

THE COLLECTIVIST APPROACH TO COLLECTIVE MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

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Abstract: In this article we critique the collectivist approach to collective moral responsibility. According to philosophers of a collectivist persuasion, a central notion of collective moral responsibility is moral responsibility assigned to a collective as a single entity. In our critique, we proceed by way of discussing the accounts and arguments of three prominent representatives of the collectivist approach with respect to collective responsibility: Margaret Gilbert, Russell Hardin, and Philip Pettit. Our aims are mainly critical; however, this should not be taken to imply that we do not ourselves support an alternative account of collective responsibility. We advocate an individualist account of collective responsibility. On this view of collective responsibility as joint responsibility, collective responsibility is ascribed to individuals. Each member of the group is individually morally responsible for the outcome of the joint action, but each is individually responsible jointly with the others.

Keywords: collective moral responsibility, collectivist approach, individualist account, joint responsibility.

In this article we critique the collectivist approach to collective moral responsibility. According to philosophers of a collectivist persuasion, a central, if not *the* central, notion of collective moral responsibility is moral responsibility assigned to a collective as a single entity. In their view “collective responsibility” should be understood in the sense of a collective’s responsibility. It is a separate question whether the members of a collective, the people who constitute the collective in question, are individually responsible. When it comes to collective moral responsibility, the collective itself is the bearer of the moral responsibility. In David Copp’s terminology this claim is equivalent to the claim that a collective can be an “independent moral agent” (Copp 1980, 147–50).¹ An important corollary of the collectivist view is that collectives are capable of bearing moral responsibility for outcomes, even when none of their

¹ In Copp’s terminology a moral agent is an entity that can have moral obligations and bear moral responsibility. According to Copp, if an agent can bear moral responsibility, then it can have moral obligation, and vice versa (1980, chs. 1 and 2).

members is in any degree *individually* morally responsible for those outcomes.²

We accept the general notion of collective responsibility.³ In particular, we accept that collective moral responsibility is not the same thing as individual moral responsibility. However, we reject the collectivist approach to understanding collective moral responsibility. In our critique, we proceed by way of discussing the accounts and arguments of three prominent representatives of the collectivist approach with respect to collective responsibility: Margaret Gilbert, Russell Hardin, and Philip Pettit. The obvious additional representative of the collectivist camp is Peter French (French 1984). However, his work has received detailed attention in the literature, including a sustained critique by Seumas Miller (Miller 1997 and 2001b, ch. 5). For this reason we will not consider French's arguments here.⁴

In the first section of this article we discuss Gilbert's plural subject account of collective responsibility. We argue that this account does not succeed in providing a clear understanding of a collective bearing moral responsibility in its own right, and that it has some important counter-intuitive consequences.⁵ In the second section we concentrate on Russell Hardin's argument to the effect that a collective—specifically, a group—can be morally responsible for a consequence of its inaction, even if none of the members is individually morally responsible. Contrary to Hardin, we claim that the correct analysis of his example does not support the collectivist conclusion. In the final section we consider an argument developed by Philip Pettit.

Our aims here are mainly critical, but this should not be taken to imply that we do not ourselves support an alternative account of collective responsibility—far from it. We advocate an individualist account of collective responsibility. Seumas Miller, in particular, has developed an

² Of course, we are not suggesting that collectivist approaches are committed to the view that a necessary condition for collective responsibility is that none of the individual members of the collective has individual responsibility.

³ So we do not have any quarrel with the likes of Virginia Held when she argues for a distinctive notion of collective responsibility (Held 2002). However, we reject her further claim that "a broad circle of humanity is collectively responsible for the outrages of the past decade in former Yugoslavia, but this tells us rather little about the moral responsibility of individual persons" (2002, 177).

⁴ Larry May and David Copp have also advocated collectivism. May's arguments are not well developed. Copp leans heavily on his example of a government being responsible for an outcome, even though supposedly no member of the government is individually responsible. French uses a similar argument. However, in our view his example can be handled fairly easily either by recourse to the notion of the individual responsibility of the occupant of the role or by the joint responsibility of the occupants of the relevant role. Thus, in his example, the individual occupying the position of prime minister is responsible, albeit qua prime minister, or the members of the Cabinet are jointly responsible, albeit qua members of the Cabinet. For details of this argument, see Miller 2001b, 171.

⁵ See also Schmitt 2003, Introduction.

account of collective responsibility as joint responsibility. On Miller's view, at least one of the central senses of "collective responsibility" is responsibility arising from joint actions. Roughly speaking, a joint action can be understood thus: two or more individuals perform a joint action if each of them intentionally performs an individual action but does so with the (true) belief that in so doing they will jointly realise an end that each of them has. On this view of collective responsibility as joint responsibility, collective responsibility is ascribed to individuals. Each member of the group is individually morally responsible for the outcome of the joint action, but each is individually responsible jointly with the others (Miller 2001a and 2001b, 234f.).

1. Gilbert's Account

Gilbert argues that *groups as such* can act, *groups as such* can act freely in the sense that they can act uncoercedly and *groups as such* can believe that their action is or was wrong. She concludes that *groups as such* can be morally responsible, pretty much like individuals. She claims that, understood in her way, the existence of collective responsibility has no implications with respect to the personal (individual) responsibility of the group's members (Gilbert 2000, 141, and 1996, 384–85).

Gilbert's account is based on her plural subject theory. The core concept of this theory is that of joint commitment (to do something as a body).⁶ The notion of joint commitment explicates the *group as such*, or the holist element in Gilbert's account:

The idea of joint commitment is the idea of a commitment of two or more people. It is not a set of personal commitments, one for each of the parties. It is rather the commitment of them all. It applies to each of the parties and can only be rescinded by their concerted action. While it stands, each has reason to conform to it. (Gilbert 2000, 147)

When persons X and Y are jointly committed in some way, they constitute a *plural subject* in Gilbert's sense. According to Gilbert, her "theory may reasonably be characterized as both conceptually and ontologically a holist theory. In other words, it goes beyond individualism both with respect to the concepts it uses and in its understanding of what there is." And further: "Joint commitment is a holistic concept in the following sense: it cannot be analyzed in terms of a sum or aggregate of personal commitments" (Gilbert 2000, 3).⁷ It is clear that when a joint

⁶ In Gilbert's words, "[A] population P constitutes a *plural subject*, by definition, if and only if its members are jointly committed to do something as a body, where 'doing something' is construed very broadly so as to include intending and being in various cognitive states" (2002, 125).

⁷ For a more detailed account of what Gilbert means by "holism" see, for example, Gilbert 1989 and 1998. She distinguishes between "internal" and "external" holism (Gilbert 1998). Roughly speaking, internal holism refers to the group-view adopted by the members

commitment is established the people involved are “members of a joint commitment and thus a plural subject” or they “participate” in a joint commitment; they enjoy it as a whole, so to speak. But it is not clear whether, according to Gilbert’s account, the joint commitment is attributed to members of the group distributively or to the group as a whole.⁸ Here it needs to be kept in mind that *relational* individualist accounts, such as that of Miller (Miller 2001b, ch. 8), accept that there is no reduction of a joint commitment to a mere *aggregate* of individual (non-relational) commitments. Nevertheless, relational individualism is (obviously) a species of individualism.

According to Gilbert, when a plurality of subjects has become jointly committed to something, the agents involved have adopted the group view with respect to the thing that they are committed to. The agents have the attitude (belief, intention, and so on) in an irreducible “we-form,” which is a kind of primitive and not analyzable in terms of “I-attitudes” and mutual beliefs. This idea of a group mode in the “heads” of the members of the group establishes the internally holist aspect of Gilbert’s theory. In addition—according to Gilbert—the individual subjects tied together by a joint commitment constitute a new entity, a real unity, a holist subject of an irreducible sort. This is the externally holist aspect of her account.

We are uncomfortable with the internally holist aspect. The “group-view” (or whatever it is to be called) adopted by the members of the group is by no means crystal clear. It seems to be a primitive introduced in an argument for the existence of groups as such. So it is not reducible in the manner of Miller’s collective ends. (Roughly speaking, these are shared, interdependent, individual ends [Miller 2001b, 58].) Nor can the states in the heads of the members of a plural subject be analyzed in terms of “we-attitudes” in Tuomela’s sense (see, for example, Gilbert 1998, 237–39; Tuomela 1995, chs. 1–3). But if the group-view is not to be understood in any of these senses, in what sense is it to be understood? We do not believe Gilbert has provided a satisfactory answer to this question.

We also want to cast doubt on the externally holist aspect of Gilbert’s account. She does not offer a clear picture of her notion of groups as such.

of the group, and external holism to the outsiders’ view that jointly-committed members of the group constitute a “new” entity in its own right. It seems to us that, for instance, Searle’s view (1990 and 1995) and Tuomela’s notion of “we-mode” in his *Cooperation* (2000) might qualify as internally holist in Gilbert’s sense.

⁸ Every participant qua participant of a joint commitment has rights and obligations with respect to every other interdependently, in the sense that if one has them then every participant has them. It seems to us that these rights and obligations are the only thing in the structure of a joint commitment that is clearly attributable to individual constituents of the plural subject—qua participants of a joint commitment and interdependently, of course. We will not discuss the nature of these obligations and rights here. (See Gilbert 1996 and 2000. See also Miller 2001b, chs. 7 and 8, and 2003.)

In Gilbert 1989 (436), she claims that her view is compatible with certain kinds of individualism. The interrelationism defended in Tuomela (1995, 367–75) is a candidate for a kind of individualist view that might be thought to be compatible with Gilbert's view. Certainly she holds that plural subjects are dependent on individual agents. Thus, according to the plural subject account, for there to be a group that exists in its own right, or as such, there must be individual agents in certain special states related in certain special ways. And with respect to actions, plural subjects are not self-sufficient; rather, they act via individual members (*qua* members) of the plural subject.

On the other hand, Gilbert's view does seem to go well beyond recognisable forms of individualism. For example, she says:

I refer to populations as “collectives” when I conceive of them as genuinely collective subjects of intention, action, and so on. I take it that a population is a *genuinely collective* subject of intention if and only if, roughly, it can plausibly be regarded as having an intention *of its own*, an intention, if you like, of the population *as a whole*. (Gilbert 2002, 123, her italics)

In short, we find Gilbert's core notion of a plural subject somewhat opaque. Let us now turn to her notion of collective responsibility. Before directly discussing the problems related to her account of collective responsibility, we need to introduce an important distinction Gilbert makes between ground-level and derived joint commitments.

The distinction turns on the difference in mode of production. In order to produce a ground-level joint commitment to espouse a certain goal, the parties must, roughly speaking, mutually express their readiness to enter this commitment. A derived commitment is arrived at *indirectly*. For example, members of the government may be jointly committed, in the sense of a ground-level joint commitment, to allowing the prime minister to accept certain goals on behalf of the government. When the prime minister *does* accept a goal and acts in the light of the commitment so created, the members of the government are jointly committed to the action in question in the derivative sense. The notion of derived joint commitments enables Gilbert to account for such actions that are attributable to a group as the group's actions on the basis of only some, maybe only one, of the members of the group acting for the group as a representative.⁹

Representative devices of this kind are very familiar. They are institutional devices by means of which one agent can act on behalf of another, one agent can be held liable on the basis of the actions of another, and so

⁹ In virtue of this joint commitment in the derivative sense, a group supposedly can act without all, or perhaps most, of the members even knowing what is happening, and by the same token a group can believe something without most of the members knowing that their group so believes (Gilbert 2000, 148–49). This is strongly counter-intuitive, even if “belief” is taken in the acceptance sense.

on. Now such devices, and the related devices of voting and the like, can readily be given an analysis that does not go beyond individuals and their individual beliefs, intentions and decisions (see Miller 2001b, 174f., and the discussion of Pettit below). However, Gilbert chooses to understand the workings of such institutional devices as *requiring* the existence of collective subjects with irreducible beliefs and intentions. Thus, in the above example, on the basis of the ground-level joint commitment, the prime minister's act of (say) expressing his intention of supporting the United States in a war against Iraq constitutes the action of a collective subject—the government—understood as an action with an intention above and beyond the intentions of the individual members of the government. As we have just noted, this collectivist element of Gilbert's account is unnecessary. But let us now turn directly to Gilbert's notion of collective responsibility. Here we need to distinguish two issues: First, what is Gilbert's notion of collective responsibility? Second, what are the practical implications of her notion of collective responsibility? Let us deal with these issues in order.

According to Gilbert, "a group bears guilt for an action performed if, acting freely, it did something wrong, something that it believed to be wrong" (Gilbert 2000, 150). Here the relevant terms are to be understood in terms of the plural-subject account discussed above. Unfortunately, in *Sociality and Responsibility* and in her 2002 article on collective guilt, she does not say much more about her notion of collective moral responsibility except that it can exist in the absence of personal moral responsibility on the part of the members of the collective in question.

Gilbert also tells us that "[c]ollective guilt is not a kind of 'sum' involving the personal guilt of many individuals" (Gilbert 1996, 384) and "members share equally in collective guilt but they do not have equal shares." By analogy with joint commitments, which do not properly speaking have parts, "there is no way of breaking collective guilt down into quantifiable shares" (385). Moreover, the collective guilt is to be ascribed only to the group as a whole.

Gilbert's statements manifest a confusion between two different conceptions. Consider the following statement: "Such 'being held responsible *qua* group member' appears to be equivalent to being held jointly responsible with the others, or to being a member of a group which is responsible" (Gilbert, 1996, 426). Here there are two different conceptions in play. On one conception—manifest in the phrase "being a member of a group which is responsible"—plural subjects are not simply the individual (typically human) subjects who might be thought to constitute them; nor do plural subjects consist of individual subjects taken in conjunction with the relations between them. Rather, on this view collective responsibility is simply a species of individual responsibility; but it is individual responsibility that attaches to a mysterious non-human subject which is a kind of macro entity. It turns out that a plural subject is a macro entity above and beyond the individual human subjects

that in part constitute it, and a macro entity to which moral responsibility attaches. This account allows that a group can bear moral responsibility, even if none of the members bears personal responsibility in the matter.¹⁰

This first way of taking Gilbert generates mystery rather than illumination. What are we to make of this strange non-human macro entity that is a subject with mental states and bears moral responsibility? Moreover, if collective moral responsibility is to be understood in this sense, then the relation of an individual member's responsibility to the responsibility of the group remains a mystery.

On the other hand, Gilbert at times—as in her use of the above-mentioned phrase “being held jointly responsible with others”—seems to have in mind the view that collective moral responsibility is attributed to individuals qua members of the group, and interdependently. This second way of understanding Gilbert can roughly be put in the following way. To say that a group G is morally responsible for X is to say that each member of G individually qua, or in his capacity as, a member of G is morally responsible for X, such moral responsibility of one being held interdependently with each of the other members of G. Actually, this view comes very close to the view Seumas Miller holds (Miller 1997, 1998, 2001a and 2001b). This view can hardly be formulated as a group bearing responsibility in the same way an individual human agent does. According to this view, the notion of collective moral responsibility is rather to be understood as the notion of many individuals bearing moral responsibility *jointly*. According to this interpretation, Gilbert's account of collective moral responsibility has clear implications for individual moral responsibility; collective responsibility turns out to be nothing more than the moral responsibility borne by each individual qua a member of a group. On this way of taking Gilbert, the mystery is dispelled, but we are simply left with a form of relational individualism.

Let us now turn to the practical implications of Gilbert's view, as she expresses it. Her view has some counter-intuitive consequences. As a preliminary to this we need to detail three additional features of her plural subject account, features that generate further problems for her account.

First, Gilbert holds that an agent can be “born” into the membership of a plural subject and that this entails participation in a joint commitment (1996, 385). Thus, Gilbert accepts that an agent can become a participant in a joint commitment without any expression of willingness, at least in any conventional sense of “expression” or “willingness.” Gilbert's account also allows for an agent to be coerced to enter a “valid” joint commitment (1996, ch. 12).

¹⁰ Gilbert emphasizes the distinction between individual (or personal) responsibility, and the responsibility borne qua a member of the group. Unfortunately she does not provide us with an analysis of the membership responsibility. How should we, under this rendering of Gilbert's account, understand members' “sharing in collective responsibility”?

Second, Gilbert's account allows for an occurrence to count as a group performing an action, even if most of the members are not even aware of what is happening (2000, 148).¹¹

Third—and in the light of features one and two just mentioned—Gilbert holds that a group bears moral responsibility for an action performed if, acting freely, it did something wrong, believing it to be wrong. Gilbert illuminates her notion of a free action of a group only by way of discussing an example (2000, 149–50). In Gilbert's example, among the inhabitants of the island Demos there is a ground-level joint commitment to let Polemia—one of the inhabitants of Demos—set goals for them as she sees fit, and see to it that these goals are implemented. As it happens, Polemia sets the goal of attacking Pathos, a neighbouring island, and Polemia then organises a successful attack on Pathos. No external agent exerts pressure on the group in favour of the group action, either through Polemia or in any other way.

Gilbert concludes that here we have an example of a free group action. On the basis of this discussion, she must take the following condition to constitute a jointly sufficient condition of a free action, A, of a group, S: (a) the relevant members of the group, S, did perform the action, A; (b) A constitutes the group's action in virtue of the ground-level joint commitment of the members of S; and (c) the relevant members did not perform A under coercion or external pressure. Crucially, these conditions do not exclude the possibility that most of the members of the group, S, were coerced to enter the ground-level joint commitment. Indeed, elsewhere (1996, 385–86) Gilbert explicitly asserts that the individual members of such a group might not have any option to dissociate themselves from group membership—for example, if they were born into the group and are unable to leave it.

Let us suppose that the president of a country, in her capacity as president, signed an immoral treaty, and that no external pressure or coercion whatsoever was present when she did so. The president had also accepted the belief that the treaty is immoral, and did so in her capacity as president. Let us also suppose that an open-ended ground-level joint commitment is present among the citizens of the country in question. Moreover, most of the citizens have been coerced into abiding by the laws of the country, and the law-abiding behaviour is the only expression of willingness to enter the joint commitment that they ever gave. We can add that most of the citizens did not know a thing about the president's signing of the treaty. The president's signing satisfies Gilbert's conditions

¹¹ That is, a ground-level joint commitment commits "passive" members of a group, qua members, to actions performed by the representative members, qua members, even in cases in which the passive members are not informed about the undertakings of the representatives. In large-scale collectives it may well happen that the majority of the members are passive.

of collective moral responsibility. Accordingly, by Gilbert's lights all the citizens of our imaginary country bear membership guilt or collective moral responsibility qua members of a plural subject, the country, for the signing, and therefore existence, of the immoral treaty. This is strongly counter-intuitive. Surely, given the circumstances, the citizens are not morally responsible for the treaty?

It might be replied to this that while the citizens are not morally responsible qua individual persons, they are nevertheless morally responsible as a group. But this brings us back to our earlier problem with respect to the precise identification of Gilbert's notion of collective moral responsibility. If collective moral responsibility attaches to individual citizens (albeit jointly), then the claim that the citizens are morally responsible is clearly unjustified. On the other hand, if collective moral responsibility is taken to attach to the citizens qua supra-individual entity, then the claim that the citizens are collectively morally responsible is mysterious. What does it mean, and how is it helpful, to ascribe moral responsibility to such a supra-individual entity?

Gilbert's account allows for the possibility that, even if the agent never made any free decisions with respect to his or her own membership in the collective or with respect to the action of the collective, he or she *qua* a member of the collective is to be held morally responsible for the action. Furthermore, the account allows for the possibility that the agent does not even know about this action for which he or she is allegedly responsible. This harsh doctrine may seem tragic but it does, according to Gilbert, nevertheless embody a tragic truth (1996, 386). We believe that Gilbert's account is too harsh a doctrine to embody a truth, even a tragic truth, about collective moral responsibility. No viable account of moral responsibility, either individual or collective, can be given in terms of such permissive epistemic and freedom conditions as these.

In the light of our discussion in this section we are entitled to draw two conclusions. First, the plural subject account as it stands does not give us a clear answer to the question as to how groups—as opposed to the individual members of groups—can be morally responsible; to this extent, Gilbert's account of collective responsibility is opaque. Second, Gilbert's account of collective responsibility has some important counter-intuitive consequences.¹²

2. Hardin's Argument

Russell Hardin (1988) deploys the following example to show that collective responsibility for omissions cannot be reduced to individual responsibility.

¹² For a more detailed argument against Gilbert, see Makela 2000.

Hardin's Car-Pushing Example

Let's suppose we are four people at a bus stop waiting for the bus. A careless driver loses control of his car, which gets stuck in the snow next to the bus stop. The driver cannot get his car out of the snow without us jointly helping him. It will take all four of us, and no more, to help the poor man. However, none of us makes a move. Every one of us omits to act, believing (truly) that none of the other three will act, and that acting alone would not make a difference. If none of the other people who must act if we are jointly to push the car out of the snow will participate, no one of us can be held individually responsible for not contributing his or her share to pushing it (see Hardin 1988, 158; here we have given a narrative form to Hardin's example).

According to Hardin, this is a case in which necessary contributors to some collective outcome all fail to contribute, and is such that: (a) no one person's action would make any difference and (b) the sum of individual responsibilities may be said to be zero, while the collective responsibility is substantial. The joint or collective action of all the members is necessary and sufficient for the outcome x (for example, the car being pushed out of the snow). Every individual member's action is a necessary condition, but not a sufficient one, for the outcome x . So every individual member's inaction is sufficient, but not necessary, for the outcome not- x . How does Hardin justify his claim that no member of the group can be held (individually) responsible for not contributing his or her share to pushing the car out of the snow? (See Hardin 1988, 156–57.)

His justification is based on the following inference: if bringing about a good result, O , requires the performance of an action, x , by each of a number of people, and if too few of these people are going to act for some individual A 's contributory action of x -ing to effect or contribute to O , then A has no moral reason to act in the relevant way. Suppose it is reasonable to assume that no action which A could undertake would make any difference in relation to the occurrence of O . Then A cannot be morally responsible for the failure of O to happen. This may be true of every member of a particular group. The failure of all of them brings about the failure of O , although no individual failure matters for the bringing about of O . The group is responsible for the failure of O , but no *member* of the group is responsible. On the other hand, it remains true that if everybody else acted while A did not, A alone would be responsible for the failure of O . Hardin calls the "responsibility paradox" characterized above "the moral analogue of the logic of collective action" (1988, 156–57).

If Russell Hardin's argument to the effect that there are cases in which there is collective, but no individual, responsibility is sound, then we have a counter-argument against individualist views of collective responsibility. However, we do not believe that his argument is sound.

Hardin's example is under-described. We offer the following three renderings:

(a) *Shared individual moral responsibility*. Every agent has an intention not to help the poor man no matter what others do. If so, then each is individually morally responsible for the outcome. There is shared individual moral responsibility.

(b) *Shared individual moral responsibility*. Every agent has an intention to help, if and only if others do. In this case, every agent has an individual end to avoid bringing about a situation in which the others help but he or she does not (or the others do not help and he or she does), that is, each has an individual end to do whatever the others do. This is a species of individuals knowingly contributing to an adverse outcome, for example polluting the river. The fact that the individual end is shared—"do what the others do"—makes no difference. Accordingly, each is individually morally responsible for the adverse outcome. There is shared individual moral responsibility.

(c) *Joint moral responsibility*. Each will help if the others do. On the other hand, each does not have as an individual end not to help, if the others do not help (so the case is unlike [b]). Rather, each will do whatever he or she intends independently of the others, if the others do not help. However, if the others help, then each will help, having as a collective end to get the car out of the snow. Notice that on (c), there is mutual knowledge, and so everyone knows that each has as an end (or at least desire) to get the car out of the snow, and each knows that each knows this, and so on. We suggest, contra Hardin, that rational agents—given these desires and beliefs—would in fact push the car.¹³ Roughly speaking, A will *x* in order to achieve O, if he believes B also has O as an end, and that therefore B will *x* if A does. So A *x*'s and B also *x*'s. For the three-person case, A will *x*, believing that B will reason as A has just done in the two-person case. So if A *x*'s then B will *x*. And of course if A and B *x*, then C will *x*. In the four-person case, A will also *x*; for A will *x* believing that B will reason as A has just done in the three-person case, and C will reason as B reasoned in the three-person case, that is, as A reasoned in the two-person case. And of course if A, B and C *x*, then D will *x*. And so the argument can be continued for the five- and six-person cases, and so on.

So on this way of taking Hardin, viz. (c), rational agents will act to avoid the adverse outcome and can be jointly ascribed individual moral responsibility for bringing about a good end.

The upshot of all this is that Hardin's example does not demonstrate the non-reducibility of collective responsibility to individual responsibility. However, he relies on another argument for this conclusion, namely, that in these kinds of case the action of any individual does not make any

¹³ Here we rely on Miller 1990 and 1987.

difference. Hence individual responsibility cannot be ascribed. Our main response to this argument is to reject the premise (Miller 2001b, ch. 8). We do not accept that failure to make a difference rules out the ascription of individual moral responsibility (see Hardin 1988, 157).

In our view, moral responsibility can be ascribed, at least in principle, in the following circumstances. (It goes without saying that we are not here attempting to provide a full analysis of the conditions for moral responsibility, but any adequate such account would need to accommodate the following kinds of case.) An agent intentionally performs an action that has an adverse outcome, and one of the following obtains: (a) the action is a necessary condition for the outcome; (b) the action is a sufficient condition for the outcome; (c) the action is a necessary and sufficient condition for the outcome; and (d) the action is a necessary part of one of a set of sufficient conditions for the outcome.

If there is more than one sufficient condition, that is, the outcome is over-determined, then the action does not make any difference. So, according to Hardin, moral responsibility cannot be ascribed, that is, Hardin does not accept (b) above. He is surely wrong to do so.

Consider two hit men who independently and simultaneously shoot dead the same person. The shot of each hit man was a sufficient condition for the death of the person; so the shot of either one of the hit men did not make any difference to the outcome. But neither hit man can escape prison by claiming that his shooting did not make any difference to the outcome!

We can make an analogous point in relation to collective responsibility for omissions. Let us consider the case of three swimmers who fail to act jointly to save a fat man. No one swimmer can save the man by acting alone, but jointly they could save him. However, each refrains from acting, and the fat man drowns. The failure to act on the part of each is sufficient for the drowning, that is, each omission is in itself a sufficient, but non-necessary, condition for the drowning.

An additional point to be made here is that once we have rejected Hardin's insistence that an action or omission makes a difference to an outcome, and have accepted that moral responsibility can be ascribed not only in cases in which an agent's action is a necessary condition for an adverse outcome but also cases in which it is a sufficient condition, then we are free to admit the possibility that responsibility can be ascribed for an action that is a necessary part of one of a set of sufficient conditions. This could be the case where two separate boat crews fail to rescue the fat man, or two separate hit squads simultaneously murder someone (Miller 2001b, 246).

3. Pettit's Discursive Dilemma

Philip Pettit has recently provided a related kind of collectivist argument for the existence of collective intentions and beliefs, and for collective reasons (Pettit 2000 and 2001, ch. 5). According to Pettit,

There is a type of organisation found in certain collectivities that makes them into subjects in their own right, giving them a way of being minded that is starkly discontinuous with the mentality of their members. This claim in social ontology is strong enough to ground talk of such collectivities as entities that are psychologically autonomous and that constitute institutional persons. (2000, 1)

Accordingly, the way is open to ascribe collective responsibility to such institutional persons.

The main argument put forward by Pettit involves examples in which he claims groups make reasoned decisions, yet none of the individual members of these groups has individually made these decisions on the basis of a process of individual reasoning. Accordingly, we apparently have processes of irreducibly *collective* reasoning and therefore must acknowledge the existence of collective intentions and judgments, and indeed collective minds and collective responsibility.¹⁴ Pettit runs this argument in a number of places, most recently in his paper revealingly entitled “Groups with Minds of Their Own” (2003).¹⁵

Pettit offers the example of three workers deliberating on whether to forgo a pay rise in order to introduce workplace safety measures. The workers are to reach their conclusion based on three considerations: first, how serious the danger is; second, how effective the safety measures would be; and, third, whether the pay sacrifice is bearable. If a worker thinks the danger is serious, the safety measures effective and the pay sacrifice bearable, then he or she will vote to make the pay sacrifice; otherwise he or she will vote against it.

Assume now that the three workers are to vote on the relevant premises and conclusion, as illustrated in table 1. The letters A, B and C represent the three workers, and “Yes” and “No” represent the decision of a worker regarding a premise or conclusion. Notice that each of the premises is supported by a majority of two to one of the workers. However, the conclusion is rejected by all of the workers.

Notice further that the workers can reach the conclusion in one of two ways, the “conclusion-driven” way or the “premise-driven” way. The group goes the conclusion-driven way if each worker casts his or her individual

¹⁴ The substance of the argument against Pettit in this section is to be found in Miller 2002.

¹⁵ Our concern here is with the inadequacy of Pettit’s argument for his position. However, there are a host of additional arguments against his position, including that: (a) the dependence of intentions (and the like) of supra-individual entities on human beings is radically different from the dependence of such states belonging to one human being on such states belonging to another human being; and (b) the self-control necessary for moral responsibility seems absent from such supra-individual “agents,” given the dependence of their intentional states on individual human beings. See also Miller 2001b, ch. 5, for other arguments against French 1984 and, by inference, Pettit.

TABLE 1

	Serious danger?	Effective measure?	Bearable loss?	= Pay sacrifice?
A.	Yes	No	Yes	No
B.	No	Yes	Yes	No
C.	Yes	Yes	No	No

vote on whether to endorse the pay sacrifice or not. If the workers adopt this way of doing things, then they will reject the pay sacrifice.

Now consider the premise-driven way. Here the workers first vote on each of the premises and then let logic decide the conclusion. Thus, the vote on the premise concerning the seriousness of the danger would be two to one in favour of “Yes”; the vote on the premise concerning the effectiveness of the safety measures would be two to one in favour of “Yes”; and the vote on the premise concerning the bearableness of the pay loss would also be two to one in favour of “Yes.” Accordingly, logic would deliver the conclusion to accept the pay sacrifice. So the premise-driven way delivers a result different from that of the conclusion-driven way.

So far, so good. Pettit’s examples illustrate that groups engaged in decision making can adopt different ways of doing things, and when they do so the result can diverge radically. Of course none of this is new. However, the conclusion that Pettit wants to draw from such examples is new. For Pettit claims that the choice between the conclusion-driven way and the premise-driven way is a discursive dilemma between submission to *individual* reason and submission to *collective* reason.

Pettit says:

The question raised by the discursive dilemma is whether the discipline of reason is meant to apply to each individual, taken singly, or to the group as a whole. When inferential aggregation precedes social, people submit themselves one by one to the discipline of reason, each drawing the appropriate conclusion and then voting on the basis of that judgment. When social aggregation precedes inferential, people submit themselves as a collectivity to the discipline of reason, each voting on the premises and then letting reason dictate what they are collectively to say about the conclusion. Under the first approach reason is individualised, under the second it is collectivised. (2000, 3)

Pettit goes on to say:

[T]he dilemma is resolved by many groups in such a way that reason is collectivised and I want to show in the next [section] that those groups thereby deserve ontological recognition as subjects of autonomous judgments and intentions, as institutional persons, and as sources of institutional and personal identity. (2000, 4)

We will now argue that Pettit's example and, by implication, all similar examples do not manifest this alleged new phenomenon of collective reason, and that therefore Pettit's example does not compel us to accept the existence of collective subjects that make judgments and form beliefs, and can be designated as collective responsibility.

Irrespective of whether Pettit's dilemma is resolved in the premise-driven or the conclusion-driven way, the example manifests only two processes. The first process is that of voting. If recourse is had to the conclusion-driven way, there is a vote on the conclusion; if recourse is had to the premise-driven way, there is a vote on each of the premises. But the process of voting simply involves two sorts of individual end. Each worker votes having as an individual end that his or her favoured candidate is voted in; but each also votes having as a *shared* individual end that the one with the most votes is voted in.¹⁶

The second process is to reason individually from a set of premises to a conclusion. Assuming that the conclusion follows from the premises as a matter of logic, and that the workers are logically competent, then each will individually derive the conclusion from the premises, and do so irrespective of whether the premise-driven or the conclusion-driven way is being used. Of course, in the case of the premise-driven way, the premises from which each worker will *individually* infer the conclusion are premises determined by voting, whereas in the case of the conclusion-driven way, the conclusion is inferred from premises that have been individually chosen. But the important point is that in both cases the only processes of reasoning going on are processes of individual reasoning in the heads of the individual workers; there is no process of collective reasoning.

In response to this it might be argued that in the case of the premise-driven way there is a *complex* process that involves a voting process as a component, and also involves individual reasoning as components, but this complex process is nevertheless greater than these parts; and that this complex process embodies collective reason. This argument does not work. To be sure, the premise-driven way in the example might be, perhaps should be, described in such a way that the workers not only individually agree to vote on the premises but also individually agree to abide by the conclusion inferred from the premises; that is, they individually agree to abide by the dictates of logic. (Alternatively, they might elect a chairperson to determine what logic has dictated.) But, if so, this would simply demonstrate that individualistic processes involving shared ends can be conjoined and/or embedded in other individualistic processes involving shared ends, that is, that individualistic processes

¹⁶ More precisely, this involves a shared *interdependent* individual end. Such ends are what Miller refers to as collective ends. (See Miller 2001b, 58f.) The process involved here is an instance of what Miller refers to as a "joint institutional mechanism." (See Miller 2001b, 174f.)

involving shared ends can be complex in character. Specifically, the workers can deploy a process of voting on the premises and also deploy the process of accepting the conclusion inferred (individually or by a chairperson) from the premises thus voted on.

4. Conclusion

In this article, then, we have discussed three recent arguments for the collectivist approach to collective moral responsibility. We have argued that none of these arguments is successful. We have not discussed all the arguments there are, or that can be given, for the collectivist approach. However, we believe that the most important arguments for the collectivist approach that are not discussed here have already been successfully rejected elsewhere (see, for example, Miller 1997 and 2001b; Narveson 2002). Thus, we conclude that there is no currently viable defence of the collectivist approach. We by no means want to reject the viability of the notion of collective moral responsibility altogether—we are not committed to flat-foot individualism with respect to moral responsibility. Quite the contrary; we take collective moral responsibility to be a very important and distinctive notion. Our claim is that the account of collective moral responsibility should and can be given without strong collectivist commitments (see, for example, Miller 2001b; Makela and Tuomela 2002).

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