

**Team reasoning and collective moral obligation**  
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**Abstract:** In certain situations, it feels apt to ascribe a collective moral obligation to a group even if the group is unstructured and lacks the properties usually required for moral agency. For example, consider a group of unrelated bystanders in a subway car witnessing an assault (a widely discussed case from Held 1970). Intuitively, it seems that the group has a moral obligation to stop the assault even if no individual interference would be helpful on its own. Most explanations of this intuition have in common that they separate the subject of the obligation - the collective - from the putative addressee of the moral demand, with a capacity for moral deliberation - the individual or the potential group agent. We find this type of separation problematic.

Unstructured groups lack a decision procedure, but there is a sense in which they can engage in collective deliberation. We suggest that by addressing the group with a collective demand, we appeal to the individuals' capacity to regard the situation from a group perspective and to deliberate about what the group should do, to "team reason". In that sense, the gap between the subject of the obligation and the moral deliberator can be bridged.

If this is what we do when we assign an obligation to an unstructured group, is that obligation collective or distributive? Since only the collective has the ability to do what is morally required, the collective is the subject of the obligation. Our claim is that it makes sense to address such a group collectively and demand that it acts as a collective. When we do so we appeal to each individual's capacity to frame the choice from the group perspective, i.e. to identify with the group and reason as a team member.

Under which conditions would it be reasonable to demand that a group of unrelated bystanders choose a course of action requiring them to view the situation from a group perspective? This will depend on what it takes for an individual to identify with a group, whether such a change of perspective can be voluntarily chosen at all, and if the change can be rationally motivated. These are controversial issues, and we briefly explore the moral implications of the main positions in this debate.

**OLLE:** Consider the following case, which we will call *Burning Building* (Colman et al. 2014: 36):

Three children are trapped in a burning building. Two of them are in one room and the third in another room some distance away. The neighbours Alessandro and Olivier see each other approaching the building from opposite sides. Alessandro breaks in and has enough time to rescue either the two children in the first room or the one child in the second room. However, the rescue can succeed only if Olivier heads straight for the same room with his fire extinguisher. If both go to the first room, then the two children will be rescued. If both go to the second room, then the one child will be rescued. If each goes to a different room, then no child will be rescued. Suppose that Alessandro and Olivier can make these choices without any significant risk to their own or each other's life or health. All this is common knowledge between them.

It seems to us that Alessandro and Olivier are morally obliged to save the two children. It would make sense to address them with a moral imperative: "You must save the two children!". Call

this *the basic intuition*. Most people working on moral obligations in collective contexts agree that this is how it seems, or at the very least, that this is how we speak. What supports the intuition that Alessandro and Olivier together have the moral obligation is that *only together* do they have the ability to rescue the two children, and rescuing the two children is the best they can do, morally speaking (see e.g. McKinsey 1981: 316).

**BJÖRN:** However, Holly Lawford-Smith (2015: 234-235) argues that for a joint ability to be of the kind required for possessing a moral obligation to  $\Phi$ , the entity that has the ability must be such that it can *try* to  $\Phi$ . And according to Lawford-Smith, only a *single* moral agent can try to  $\Phi$ . But arguably, a plurality of moral agents could together try to  $\Phi$ , where this just amounts to each of them trying to do their part of them  $\Phi$ -ing together (Aas 2015: 15-17; cf. Collins 2019: sect. 3.2).

Another reason for thinking that the basic intuition must be rejected is that only an entity that can deliberate and make decisions can be the subject of a moral obligation. The basic intuition concerns a *deliberative* moral obligation: It is connected to the deliberative question “what ought I do?” (Lord 2015: 28). This seems to imply that Alessandro and Olivier can have the moral obligation only if they together constitute an entity that is capable of asking and settling on an answer to this deliberative question (cf. Wringer 2010: 224-225). Since they don’t constitute a collective moral agent, one might think that they don’t have the moral obligation that they seem to have.

**OLLE:** One might try to respond to this by suggesting that the group asking and answering the deliberative question simply amounts to each member asking and answering the question “what ought I do?”. However, if Alessandro starts out asking what he ought to do, then there is arguably no determinate answer. After all, what Alessandro ought to do depends on what he reasonably expects Olivier to do, and vice versa. This is a moral version of a general challenge for orthodox individualistic game theory to make sense of our intuitions about rational choice in some coordination games, such as the so-called Hi-Lo game for example.

There is another reason why a collective moral obligation cannot be reduced to several parallel answers to the question “what ought I do?”. Plausibly, the subject of a moral obligation to  $\Phi$  must not only have the ability to  $\Phi$ , but also the ability to  $\Phi$  for the normative reasons that make  $\Phi$ -ing obligatory (see Collins 2019: ch. 3; Markovits 2010; Lord 2015). Alessandro and Olivier would lack this ability if they couldn’t deliberate on the basis of their joint ability to rescue the two children, that is, if each were restricted to asking and answering the question “what ought *I* do?”. They could at most each have an individual moral obligation to go to the first room and do their part of saving the children. Since a group such as that consisting of Alessandro and Olivier isn’t itself a deliberating and decision-making agent, it might thus seem like the basic intuition must be rejected. Unless, that is, it is possible for each of them to ask and answer, without mistake or delusion, “what ought *we* do?”.

**BJÖRN:** In this paper, we want to explain and vindicate the basic intuition. We will explain not only why we have the intuition, but explain why it makes sense. A virtue of our account is that it does not separate the subjects of the moral obligation from those toward whom we would address a moral advice or moral imperative. In *Burning Building*, Alessandro and Olivier are the subjects of the obligation and it is to them we would direct the moral advice to save the two children. Giving such advice makes sense because it is possible for Alessandro and Olivier to each ask “what ought *we* do?”. We will argue that when we ascribe a moral obligation to  $\phi$  to several agents considered collectively, we do so on the implicit assumption that each agent has a

capacity to identify with the group and view the decision situation from the group's point of view.

**OLLE:** The notion of 'group identification' or 'group identity' have been central in social psychology since the seventies. Importantly for our purposes, experimental evidence suggest that group identification leads individuals in social dilemmas to be concerned about and act on the group's interests rather than their own private interests. In these experiments, group identity has been induced through pre-existing shared community membership (Kramer & Brewer 1984), common fate (Brewer & Kramer 1986) or through face-to-face discussion (Dawes, Van De Kragt & Orbell 1990). The hypothesis that group identification tends to lead to cooperation with in-group members is a plausible live hypothesis.

**BJÖRN:** According to Michael Bacharach (2006), group identification can also be triggered by the strong interdependence that exists between individuals' interests in a social dilemma such as the Prisoner's Dilemma or Hi-Lo (as far as we know, this hypothesis has not been experimentally tested, see Colman & Gold [2018]). Group identification will in turn lead to "team reasoning". Bacharach's model of team reasoning is tailor-made for understanding how individuals who find themselves in potential social dilemmas can rationally choose the alternative that is collectively the best one. A team reasoner views the decision situation from the point of view of the group---asks herself what *we* should do rather than what *I* should do for us. She evaluates the courses of action available to the group and infers which component of the collective action that he should perform. The last step means that each individual asks herself "What should I do as part of what we should do?" The team reasoner identifies with the group in a strong sense - the shift from I-reasoning to we-reasoning is what Bacharach calls an "agency transformation" (as opposed to a mere preference transformation).

We suggest that the ascription of a collective moral obligation to save the two children to Alessandro and Olivier appeals to their capacity for group identification and practical reasoning from a 1st person plural perspective. The assignment of the obligation makes sense on that assumption since it allows them to each reason on the basis of what they can do together. We also implicitly assume that they are capable of acting on the result of their deliberation, i.e. of performing the collective action required to fulfil the obligation. However, our focus here is a certain individual capacity that makes the assignment of a collective obligation meaningful in cases where no collective moral agent has yet been formed, not all the capacities that must be exercised to fulfil such an obligation.

**OLLE:** In *Burning Building*, there is a salient collective action alternative open for the group, an option that intuitively has the best result, and intuitively ought to be performed. But our account does not involve any substantive moral commitments about what individuals or groups ought to do in specific cases. Depending on one's moral outlook, one could deny that agents are always morally obliged to perform the action that yields the morally best result, for instance. The account would not be incompatible with this. Our point is just that we can explain why the assignment of the obligation to the yet unstructured collective makes sense, if we assume that such assignments come with implicit assumptions about the individuals' capacity to identify with the group and deliberate from the 1st person plural perspective. This necessary condition is a key to understanding how it is possible at all for an unstructured group to have a moral obligation.

Potential Hi-Lo cases like *Burning Building* illuminate the functional difference between I-reasoning and team reasoning, and the role of group identification. Insofar as people tend to get it right in such social dilemmas, this is support for the assumption that group identification

in the strong sense occurs. But there is no reason to restrict the possibility of group identification and team reasoning to collective choice situations with that structure.

**BJÖRN:** The question of whether an individual is capable of group identification might concern the individual's general social capacities - her ability to view things from the group perspective in any situation where external conditions for group identification are favourable. It could also be a question about her ability to group identify in a specific choice context. It is the latter context-dependent capacity that we have in mind when we claim that the group members' capacity for group identification is a necessary condition for meaningful assignments of collective obligations to unstructured groups.

According to Bacharach (2006), group identification and team reasoning is a-rationally prompted by the character of the choice situation. It is not something that an agent can choose to adopt.

To what extent is Bacharach right that group identification isn't a matter of choice? If identifying with a group involves believing that one belongs to a group, then one arguably cannot directly choose to identify with it: beliefs are acquired rather than chosen. However, within the current framework, conceiving of a decision situation from a group perspective is not supposed to be equivalent to believing that one is a member of the relevant group. The perspectival understanding of conditions for collectivity is a distinct alternative to accounts requiring a conception of the group in the content of participants' attitudes. (Schweikard & Schmid 2013, Petersson 2017)

**OLLE:** Involuntarism seems to apply to perspectival features of cognition too though: when I recall the shameful thing I did at that party twenty years ago, I cannot choose whether or not it seems temporally close or distant in my memory. This might extend to the agential perspective from which I conceive a decision situation. In that case, it seems unreasonable to issue an obligation demanding that its primary addressees take one agential perspective rather than another.

But consider an analogy with visual perspectives. Once you are aware of the two ways in which you can perceive the duck-rabbit, it becomes relatively easy to switch between the two perceptions. When this procedure becomes sufficiently automatic, the direct/indirect distinction may not matter much. If your life depended on me perceiving the duck, it would not seem implausible to say that I had an obligation to do so, regardless of whether I could do it directly by choice or if I had to go via some kind of "self-nudging" - by trying to think of the side facing left as the front of a creature, for example. We do not yet want to take a position about these mechanisms here. It is partly an empirical question.

Regardless of whether or not the perspective shift associated with group identification can be under intentional control, there is no neutral perspective from which we can objectively weigh reasons for and against taking the I/we-perspective (Pacherie 2011: 186-187; Townsend 2015: 186). So, even if the we-perspective can be chosen, it will be rationally chosen relative to an agential perspective. This too seems morally relevant: if we cannot provide the primary addressees of our assignment of a collective moral obligation with perspective-neutral reasons to group identify, it seems unreasonable to demand that they do so.

**BJÖRN:** Ascriptions of collective moral obligations presuppose a group perspective (a second- or third-person plural perspective: *you* or *they*). When one addresses the agents with "You must

save the two children!” one conceives of them as a group and the ascribed obligation is relative to a perspective of collective rationality.

Suppose that we cannot provide perspective-neutral reasons for group identification, and that the agents entering the burning building have not framed the situation from the collective point of view. Nevertheless, intuitively it still makes sense to say that they are obliged to perform the collective act that moral team reasoning would prescribe. If our worries about voluntariness and/or perspective-neutral reasons are warranted, how should we explain this intuition?

**OLLE:** When we say that a group has an obligation to  $\Phi$ , we imply that the group ought to  $\Phi$  and that it would be meaningful to address it with a moral imperative,  $\Phi!$  (Hare 1981: 152-3) Such a moral imperative can be meaningful because it can contribute to group identification as an added element in the choice context. By commanding collective action, we stress the collective features of the case and appeal to the group members’ capacity for group identification. By addressing them in this way, we may tip them over into taking the collective perspective.

In standard examples of unstructured groups that intuitively have moral obligations, like Virginia Held’s much discussed subway passengers who fail to stop an assault (Held 1970), external conditions for group identification are typically favourable: in Held’s case the group is confined to a limited common space, there are no obstacles to communication or signalling preparedness to coordinate etc. Little should be needed to prompt group identification, and consequently our moral intuition about the group’s obligation seems stable.

**BJÖRN:** In *Burning Building*, the description is less specific. Which are the opportunities for signalling and talking? Did the individuals get there together or did they just happen to notice the other’s presence? Is the group naturally delimited by some external factor? In other words, is the situation such that team reasoning should be expected at all? It seems to us that the strength of our intuitions about their collective obligation will vary with such additional features, in a way that supports our theory. More favourable external conditions for group identification makes the assignment of an obligation to act collectively seem more apt. So, it seems right that what we called the basic intuition relies on an implicit assumption about the individual’s capacity to identify with the group in the specific choice context.

If this is the explanation in the case where the individuals have not yet identified with the group, have we really done justice to the intuition that such a group *has* a collective obligation to  $\Phi$ , or merely shown that there may be good pragmatic or consequentialist reasons for addressing the group *as if* it had a collective obligation? On a prescriptivist understanding of obligation-talk, like Richard Hare’s, if it is plausible to address the group with a moral imperative, then it is plausible to assign an obligation to it - it “has” an obligation in that sense. We would prefer to leave this meta-ethical issue open here, though.

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