



Title	Responsibility in Games
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Citation	SOCREAL 2010: Proceedings of the 2nd International Workshop on Philosophy and Ethics of Social Reality, 326-328
Issue Date	2010
Doc URL	http://hdl.handle.net/2115/43240
Type	proceedings
Note	SOCREAL 2010: 2nd International Workshop on Philosophy and Ethics of Social Reality. Sapporo, Japan, 2010-03-27/28. Session 3: Responsibility and Collective Agency
File Information	Martin.abs.pdf



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Responsibility in Games

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January 10, 2010

When outcomes result from the joint actions of two or more people it is generally believed that we face major difficulties in ascribing responsibility. Thompson (1980) has christened it the ‘many hands problem’. One part of the problem is determining the causal contributions given that individual efforts may be like strands in a rope: together each strand makes up the rope but each particular strand may be dispensable. In joint actions, the role of each individual in bringing about an outcome appears to be lost in a complex process. Another part of the problem is that even when causal contributions can be determined, there may not actually be anything wrong with each of the actions per se. Determining ‘whose hands’ will not necessarily pick out ‘whose hands were dirty’, i.e. the set of individuals who should – as is generally the case – be punished, held liable, or subjected to moral criticism.

The problems are germane and pervasive. Feinberg (1968) discusses the example of the ‘Jesse James train robbery’ in which an armed man holds up a car full of passengers. If the passengers had risen up as one and rushed the robber, one or two of them would have perhaps been shot, but collectively they would have overwhelmed him and saved their own and other’s property. Feinberg asks to what extent are any of the passengers responsible for the loss of their property given that none alone could have prevented Jesse James walking off with it? Copp (2006) and Pettit (2007) have discussed a quirk of collective decision-making known as the ‘discursive paradox’ in which members of a committee each have their reasons to reject a particular proposal put before them but the proposal passes nevertheless given the way in which the decision procedure works. In what way can the committee members be held responsible for the outcome?

A more down to earth example concerns the group of managers and engineers at McDonnell-Douglas who knew of the design faults in early DC-10s that led to these planes dropping out of the sky in the 1970s but nevertheless allowed these planes to, fatally, go into service. As it turned out no single individual was declared as having been directly decisive for the harm that occurred. Then there are the My Lai or Sebrenica massacres; the infamous murder of Kitty Genovese in New York in which onlookers watched her slow death; and the run of recent bank collapses that have greatly damaged the international financial system. The list is endless (for a catalogue of further cases see Bovens, 1998).

One solution to the problem has been the introduction of the concept of *collective responsibility*. The idea here is to argue that the outcomes are the result of a form of ‘collective agency’, which supervenes on individual members of a group. The task has been to show first which types of groups can be treated as ‘moral agents’ and then assign any personal responsibility on the basis of voluntary membership of the collective agent. Proponents of this idea of collective responsibility are French (1984) and Pettit (2007). The concept of collective responsibility is, however, not undisputed. The hypostasization of groups is anything but straightforward. It raises a host of metaphysical quandaries about the ontological status of agency. Normatively speaking there are equally difficult problems, one of which is that the ‘membership’ or ‘shared attitudes’ criteria has the highly unpalatable consequence that it can result in holding people responsible for states of affairs for which they played no part in bring about.

The purpose of this paper is to tackle the problem anew and demonstrate that it is in fact possible in principle to ascribe moral responsibility to individual agents in complex joint activities. To do so, we assume an agent can be held responsible for the realization of a state of affairs *A* if the following criteria are satisfied:

Agency Condition — The person is an autonomous, intentional, and planning agent who is capable of distinguishing right and wrong and good and bad.

Causal Relevancy Condition — There should be a causal relation between the action of the agent and the resultant state of affairs.

Avoidance Opportunity Condition — The agent should have had a reasonable opportunity to have done otherwise.

Building on previous work (Braham and Holler, 2008; Braham, 2008; Braham and van Hees, 2009), we show how these conditions can be recast in a very natural habitat: a game theoretic framework. We then define the components of what we call a ‘responsibility game’ and examine how different allocations of responsibility can be associated with different classes of responsibility games. Subsequently we show that, from a theoretical viewpoint, the ‘many hands problem’ is not as severe as it may at first appear.

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