

Precis of *Group Duties: Their Existence and Their Implications for Individuals*

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Abstract: This paper provides an overview of *Group Duties: Their Existence and Their Implications for Individuals*.

Key Words: Group duties, group agency, group responsibility

Your university has a moral duty to increase casual workers' pay. Liberals have a moral duty to prevent de-platforming. Humankind has a moral duty to completely end the fossil fuel industry. It's not clear that any of these statements are true. We can debate their merits from the perspective of ethics, economics, and political philosophy. More fundamentally, each statement might contain a false presupposition. Each of these statements presupposes that a group (a university, liberals, humans) is *the kind of thing* that can bear a moral duty, because the alleged duty is assigned to the group and requires the group to do something (increase pay, prevent de-platforming, end an entire industry) that only a group—no individual acting alone—can do.

Are groups the kind of thing that can bear moral duties? I address this question in *Group Duties: Their Existence and Their Implications for Individuals*. I argue that the answer is 'yes' regarding some groups and 'no' regarding others. In either case, the presupposition-containing statements have implications for the members of the group in question: when we assert that a group has a duty, our assertion implies that individuals have duties (even if our assertion contains a false presupposition, by assigning a duty to a group that cannot bear one). The implied individual duties are as important—perhaps more important for creatures like you and I—as the group duties. So three of the book's six substantive chapters are concerned with these group-based individual duties. But the jumping off point is in social ontology: which kinds of groups can bear duties 'in their own right' or 'non-reductively'—and why?

The book develops a 'Tripartite Model' of group duties, which divides groups into three types: collectives, combinations, and coalitions. Collectives are constituted by agents that are united under a rationally operated group-level decision-making procedure that has the potential to attend to moral considerations. Coalitions are constituted by agents who are commonly known to each hold a particular goal and are disposed to work with the others to realize the goal, while lacking a group-level decision-making procedure with the potential to attend to moral

considerations. Finally, combinations are constituted by any collection of agents that do not together constitute either a collective or a coalition. Under this framework, your university is a collective, liberals are a coalition, and humankind is a combination.

The book has six substantive chapters, of which two argue that (i) collectives are the kind of thing that can bear moral duties (Chapter Six) and (ii) whenever a collective has a moral duty, at least one individual member of the collective also has a moral duty (Chapter Seven). The commentators in this symposium didn't focus on these chapters, which might make you think (i) and (ii) are uncontroversial. Indeed, (i) has become common currency amongst those working on group agency and responsibility, although my characterisation of collectives is more permissive than most other authors'. On my view, collectives can last a few minutes to a few centuries, can be task-focused or open-ended, and can be dictatorial or conversation-based or anything in between. A collective's 'group-level decision-making procedure' does not need—and often will lack—the kinds of formal voting mechanisms, command structures, and unifying projects that have been emphasised in some of the literature (e.g. List and Pettit 2011; French 1984; Rovane 1998). And (ii) is more controversial again: it's natural to assume that a truly 'holistic' and 'non-reductive' property of a group would lack implications about the correlative property in the group's constituents, and other authors have argued that a group can hold backward-looking responsibility without any individual holding backward-looking responsibility, leading to so-called 'responsibility gaps' (Collins 2019b). But collectives' duties entail members' duties—or so *Group Duties* argues, by rejecting a number of purported counterexamples to that implication.

With that quick summary regarding collectives, I will focus this precis on *Group Duties*' arguments regarding combinations and coalitions. These are the arguments on which the commentators focus.

I argue that neither combinations nor coalitions are the kind of thing that can bear duties. So when we say that liberals or humankind have a duty, we make a mistake akin to a category error or a false presupposition. My argument for this proceeds in two movements. First, in Chapter Two, I poke holes in six arguments someone might give for the idea that combinations and/or coalitions can bear duties. The first five arguments argue that such duties are necessary for some theoretical purpose, respectively (1) explaining certain intuitions about individuals' duties, (2) explaining group-level blameworthiness, (3) matching our pre-theoretical convictions, (4) distributing the duties that correlate with human rights, and (5) avoiding

overdemandingness objections in ethics. I argue that all those purposes can perfectly well be served without positing combinations or coalitions' duties, or at any rate that those duties do not help with those purposes. The sixth argument posits that some combinations or (more plausibly) coalitions are moral agents, and that this makes them duty-bearers by definition. I argue that even richly-structured coalitions are not moral agents, focusing on Margaret Gilbert's 'plural subjects' and those who partake in Michael Bratman's 'shared intentions.' The result of all this is, I claim, a stalemate: we have no good arguments for combinations and coalitions being the kind of thing that can bear duties—but we have no good arguments against it, either.

The second movement of my argument is an attempt to break the stalemate. I start by arguing that combinations and coalitions can—and often do—have abilities. This is important for two reasons. First, I later use these groups' abilities to justify the individual duties that (I claim) are implied when we attribute duties to combinations and coalitions. Second, much of the literature on combinations' and coalitions' duties has focused on whether or not they have abilities. This, I suggest, is a red herring. Sure, they have abilities. That's not the point. Not everything that has an ability is the kind of thing that can have a duty.

Next comes the main argument against combinations' and coalitions' duties. The overall argument is:

Decision Argument

- (1) If an entity can bear duties, then that entity has the ability to make a decision.
- (2) Groups that are not agents lack the ability to make decisions. [This is argued for in the first movement, in Chapter Two.]

Therefore,

- (3) Groups that are not agents cannot bear duties. (Collins 2019, 86)

I give a separate argument for the *Decision Argument's* (1):

Moral Worth Argument

- (1) If an entity fulfils a duty, that entity acquires moral worth.
- (2) If an entity acquires moral worth, it has performed in a way that has a psychological explanation that accords with the performance's moral justification.
- (3) If an entity's performance has a psychological explanation that accords with its moral justification, then the entity has made a decision.

Therefore,

- (4) When an entity fulfils a duty, that entity has made a decision.

(5) For an entity to bear a duty, the entity must have the ability to fulfil a duty.

Therefore,

(6) If an entity can bear duties, then that entity has the ability to make a decision.

I give these arguments in full because the commentaries discuss various of their premises. That being the case, I will refrain from commenting further on these arguments here. I will emphasise various aspects of them in my reply to the commentators.

Assuming the Decision Argument establishes that combinations and coalitions lack duties, what's implied by the claim that liberals or humankind have duties? Two chapters of the book focus on this question. In brief, the implication is that *individual members* of the group 'liberals' or 'humankind' each have duties to act individually, but in response to the other members, with a view to the outcome in question (in the examples, preventing deplatforming or ending the fossil fuel industry). These are 'coordination duties.' Coordination duties will sometimes require acting with a view to the existence of a collective that can directly produce the relevant outcome (in that case, individuals have 'collectivisation duties,' which are a species of the 'coordination duties' genus). But other times, the best way to produce the relevant outcome isn't by forming a collective: we don't always need to be so organised. In those cases, coordination duties simply require that the individuals act in response to one another with a direct view to the outcome in question (in that case, individuals have 'responsiveness duties,' which are another species of the 'coordination duties' genus).

Coordination duties play out differently in combinations than in coalitions. After all, the members of coalitions are commonly known by each other to each endorse some goal. They can therefore reasonably expect certain actions of one another. Specifically, they can expect from each other whatever actions would be most effective for the achievement of their goal. They are permitted—indeed, they should—presume that each other will take these actions. This gives members of coalitions more certainty over what to do, than we find in combinations (at least, all else being equal). I argue that this presumption—that the others will play their part in some pattern of actions—is all that's really doing work in (what is commonly known as) 'we-reasoning.' So, I propose that reasoning on the basis of this presumption is a stripped-down, bare-bones, essentials-only version of we-reasoning. I call this 'coalition-reasoning.'

There are also subtle differences amongst kinds of coalitions. Things get complicated here, but the complications are necessary background to the commentaries (particularly Schwenkenbecher's). A *moral coalition* is one whose common goal is the realisation of a

morally important outcome (via the most efficient and likely-to-succeed means), where the members of the coalition have coordination duties over that outcome. A *non-moral coalition* is one whose common goal is something other than the realisation of a morally important outcome (via the most efficient and likely-to-succeed means), but where the members nonetheless still have coordination duties over a morally important outcome.

In moral coalitions, things are straightforward: each member should presume the others will do their bit towards the morally important outcome. In non-moral coalitions, things are trickier: each should presume the others will do their bit towards the coalition's goal (whatever that is), and each should then do the best they can towards the morally important outcome.

Group Duties is primarily a book about collective agency and ontology. Throughout, I tried to avoid making any substantive normative claims. But my hope is that those who are in the business of making substantive normative claims will have some interest in the book, since it provides arguments for directing normative claims at certain social entities but not others.