

Book Review

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What Responsibility? Whose Responsibility? Intention, Agency, and Emotions of Collective Entities by Bhaskarjit Neog, New York: Routledge, 2024, 154 pp.

Holding a collective or group responsible for its deeds is quite common. In our everyday lives, we often find ourselves holding communities, institutions, mobs, or state bureaucracies responsible for their actions or inactions. But who exactly do we hold responsible when we hold such a collective responsible? Is it the individuals who are part of the collective, or the collective *itself*?

Bhaskarjit Neog's book, *What Responsibility? Whose Responsibility? Intentions, Agency, and Emotions of Collective Entities* is an effort to respond to the above questions by using the theoretical resources from the philosophy of mind, philosophy of action, and social ontology. Broadly speaking, the author notes, there are two dominant approaches to understanding collective responsibility: the individualist approach and the collectivist approach. The individualist thinks that it can be explained in terms of the responsibility of individuals and their interrelations ("beyond individuals and their joint association there is nothing that really matters morally", p. 12). On the other hand, the collectivist, by and large, denies that the responsibility of a collective can be understood by reducing it to the responsibility of its individual members. They, instead, believe that collective responsibility needs to be located in a non-individualized space where the collective can itself be held morally accountable *qua* collective ("certain moral situations of collective wrongdoing can be made sense of only by considering the collective as a full-blooded autonomous entity," p. 12).

Neog raises crucial questions against these dominant approaches and offers an "ecumenical account which is neither fully collectivistic nor fully individualistic" (p. 35). He calls it a 'non-individualist' or 'quasi-collectivist' account. In his view,

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this account neither endorses the individualistic tendency of reducing the collective responsibility to its constituent members nor treats it, like the collectivist, as a matter of responsibility of the collective as a supra-individual entity that hovers over and above the individuals. Neog suggests that his account is guided by four desiderata: (a) The moral responsibility of individuals in a collective does not and cannot capture the essence of what is happening at the level of the collective; (b) collective responsibility does not ask us to assume a collective entity with its irreducible ontological status; (c) collective responsibility does not threaten the autonomy of constituent individuals; and (d) talking about collective responsibility does not preclude the moral responsibility of individuals. (p. 35)

The book is divided into five chapters. After familiarizing the reader with the basic philosophical underpinnings of moral responsibility and its importance for collective entities (ch.1), Neog discusses how collective responsibility can be interpreted as the responsibility of a collective, and not just a matter of responsibility for its individual members (ch.2). Given that the question of responsibility is ineluctably attached to the concept of agency, the author questions whether a collective can be shown to have a kind of agency of its own, separated from the agency of its constituent individuals. The agency at the collective level can be accounted for by talking about at least three different kinds of interconnected capacities—the capacity to form intentions, the capacity to act as an agent, and the capacity to have proper emotional responses. The three subsequent chapters thus are devoted to collective intentions (ch.3), collective agency (ch.4), and collective emotions (ch.5). The author considers these three components as the rationale for a “standard justification of moral responsibility” at the collective level (p. xiv). The main goal of this effort is to develop a “framework of criteria that blends within them both rational and emotional aspects of agency” (p. 38). In what follows, I offer a synopsis of the main arguments and then highlight some concerns.

Neog begins with a rather well-recognized idea within philosophy of action: human actions get their significance from the meanings attached to them. This meaning can be decided by referring to the intentions behind the action in question. So, when we think of genuine collective actions, we are required to think of intentions at the level of the collective.

The author discusses how the four prominent philosophers of collective intentionality (Tuomela, Gilbert, Searle, and Bratman) have theorized the existence of collective intentions. One of the common, underlying features of these four accounts is they “subscribe to the truths of some form of methodological individualism which shows how social phenomena can be explained by referring to individual actions and the interrelations of the intentional states behind those actions” (p. 58). However, for Neog, this “inter-relatedness of the participating individuals” fails to capture a truly

collective character of collective intentions (p. 59). He distinguishes his position from the prevalent accounts in that he emphasizes the 'collectivity' of collective intentions. This 'collectivity' goes beyond the mere interdependence of individual intentions, but at the same time, it resists locating it in some purely collective space (like group mind). Thus, a genuine collective intention acknowledges the multiplicity of interdependent individual intentions but does so without reducing the former to the latter or giving autonomous ontological status to the former. Neog affirms that collective intentions "are a state where all the individuals intentionally converge at one point for the execution of a particular common goal in an irreductive way" (p. 64).

Nevertheless, an important question arises at this point: does this definition and the overall picture of collective intentions here really go beyond the ones provided by the above-mentioned philosophers, and say something substantially new? It might be difficult for Neog to respond with a complete affirmative. While he highlights the shortcomings of these existing accounts, it seems that his own account cannot entirely avoid taking sides with them.

Collective intentions, generally understood, result in collective agency. Neog highlights a difference in the nature of the relation between intention and agency in individual and collective cases. For individuals, an individual human agent "pre-exists the individual intention in that it is the individual agent who forms the intention" (p. 63). However, apparently in the case of collectives, there seems to be "no pre-existing 'collective agent' to form a collective intentional state" (p. 63). Instead, a collective agency appears to result from the formation of collective intentions by individual members.

In terms of collective, Neog thinks we actually can talk of three different forms of agency: individual, shared, and collective (p. 74, p. 84). Individual agency, in the collective context, refers to the actions of an individual with other individuals. Take the example of the air pollution caused by the use of different people's vehicles in the last 40–50 years. Here, even though no individual can be said to have the "intention" to cause pollution, these actions by a vast number of individuals took a collective look. Shared agency occurs when a group of individuals "perform things in a shared way which they could not have done if they had to perform them individually" (p. 83). Individuals here intentionally do things with others and pursue a common goal without taking that as the goal of a collective. For Neog, shared agency lacks the strong collective character. Individuals showing shared agency remain committed to their own individual vantage points. A collective agency, unlike both individual and shared agency, is a genuinely collective phenomenon that depends on two rather counterintuitive facts: first, a notion of a single agential unit, and second, within that single agential unit, there are multiple individual agents (p. 87). A multinational company making decisions on one of its products can be seen as an instance of

collective agency. Here, the whole company (collective) works as a single agent. However, one problem is that the idea of interpreting collective agency as a 'single agential unit' risks begging the very question of collective agency itself. It is not entirely clear how the author's argument avoids committing this fallacy (i.e., begging the question).

Furthermore, Neog points out that two factors are particularly important in ensuring that a collective agency has a 'collective' viewpoint of its own: first, normativity, and second, robustness of the agency (p. 90–94). What makes individuals with their own agential status come together and realize a collective agency is the force of normativity. One way to understand this normativity is to see it as a mutual responsiveness towards a collective goal. This mutual responsiveness can take different forms, such as mutual reliance, expectation, and commitment. However, the normativity inherent in the collective intention and agency is best articulated as an 'internal evaluative viewpoint' of the collective. Neog says, "the normative inter-subjective relation that prevails in the collective is ultimately an expression of the evaluative point of view the collective has towards the goal it intends to achieve" (p. 93). This internal evaluative viewpoint gives a sense of significance and concern to a collective goal, which is achieved by the exercise of collective agency. The glue of normativity, expressed as the evaluative attitude of the collective, is what provides robustness to a collective agency. A robust collective agency, for Neog, is a collective agency in a substantial sense, where the collective as a whole (and not just the individual members of the collective) intends and acts to achieve a goal (p. 94).

While this account is intriguing, I remain uncertain whether it significantly differs from those previously advanced by scholars such as Tuomela and Gilbert. Neog, for instance, finds Gilbert's "explicit subscription to a force of normativity to talk about a new entity in the formation of collective intention" problematic (p. 61), but it is unclear how Neog's own endorsement of normativity could be quite different from that of Gilbert.

Now, the last question is whether collective entities can be understood to have certain other important agential features, like reactive attitudes, to address the question of moral responsibility. Here, Neog subscribes to a view of responsibility essentially attached to reactive attitudes. In a broadly Strawsonian spirit, he suggests a link between our practices of attributing moral responsibility and the expression of certain reactive attitudes like guilt, resentment, remorse, shame, pride, etc. (p. 101–102). In other words, in holding an agent responsible, we also express certain emotions towards her. In a paradigmatic case of individual moral responsibility, we see an individual not just as an object of these emotional attitudes but also as a subject capable of experiencing and expressing them. So, the most crucial issue here is whether collectives, which are the regular objects of our moral emotions, can be imagined to

“have the ability to be responsive so that they can be treated as the subject of similar emotional attitudes” (p. 101).

With a primary focus on guilt-feelings, Neog develops an account of collective guilt—called ‘positional guilt’—to establish a collective as a subject of reactive attitudes (p. 104, p. 115). This ‘positional guilt’ reconciles two facts: the singularity of collective agency at work and the plurality of the experiencing subjects (the constituent individuals). The individual members experience the feeling of guilt in an interconnected way by referring to the singular viewpoint on which the collective agency is based. One crucial feature of positional guilt is that it does not endorse what Neog calls the “identity principle” (p. 116). According to this principle, the agent of wrongdoing must be the subject of experiencing guilt for that wrongdoing. But the notion of positional guilt asserts that the agent is collective, while the subjects of the guilt-feeling are the individual subjects.

As a whole, the book provides a compelling account of the intentions, agency, and emotions at the level of the collective, without reducing it entirely to its individual members or making the collective independent from its constituent individuals. These three components, in turn, form an important justification for the moral responsibility of structured collectives. One of the attractive merits of the book is that it combines contemporary writings on collective responsibility with engaging examples from movies, fiction, politics, and everyday situations. Having said this, one objection I have at this point is whether this account also works equally well for other kinds of collectives that do not have any structure. Our social life is full of collectives with either a bare minimum structure or no structure at all—they can be as wide and loose as a nation or group of bystanders. Neog seems hopeful that his account would also work for certain unstructured collectives (p. 8, p. 130–131). However, it needs to be further investigated whether the same framework of intentions, agency, and emotions can be satisfactorily applied in cases involving the responsibility of unstructured or loosely structured collectives. For instance, in the cases of unstructured collectives, individual members may be able to express the reactive attitudes more freely, whereas, in the cases of structured collectives, the emotional expression may be bound and suppressed by other normative constraints of the collective.

A final concern is this: how Neog’s proposed account of backward-looking (or retrospective) collective responsibility can be connected to broader moral concepts like obligations and duties—the concepts generally associated with responsibility in a forward-looking (or prospective) sense. When we hold an agent responsible or blame her for certain actions, we presuppose the existence of obligations that she failed to fulfil—obligations that, as a result, become the basis of our moral assessment. It is incoherent to blame or hold an agent responsible if that agent does not have any obligations in the first place. It suggests that backward-looking responsibility does

need some idea of obligations and duties. Neog acknowledges “a parallel between the retrospective and prospective senses of collective responsibility” (p. 127), and that the “responsibility of collectives, in both the senses, invariably demands the involvement of intentions and agency in making them what they are” (p. 127). However, the question of how one should draw a relationship between blaming and holding a collective responsible, and ascribing obligations and duties to it, is worthy of further debate and discussion.

Overall, this book is a thoughtful addition to a timely discussion on collective responsibility. Neog’s nuanced and detailed engagement with the notions of intentions, agency and emotions in the collective context provides a crucial philosophical justification of the idea of collective responsibility. I believe this book will be a helpful intellectual resource for a wide range of scholars and researchers across both philosophy and the social sciences.

Competing Interests I should note that the author of the book under review is my Ph.D. supervisor. I acknowledge that this professional relationship may be considered a potential conflict of interest. Nevertheless, I have written this review with utmost objectivity and critical rigor, and the views expressed herein are my own independent assessment of the work.