

Collective Responsibility

Synonyms

corporate social responsibility, methodological individualism, group responsibility, social responsibility, societal responsibility, social intentions, political responsibility

Definition

The ascription to a group or organization of something to be done, of doing something, or of answering to something done. (What a collective should do or what it has done and/or is answerable to.)

Description

The concept of responsibility has been the subject of discussion, analysis, and debate throughout the history of philosophy. Almost every important philosopher has discussed it in one way or another. In the latter half of the [twentieth century](#), it became a major topic for many philosophers, including as the subject of numerous books. Most of this attention has been on the responsibility of an individual, with special concern for moral responsibility. There are broad connections of responsibility with moral principles, [freedom of the will](#), and action theory.

With revelations of the Holocaust (see Hannah Arendt in May and Hoffman), of the horrors of world wars, and of moral turpitude in Vietnam (see French, 1972, 1998) and Indochina came important, but difficult, questions about collective responsibility. For decades now, the idea of collective responsibility has become puzzling and troubling. In recent years, there have also been discussions about collective responsibility for problematic issues, [for example](#), alcoholism, [suicides](#), [and](#) human trafficking, and collective responsibility against terrorism, nuclear threats, [and](#) climate change. On another front, there has been a movement for corporations to adopt a model of corporate social responsibility.

Discussions of collective responsibility first focused on cataclysmic cases like genocide against aboriginal peoples in North America, the Armenian genocide, the Japanese massacre in Nanjing, the Holocaust perpetrated by the Nazis, and the My Lai massacre by US soldiers, for which nations, governments, and armies have been held collectively responsible. Cases of corporate responsibility for major disasters were also discussed, such as that of Union Carbide in the Bhopal (India) gas leak and of the Exxon Valdez oil spill. The tragedies perpetrated were of course major assaults on the quality of life for individual and collective victims. Furthermore, the charge of collective responsibility was a way of recognizing the evil and harm done, while the later call for apologies and restitutions affect the [quality of life](#) of survivors and the descendants of the victims. Feelings of being wronged on one side and of guilt on the other are certainly part of what

must be responded to in maintaining a satisfactory quality of life. Many have seen the establishment of truth and reconciliation commissions as a way of attending to the feelings and relations, individual and collective, that make up a good quality of life, although debates continue about a discord between reconciliation and [justice](#). Important issues about quality of life clearly arise from considerations of collective responsibility.

In philosophy, there was significant early work on group and corporate morality (e.g., French, 1984 and May, 1987). Soon after, philosophical work developed on the basic nature (or “ontology”) of collectives, groups, and societies (see Gilbert, 1989 and Tuomela, 1995) and on the nature of shared or group intentions. From early on, the philosophical debates about collective responsibility have been encouraged and supported by literature in the social sciences. Philosophical discussions in the area continue unabated with little agreement and much dissension. (For a recent representative collection on collective responsibility, see French and Wettstein, 2006.) Collective responsibility is itself complex with diverse applications, but understanding it is important to a variety of concerns.

Forms of Being Responsible and of Responsibility

Feinberg says that when “we state that a person is responsible for some harm, we sometimes mean to ascribe to him *liability* to certain responsive [attitudes](#), judgments, or actions” (Joel Feinberg, “Collective Responsibility” (1968, in French, 1998, p, 51)). This is a characterization of what is frequently said of moral responsibility. However, it should be noted that the words “responsible” and “responsibility” also have more general uses.

In the most general terms, causal agents of all sorts are responsible for their effects. Cold fronts are responsible for bad weather, and an earthquake can be responsible for a rooster crowing. An alarm clock can be responsible for one’s waking up just as a rooster can be and so can the staff at the hotel front desk or the hotel’s automated messaging system. People, but not things, are given responsibilities for doing things (e.g., phoning or maintaining the message system) and are consequently responsible, in another sense, for doing them even before they are done. People, but not cold fronts, have responsibilities, but not all of them are moral responsibilities. There are service responsibilities, [for example](#), to keep records; civic responsibilities, [for example](#), to keep informed or to complain; citizens’ responsibilities, [for example](#), to vote; and moral responsibilities, [for example](#), to help the injured and to reimburse someone for a loss at one’s hands.

Moral responsibility, which has got most of the attention, does of course apply to people and is usually reserved for cases of harm done or losses incurred that need to be rectified. This is being responsible after the fact. (Gilbert, in French, 2006, pp. 94f, calls a requirement of paying for a loss a backward-looking responsibility, to do something because of what one has done, as opposed to a forward-looking responsibility, to see that future action is taken.) One is responsible for causing harm and henceforth is morally responsible for the harm done and, consequently, susceptible to reprimand, punishment, and/or making amends. (Sometimes the responsibility is taken by a parent of a delinquent

child or by a boss for an employee's accident.) The action of harming is not a responsibility, but the obligation to respond is. Most of the discussions about being morally (individually and collectively) responsible are about harm done or disasters perpetrated rather than about any positive good promoted or other behavior deserving praise. People are held morally responsible for immoral irresponsibility.

There are three kinds of cases of an individual being responsible:

1) Causal responsibility: People — and other agents, human, or otherwise — are said to be responsible for what they cause, do, or maintain, although what has been done is not said to be a responsibility.

2) Responsibility as task or obligation: One can be responsible for things to be done, with the responsibilities being set out formally as in a constitution or informally by expectations or precedents, and may be of a personal, civil, or moral nature. People can take on responsibilities or be given them even unwillingly. One is responsible from the time the responsibility is taken on (or given) until the act is performed (by the agent or someone else) or one is released from it.

3) Responsibility as moral obligation for one's transgression: Finally, as a special case, agents can be responsible for making amends for something they have done. Moral agents who are responsible for immoral behavior are then morally responsible for apologizing or making amends, as an obligation. Moral responsibility in this sense, which is the focus of most discussions of collective responsibility, looks back to wrongs done, as the agent's fault, and looks forward to amends to be made. Surely, there also are independent moral responsibilities to behave in right and good ways.

Society and Responsibility

Each kind of case can be understood collectively and non-individually. People do things together and collectively, including in ways that make them morally responsible. Two or more people can carry a table and bash a wall. It is easy to see each responsible and all responsible collectively. They can be thanked, individually and collectively, for moving the table and blamed, individually and collectively, for damaging the wall. Mere collections of people can perform collections of acts, such as multiple gifts to a charity or overfishing a pond, thereby improving or worsening the quality of life. There is nothing uncommon about collective (moral) responsibility.

There are, of course, more portentous cases of collective responsibility, some of which have gotten most of the attention. In 1968, Lieutenant Calley and his “Charlie” company were held responsible for the massacre of hundreds of Vietnam women, infants, and other civilians in My Lai village. Apparently, virtually all soldiers in the company were responsible for murders and mayhem and, consequently, are held collectively (morally) responsible. Our intuitions about collective responsibility seem clear here about each individual being responsible for the atrocity. It was several decades later before Chief

Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson was decorated and honored, belatedly, for confronting his company and saving the lives of many other villagers. He has said he feels some moral responsibility for civilian deaths, but he also felt it was his responsibility to confront the massacre in process. In his view, stopping the massacre was a moral responsibility.

The My Lai massacre was awful, but there is little question about the nature of responsibility and even about the apportionment of blame to the individuals involved. Questions begin to arise, however, about the context and about the US invasion of Vietnam. Is there a collective responsibility for sending people to war in the first place and the killing and destruction that ensued?

This parallels the question that arose a couple of decades earlier about the Nazi German pursuit of the Final Solution against Jews and non-Aryans, especially as carried out in the Holocaust. In the case of the Holocaust, the questions reach further and are more troubling about what happened but also troubling conceptually. Some are tempted to say that Germany as a whole, that is, the nation, was responsible. There were indeed thousands carrying out orders and administering the policy. And there were millions that apparently tolerated what happened, mostly in silence. It was the policy of a nation and its government. In 1947, Karl Jaspers claimed that all human beings, including all Germans, participate in a universal “metaphysical guilt,” while Hannah Arendt wrote of Germans acting “as cogs in the mass-murder machine” (May and Hoffman, p. 279), as mere functionaries in a bureaucratic organization. Her hope was that people would act out of “fear of the inescapable guilt of the human race” (May and Hoffman, p. 283).

Two contrary, but troubling, positions arise from the claim that a whole nation is collectively responsible. One position, taking an individualist perspective, is that every individual in the nation, as a national, is held responsible for the tragedy or crime. This seems extreme and unfair for its lack of discrimination about the responsibility, as though everyone is responsible, although to a different degree, along with Hitler. Despite attempts at explanatory and justificatory accounts about [citizens' consent](#) or culpable silence or, in an active role, about [solidarity](#) or shared intentions with diminished responsibility, most think it is ultimately unsatisfactory to attribute individual responsibility universally in such a national crime.

A second position claims that the [collective as a whole](#), the nation (and maybe a few leaders), is responsible and consequently not the individual members of the collective. This position is troubling for attributing responsibility only to the nation as a whole, as a single collective. On this view, individuals are absolved from responsibility (except perhaps Hitler and a few other leaders). Another position, discussed below, is that responsibility should be attributed to many individuals as well as the whole nation. The overarching trouble, according to many social theorists, is that there is no such thing as a nation, a society as a whole, to be responsible.

Here begins a morass of problems that lead to the view that “[c]ollective guilt' is a nasty phrase” (Bar-on in May and Hoffman, p. 255). As French writes, the “idea of collective

... responsibility has been frequently and loudly decried as a vulgarism” (French, 1998, p. 33). French has confronted the confusions by arguing that corporations are moral persons with social responsibilities and that there are other collectives to which responsibility can be attributed (see French, 1984 and 1998). Questions persist and debates rage about whether there (really) are collectives and how they relate to individuals – through reduction, eliminable or otherwise; through composition, via solidarity or shared intentions; or through some sort of independence. The positions that are taken on these questions affect what is said about collective responsibility, moral, and otherwise.

Bringing in Collectives

The concerns about collective responsibility arise when collectives or social groups of various kinds are said to be collectively responsible as a whole. The response of “agency individualists” is that there are no collectives – all collectives, societies, and other groups can be reduced to the individuals that constitute them, with the consequence that there are no collectives to be responsible. According to agency individualism, the only sense in which an organization, corporation, nation, or other collective can be responsible is through the acts of constituent persons or at least some responsible executive officers or leaders.

“Methodological individualism” in the social sciences claims that only individuals do things, and thus only individuals are responsible for what happens. A group of individuals can act collectively in unison, like a chorus line of dancers. Each and every individual is responsible for doing the same thing, which may be something in aggregate. If each member of Charlie company killed a civilian in My Lai, then the company is morally and collectively responsible – but only because of individual responsibility, to which the collective responsibility is reduced. For the agency individualist, only individual persons, not collectives, have the requisite intentions, consciousness, and will to be moral agents. A collective cannot be an agent of any kind and certainly not a responsible (moral) agent. “The political will” of a nation is only a figure of speech.

There is the danger that if the collective were held responsible as a whole, many individuals in the collective would be wrongly held to account even though there was nothing that they did, nothing wrong, even nothing at all. Not all Americans in the nineteenth century were slaveholders, and those who were not should not be held accountable for the human cruelty and devastation of lives. Not even their silence is sufficient to hold the nonparticipants at the time responsible.

Some may think that the moral responsibility of the nation for the evils of slavery remains in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but few would think that contemporary Americans should be charged with moral responsibility for the commission of those evils. However, contemporary Americans can have a different moral responsibility, even through reparations, to help other citizens who have been somehow disadvantaged. They will then be morally obligated, but not because of what they did or

even their country did. This is parallel to the case of parents being responsible for what their child has done.

Moreover, there are also responsibilities other than moral responsibilities. Individuals have general duties, or responsibilities, as citizens, but also as [friends](#), [neighbors](#), or nationals without being charged with any moral failings. There are even mundane responsibilities of cleaning up one's messes or apologizing when one disturbs the peace. Individuals have a variety of different responsibilities but so do collectives, groups, organizations, and nations.

For collective responsibility, one needs to distinguish between responsibility of individual people doing something collectively and a collective, including organizations, doing something. The members of a chorus line dance collectively, each dancing. All the dancers can be bad and share in the responsibility collectively, but the dance troupe as a whole is collectively irresponsible if they do not dance together.

There is much that happens that is difficult, and some think impossible, to understand as the sum of a collection of individual actions. Constant complex activity in society happens because of groups and movements and other collections of individuals but also because of organizations, associations, parties, corporations, NGOs, nations, [and](#) international organizations, to name some. Hundreds of thousands of individual drivers constantly contribute to, and are responsible for, pollution in a city, while a car company, as an organized collective, creates, and is responsible for, pollution from its factory smokestacks and the inferior fuel systems in all of its cars. (This useful comparative example comes from Mathiesen in French and Wettstein, pp. 240f.)

A food processing company is a collective actor that can risk infection of its products. The board of directors acts as a collective in deliberating and deciding what the corporation should do and what risks can be taken. A government inspection agency may share some responsibility for not stopping the risk taking. Employees may have no responsibility at all, even though they are part of the company. To take another example, a sales team may be responsible as a collective for a drop in sales for various reasons. It could be because the team is made up of excellent salespeople who are sent to the wrong places by a deficient sales manager. Or a good sales manager may be handicapped by all or most of the salespeople being inept. Only in some cases is the collective irresponsibility the result of (most of or all) the people being collectively irresponsible.

Corporations, and other organized collectives do things, plan, and decide, and know and conceal things. What they decide and do clearly can be assessed and praised or criticized. It is thus reasonable to speak of corporate social responsibility, corporate responsibility to shareholders, and corporate responsibility for pollution and other problems. French (1984) thinks that corporations have internal organizations and decision procedures that justify their being considered persons with responsibilities, moral, and otherwise. Bratman (1999) argues for a planning theory of intention and agency that applies to corporations, and other collectives, as well as individuals. That corporations do not have conscious phenomenal experiences is not a problem, although some may think so.

Bratman and others have also argued that there are shared intentions that support the idea of there being collectives that are responsible. Pettit (and others) also argue for group agency over and beyond individual agency (Pettit and List and Pettit). These ideas are still being developed – and contested – by many.

One could start from intuitive ideas about what corporations do. So much of social activity involves organizations, for example, corporations, governments, churches, and departments, rather than simple (random) aggregations of individuals. Even groups of individuals are usually grouped or organized into teams, brigades, casts, committees, etc., which act as collectives. Since corporations are held to be criminally liable and national apologies are demanded for what nations have done, it is intuitively plausible that corporations, and nations and other organizations, are responsible agents in the requisite ways, allowing collective responsibility to be understood in a way parallel to individual responsibility, but where the responsibility is attributed to collectives rather than individuals. This is an intuitively plausible social ontology. (See Copp on “the intuitive argument” in French and Wettstein and on “collective moral autonomy” in the *Journal of Social Philosophy*.)

This reintroduces the question of understanding, and explaining, collectives. If a collective (or group or organization) is thought of as real and recognized as doing things, then ideas about collective responsibility fall into place. Moreover, unrealistic attempts to reduce complex corporate, national, and global organizational activities to what the individuals were doing are avoided. What would be even more recherché, reductions of corporate responsibility to individual responsibilities are also avoided. Of course, with collective activities there are virtually always complex individual activities to explore, criticize, and praise; but one can, and should, always consider directly what the organized collectives have done. (On why one can and should look at both levels, see Isaacs 2011.)

Corporate social responsibility is standardly about what corporations should do in a quasi-moral sense. A corporation has collective responsibility to its shareholders but also to the community in which it is based and/or active. Corporations deliberate, plan, and act to bring about – be responsible – for much that happens in society. It may be unclear just what the “best practices” are, but it will also be unclear what the boundaries of the moral are. It is sufficient that corporate (and other) collectives can be held responsible for what they do and acted upon by shareholder (or member) pressure, community criticism, and legal action to make amends. Despite these intuitive points, some maintain that corporations are limited in the responsibilities that they have, even to the single goal of shareholder profit. (For discussion, see Silver.)

Blame, Punishment, Duties, and Beyond

Even granting that collectives, like corporations and nations, can be collectively responsible, two questions arise. What happens to individual responsibility when there is collective responsibility, and how can collectives be punished and with what results to individuals?

A common concern is that when a collective is responsible and punished, individuals that are associated with it will also be held responsible and punished, even when they are completely innocent. Nothing follows from a collective being responsible about associated individual responsibility, but this does not mean that there is no individual responsibility for individual actions wherever there is collective responsibility for collective actions. Some have proposed cases where there is collective responsibility without any individual responsibility (see Pettit and also Copp in French and Wettstein and in the *Journal of Social Philosophy*, with criticisms), although there is almost always individual responsibility as well. (See the discussion of this issue in Isaacs, 2011.) There is the opposite concern that guilty individuals sometimes avoid responsibility when the corporation is held responsible. (In the case of the Bhopal gas leak from which “tens of thousands died,” it is reported that eight executives were convicted, but “none has yet served time” *Globe and Mail*, December 3, 2012, p. A2.)

Whoever and whatever is responsible depends always on who and what does something. That someone does something is not negated by someone else, or by some collective, also doing it. An orchestra can play beautifully when some instrumentalists, but not all, do. A university can cultivate a creative student as can some of its best professors. Often what the collective is responsible for is different but related to what individual members do. In the United States, Congress is responsible for declaring war, but not the Congressional representatives, who can be praised or blamed for voting or speaking up one way or another. There are formal rules about majorities but not about persuading Congress. There are no formulae based on individual actions for determining whether and how collectives are responsible. In the case of war, there are individual and collective responsibilities that combine to determine what the country does. Silence, for example, is a collective responsibility where individuals should have spoken out; unions should have taken a stand; the media should have published material; and corporations should have acted.

It is important also to note that not all duties or tasks are moral obligations. There are many responsibilities, beyond criminal liability and moral responsibility, which apply equally to collectives and individuals, and thus collectives —like individuals — can be responsible for civic tasks, social activities, and global actions. In fact, that is the significance and apparent reason for promoting corporate social responsibility, which improves the image of corporations, and perhaps advances some of their civic work. There is no reason corporations and other collectives cannot be responsible in many ways, including morally, both negatively and positively, despite arguments to the contrary that their only responsibility is to make a profit.

Once one holds organizations and corporations as wholes collectively responsible, there is the difficult question of how they can and/or should be punished. Unlike individual punishment for individual responsibility, society cannot use house arrest, imprisonment, or the death penalty. Nor do shame and humiliation have any traction. Collectives are different, but not all that different. Organizations and corporations can be taxed, forced to pay reparations, and perform community service. Because they are different, they can also be dealt with in different ways that are appropriate to their collective nature.

Corporations can be regulated in a variety of ways and restrained financially. There are also a variety of ways that they can be forced to make their records and activities public. For other collectives like nations, there can be restrictions in treaty relations and/or economic sanctions.

It is appropriate to try to avoid individual suffering when the collective is punished, but those connected with the miscreant may suffer misfortune, just as a family suffers from the arrest of a parent and breadwinner. Shareholders and employees will suffer from losses of a firm whether it be by criminal charges, bad decisions, or market changes. Citizens under a dictatorial government may call for a boycott of their country and endure the consequent suffering in order to bring down the repressive regime. The boycott, which serves as a punishment of the government, may be “punishing” but not a punishment of the citizens. Most of the questions here seem practical rather than conceptual.

Over half a century ago, discussions of responsibility focused on individuals and then branched out to collectives and whole societies, usually centered on moral failings and then large-scale social evils. Eventually, corporations were included in charges of moral turpitude. However, in the attempt to understand collective and organizational responsibility, these studies were connected with philosophical debates about the nature of groups and with practical movements of positive social and collective behavior. Numerous philosophical studies with analyses of group and social intentions have developed with the attempt to understand the nature of society and social action. All of this broadens the reach of our understanding of collective responsibility and, consequently, the quality of life for individuals and collectives. For example, it gives sense to considering the daily travesty of [poverty](#) and [homelessness](#) in the world and in our own countries as something for which society is collectively responsible.

Social theorists can now investigate what Bratman calls the “dynamics of sociality,” which goes far beyond earlier discussions of collective responsibility, allowing us to look at group and social agency, [public goods](#), and collective visions. The discussions connect with what can be said about deliberative [democracy](#) and social agency in many forms and, thereby, develop a strong foundation for a better quality of life, both for individuals and collectives.

Cross-References

[morality and well-being](#)

[moral theories](#)

[collective action](#)

[collective efficacy](#)

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