

Individual Duty and Collective Action

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What I'm Going to Talk About

1. A puzzle about how to evaluate situations where morally required collective action did not take place
2. A proposal for how to resolve that puzzle that appeals to the dispositions of individuals

The participant principle: if one has a *pro tanto* obligation to cooperate in moral collective action conditional on others participating, then, in lieu of an institutionalized solution to that collective action problem, one has an unconditional *pro tanto* obligation to cultivate a disposition to cooperate when others are willing to cooperate.

The puzzle

- How do we assess the moral state of affairs that arise when persons fail to undertake morally required collective action?
- Intuitively, failing to bring about morally required collective action is wrong or unjust
- The intuitive response faces a puzzle: duties to participate in morally required collective action are often conditional, and if all parties are unwilling to do their bit, then it seems no one violates any duty in failing to do their bit.

Examples

- The general structure of the problem that I am concerned with is the following
- Person(s) A will suffer some severe and avoidable harm that can only be prevented if both B and C do their part in a cooperative activity. If B or C act alone, they will either achieve nothing or bring about some worse harm than if they had not acted, such that B and C's duties to cooperate are both conditional on the other doing so. Neither B nor C is willing to do her part, releasing the other from her duty. Consequently, A suffers the severe avoidable harm.

Examples

Slice and Patch Go Golfing. Patient has a tumor which, if not operated on by Dr. Slice and Dr. Patch, will cause the patient to die at noon. Slice has the expertise to make the necessary incisions, and Patch has the expertise to stitch the wound closed. Slice should cut if, and only if, Patch will stitch, since otherwise Slice would only cause the patient needless pain. Likewise, Patch should stitch if, and only if, Slice will cut. Suppose that Slice and Patch each plan on going golfing rather than operating on the patient, regardless of what the other does. Consequently, Patient dies at noon.

Estlund, *Utopophobia*, pp. 210-1.

Examples

“Two of us are walking past a pond and see a wrecked car slowly sinking, with a child trapped inside. It would take the strength of both of us to pry open the mangled door, and that is the only way the child can be rescued before drowning. There is no one else around to help; it has to be the two of us who do it, if the child is to be rescued at all. I look at you and say, ‘I don’t want to get my clothes muddy’. You look at me and say, ‘Same here’. We both say, in unison, ‘Whew! Off that moral hook, then!’”

Goodin, “Excused by the unwillingness of others?,” p. 19.

Examples

‘Whom to Save: Carla and Paul have been fighting a battle as part of an unjust war. They have a makeshift stretcher available. Three people are left wounded, and they cannot carry all of them to safety. To save anyone, they must work together to carry the stretcher. They can either save Jimmy, their comrade in arms, or both Miles and Manu, who are innocent civilians in the country they are fighting against. However, neither Carla nor Paul is at all motivated to save Miles and Manu. If either tries to do this, or tries to persuade the other to do it, the other will not help, time will be wasted, and no one will be saved.’”

Tadros, *To Do, To Die, To Reason Why*, p. 30.

The Disposition View

- In order to assess whether a failure to bring about moral collective action is a wrong, and who is implicated in the wrong, we must assess the people who might have participated in that collective action.
- So, not only do parties to moral collective action problems have conditional duties to cooperate if the other does, they also have duties to cultivate a cooperative disposition within themselves

An objection to the disposition view

Evaluations of dispositions at most get us to evaluations of the goodness or badness of individuals, i.e., on what grounds is there a duty to cultivate a cooperative disposition?

Estlund, *Utopophobia*, pp. 225-6.

The Ground of the Duty to Cultivate a Cooperative Disposition

The first-pass participant principle: if one has a *pro tanto* obligation to cooperate in moral collective action conditional on others participating, then one has an unconditional *pro tanto* obligation to cultivate a disposition to cooperate when others are willing to cooperate.

The problem with the first-pass principle: it neglects the organizational role of institutions.

1. In the context of a moral collective action problem, persons have a conditional duty **D** to do cooperative act **F**, where the condition of that duty is that other persons will do their part
2. **D** is conditional because:
 - a) There is some reason(s) **R** to bring about some good that requires collective action
 - b) Collective action is a cooperative activity, such that the effects of one's own actions are interdependent with how others exercise, or are willing to exercise, their agency
 - c) Because of such interdependence, **R** is a reason to **F** only when others will do their part

3. A necessary condition of successful collective action is that the agency of interdependent persons be organized appropriately
- In cooperative contexts, others' agency is a *structuring cause* with respect to exercises of one's own agency.
 - Some cause S is a structuring cause with respect to some other cause C that has effect E when S is the cause of C's causing E.
 - E.g., flipping a switch in a room turns on the light rather than the ceiling fan. The switch is proximate cause C of the light turning on, E, and the wiring is the structuring cause S in virtue of which C causes E.
 - Premise (2b) amounts to the claim that in cooperative contexts, others' exercise of agency is a structuring cause of exercises of one's own agency.

4. In order for persons to organize collective action, they must be disposed to cooperate when others are so disposed
5. Reason R for bringing about successful collective action is therefore a reason for persons to cultivate a disposition to cooperate when others are disposed to do so as well
6. Whereas R is a reason to do cooperative act F only on the condition that others cooperate, R is an unconditional reason for persons to cultivate the right kind of disposition

The case for (6):

- By (2), reason(s) R to bring about the good that requires collective action is the ground of conditional duty D to do F; F is a contributing cause of collective action only when structured by the agency of others.
- In contrast, the acts of cultivating the right disposition do not need to be structured in order to be a contributing cause of collective action; they partially constitute the structuring cause in virtue of which others' exercises of agency can be a contributing causes of collective action.
- By cultivating the right kind of disposition, one brings one's social circumstances closer to those in which successful moral collective action can take place, independent of what others do.
- In terms of the light analogy: cultivating a cooperative disposition is the same as laying wire to connect the switch to the light.

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- 3) A necessary condition of successful collective action is that the agency of interdependent persons be organized appropriately
- 4) In order for persons to organize collective action, they must be disposed to cooperate when others are so disposed
- 5) Reason R for bringing about successful collective action is therefore a reason for persons to cultivate a disposition to cooperate when others are disposed to do so as well
- 6) Whereas R is a reason to do cooperative act F only on the condition that others cooperate, R is an unconditional reason for persons to cultivate the right kind of disposition
- 7) Therefore, persons are subject to an unconditional duty to cultivate the right kind of disposition

Institutional Alternatives

4) In order for persons to organize collective action, they must be disposed to cooperate when others are so disposed

This premise is overstated: widespread cooperative dispositions on the part of individuals are necessary for self-organized collective action, and that necessity can be obviated by functional institutions

Social organization: top down vs. bottom up

- Institutional organization is based on pre-established rules defining roles or offices to which attach responsibilities to organize cooperation and powers and authority to direct and induce cooperation on the part of others.
- Self-organization, by contrast, consists of persons exercising their agency under their own direction (as opposed to under the direction of institutional rules and officials) attempting to establish the requisite cooperative behavior among themselves.

Nevertheless, cooperative dispositions on the part of individuals will be necessary when, for whatever reason, extant institutions are not an available means for resolving some moral collective action problem

- Extant institutions may be insufficient because they lack the power or resources to deal with a given collective action problem
- Dysfunctional institutions may be the source of the problem themselves
- Control and direction of institutions may depend on resolving prior collective action problems
- Self-organization is fundamental in a way that institutional solutions are not, in that the establishment of institutions in the first instance is a moral collective action problem itself

The participant principle: if one has a *pro tanto* obligation to cooperate in moral collective action conditional on others participating, then, in lieu of an institutionalized solution to that collective action problem, one has an unconditional *pro tanto* obligation to cultivate a disposition to cooperate when others are willing to cooperate.

Thanks!

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Alternative answers to our puzzle

1. Might there be a joint or collective obligation?
 - a. Does not solve the puzzle, only moves it to that of constituting a joint or collective agent, which itself requires collective action.
2. Estlund appeals to *plural requirement*: group G is subject to a plural requirement to do collective action C when: i) each member of G has a conditional obligation to do her part in C if others will do theirs; and ii) it would be good that C obtains
 - a. This view is unable to explain judgments about the way in which independence from the exercise of agency can influence an outcome's deontic status—this view will (wrongly, I think) judge all unsuccessful cases of moral collective action as wrong, regardless of why they are unsuccessful

Alternative answers to our puzzle

3. Maybe there's a more straightforward answer: an individual wrongs those who suffer from unachieved moral collective action just when she fails to appropriately intend to do her part (see Goodin)
 - a. Forming the right intention as such cannot be the answer, it's vulnerable to a toxin-puzzle-style counterexample—one can intend to do their part without ever having to do it by forming the following intention: “(I will if you will) only if you won't”
 - b. The above intention is fishy. It is not just that one should intend to help with collective action, but that one would intend to help in those cases where it could still be achieved. That sounds right to me, but that takes us to thinking about dispositions, which I endorse.

What exactly is a disposition anyway?

- Some person P is disposed to do action F in some type of context C when P has some psychological property Q such that so long as P has Q, P will have sufficient motivation to F in tokens of C.
- The psychological property Q is the reason that explains why P is disposed to F; it can be anything that results in a robust propensity to F in tokens of C, e.g., in the context of moral collective action, it might be a virtue, a character trait, a deep desire to see justice done, a consequence of a prior commitment, and so on
- Dispositions can be interrupted or overridden, they still exist (e.g., I'm disposed to teach my class on time, and I still have that disposition even if it is overridden on account of my needing to rush a loved one to the hospital)

Another Challenge: The Temporal Constraint Objection

Estlund raises another worry about the disposition view: it is unable to explain how wrongdoing related to collective action occurs at a particular time.

The problem is two-fold: i) since one can cultivate a disposition at numerous times, there seems to be no determinate time at which one violates their duty to cultivate a cooperative disposition; ii) even if there is a determinate time at which that violation takes place, the disposition view reaches an incorrect judgment about it, namely, that the violation occurs well before the time at which collective action would need to.

Temporal Constraint I

- Duties to cultivate a cooperative disposition are imperfect duties
- At a given time, the discretionary nature of imperfect duties allows duty-bearers to discharge their duty at a later time
- If one has violated some imperfect duty, then it will not be the case that they can fulfill it at a later time
- Consider the “I’ll do it later” test: an imperfect duty has not been violated so long as the duty-bearer can legitimately answer a demand that they perform the duty by responding with “I’ll do it later”

Temporal Constraint II

- Granting the “I’ll do it later” test, the time of that violation still appears to be much earlier than intuitive
- Reply: the wrong really does happen earlier than we think
- When one’s conduct has relatively temporally remote consequences because the effect of one’s conduct is mediated by a process that one cannot control, then evaluation of such conduct will in part be based on its temporally remote consequences
- E.g., burying landmines indiscriminately is evil at the time they are buried, even if a great deal of time passes before anyone becomes a victim

Slice and Patch Watch the Trolley. Because of an unforeseeable circumstance, at time t_0 there is a runaway passenger-less trolley. As is wont to happen in such examples, our poor friend Patient has non-negligently slipped on the tracks and gotten stuck. If nothing is done, then at t_2 Patient will be swiftly and painlessly killed by the runaway trolley. Slice and Patch happen to be nearby, and, moreover, each is by one of two levers. If both Slice and Patch pull their lever by t_1 , the trolley will be stopped before it kills Patient. However, if only one lever is pulled by t_1 , it will only slow the trolley down slightly, turning what would have been a swift and painless death into a gruesome, protracted, and painful death. So, each of Slice and Patch ought to pull their lever by t_1 only if the other will too. For trivial reasons (e.g., they do not want to get grease on their hands and clothes) neither Slice nor Patch is disposed to pull her lever by t_1 . Consequently, the trolley barrels by and swiftly kills Patient at t_2 .

Temporal Constraint III

- *Slice and Patch Watch the Trolley* is has the same general form of puzzles of moral collective action, it only makes the temporal gap explicit
- I claim that in this example, the wrong occurs at t_1 , the last time at which Slice or Patch could have acted to prevent Patient's death, rather than t_2 , the time at which Patient dies
- Therefore, while the disposition view provides a revisionary answer as to when the wrong of unfulfilled collective action obtains, that revision is not an objectionable one