

## Where the Distribution Problem Ends and ‘Real’ Collective Responsibility Begins

### Abstract

#### Introduction

Just as individuals perform individual actions, groups of individuals often perform so-called ‘collective actions.’ Moreover, many of the considerations that require an analysis of the actions of individuals play an analogous role in collective action. For example, if individuals are responsible only for their actions and the consequences of their actions, then whether some event is an action is of obvious importance in a discussion of individual responsibility. If collective responsibility operates in an analogous way, then getting a clear understanding of the nature of collective action will be crucial to any account of collective responsibility.

Issues arising from moral responsibility for collective actions have received a lot of attention from philosophers of action and moral theorists alike; virtually every position one might take within the logical terrain has been occupied. Indeed, the intractability of the problem speaks in favor of searching for a new strategy upon which we can base an analysis. Accordingly, I argue that we may reasonably look to moral responsibility for individual actions as providing the desired analogy; if conditions can be found that play an uncontroversial role in attributions of individual moral responsibility, then it is a reasonable working hypothesis that analogous conditions may play a role in attributions of collective moral responsibility.

There have been a number of attempts to implement the strategy above. For example, some have argued that collective responsibility is always distributive and that the distribution problem may be solved by looking to the causal contributions of the agents in the collective. There are others who agree that the collective responsibility is distributive, but have suggested that the content of the individual intentions is relevant to distribution. And still there are others who think that at least sometimes there is ‘real’ non-distributive collective responsibility along the lines that Feinberg suggested.

In this paper, I start by examining these attempts to answer the distribution problem in collective responsibility and I go on to argue that neither the causal nor the intention content approach will capture all the cases. Then I examine one overlooked approach based on recent work on interactive knowledge in collective intention – what I refer to as the epistemic approach.

One relatively uncontroversial factor in attributing individual moral responsibility is the knowledge held by the individual, and how the individual’s knowledge played a role in bringing about or otherwise justifying her action. Thus, if we hope to model an account of collective moral responsibility after an account of individual moral responsibility, then it is a reasonable first step to consider the role that epistemic conditions play in the production of collective action. But in spite of the naturalness of this suggestion, little has been done to implement the idea in existing discussions of collective moral responsibility. And it is easy to see why this is so. After all, well-known problems of judgment aggregation, including the so-called ‘discursive dilemma,’ have shown that the most straightforward analyses of collective belief and collective preference may have highly

paradoxical implications. Furthermore, it is also difficult to press epistemic considerations into service for understanding collective moral responsibility because most existing accounts of collective action and collective intention have not spelled-out exactly how such epistemic conditions give rise to collective action, notwithstanding the fact that most accounts do require that epistemic conditions be met.

I go on to argue that we may go a long way toward solving the distribution problem by looking to the epistemic approach. After all, our attempt to answer the problem of collective responsibility seeks guidance from the more established literature of the individual. And it has been long since appreciated that the agent's responsibility for an action may depend in part on her epistemic states.

Finally, I go on to argue that only after the distribution problem is adequately addressed will we find ourselves in a position to handle the problem of collective non-distributive responsibility. In particular, I argue that we might arbitrate the problem of 'real' collective responsibility by determining whether and where our best solutions to the distribution problem break. If there is a natural breaking point – which I suggest there is – then that point may serve as a mark between distributing responsibility to individuals in the collective and 'real' collective moral responsibility.