability to perform the joint action on her own. All that might be blameworthy in such cases are individual agents' individual failures to try to initiate the joint action or to perform their part in the joint venture. The failure to fulfil the joint duty itself turns out to be unblameable.

The third alternative is to argue that, just as joint capacity is not merely a sum of individual capacities, joint blame is not merely a sum of individual blame. But, unlike joint capacity, joint blame is distributive: agents share the blame. This appears to be Schwenkenbecher's preferred understanding of joint blame [109]. On this reading, joint blame is to be distributed among the respective group's members, regardless of (and in addition to) their individual wrongdoings [*ibid.*]. Such an account of joint blame faces the problem of blaming the innocent. If a plurality of agents can be blameworthy for their failure to fulfil a joint duty, and if this collective blame is then to be distributed among all of its members, even individuals who did their utmost to work towards the success of the joint action will be blameworthy. While Schwenkenbecher seems to be prepared to accept these costs, others will regard such a notion of moral blame an unacceptable revision of our moral practice. However, regardless of whether one is convinced that the advantages of Schwenkenbecher's joint duties approach outweigh its downsides, *Getting Our Act Together* equips

its readers with a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the challenges of conceptualising our moral duties in collective contexts.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References

- Björnsson, Gunnar 2014. Essentially Shared Obligations, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 38: 103–20.
Miller, Seumas 2020. Joint Abilities, Joint Know-How and Collective Knowledge, *Social Epistemology* 34/3: 197–212.
Pinkert, Felix 2014. What We Together Can (Be Required to) Do, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 38: 187–202.
Stempłowska, Zofia 2016. Feasibility: Individual and Collective, *Social Philosophy and Policy* 33/1–2: 273–91.
Wringe, Bill 2010. Global Obligations and the Agency Objection, *Ratio* 23/2: 217–31.

Maike Albertzart
Johannes Gutenberg Universität Mainz

© 2021 Maike Albertzart
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00048402.2021.1978514>

