

Collective Responsibility and International Relations

Stephanie Collins

*This is the penultimate draft of a chapter whose final and definitive version will be published in: Saba Bazargan-Forward and Deborah Tollefsen (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Collective Responsibility*. Routledge.*

Abstract

International relations is a dense web of interacting and overlapping collectives—from states, to intergovernmental organisations, to multinational corporations, to international non-governmental organisations, to civil society movements, to ad-hoc collectivities like ‘the rich.’ To which of these groups can we properly attribute moral responsibility? This chapter starts by providing an account of what it takes for an entity to be a candidate for moral responsibility. It then suggests that—according to this account—entities that can be assigned responsibility include (some) states and intergovernmental organisations, while entities that cannot be assigned responsibility include ‘the affluent’ and ‘the West.’

Introduction

Which entities bear responsibility in international relations? This chapter answers this question via four illustrative case studies: states, intergovernmental organisations, the affluent, and the West. Section 1 begins by distinguishing causal, retrospective, and prospective responsibility. The rest of the chapter focuses on the latter two, which, I assume, can be borne only by moral agents. Section 2 provides a permissive account of the conditions under which a collective is a moral agent and demonstrates that it applies straightforwardly to most states. Section 3 turns to a more contentious case: intergovernmental organisations. I argue that some IGOs are moral

agents, and so are liable to retrospective and prospective responsibility. But this conception of collective moral agency is not as inclusive as one might hope. In Section 4, I demonstrate that it straightforwardly does not apply to the affluent; in Section 5, I demonstrate that it (somewhat less straightforwardly) does not apply to the West. The result is that neither ‘the affluent’ (as a group) nor ‘the West’ can bear retrospective or prospective responsibility—though they may well be candidates for causal responsibility, and their members are severally candidates for retrospective and prospective responsibility.

1. Responsibility

There are at least three senses of responsibility-for-an-outcome: causal, retrospective, and prospective. Causal responsibility occurs when one thing impacts or influences another. The causal responsibility of groups has been investigated extensively in the long-running social scientific debate between methodological individualists and holists. There, the primary question is whether groups are eliminable from our explanations about what causes what within the social world. I mention causal responsibility only because—as foreshadowed above—I will deny that certain collectives can bear retrospective or prospective responsibility. By denying that, I emphatically do not deny that they can bear irreducible causal responsibility. (In Collins forthcoming B, I argue that ad hoc groups can bear group-level causal responsibility. See similarly List and Spiekermann 2013.) Causal responsibility does not entail any moral assessment, which contrasts with retrospective and prospective responsibility.

Retrospective responsibility is at issue in debates about blame, answerability, and accountability. It is sometimes called the ‘basic desert’ sense of responsibility (Pereboom 2001) and is often used interchangeably with ‘blameworthiness or praiseworthiness’ (Smiley 2010). If an entity has retrospective responsibility, then it is an appropriate target of reactive attitudes

such as indignation, resentment, or gratitude. Several philosophers have developed theories of groups' retrospective responsibility (e.g., French 1984; Pettit 2007; Isaacs 2011).

Prospective responsibility is evoked when entities are attributed moral obligations or duties. I assume that obligations and duties are grounded in moral reasons that are presumptively decisive in decision-making: moral reasons that their bearer should, when deliberating about what to do, presume are not defeated, undermined, or outweighed by other reasons—even though this presumption will sometimes rightly be overridden. Again, there are several accounts of groups' prospective responsibility (see, e.g., *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 38(1)).

I will assume that all and only moral agents can bear retrospective and prospective responsibility. This assumption is based on three natural thoughts: responsibility attaches to actions; only agents can act (or refrain from acting); and all and only *moral* agents can consider moral reasons when choosing how to act. So, a collective can bear (retrospective and prospective) responsibility if and only if it is a moral agent. This assumption is disputed (Wringe 2016; cf. Collins forthcoming A chs. 2-3; Lawford-Smith 2015). I make the assumption so that I can focus on its implications for international relations.

My discussion will focus on whether a collective can *itself* bear responsibility—that is, whether a collective can bear responsibility that is distinct from the responsibility of its members. I assume that if this is possible, then it'll be possible for a collective to be responsible for some outcome without any of the members being responsible for it (as explained by, e.g., French 1984; Pettit 2011). This question differs from the question of whether individuals can together *share* responsibility for some outcome (on which, see, e.g., (e.g. Björnsson 2014; Schwenkenbecher 2013)). If the latter is possible, this doesn't entail that individuals can share responsibility for something for which none of them individually has responsibility. I take

collective-level responsibility to be more contentious—and, therefore, more interesting. So, I put shared responsibility to one side.¹

2. An Easy Case: States

I'll assume that, in the most general and abstract terms, a collective agent is composed of (at least two) human agents that are united under a rationally operated group-level decision-making procedure, while non-agential groups are composed of human agents that are not united in this way. The basic thought here is: a distinctly group-level decision-making procedure is necessary for distinctively group-level *deliberation*, which in turn is necessary for the group to be an agent distinct from (although supervenient upon and constituted by) its members. In this section, I'll say more about this conception of collective agency, primarily to demonstrate that it is held by the most powerful and prevalent actors in international relations: states. As we shall see, many (but not all) states are also *moral* agents. For reasons of length, my remarks here will be somewhat stipulative. (I develop this account of collective agency and collective moral agency in Collins forthcoming A, ch. 6.)

I'll assume there are three jointly sufficient conditions for a decision-making procedure to be *group-level* and for individuals to be *united under* that procedure. When these three conditions are met, the individuals who are united are the collective's *members*. So I'll call them the 'members' in what follows.

First, each member is committed (even if only tacitly) to abide by the procedure's results. This condition is important for enabling the collective to act in the world. After all, members are the physical constituents of collectives, so the collective can physically act only if it does so through the physical form of its members. But in order for the collective to reliably

¹ I thank Deborah Tollefsen and Saba Bazargan-Forward for pressing me to clarify this.

control these physical constituents, the constituents must be committed to enacting the collective's decisions. This commitment is *pro tanto*—it can be overridden—but the commitment is presumptively decisive in the individual's decision-making. Take the UK: citizens' behaviour largely reflects a *pro tanto* commitment to abide by the UK's decisions (that is, its laws). The commitment is *pro tanto* insofar as committed individuals might sometimes break laws for reasons of personal conviction, individual gain, or outright thoughtlessness. And perhaps the commitment is made under duress, thus not entailing any duties for members. But members' duties are not at issue here: all that's at issue is whether members are presumptively committed to the group's procedure; this commitment can exist even if it was coerced (Gilbert 2006). The general (even if not infallible) ability of the collective to determine its members' actions allows the collective to act through them. Importantly, there will be some citizens and some residents who don't meet this 'commitment' condition—for example, committed anarchists or children. These individuals are not members of the state *in the sense relevant to constituting the state as a morally responsible collective agent*. The state does not act through these individuals. (Which is not to say that they are not members for other purposes—for example, we might use the term 'member' to indicate the people that have special claims to the state's resources.)

Second, the beliefs and desires that the collective's procedure takes as inputs—and the way the procedure processes those inputs to form decisions—systematically depend on the behaviour (e.g., deference, votes, debate contributions, etc) of members, while being *operationally distinct* from the inputs and processes that any member uses when deciding for herself. This condition is important for locating the collective's agency as distinct from its members' agency. The collective's inputs and processes are operationally distinct insofar as: first, the beliefs and desires that are the outputs of the group-level procedure can have different content than the beliefs and desires that any of the members inputs into the procedure; second,

its method for processing the beliefs and desires (that are produced by the procedure) is different from the method of any one member when deciding for herself; and third, the decisions it produces are not the straightforward conjunction of individuals' decisions. (On different kinds of group-level belief, and on the possibility of such distinctively group-level beliefs, see, e.g., List 2014; Lackey 2016; Mathieson 2006).

Take the UK again. The beliefs, desires, and decisions of the UK systematically depend on the manifestos of political parties, the decisions of ministers, the judgments of judges and juries, and so on. The first two of these, at least, in turn systematically depend on the votes, letters, petitions, and so on of citizens (and, sometimes, some non-citizen residents). So the UK's decisions systematically depend on those of its component members (though, again, citizens are not component members if they don't meet the commitment condition). Although this systematic dependence holds, the UK's beliefs, desires, and decisions are *operationally distinct* from those of its members, in the three ways outlined above: first, the UK can believe something (e.g. 'a bespoke Brexit deal is possible') even while many, most, or even (in theory) none of the members personally believes this; second, the UK's methods for using its beliefs and desires to form decisions include parliamentary debates, Cabinet meetings, and so on—these are decidedly *not* the procedures that members use when using their own beliefs and desires to make their personal decisions; and, finally, the decisions of the UK are not just “Theresa May decides this and Boris Johnson decides that and...” Instead, the UK resolves such disagreements to arrive at an unequivocal collective position (this is most clearly exemplified in the ‘collective responsibility’ of Cabinet (Brady 1999)).

The third jointly-sufficient condition on a decision-making procedure's being group-level, and of individuals being united under the procedure, is that the enactment of the group's decisions requires actions on the part of the members, where those actions are properly understood as attributable to the collective. This third condition will hold if there is a particular

interplay between the first two conditions: not only are individuals committed (so that the collective can, by and large, determine their actions-qua-members), and not only does the collective make decisions in a distinctive way, but the distinctively collective decisions and the actions of the committed individuals converge to make some actions of members attributable to the collective as such.

To illustrate, suppose the UK decides that it will teach its schoolchildren a particular curriculum. The enactment of this decision requires actions on the part of thousands of members: teachers, regulators, curriculum designers, and so on. The actions of a given teacher, when teaching this curriculum, are his own. But they are *also* properly attributable to the state, because they result from his commitment to abide by the state's distinctive decision-making procedure. To see this, we can imagine that the state takes the position that evolutionary theory will be taught in biology classes. To a teacher who doesn't believe evolutionary theory, his action of teaching evolutionary theory is his own—but it cannot be properly understood as due to his agency alone. He is acting as an organ, part, participant, or (I will usually say) member of the state. Without referring to the state, we cannot locate one of the decision-makers (alongside himself) that is behind his action, since the group's decisions explain his action and he would not perform that action if acting in a non-member capacity.

As it hopefully clear from the discussion of the UK, all states have collective agency. Of course, not all states have ordinary citizens as members (in the technical sense of membership at issue here): dictatorships and aristocracies, for example, will include a much narrower group of humans as members that meet the three conditions just outlined.

The idea that states are agents accords with the views of prominent international relations theorists (e.g., O'Neill 1986; Erskine 2001; Wendt 2004), and with the long tradition of realism in international relations theory. According to realism, states are rational and self-interested agents, who pursue their own power, preservation, and self-interest in perpetual

tension with other states. Realism assumes that states are agents. But realism doesn't impute *responsibility* to states, because responsibility requires *moral* agency. Yet in international political practice, states are treated as moral agents. For example, UN summit documents regularly attribute to states both prospective and retrospective responsibility (for discussion of how responsibility operates in the UN summit documents on the Sustainable Development Goals, see Bexell and Jönsson 2017).

Do states have moral agency? Moral agents are agents that can deliberate about, and act on, morally good reasons. Such deliberation and action plays a crucial role in prospective responsibility (an entity must be able to deliberate and act upon morally good reason if it is to fulfil its obligations) and in retrospective responsibility (we typically blame and praise only those entities that can deliberate and act upon morally good reasons). There is no conceptual roadblock to a collective being a moral agent. After all, human moral agents can recognise the morally good reasons that apply to agents other than themselves. If a collective's members are human moral agents, and so can recognise such reasons, then they will be able to (i) design a collective's decision-making procedure such that the procedure countenances the input of the morally good reasons that bear on the collective's decision-making, and then (ii) operate the procedure so it processes those reasons in the way morality demands of the collective, such that the collective forms its own intentions to act in response to those reasons. Of course, it's unlikely that any collective will respond to morally good reasons infallibly, but if infallibility were the standard for moral agency, then no human would be a moral agent. Our conception of moral agency should not require moral perfection, so this is not a conceptual roadblock to collectives' moral responsibility.

However, if a collective is *constitutionally incapable* of taking morally good reasons as inputs and processing them, then the collective cannot be held morally responsible: it can neither bear obligations nor be blameworthy. This is the same for individuals: children, for

example, cannot process moral reasons, so lack obligations and blameworthiness. To be sure, in the case of a collective that's not moral responsibility, the *founders* or perhaps *present-day members* might be responsible as individuals for the fact that the collective lacks moral responsibility. But the collective itself cannot be blameworthy for that fact, or have an obligation to fix that fact. Thankfully, 'being constitutionally capable of taking morally good reasons as inputs and processing them' is a low bar for a collective to meet. It requires only that (i) members are permitted (by the collective's decision-making procedure) to put morally good reasons as inputs into the procedure, and (ii) the collective has the minimal material and structural resources to deliberate upon those inputs. (For a similar, but more stringent, account of collectives' moral agency, see Hindriks forthcoming.)

If members are not permitted (by the procedure) to present morally good reasons to the collective, then their attempts to do so will result in 'stonewalling' by the collective. The collective is then the moral equivalent of a psychopath: rational, but amoral (Hindriks (forthcoming) also draws this analogy. The Nazi party might be an example of such a collective). To picture this, imagine sitting on a committee and raising a consideration outside the committee's remit. While you have *tried* to present this consideration to the committee, the committee's constitution does not permit it to be considered—so the committee is constitutionally incapable of acting on that consideration. If the procedure does not permit *morally good* reasons to serve as inputs to the collective's deliberation, then the collective will not be able to act on such reasons. But if morally good reasons *can* be input into the collective's procedure, and if those inputs *are in fact* put into the procedure, then the collective will deliberate upon them—using such mechanisms as inter-member debate, member reflection established collective practice, and so on. Such deliberation is not algorithmic or automatic: a collective's use of its procedures to deliberate upon morally good reasons is thus similar to the

deliberation of human moral agents. It can be held prospectively and retrospectively responsible for the results of its deliberation.

How can a *state* have moral agency? By having fora in which members are permitted (by the group) to input morally good reasons into the group's decisions and within which deliberation on such reasons occurs. Examples of such fora include petitions and protests that are then discussed in the legislature; parliamentary debate in general; and election campaigns with subsequent voting (the slogans for which regularly appeal to citizens' moral sensibilities). By having such fora, a state is not just a collective agent, but also a *moral* collective agent. That said, states need not be democratic to be moral agents: conditions (i) and (ii) for moral agency are multiply realisable. Even a dictatorship or aristocracy can be a moral agent—just not one of which ordinary citizens are members.

However, it's possible that not all states are moral agents. This is because—arguably—not all states have decision-making procedures that permit their members to put morally good considerations as inputs into the procedure. Swaziland or the DPRK are perhaps examples of states that are agents. After all, even in an absolute monarchy—where the state has just one member, in the sense outlined above—that member's decision-making processes will differ when he is acting *qua* head-of-state than when he is acting *qua* individual. But such states are not *moral* agents, that is, capable of acting on morally good considerations or reasons. If a group's decision-making procedure has immoral goals as its absolute priority (the goal of maintaining the power of the leader, say), then feeding morally good inputs into the procedure may not be permitted by that procedure. Another way to say this is that morally good considerations are ruled out by the state's constitution. The state is a psychopath.²

² Erskine (2001, 82-3) considers but ultimately rejects a similar conclusion for “quasi-states.”

“Quasi-states” are moral agents on my criteria, which are more permissive than Erskine's.

Crucially, this is consistent with thinking that other entities—whether individual or collective—have obligations to *make* that state into a moral agent. For example, dictators may well have obligations to do so. After all, states’ leaders are moral agents—constitutionally capable of having morally good considerations bear on their decisions. So, they are capable of bearing responsibility for the actions performed by the states they control. Even if the state’s leader is a psychopath, *other* agents can bear obligations to act upon the state and its leader to render the state a moral agent. To be clear, I have not here *argued* that such obligations always exist. I just mean to emphasise that such individually-held obligations (and blameworthiness for not discharging them) are not ruled out by the fact that the relevant state is not itself a moral agent. If such individually-held obligations exist, then individuals can (and, often, should) be held blameworthy and culpable when the non-moral-agent state causes harm.

3. A Harder Case: Intergovernmental Organisations

The above notwithstanding, my conception of group agents is permissive—more permissive than other prominent conceptions (for example, the conceptions of List and Pettit (2011), whose ‘group agents’ exclude dictatorial groups; Rovane (1998), whose ‘group persons’ must have a unifying project; and French (1984), whose ‘corporations’ have unchanging policies). To picture the permissiveness, imagine a group of five friends at the beach. Numerous decisions must be made: where to lay their towels, where to go for lunch, and so on. Such a group is likely composed of humans that are united under a group-level decision-making procedure. The procedure is likely *conversation-based consensus*. This procedure can become established simply by each member’s taking a conversational and consensual stance to the various decisions—each asking the others where they would prefer to go for lunch, and why, until all agree. Such a procedure can be rationally operated, just so long as the group doesn’t decide, for example, both to get burgers for lunch and not to get burgers for lunch. By taking

part in the conversations (which can be done simply by staying silent to indicate indifference), each member tacitly commits to abide by the procedure's results. (This example illustrates another way in which my account is more permissive than List and Pettit's: they focus purely on groups that have formal 'aggregation functions.' The group of beachgoers has no such formal function.)

The group has different beliefs and desires, and processes them differently, than the members. This is what makes its beliefs and desires distinctively group-level. For example, Laura might prefer sushi for lunch, but upon learning the preferences of the others, partake in the consensus over burgers. We can even imagine that all members aim to please all others, but all are wrong about what the others want, so they end up using conversation-based-consensus to go somewhere *none* of them wants to go. Here, the group desires something (having pizza, say) that none of the members desires. Thus, the collective forms desires in a way none of the individuals does when forming her desires. And because no member can unilaterally decide that the group will have pizza for lunch, its decisions are not the straightforward conjunction of individuals' decisions.

Finally, the enactment of the pizza-for-lunch decision requires that members act (by walking to the pizza place). These actions are attributable to the group in the following sense: the explanation of why any one of the individuals is walking to the pizza place requires referring to the fact that she's a committed member of a group that has decided to have pizza for lunch. She goes to the pizza place for lunch, but this action also partly constitutes the group's action of going there for lunch. The same considerations that led us to classify the UK as an agent also lead us to classify our beachgoing group of friends as an agent.

I emphasise this application because it has implications for international politics. Specifically, collective moral agency extends to some groups in international politics whose decision-making processes involve informal diplomatic wrangling, power-play, self-interest on

the part of members, and case-by-case bargaining amongst members. This includes some intergovernmental organisations (IGOs).³

An IGO is a group created by agreement between states, whose members are the states who made the agreement (or organs of those states), where that founding agreement determines the group's aims and operations (Union of International Associations 2015; ILC 2011, 2). Additionally, an IGO has a permanent secretariat, staff, and/or headquarters.⁴ The IGO's continued identity depends upon temporal continuity in the *broad structure* of the secretariat, the staff relations, and the headquarter operations. This doesn't mean that a new IGO comes into existence every time there are changes in which individuals make up the IGO, but that sufficiently significant changes in the role structure would lead to a change in identity.

IGOs might aim to be maximally inclusive, such as the United Nations (UN) or International Criminal Police Organization. Or they might select members regionally (e.g. the African Union or European Union), or historically or politically (e.g. the Commonwealth or the Francophonie). IGOs are hugely diverse—even more diverse than states. In what follows, I'll focus on those in the UN system, alongside the clearest cases of IGO agents, such as NATO, the European Union, the World Bank. My aim is to show that at least *some* IGOs are moral agents, not that all are.⁵

³ The idea that IGOs are agents accords with public international law (Crawford 2012, 169–70). I've argued elsewhere that moral agency applies to even more informal groupings, such as some 'coalitions of the willing' (Collins 2014).

⁴ I add this condition because it rules out the G7 and G20 are not IGOs. While this deserves argumentation, it allows me to focus on the strongest examples, to demonstrate that at least *some* IGOs are moral agents.

⁵ I thank Richard Collins for pressing IGO diversity and encouraging the "some" claim.

In considering the possibility that IGOs are moral agents, one should not be concerned that the members of IGOs are collective agents. Any group with its own decision-making procedure is an agent that can make decisions, have goals, and perform tasks distinctly from its members. Some of these decisions, goals, and tasks might involve membership in a supra-group agent. This reveals the possibility of many levels of ‘nested’ agency: the US State Department is a member of the US, which is a member of the Security Council, which is a member⁶ of the UN, and so on.

Are IGOs agents? They have members, which are agents (in this case, states). In joining the IGO, each member explicitly agrees to abide by the procedure’s decisions (or at least, to abide by most of them: states can enter “reservations” when signing treaties, but when the reservations arise they can be treated in the way lawbreakers were in the above discussion of states). The members are given roles by the procedure, usually in the form rights and duties listed in the IGO’s founding and subsequent treaties. These membership-based rights include a right for the member to have influence over the collective’s decisions, under the procedure. Yet the IGO’s decision-making procedure is different from the procedure any one member uses when deciding for itself—often, an IGO’s procedure is ‘negotiation and consensus amongst members.’ The IGO’s decision-making procedure chooses actions the IGO will perform, member roles jointly sufficient for those actions, and an allocation of these roles amongst members. At the most general level, the actions might be the maintenance of international

⁶ In the sense defined in Section 2—there is also a natural sense in which only states are ‘members’ of the UN.

peace and security,⁷ the facilitation of cooperation amongst states' law enforcers,⁸ and so on; at a more specific level, the actions might be calling for restraint in civil wars, or training states' criminal investigators; even more specifically, it might be the issuing of a resolution regarding a particular conflict. Some IGOs are, therefore, agents.

What's more, the procedures of at least some (perhaps not all) IGOs permit members to bring morally good reasons to bear on the IGO's decisions. This permission—even encouragement—is implicit in the general actions described above: 'maintaining peace and security' and 'facilitating cooperation' require concern for the interests and perspectives of multiple agents. Indeed, many IGOs were set up specifically to bear retrospective or prospective responsibility. Consider, for example, the IGOs that are charged with enforcing various declarations, conventions, and covenants—such as the Human Rights Committee, the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights, the Human Rights Council, or the International Criminal Court. The moral outcomes at which these documents aim could not be produced if not for the relevant IGO, because each member state requires assurance that other member states will do their bit toward the moral outcome—otherwise, any state's performance of its own tasks would be inefficacious. What's more, no single state could have a prospective responsibility to, say, progressively realise the fulfilment of everyone's human rights—because no single state could do that (Collins 2016). Analogously, we can imagine a friendship group in which no member can, on her own, afford to buy enough pizza for the whole group. So if there is a prospective responsibility to produce the collective-level outcome (whether human

⁷ The most general aim of the United Nations,

<<http://www.un.org/en/documents/charter/chapter1.shtml>>.

⁸ The most general aim of the International Criminal Police Organization,

<<http://www.interpol.int/About-INTERPOL/Overview>>.

rights or pizza), it had better be an intention held by the collective itself (whether IGO or friendship group)—on pain of violating the principle that “ought” implies ‘can.’” Once a relevant IGO is in place, there is an over-arching procedure that can organise states towards such collectively-attainable outcomes—and so, can bear prospective responsibility for doing so (and retrospective responsibility for not doing so). Indeed, many IGOs positively endorse this conception of themselves as responsibility-bearing collective agents—most prominently, the UN and the EU (on the EU’s self-presentation as a moral actor, see Aggestam (ed.) 2008; Mayer 2017; on the UN’s, see Bexell and Jönsson 2017).

This idea—that some IGOs are moral agents—accords with a growing consensus amongst international relations scholars. Thus Kjell Engelbrekt (2015) points to the ease with which the Security Council’s structure enables it to shirk its responsibilities. Anthony Lang Jr (2003) argues that the Security Council bore retrospective responsibility for the fall of Srebrenica, via its construction of ‘safe havens’ that were not protected. Lang argues that (1) the structure of the Security Council—more so than the actions of any individual members—led to safe haven resolutions, and (2) the culture of the UN led commanders to make mistakes. Michael Barnett (2003) similarly argues that the UN’s “cultural landscape” played a crucial role in the 1994 Rwandan genocide. The point to appreciate when considering these arguments is that the UN’s *structure*, *constructions*, and *cultural landscape* are group-level features—they are not just the aggregation of the features of its members.

Similar arguments concern IGOs other than the UN. For example, Paul Cornish and Frances V. Harbour (2003, esp. 121-3) argue that NATO undertook prospective responsibility to halt ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. More broadly, Desmond McNeill and Asunción Lera St. Clair (2009) analysed the financial clout, economic expertise, delegated authority, and moral authority of various intergovernmental organisations: the UN Development Programme, the World Bank, UNESCO, and the Inter-American Development Bank. Their analysis took the

starting point that “international organisations have a [prospective] responsibility to ameliorate poverty, [and] they also have a [prospective] responsibility to rise above the states that created them—should this be necessary in order to achieve their purpose.” (2009, 10-11) My analysis vindicates this starting point.

Yet this analysis will be contentious. Surely, one might think, IGOs are run by their members (states). So IGOs can make only the decisions that states permit. Yes, IGOs can and sometimes do provide “warrants,” “approval” or “legitimacy” to states’ actions (as Harbour (2004, 67) argues in defence of their status as moral agents). But they are not the ones executing the actions and their instructions are not always authoritative. Thus Crawford asserts that, “[u]nlike states, international organizations do not possess general competence: they may only exercise those powers expressly or impliedly bestowed upon them” (2012, 184) and Chris Brown argues that Security Council authorisations are “not the exercise of discriminating moral judgment by the council acting as a collective body, but ... the operation of political judgments based on calculations of interest. ... [m]uch of the time, because of the veto [powers of the five permanent members], they [the UN and Security Council] will simply be unable to act.” (2001, 92) We should therefore be sceptical of IGOs’ agency—let alone their moral agency. Or so the thought goes.

Other IR scholars make more circumscribed, but still pessimistic, remarks about IGOs’ agency. Abbott and Duncan Snidal (2009) suggest that IGOs have independent capacities only insofar as the IGO can bring in third parties (such as NGOs or private actors) to act as intermediaries between IGOs and those actors (usually states) that IGOs wish to influence. Similarly, Frances Harbour (2004) looked at six cases of humanitarian intervention and found that in none did states base their decisions on IGOs’ evaluations. And Gareth Evans points out that “[s]tates remain, for better or worse, and will be for the foreseeable future, the primary

actors in international affairs. Intergovernmental organizations can only decide if their member states agree and can only act if their member states deliver..." (2008, 196).

Clearly, IGOs' moral agency is constrained: IGOs rely on members to *enact* the IGO's decisions; members sometimes resist bringing morally good reasons as *inputs* to IGOs' decisions; IGOs are *set up* by members; and IGOs cannot act in *any and all* circumstances. How much of a problem is this for IGOs' capacity to bear responsibility? Not much of one. After all, individuals also face these constraints: individuals rely on their later temporal parts to enact present decisions; individuals have recalcitrant desires that sometimes prevent moral considerations from being considered by the individual (even if the individual would overall prefer to be moral); individuals are set up (raised) by other individuals; individuals cannot act in many circumstances. So if these constraints must be overcome in order for an entity to be a moral agent, then we jettison individual moral agency.

Perhaps one thinks that individuals don't face these constraints to the extent that, or in the way that, IGOs do. Even if that's right, it's still true that all collective agents face exactly these constraints. So if we jettison IGO moral agency, then we jettison all collective moral agency. One might accept this, and reason via *modus tollens*: given that IGOs are not collective agents, perhaps there are *no* collective agents—whether IGOs, states, beachgoers, or anything else. But this neglects three important facts about (some) IGOs' capacities. These capacities together demonstrate that IGOs are not problematically tethered to their parent-states, and therefore that they don't face the kinds of constraints that would warrant scepticism about their agency, and therefore that we needn't use their lack of agency as a premise in an argument against collective agency in general.

First, IGOs often *make possible* the multilateral coordination that is necessary for states to reliably bring about moral states of affairs. Often, IGOs do this by acting as fora within which states can coordinate their actions. For example, IGOs might intentionally provide states

with the physical and administrative apparatuses states need to provide each other with the requisite assurance that they will ϕ if others ϕ . The fact that IGOs intentionally opt to offer such apparatuses points towards a special capacity of IGOs: the capacity to *encourage* and *facilitate* states' use of IGOs' apparatuses in this way. This is a matter of IGOs guiding and managing states, not vice versa.

Second, such inter-state coordination will sometimes require that IGOs don't just intentionally provide the *forum* for decision-making, but that IGOs are the *decision-maker* itself. Again, these are situations where the IGO guides states, rather than vice versa. Some outcomes require that multiple states agree on *how* they will decide, before the time for decision comes. This is more than just an agreement on a particular decision: it is the setting up of a group decision-making *procedure* to which they are all committed, which will come into effect under conditions on which they all agree, which will be used to make many future particular decisions. The use of such a procedure is *the IGO* making a decision. This is particularly clear in majoritarian IGOs, such as the Security Council and the World Health Organisation.

Third, any given state cannot be guaranteed that the IGO will make the decision the state wants it to make. The quotations above suggest that *each* state is more powerful than the IGO. In fact, states *together* determine the scope of IGOs' powers. The power of any one state—even a powerful state like the United States—is weaker than that of the IGO, within the IGO's scope of decision-making. Powerful states can of course 'veto' certain IGO decisions (notoriously those of the Security Council), but they still are not guaranteed to have their preferred action permitted (Woods 2003; Grigorescu 2007, 296–7; Steffek 2010). IGOs' decision-making procedures are a result of complex and lengthy negotiations between members, with the result that members are often required to perform actions that they would not perform in the absence of the IGO (as demonstrated by Harbour's (2003) discussion of compromise in IGOs). The capacity to make decisions and distribute roles against the will of

any one state gives an IGO a decision-making capacity that is distinct from the sum of members' capacities—and, once again, shows that (in some contexts) states are tethered to IGOs, not vice versa.

This is important, since holding an IGO responsible as a collective agent—in either the prospective or retrospective sense—is not the same as holding responsible the sum of the states that happen to constitute that IGO. This distinction is not always appreciated in international political practice. For example, the UN's 1999 report on the fall of Srebrenica asserted that

The international community as a whole must accept its share of [retrospective] responsibility for allowing this tragic course of events by its prolonged refusal to use force in the early stages of the war. This responsibility is shared by the Security Council, and Contact Group and other Governments ... as well as by the United Nations Secretariat and the mission in the field. (United Nations 1999, paragraph 501)

My analysis suggests that the Security Council, Contact Group, and United Nations Secretariat are all candidates for responsibility—prospective and retrospective. But the 'international community as a whole'—understood as a collection of states and not identified specifically with the UN (or the UN General Assembly)—is not a moral agent.⁹ To hold this informal group responsible is not the same as holding particular IGOs responsible. I take up such informal groups over the next two sections.

⁹ I therefore agree with Brown (2001, 98, emphasis original) that “there is no body that acts for the society of states *as a whole*”. However, in opposition to Brown, this is not because UN organs are not moral agents. It's rather because 'the society of states' is not an agent, and no agent can act on behalf of something that is not itself an agent.

4. An Easy Non-Case: The Affluent

My conception of collective agency is permissive. But it's not as permissive as some might hope. In particular, it doesn't include groups such as 'the international community,' 'the affluent' or 'humanity.' To settle ideas, I'll focus on 'the affluent.' But my remarks apply equally to the international community, humanity, carbon emitters, and so on. Each of these groups lacks a group-level decision-making procedure. But we might try to attribute responsibility to them, by pointing out that they are *potential moral agents*. The argument would be roughly: (1) the affluent has the potential to become a moral agent, and (2) if the affluent were a moral agent, then it would bear moral responsibility; therefore, (3) the affluent bears (perhaps putative) responsibility for making itself a moral agent.¹⁰ One way to understand this is that the affluent's becoming an agent is the *means* towards the affluent's discharging its moral responsibility. Since the affluent has the ability to take this means (i.e., it has the ability to become an agent), the affluent has responsibility to take the means. The responsibility to take the means (become a moral agent) derives from its responsibility over the end (alleviating global poverty, for example).

The problem with this argument is that *becoming a moral agent* is either an action, or it is not. If it is an action—and if only agents can perform actions—then the affluent would need to be an agent before it could become an agent. But this is impossible, because no entity

¹⁰ Arguments of this kind are made by May 1992, 109; Isaacs 2011, 145-51; Wringe 2010, 222. These authors could be interpreted as arguing that each of the individuals in the group has a responsibility with the same content, rather than that the responsibility is group-level. Given this possible interpretation, I am considering this argument independently from its presentation by these authors. I thank Deborah Tollefsen and Saba Bazargan-Forward for pressing the alternative interpretation of these authors.

is an agent before it has become an agent. But in that case, the affluent cannot have a responsibility to perform the action of becoming an agent as a means to discharging its responsibilities. Alternatively, perhaps becoming an agent is not an action. Then, becoming an agent is indeed something that can *happen to* the affluent. But it is not an action, so it doesn't look like something the affluent can have responsibility over.

A different way to argue that the affluent can have responsibility is to say that each affluent individual is retrospectively responsible for her individual actions that casually interacted with certain actions of other affluent people (leading to poverty, or climate change, or so on), and/or that each affluent individual has prospective responsibilities that require her to consider, and interact with, other affluent individuals (in order to alleviate poverty, or climate change, or so on). That is, we might point out that individuals' responsibilities have interrelated *content* or similar *explanatory origins*. This might be thought to suggest that the responsibilities are held by the collective *as such*.¹¹

However, inter-related content of individual responsibilities does not suggest that the responsibility is held by the group *per se*. After all, almost all prospective responsibilities of all agents require their bearers to react to other agents, and almost all retrospective responsibility of all agents are responsibilities for actions that were linked with others' actions. For example, if I am retrospectively responsible for breaking my promise to you, then I have performed an action of promise-making, where that action is linked to your action of promise-accepting. Or if I am prospectively responsible for giving you \$10, then fulfilling that responsibility will require that I interact with you (or at least your bank account). If we said that all

¹¹ Young (2011, 180-1) implies something like this, though again one could make the 'shared content of individual responsibilities' rather than the 'group-level responsibility' interpretation of Young.

responsibilities-that-are-linked-with-other-agents'-responsibilities were responsibilities of a group that included those other agents, then the results would be bizarre: plainly, my retrospectively responsibility for breaking my promise to you is not held by me-and-you; likewise, my prospective responsibility to give you \$10 is not held by me-and-you. By the same token, my responsibility to contribute to poverty relief might require that I interact with other affluent people, but this does not mean the responsibility is held by *the affluent* as such. Such a group cannot bear responsibility for international political problems.

5. A Harder Non-Case: The West

The final group that I'll consider is the West. Unlike the affluent, the West is united by a substantive common cause that's not held by all agents—roughly, the promotion of individual rights and free trade. The West is what Isaacs (2011) calls a goal-oriented collective. To give my own gloss on this notion: each member of the group (1) holds the same goal, where it's out in the open between them that the goal is held by each (though it might be held only tacitly or implicitly); and (2) is disposed to act responsively to one another (insofar as they encounter one another) to realise the goal; however, the group (3) lacks group-level procedures for forming decisions, intentions, beliefs, and desires that are attributable to the group as such. Other examples of groups that meet (1), (2), and (3) include capitalists, environmentalists, human rights campaigners, and the oil lobby—all key players in international politics. To be clear, the members of these goal-oriented collectives each contribute to relevant collective agents—but there is no *one* collective agent to which they all contribute, so the group as a whole does not constitute a collective agent.

Other international relations theorists have similarly delineated this category of collective. 'The West' is what Stephen Krasner seminally defined as a "regime," that is, a group united by "implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around

which actors' expectations converge in a given area of international relations." (Krasner 1983, 2) Crucially, the "decision-making procedures" that Krasner references here are decision-making procedures held severally by each of the members—the procedures "converge" in that they have similar structures and goals, but there is one procedure for each member, rather than one overriding procedure that subsumes all members. Likewise, Mervyn Frost (2003, 94-8) analyses groups whose members are engaged in a "dispersed practice." Within this category, Frost includes collectives bound together along religious, political, or linguistic lines—within which he includes "global civil society," "the West," and "capitalism" (2003, 99). I will take the West as a paradigm example of a goal-orientated collective (Isaacs), regime (Krasner), or dispersed practice group (Frost).

What are we to say about the moral responsibility of such entities? It is tempting to attribute moral agency (and, therefore, moral responsibility) to them, because of their common goal, shared dispositions, and shared ability to deliberate about morally good considerations. We might naturally say *the oil lobby frustrates climate legislation reform* or *the environmental movement should take more radical action*, meaning to attribute retrospective and prospective responsibility, respectively. International relations scholars do the same: Frost points out that his "dispersed practice" groups are in fact treated as responsible, and sometimes treat themselves as responsible. Frost views such treatment as sufficient to *construct* or *establish* the moral agency of such entities. From a normative perspective, however, we should be wary of uncritically accepting 'the way entities happen to be treated.' Our treatment of these entities as agents might be inappropriate. Instead, the question I want to address is: *should* we treat the West as a responsible entity?

From some theoretical perspectives, such treatment might make sense. For example, suppose 'the West' includes all and only those states that favour individual rights and free trade (rather than also including the individual members of those states). One might then think the

West meets the conditions Michael Bratman gives for a ‘shared intention’: “[w]e each have intentions that we J, and we each intend that we J by way of each of our intentions that we J and by way of subplans that mesh.” (Bratman 2014, 103) This will be the case where J is, for example, ‘slow China’s economic rise.’ We might grant that the West can, in this way, have intentions. (Though it’s worth noting that Bratman himself eschews such applications of his framework (Bratman 2014, 7).)

Still, I suggest, we should not grant agency—and, therefore, not responsibility—to the West *per se*. This is because the collective (or joint, or shared) intention was not formed *by the group*. That is, the West does not have a central core of agency—a *procedure* by which it can make official group-level decisions—at which it is possible for the group to produce that collective intention. Instead, the collective intention was formed simply via each agent (that is, each Western state) holding a certain intention, and intending to exercise it in ways that mesh with the others’ like intentions. The West cannot intend anything that its state-members don’t intend. That is to say: to be an agent (and, a fortiori, a moral agent), it’s not enough that one has an intention, or acts intentionally. In addition, one’s intentions must have a certain kind of causal history: one’s deliberation, consideration, or reflection must be what produces the intention. But in a group like the West—considered distinctly from NATO or the European Union, both of which have the kind of agency discussed in Section 3—there is no group-level capacity for such deliberation, consideration, or reflection. Such processes require that the entity acts on *its own* reasons, not the conjunction of the reasons held by each of the members of the group. But a group can come to its own reasons only if it has its own distinctive goals and beliefs. This means that the West, *per se*, cannot bear prospective or retrospective responsibility—though its individual members can, as can collective moral agents that include those members as members (such as NATO or the EU).

Conclusion

Where are we to locate prospective and retrospective responsibility in international relations? I answered this question by starting with the (admittedly large) assumption that all and only moral agents can bear responsibility. I offered a characterisation of moral agency, which I suggested was straightforwardly applicable to many states and (somewhat less straightforwardly) to some inter-governmental organisations. Things are less promising, however, when it comes to holding responsible a group whose members hold no goals in common (such as ‘the affluent’), or even groups that are united around a common cause (such as ‘the West’).

Let me close with two important caveats. First, states’ and IGOs’ moral agency does not imply that states or IGOs are moral saints that should go unquestioned or unchallenged. Precisely because they have the *capacity* to deliberate upon morally good reasons, we should hold them accountable for their decisions—both good and (perhaps more often) bad. Second, members of non-agent groups can have responsibility (prospective or retrospective) for acting upon those non-moral collective agents—and upon non-agent collectives—in such a way as to transform them into collective moral agents. Likewise, non-members (including various moral collective agents) can have responsibility for such transformation of collectives. In this way, the fact that some entities in international politics do not themselves bear responsibility does not let anyone ‘off the hook’ in the long-run. Instead, by limiting our responsibility-ascriptions to those entities that are moral agents, we can be surer that we make demands only on those entities with the capacity to respond.

Reference List

- Abbott, Kenneth W. and Duncan Snidal. 2009. "Strengthening International Regulation Through Transnational New Governance: Overcoming the Orchestration Deficit." *Vanderbilt Journal of Transnational Law* 42(2), 501–578.
- Acharya, Amitav. 2017. "After Liberal Hegemony: The Advent of a Multiplex World Order." *Ethics and International Affairs* 31(3), 271-285.
- Aggestam, Lisbeth, ed. 2008. *Ethical Power Europe?* Special Issue of *Ethics and International Affairs*, 84(1), 1-143.
- Barnett, Michael. 2003. *Eyewitness to a Genocide: The United Nations and Rwanda*. Cornell University Press.
- Bexell, Magdalena and Kristina Jönsson. 2017. "Responsibility and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals." *Forum for Development Studies* 44(1), 13-29.
- Björnsson, Gunnar. 2014. "Essentially Shared Obligations." *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 38(1), 103-120.
- Brady, C. 1999. "Collective responsibility of the cabinet: an ethical, constitutional or managerial tool?" *Parliamentary Affairs* 52(2), 214–229.
- Bratman, Michael. 2014. *Shared Agency: A Planning Theory of Acting Together*. Oxford University Press.
- Brown, Chris. 2001. "Moral Agency and International Society." *Ethics and International Affairs* 15(2), 87-98.
- Collins, Stephanie. 2014. "Are 'Coalitions of the Willing' Moral Agents?" *Ethics and International Affairs* 28(1), online only.
- Collins, Stephanie. 2016. "The Claims and Duties of Socioeconomic Human Rights." *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 66/265: 701–722.

- Collins, Stephanie. Forthcoming A. *Group Duties: Their Existence and Their Implications for Individuals*. Oxford University Press.
- Collins, Stephanie. Forthcoming B. "Collective Responsibility Gaps." *Journal of Business Ethics*.
- Collins, Stephanie. Under contract. *Group Duties: Their Existence and Their Implications for Individuals*. Oxford University Press.
- Cornish, Paul and Frances V. Harbour. 2003. "NATO and the Individual Soldier as Moral Agents with Reciprocal Duties: Imbalance in the Kosovo Campaign." Pp. 119-137 in Erskine, ed., 2003.
- Crawford, James. 2012. *Brownlie's Principles of Public International Law*. Eighth edition. Oxford University Press.
- Engelbrekt, Kjell. 2015. "Responsibility Shirking at the United Nations Security Council: Constraints, Frustrations, Remedies." *Global Policy Volume 6(4)*, 369-378.
- Erskine, Toni. 2001. "Assigning Responsibilities to Institutional Moral Agents: the Case of States and Quasi-states." *Ethics & International Affairs* 15(2), 67-89.
- Erskine, Toni, ed. 2003. *Can Institutions Have Responsibilities? Collective Moral Agency and International Relations*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Erskine, Toni. 2014. "Coalitions of the Willing and Responsibilities to Protect: Informal Associations, Enhanced Capacities, and Shared Moral Burdens." *Ethics and International Affairs* 28, 115-145.
- Evans, Gareth. 2008. *The Responsibility to Protect: Ending Mass Atrocity Crimes Once and For All*. Washington: The Brookings Institution.
- French, Peter. 1984. *Collective and Corporate Responsibility*. New Columbia University Press.
- Frost, Mervyn. 2003. "Constitutive Theory and Moral Accountability: Individuals, Institutions, and Dispersed Practices." Pp. 84-99 in Erskine, ed., 2003.

- Gilbert, Margaret. 2006. *A Theory of Political Obligation: Membership, Commitment, and the Bonds of Social Society*. Oxford University Press.
- Grigorescu, Alexandru. 2007. "Transparency of Intergovernmental Organizations: The Roles of Member-States, International Bureaucracies and Non-Governmental Organizations." *International Studies Quarterly* 51(3), 625–648.
- Harbour, Frances V. 2004. "Moral Agency and Moral Responsibility in Humanitarian Intervention." *Global Society* 18(1), 61–75.
- Harbour, Frances V. 2003. "Collective Moral Agency and the Political Process." Pp. 69-83 in Erskine, ed., 2003.
- Hindriks, Frank. Forthcoming. "Collective Agency: Moral and Amoral." *Dialectica*.
- International Law Commission (ILC). 2011. *Draft Articles on the Responsibility of International Organizations*. Available at http://untreaty.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/draft%20articles/9_11_2011.pdf
- Isaacs, Tracy. 2011. *Moral Responsibility in Collective Contexts*. Oxford University Press.
- Krasner, Stephen D. 1983. "Structural Causes and Regime Consequences: Regimes as Interveneing Variables" in Krasner, Stephen D. (ed.), *International Regimes*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 1-20.
- Lackey, Jennifer. 2016. "What Is Justified Group Belief?" *Philosophical Review* 125(3), 341-396.
- Lang, Jnr, Anthony. 2003. "The United Nations and the Fall of Srebrenica: Meaningful Responsibility and International Society." Pp. 183-206 in Erskine, ed., 2003.
- Lawford-Smith, Holly. 2015. "What 'We'?" *Journal of Social Ontology* 1(2), 225-9.
- List, Christian. 2014. "Three Kinds of Collective Attitudes." *Erkenntnis* 79 (9 supp), 1601-1622.

- List, Christian and Philip Pettit. 2011. *Group Agency: The Possibility, Design, and Status of Corporate Agents*. Oxford University Press.
- List, Christian and Kai Spiekermann. 2013. "Methodological Individualism and Holism in Political Science: A Reconciliation." *American Political Science Review* 107(4), 629–643.
- Mathiesen, Kay. 2006. "The Epistemic Features of Group Belief." *Episteme* 2(3), 161-175.
- May, Larry. 1992. *Sharing Responsibility*. University of Chicago Press.
- Mayer, Hartmut. 2017. "Is It Still Called 'Chinese Whispers'? The EU's Rhetoric and Action as a Responsible Global Institution." *International Affairs* 84(1), 61-79.
- McNeill, Desmond and Asunción Lera St. Clair. 2009. *Global Poverty, Ethics and Human Rights: The Role of Multilateral Organisations*. Routledge.
- O'Neill, Onora. 1986. "Who Can Endeavour Peace?" *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 16(1), 41-73.
- Pereboom, Derek. 2001. *Living Without Free Will*. Cambridge University Press.
- Pettit, Philip. 2007. "Responsibility Incorporated." *Ethics* 117, 141–201.
- Rafael Biermann and Joachim A. Koops. 2017. "Studying Relations Amongst International Organisations in World Politics: Core Concepts and Challenges." Pp. 1-46 in Biermann and Koops (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Inter-organizational Relations in World Politics*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rovane, Carol. 1998. *Bounds of Agency: An Essay in Revisionary Metaphysics*. Princeton University Press.
- Schwenkenbecher, Anne. 2013. "Joint Duties and Global Moral Obligations." *Ratio* 26(3), 310-328.
- Smiley, Marion 2010. "From moral agency to collective wrongs: rethinking collective moral responsibility." *Journal of Law and Policy* 19(1) 171-202.

Steffek, Jens. 2010. "Public Accountability and the Public Sphere of International Governance." *Ethics & International Affairs* 24(1), 45–68.

United Nations Department of Public Information (UNDPI). 2012. "Secretary-General, Addressing Drake University Students on 'Global Citizenship', says no Issue can be Seen in Isolation as World Changes." UNDP News and Media Division, New York. 5 September. Available at <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2012/sgsm14595.doc.htm>

Union of International Associations. 2015. "What Is an Intergovernmental Organization?" Available at www.uia.org/faq/yb3

United Nations. 1999. *Report of the Secretary-General pursuant to General Assembly resolution 53/35: The Fall of Srebrenica*, Document A/54/549. New York: United Nations. Available at <http://repository.un.org/handle/11176/227626>

Wendt, Alexander. 2004. "The State as Person in International Theory." *Review of International Studies* 30(2), 289–316.

Woods, Ngaire. 2003. "Holding Intergovernmental Institutions to Account." *Ethics & International Affairs* 17(1), 69–80.

Wringe, Bill. 2005. 'Needs, Rights, and Collective Obligations', *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*, 57, 187–208.

Wringe, Bill. 2010. "Global Obligations and the Agency Objection." *Ratio* 23(2), 217–231.

Wringe, Bill. 2016. "Collective Obligations: Their Existence, Their Explanatory Power, and their Supervenience on the Obligations of Individuals." *European Journal of Philosophy* 24(4), 472-97.

Young, Iris Marian. 2011. *Responsibility for Justice*. Oxford University Press.

