

Rewiring Ethics: Recognition, Localism, and Collective Action

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Abstract

Many moral theories hold individuals responsible for their marginal impact on massive patterns (for instance overall value or equality of opportunity) or for following whichever rules would realise that pattern on the whole. But each of these injunctions is problematic. Intuitively, the first gives individuals responsibility for too much, and the second gives them responsibility for too little. I offer the outlines of a new approach to ethics in collective action contexts. I defend a collaborative principle that assigns recognisably worthwhile responsibilities to agencies wherever possible. This approach is most distinctive in the cases in which the consequential value is the same whether individuals have 'local' responsibilities or diffuse responsibilities. There are real life applications across large swathes of production and consumption. But the new principle also has explanatory value in cases in which it is not possible to assign recognisably worthwhile responsibilities to individuals; the central examples here are responsibility for climate change and reparations for historical injustice. This essay is programmatic: starting from a conjecture about the moral significance of human recognition, it sketches a new way of approaching a range of collective action problems that combines the importance of the perspectives of both moral and political philosophy.

Section One: Collective Action Problems

1.1 Collective Action Problems

Many situations of moral significance have the following structure. There is some large negative outcome that would be produced or prevented only by a pattern of actions across the individuals in a large group. The obtaining of this pattern does not significantly depend upon the choices of any one individual in the group. Moreover, each individual faces some significant incentive to do their part in collectively producing this outcome (usually some palpable cost or benefit for themselves or their family). Call such cases *collective action problems*. The choices we make about which job to take, whether to strike or protest, which neighbourhood to live in, which schools to send our children to, how to vote, and about the environmental impacts of our lifestyles all can have significant negative social impacts. And yet, in many of these cases, individuals face incentives to conform to the problematic pattern of actions. Moral theorists standardly want their moral theory to yield the result that individuals come to behave in ways that mitigate these negative social impacts.

In philosophical reflection on these kinds of cases, we tend to oscillate between two scales: either giving responsibility to individuals for their marginal contribution to some massive pattern, or giving responsibility to massive agencies to instruct individuals blindly. But ideally, we want individuals to be doing something important and also participating in some larger collaboration of significance.

This essay starts with a conjecture. Lots of people find work more fulfilling when it is *recognisably* worthwhile: when they are more transparently and palpably connected with the value they produce.¹ Relatedly, lots of people are

¹ I will be ecumenical about what it is to be 'worthwhile.' There is a range of views one could take, from being valuable (cf. Wolf 2010; Hurka 2001), to meeting needs of others (cf. Kandiyali 2020, Brudney 1997), and perhaps even to be not reasonably rejectable on the basis of personal reasons (Scanlon 1998). A full development of my proposal with applications to particular issues

more motivated to work when they are more transparently related to the value they produce. Call this *the localising preference*.

I assume this is intuitive enough. We can find further support for this conjecture in management science,² in economic literature,³ in empirical psychology,⁴ and in contemporary ethical theory.⁵ This also connects up with an important theme in the history of political theory, namely the importance of moral recognition. Recognition is a key aspect of the ideal of unalienation in the work of Marx, especially in the *Comments on James Mill*, and a key aspect of the ideal of contractualism developed by T.M. Scanlon, and Waheed Hussain's recent criticisms of market opacity.⁶

The central theme of this essay is that taking *morally* seriously the importance of recognition in the structure of moral responsibilities provides the basis for a new approach to thinking about responsibility in collective action contexts. This approach supports dividing labour in ways that preserve recognisably worthwhile responsibilities where possible. This applies within a given group of individuals with some large responsibility, but also to the allocation of responsibilities to those groups of individuals themselves. This supports a *fractal* model of moral responsibility, where each agency is assigned recognisably worthwhile responsibilities as participants in collaborations that are themselves assigned recognisably worthwhile responsibilities as parts of larger collaborations, and so on. In this way, individuals can take responsibility themselves for suitably-sized responsibilities while nevertheless also taking responsibility for their parts in increasingly larger endeavours. Since there will be natural limits on the extent to which responsibilities can be feasibly allocated in recognisably worthwhile ways, this approach also yields a taxonomy of strategies, favouring large-scale management of large-scale values in suitable contexts.

would need to take a stand on this question. However, the basic ideas of the current proposal don't turn on these issues.

² Cf. Carton 2017a, though this approach occasionally runs afoul of the view that Marx makes fun of – see section 2.1 below.

³ Cf. Brennan & Tullock's terrific 1982 paper, which inspired the current approach.

⁴ E.g. Sinisalo, 2004; Yang, Jiang, Pu, 2021; Yang, F., Jiang, Y., Paudel, K.P. 2021.

⁵ E.g. Wolf (2010, 26).

⁶ Marx & Engels 1975 (1844); Scanlon 1998; Hussain 2023.

1.2 Quick Contrast with Rule Consequentialism

One option is to defend an indirect consequentialism that treats the Localising Preference *strategically*, as an empirical fact about what would affect the consequences of different patterns of rule-conforming behaviour. This striking but characteristic remark from *A Theory of Justice* is significant here (1971, 57):

In designing and reforming social arrangements, one must, of course, examine the schemes and tactics it allows and the forms of behaviour which it tends to encourage. Ideally the rules should be set up so that men are led by their predominant interests to act in ways which further socially desirable ends. The conduct of individuals guided by their rational plans should be coordinated as far as possible to achieve results which although not intended or perhaps even foreseen by them are nevertheless the best ones from the standpoint of social justice. Bentham thinks of this coordination as the artificial identification of interests, Adam Smith as the work of the invisible hand.

Rawls thought it was a job for social science to figure out what sorts of rules would produce the best overall outcomes.⁷ Notice that the ‘predominant interests’ we are to be led by are given *antecedently* – in advance of collaboration.⁸ Moreover, the overall results need not be intended or even foreseen by the individuals.

There are two problems here. One is extensional. To see this, consider cases in which a localising rule (one assigning more recognisably worthwhile responsibilities) would bring about less overall value. In such cases, the localising option would promote more disvalue than the disaggregated

⁷ Of course, Rawls in 1971 was clearly not a Rule Consequentialist, but he shared the with the classical utilitarians a willingness to endorse opaque incentives to conform with rules governing large groups in order to promote large-scale values (in his case, the difference principle rather than value maximisation).

⁸ N.B. Rawls’ considered view is more complex, given that motives will be somewhat endogenous in the well-ordered society (cf. Rawls 1971, 454). But compare Cohen’s objections to the strict rather than lax interpretations of Rawls’ principles (Cohen 2008).

option – though perhaps not all that much. Rule Consequentialism would not advocate a localising rule in such cases. But I think that even if the overall result would not be value maximising, it may well be most morally desirable to follow a rule enjoining one to act in a localising way.

The other problem is explanatory or methodological. I want to resist the idea that we design rules based on exogenous descriptive expectations about how individuals are likely to behave. That gives individuals too little moral responsibility. It treats moral motivation as analogous to non-agential influences on outcomes; this is a classic mark of moral alienation.⁹ And it threatens to make the relationship between substantive individual responsibilities and social value invisible.¹⁰

In my view, it is a mistake for *Act* Consequentialists to think that individuals have some individual responsibility for everything of value that they can affect. This seems to give individuals too much responsibility – and for them not to give others enough responsibility. Act Consequentialists are not moral team players. But it is also a mistake for *Rule Consequentialists* to think that individuals are merely responsible for following whichever massive rule happens to be most impactful in the aggregate. This seems to give too *little* consideration to the specific moral responsibilities of individuals. It seems problematic to me that individuals have no guarantee that they will be able to ‘foresee’ the ways in which their actions contribute to the ‘best overall outcomes.’ It is mere luck in this case when the best rule enjoins individuals to take a more localising responsibility for particular individuals. Intuitively, the Rule Consequentialist approach gets the right result (when it does) for the wrong reasons.

1.3 The Recognisable Responsibility Principle

⁹ Cf. Williams 1974; Maguire 2022.

¹⁰ Plausibly, a Rule Consequentialist evaluating the internalisation rather than compliance with a rule will allow some leeway for non-compliance based on the Localising Preference. (On this general strategy, see Hooker 2000, 76.) This would be to model the Localising Preference as a kind of weakness of will. Even so, there will be cases in which the Rule Consequentialist must enjoin internalisation of a non-localising rule given the overall values at stake. There is quite a deep instability in Rule Consequentialism here, concerning the extent to which individuals can clear-headedly internalise a rule justified in part on their pre-internalisation psychology.

I offer instead:

The RECOGNISABLE RESPONSIBILITY principle: Individual agencies should be assigned recognisably worthwhile responsibilities where possible.

I'm going to spend most time on the most distinctive aspect of this proposal, the moral significance of *recognisably* worthwhile responsibilities.¹¹ But it is important to keep in mind that the RECOGNISABLE RESPONSIBILITY principle is a *collaborative* principle.¹² The principle distinguishes merely acting locally, as one might without knowledge of one's potential collaborators, from acting in a localising collaboration, in which one takes oneself to be playing one's collaborative part. One's first-order reasoning and one's behaviour may be superficially similar in the two cases. But one's overall motivational orientation would be importantly different; this also has counterfactual implications for one's motives and actions, and for the prospect of recognising oneself as participating in a larger collaboration responsible for larger values. The RECOGNISABLE RESPONSIBILITY principle does not advocate the kind of focus on one's own prospects that would neglect the significance of the actions of others. Rather, it is based on collaboration, and hence, given that the agents are similarly situated, a form of universalisation. According to the RECOGNISABLE RESPONSIBILITY principle, one upholds one's responsibilities as a way of playing one's part in a collaboration with others, where those others also have recognisably worthwhile responsibilities.

The recognition of this fact, that we are collaborating in recognisably worthwhile ways, can form the basis for a desirable form of moral

¹¹ To keep the discussion manageable, I'll mostly focus on cases in which agents face similar options and prospects (either all recognisably worthwhile or, later, none). A fuller treatment would need to address cases in which only some agents can be assigned recognisably worthwhile responsibilities. For congruent discussion of these issues in the ethics of production, see Kandiyali 2020, Gomberg 2007.

¹² Ideally agents will actively and democratically collaborate with one another in ways that aspire to honouring the RECOGNISABLE RESPONSIBILITY principle. However, I will more minimally assume that agents act on the basis of a rule for all that each of them can reason to individually.

community. Or so I'll argue. But let me clarify and motivate the approach further first.

Section Two: Localising, Recognition, and Alienation

2.1 Explaining Recognisability

What are the conditions under which a responsibility is *recognizably* worthwhile? Here's a first thought: a responsibility is recognizably worthwhile if the agent (or some other pertinently situated agent) *knows* that upholding the responsibility would be worthwhile.¹³ But this won't do. For by hypothesis, in many collective action cases, it is stipulated that we know what the overall effect of our action and everyone else's actions will be (whether or not we know exactly how or who will be involved in that effect). So, this can't be what explains the Localising Preference.

The distinctions under consideration are important in the organization of production. Here it is relevant that Karl Marx – making reference to Smith's famous example of the division of labour in a pin factory – actually made fun of the idea that recognition in production might come merely from the fact that one knows that one is a trusty cog in a good system, whatever the content of one's duties (MECW, 5:225):

Man remains a maker of pin-heads, but he has the consolation of knowing that the pin-head is part of the pin and that he is able to make the whole pin. The fatigue and disgust caused by the eternally repeated making of pin-heads is transformed, by this knowledge, into the 'satisfaction of man.'

There you are every day, banging away at some fraction of some pin. You have read your *Wealth of Nations*, so you know that everyone's taking a tiny part of the overall productive process is massively more efficient than each

¹³ I'm going to be arguing that recognition is more than an epistemic condition so I am starting with a strong epistemic condition (knowledge) rather than, e.g. justified belief.

person taking responsibility for making the whole pin. But still, there you are, banging away at these fractions of pins all day, miserable – and perhaps now also feeling guilty because you think you should be pleased to be helping people.

This is closely connected with the idea that the moral injunction to ignore the Localising Preference is alienating. Interestingly, the idea that workers will be alienated if they lack some more *palpable* understanding of the worth of their efforts is well-known among business leaders and military strategists.¹⁴ Andrew Carton advocates that we “conceptualize leaders as architects who optimally motivate employees when they create a cognitive blueprint composed of a small and streamlined constellation of connections that link everyday work and the organization’s ultimate aspirations and then allow employees to mentally assemble more elaborate connections around that core structure” (2017a, 352). Carton offers this as purely instrumental advice for managers trying to motivate employees – because alienated employees are less productive.

These insights from business management and military strategy provide further support for the prevalence of the Localising Preference, and their prescriptions point in the direction of assigning recognisably worthwhile responsibilities to individuals. But there is a risk in these cases that these managers are *merely* trying to change the perceptions of their work. This would collapse into the proposal that Marx made fun of: changing perceptions without changing material reality.

For it also matters what *constitutes* participation in such activities. It matters that, where possible (and I’ll come back to this condition), we relate to one another morally in ways that enable actual human recognition of the ways in which we are serving one another. This isn’t a point about axiological mathematics or formal epistemology. This is a point about people, about what we’re actually like, what the good life involves for creatures like us. It involves actual palpable genuine concern manifested to one another, and recognised

¹⁴ Brennan and Tullock *op. cit.*

as such. This is what is missing in the pin factory. Even if you know, theoretically as it were, that your action has some impact in the void, this is no part of your productive experience. It is all the same to you whether the eventual causal impact is positive or negative or neutral. It is likewise all the same to the patient whether and why you did whatever you did.

This is why one cannot simply redescribe cretinising or massively diffuse contributions into something recognisably worthwhile. It is also why the stratagems of the military and business leaders ring a little hollow: they are (some of them) mere rebranding. My suggestion is not that we rebrand, but *rewire*: that, where possible, we restructure collective activity in ways that assign individuals recognisably worthwhile responsibilities, on some not-far-fetched understanding of what this amounts to.

Recognition is manifest care about something. As such, recognition involves both a representation – by the agent, patient, or a third party – of something as a certain way and the manifestation of one’s caring about thing’s being that way; this, in turn, entails that one cares about the thing being that way.¹⁵ The simplest instance of recognition is an expression of gratitude for a kindness.

We still need an explanation of the relation between the importance of recognition and localism. This is where we can appeal to some simple facts about our abilities to meet needs and to know that we are meeting needs.

I submit that the limits on genuine human relationships are limits to human recognition.¹⁶ These relationships are of tremendous importance in moral life. There is a tendency to abstract too far from such quotidian details in analytic moral philosophy. There is a presumption that only necessary conditions and universals can be starting points in moral theory. But an alternative, equally venerable tradition, starts with what David Wiggins, in a slightly different context, called the “truly irrevocable cares and concerns of human existence”

¹⁵ This is distinguished as ‘British recognition’ in Honneth 2020; see also Brudney 1997.

¹⁶ Importantly, I’m not relying on the idea that one cannot care impersonally or at a distance. Rather, the claim is that recognition is attenuated by certain kinds of distance between people and by the significance of one’s action on others. The scale of a responsibility is allocated in ways sensitive to the abilities of the relevant agent to the needs in question; more on this shortly.

(2008, 6). We can think that morality is about people, about community, and start with what people are really like and what community is really like – not just empirically, but phenomenologically. On this approach, it becomes easier to see how the phenomenology of actually making a difference can be important to someone, and that kind of importance could be a condition on the structure of moral responsibility.¹⁷

2.2 Two Moralities of Recognition

Let us say that a morality of recognition is a moral view according to which moral standards bearing on actions obtain at least partly in virtue of standards bearing on a certain kind of ideal relationship between the relevant parties. Such views are contrasted with consequentialist approaches on which morality is just about promoting antecedently specifiable goods rather than acting in order to constitute moral community with others.

This recognition-based approach has roots in Karl Marx and John Rawls, and has been given particularly clear expression in T.M. Scanlon's defence of moral contractualism.¹⁸ In order both to show the methodological overlap, and the substantive differences, it will be helpful to contrast the two a little more. To be morally wrong, for Scanlon, is to be unjustifiable to others. The standard of justifiability is given by the contractualist principle: roughly, an action is unjustifiable if its performance under the circumstances would be disallowed by any set of principles for the general regulation of behaviour that no one could reasonably reject (1998, 153). This forms the basis of the relationship between agents and relevant parties, which is, loosely speaking, one of respect as justifiability. Scanlon's argument for this approach is phenomenological (1998, 187). As Scanlon says (1998, 162):

¹⁷ For instance, Carton assumes this matters to the NASA workers in his management piece: "I'm working on a small piece, *but an irreplaceable and essential piece* of that puzzle. And I can see how it fits in within this broader organizational system. Because of that, I can see how my work connects to the organization's aims." (2017b; my emphasis).

¹⁸ For discussion of relevant similarities between Marx and Rawls, see Brudney 2013. On Scanlon, see especially (1998); see also Wallace 2019, and the relational egalitarians (e.g. Scheffler 2014). The importance of recognition is more familiar in other parts of practical philosophy that are more heavily influenced by Marx and Hegel, e.g. Honneth *op.cit.*

The contractualist ideal of acting in accord with principles that others (similarly motivated) could not reasonably reject is meant to characterise the relation with others the value and appeal of which underlies our reasons to do what moralities requires. This relation, much less personal than friendship, might be called a relation of mutual recognition.

I am taking on board the idea that the value and appeal of mutual recognition might underlie the authority of a set of guiding principles in collective action contexts – which is most contexts, really. The distinctive suggestion that I am drawing out in this essay is that recognition of others is not a formal property, or a merely epistemic condition, but a palpable fact about the human experience of living together. I am suggesting that recognition of serving others is relevant to the moral assignment of responsibilities. This seems to be an important part of the phenomenology of everyday moral life.¹⁹

I have focussed on the recognition available to the agent themselves that their action is worthwhile. It is plausible that this recognition by the agent of the worth of their own action is related to the recognition by the ‘patient’ that the action is worthwhile, and perhaps also by third parties. Like Scanlon’s attempts to motivate his respect-based conception of moral recognition, my attempts to motivate my approach draws on the phenomenology of everyday moral experience. I have been building in particular on the evidence provided by a single conjecture, the Localising Preference. My hunch is that this conjecture is explained by the fact that living well together involves not merely meeting one another’s needs, but doing so recognisably, in a way that continuously enacts deepening forms of moral community.

The ideal of human recognition is one in which individuals have (or aspire to have) actual relationships with one another. This follows quite naturally from the definition of recognition as *manifest* care. This conception, in turn, fits

¹⁹ It is worth pointing out that my proposal is stronger than Hussain’s requirement that relations between agents and outputs be *transparent*; see his 2023, chapter six. However, Hussain himself assumes that his conception of respect requires democratic control in political life, rather than mere transparency (2023, 2, 105); I’m suggesting we extend this idea to the economic and other domains of social life.

within a more robust ideal, that is part of a tradition that draws on the ideal of a 'completed' service from Marx.²⁰ In completed service, an agent does what they can to meet a patient's specific need; their doing so is recognized as such by the patient; and the patient's doing so is recognized, in turn, by the agent. If these attitudes are reciprocated, there is a relationship of mutuality, each disposed to do what they can to meet the needs of the other, and recognizing the other as such. This is not merely a moral status, as when A has a right against interference from B, say, or when it is true of both that they would only act on reasonably rejectable principles. This is an actual relationship between concrete individuals with shared ends. This ideal of actual mutual recognition constitutes the ideal of moral community that underlies the RECOGNISABLE RESPONSIBILITY principle.²¹

2.3 Two Natural Objections (One Postponed)

Before applying this idea to some collective action cases, there are two natural kinds of objections one might raise about the foundational moral role that I'm assigning to human recognition.

One is that there are jobs that need to be done that cannot feasibly be organized in such a way as provide workers with a palpable sense of the ultimate worthiness of their efforts. I've been keeping this objection at bay so far with the occasion reference to localizing responsibilities *where possible*. I will shortly generalize this approach to offer a principled account of non-localisable cases.

The other concern, naturally raised from a more consequentialistic perspective, is that insisting on the importance of recognition can sound problematically self-interested. It is as though one is focused on the value to oneself of serving others rather than the value to the others. But that is a

²⁰ Especially in the *Comments on James Mill* and the *1844 Manuscripts*. This approach is also influenced by the remarks on higher-phase communism in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*. For useful discussion, see Brudney 1997 and Kandiyali 2020.

²¹ Obviously, I cannot defend the entire ideal here. I'm just providing some motivation for the RECOGNISABLE RESPONSIBILITY principle. But it is presumably helpful to see the shape of the more substantive moral ideal that could underlie this principle.

misunderstanding of the functional role of recognition in the approach I am advocating. The first point to make in response is that one's reason for action in service is not recognition but the meeting of the relevant need.²² The importance of recognition plays a role in framing the options rather than providing reasons for them. Another point concerns universality: one is not merely rearranging one's own responsibilities to make them more personally agreeable. Rather, the conjecture is that recognizable service is important to all of us. This explains the significance of structuring responsibilities for everyone to empower recognizable service. This also fits with the shift in moral perspective from the circumstances of patients to the circumstances of agents. A significant part of the quality of our lives together is determined by our own activities, not just the resources we have or the ways we materially impact on others. And yet the *quality* of service has been oddly erased from much moral theory.²³ I suggest that a morality that *starts* with the quality of service – everyone's service – has much to recommend it. This is true both for agents assigned recognizably worthwhile responsibilities where possible, but also for 'patients' who are in a position both to recognize that their needs are being met and to recognize the work of those meeting them.²⁴

Section Three: Applications of the RECOGNISABLE RESPONSIBILITY Principle

I will briefly apply the RECOGNISABLE RESPONSIBILITY principle to a range of different collective action situations. It will not be possible, of course, to work out every detail, or engage with every alternative approach to these complex situations. The goal is more programmatic: to show, across a range of cases, how the RECOGNISABLE RESPONSIBILITY approach can enhance our moral understanding.

²² Compare Scanlon's response to J.J.T. Thomson's objection (1998, chapter 4 and 5).

²³ Both consequentialist and deontological approaches often focus on properties of particular actions rather than the qualities of the responsibilities that would lead someone to take those actions. This connects with Williams' point about projects. Some notable exceptions include the recent emphasis on *productive* justice and meaningful work in political philosophy (cf. Gomberg, 2007; Stanczyk 2012).

²⁴ Another lamentable aspect of consequentialist ethics is that 'patients' just like 'agents' are not empowered to exercise their moral agency.

3.1 Localisable Collective Action

The most obvious practical implications of the RECOGNISABLE RESPONSIBILITY principle concern localizing postures in consumption and production activities. The principle advocates spending more time and energy caring for one's local social environment in production (in one's professional and other contributive projects) and in consumption (patronizing local producers) than one spends on more distant social environments, even at some cost to overall value promotion.

The principle also advocates a certain amount of reasonable partiality in one's projects – to care more about one's own children and students than those of others. How does it do this? Easily: children and students are ready bases of important kinds of recognition.²⁵ It would be natural to universalize responsibilities in ways that preserve these recognition-enhancing responsibilities even at some cost to overall efficiency or value promotion. (Plus, as we saw earlier from moments of extensional convergence between Act Consequentialism, Rule Consequentialism, and the RECOGNISABLE RESPONSIBILITY principle, promoting overall value will not always conflict with distributing recognizable responsibilities.²⁶)

Perhaps a more interesting kind of case reconsiders the limits on what constitutes the group with which one is collaborating – which involves questioning the presumption of the 'case' in moral reflection. The idea is that one aims to break down a large group with a single end into smaller subgroups all with recognizably worthwhile ends. One can break those subgroups down again, and again, until one's participation in the group is itself easily recognizable. The clearest example of this in real life is the structure of armies. To reduce desertion rates, armies are divided into increasingly small units – small enough to make desertion humanly recognizable.²⁷ We can reproduce this structure in industrial action, for

²⁵ For a terrific account of the relational values in prospect in parenting, see Swift and Brighthouse 2014.

²⁶ Jackson 1991 is illustrative here.

²⁷ Cf. Brennan and Tullock *op. cit.*

instance. Take the recent industrial action in UK academia. Forgoing wages and withholding teaching is individually costly to academics; the implications of one individual teacher's doing so are fairly negligible in national negotiations. But rather than focusing on the national movement, one can identify with one's own university, or school, or department. The strategies one employs might well be different in these different cases, if the strategy that increases the chance of success at your university conflicts with national strategy.²⁸

Importantly, the idea is not that in such cases one is choosing whether to collaborate with the university as the larger group or with the national group. Rather, the suggestion is that one is choosing whether to add an additional agential layer in the total collaboration. The additional layer – the university-sized group – itself aims to honour the RECOGNISABLE RESPONSIBILITY principle. In fact, the national struggle for fair terms in academia itself be seen as a collaborative layer within a larger struggle for fair terms across the economy as a whole – and that in some country, and so on. At each level of organization, the RECOGNISABLE RESPONSIBILITY principle advocates assigning to all participants in some group some recognizably worthwhile end, to the extent possible; that group is itself assigned this responsibility as part of a larger group assigning recognizably worthwhile responsibilities; and so on. This is a *fractal* ideal for social organization: at every level of social organization, agencies are upholding recognizably worthwhile responsibilities as a way to participate in a suitable collaboration with relevant others. Every agency has responsibilities in two directions as it were: their first-order responsibilities (designed to be recognizably worthwhile) and their responsibilities to the collaboration (to take on such first-order responsibilities as fits with a distribution of recognizably worthwhile responsibilities to the other participants in a way that meets the group's responsibilities).²⁹

²⁸ For a range of examples, see Kelliher 2019.

²⁹ Of course, this raises a host of interesting questions in distributive ethics, especially if recognisably worthwhile responsibilities cannot be divided equally. As noted in fn. 11, I'm going to set such questions aside for further study.

It is worth pointing out that the metaphor of 'localism' can be misleading. Really, the principle underlying the division of responsibilities into the recognizably worthwhile is something like 'from each according to their abilities to each according to their needs.' The presumption of localism comes from human limits on service and recognition – on what we can do and see. That being said, a proper division of responsibilities will probably require some people to be in charge of coordinating subgroups, and the larger groups of which they are a part. Some people at certain career stages are better suited to taking responsibilities for municipal and national coordination of strategies; others are better suited to far more intimate needs.

In cases involving larger agencies, the notions of recognition, ability, and need will all be scaled up appropriately. The needs at stake will often be massive – such as the concerns of public health in a mining community, or the importance of democratic rules in a massive state. The relevant abilities will also be massive; clearly, groups can do lots of things that no individuals can do by themselves. We will also need some collection notion of recognition, such that there could be recognition by and of a massive agency, such as Preston or Finland. This provides an alternative source of justification for subsidiarity and municipal economic management, as in certain models of Community Wealth Building.

Municipalities might themselves aim to honour a version of the RECOGNISABLE RESPONSIBILITY principle, thereby to realise a kind of community-level analogue of mutual recognition. They might aim to invest in local labour and capital in ways that are designed to foster relations of solidarity, and doing so in a way that is nevertheless responsive to some overall distribution of abilities and needs across a far larger population. This is precisely the moral ambition of some participants in the Community Wealth Building movement (cf. O'Neill & Guinan, 2019), which seeks to structure capital and labour management within a community in ways that provide short- and long-term benefits to that very community. By simultaneously seeing themselves as

participants in a larger collaborative enterprise, these municipalities are also in a position to avoid concerns about self-interested protectionism.³⁰

3.2 Non-Localisable Collective Action

I have so far mostly focussed on cases in which responsibilities are localisable. But it will not always be possible to assign recognisably worthwhile responsibilities to individuals in collective action situations. This will sometimes be due to the nature of goods being collectively managed, and sometimes due to the state of prevailing technology. In this subsection, I'll talk about the technological limitations; in the next, about collective values.

Climate change is a good example of a technological limitation on localisation. Climate change is already negatively impacting the lives of billions of people, and it has resulted from the actions of billions of particular people. But it is not possible to distinguish recognisable relationships connecting particular agents and patients, either retrospectively or prospectively, due to the global and systemic nature of the causal chains in play. This is importantly different from the kind of recognition that is possible in lots of production and consumption contexts. It is also importantly different from the recognition that is possible in army and industrial action cases, where the collaboration itself can be made more recognisably worthwhile. In cases where the nature of the phenomenon or the limits of technology render recognisably worthwhile responsibilities unavailable, we should opt for effective collaboration. Our contributions to this effective collaboration can still then be recognisably worthwhile in the following different sense: so long as the rationale for our responsibilities (stated in this paragraph) is as transparent to us as possible, we will know that we are contributing in the best way that we can.³¹

The moral difference between the localising and non-localising responses in these cases is explained by a fact about the nature of alienation, which is that

³⁰ On protectionism and CWB, see Dennis and Stanley 2022.

³¹ I think this is also a good way to treat drudgery; compare Gomberg 2008 and Kandiyali 2022.

alienation is *agentially-imposed*. (I'm assuming that the relevant notion of alienation is the negative counterpart to the positive notion of recognition.) You are not alienated from someone separated from you by a river; you are just inconvenienced. But you would be alienated from someone who you could not spend time with due to homophobic social norms or your own racist attitudes or because they were afraid to say the wrong thing in case you fired them, for instance. In localisable collective action situations, where we do not distribute responsibilities in ways that empower recognisably worthwhile responsibilities, we *are* plausibly alienated from one another.³² However, in non-localisable collective action situations, where we *cannot* distribute responsibilities in ways that empower recognisably worthwhile responsibilities, transparently distributing responsibilities in some other satisfactory way is the best we can do.³³ We are *not* alienated by the non-availability of greater recognition in these cases.

Somewhat ironically, I think we would be alienated by a moral approach that claims that one's contribution *is* individually worthwhile in such cases – even if we are certain that our contribution makes some tiny difference to the massive outcome.³⁴ For that constrains us to misinterpret the point of the proceedings and the real significance of our contribution. And in fact, I'm inclined to agree with Walter-Sinnott Armstrong (2005) that we should freely draw on *extrinsic incentives* to ensure compliance with the collectively optimal strategy in some non-localisable cases. This should be within the remit of our collaborative design of responsibilities in non-localisable cases.

This also yields a response to a natural question from consequentialistically-inclined philosophers. What about rich people in an unequal world? Should they still prioritise the recognisability of service over the far more significant good they can do opaquely, e.g. by simply relinquishing their fortunes to a well-run charity?³⁵ And if not, do we collapse into consequentialism?

³² For an argument that efficient markets are so alienating, see Maguire 2022.

³³ When these conditions are met, I would agree with Hussain 2023 about the sufficiency of the transparency condition.

³⁴ Cf. Nefsky 2017.

³⁵ Though see Wenar 2010 for excellent commentary on the debate between optimists and sceptics about the consequential value, all things considered, of international aid.

In reply, this sort of case involves a combination of localisable and non-localisable considerations. Global injustice calls for reparations and radical changes to international trade and international politics. These are not things that I can do, personally, as a rich person in an unequal world. Take reparations, say. These reparations are recognisably worthwhile at some macro-level, which is where they are properly situated. I should simply do my part in financially supporting reparations, for instance, through aggressive taxation. This doesn't collapse into consequentialism, because there is no presumption that one must donate all one's time and resources to the point of diminished marginal returns. Plus, there are lots of other contexts in which localism *would* apply.

The moral approach under development in this essay lends itself to an integration between moral and political considerations. This project blends into normative politics. I think this is a feature, not a bug, but I lack the space to develop these connections further here.³⁶

3.3 Collective Values?

What about the value of equality or democracy or autonomy or ownership rights? It doesn't seem possible to assign responsibility for these values to a particular individual because they are, in part, essentially collective values. These are not examples of local values that we lack the technology to assign to individuals. Rather, these are values that are essentially realised in collective arrangements.

Not all of these collective arrangements will be massive. It would be a mistake to think that democracy is something instantiated only at massive scales, and even more of a mistake to think that democracy is constituted only by massive plebiscites. Much of democratic life is local; this will mean the delegation of large swathes of political authority to regional and local authorities.³⁷

³⁶ See [redacted] for a similar approach to the one developed here that starts from a number of familiar problems in political philosophy.

³⁷ Compare Dewey on democracy as a way of life 1939.

Still, some democratic processes in some places are constituted by massive plebiscites. The importance of participating in them is explained by appealing to the prospect of recognition suitable to this kind of value. Ideally, participating individuals have a transparent account of why the policies managed at that level are best managed at that level and with precisely that amount of individual accountability (which is to say, not terribly much). Participating in massive plebiscites has value precisely in playing an almost performatively recognitive function: we all engage in the theatre of voting in part to manifest our commitment to democracy itself. This explains why expressivist theories of voting can feel quite compelling.³⁸ Earlier I said that there is a distinctive kind of value instantiated in societies structured to empower individuals to recognizably serve one another. I think we enact structures that have this value by participating in democratic processes.

Does this strategy collapse into the wishful thinking that Marx made fun of? No, precisely because there is a transparent explanation for why this particular collective action has to be undertaken at this scale and in this way. Such an explanation is lacking in the pin factory, on the assumption that profit-maximisation is the preeminent organizing value there. In the case of massive plebiscites, the best moral explanation acknowledges the importance of recognition, in the sense that we have been considering. Given the nature of the values at stake in massive plebiscites, we should not expect individual actions to be efficacious. In fact, more strongly, in the light of this transparent explanation for the inherent massiveness of this collective activity, we should expect ideal individual actions in such contexts *not* to be individually efficacious.³⁹ The 'rationality of voting' is mostly puzzling for philosophers and economists; ordinary people do not naturally deploy a standard of consequentialist rationality in this context.⁴⁰

³⁸ I think we can explain this truth in expressivist views about voting (cf. Brennan 1998) without relinquishing the continuities between the consequential function of voting and the function of other forms of more local democratic participation altogether.

³⁹ This, in turn, might explain why approaches that focus on the rationality of aiming to be the 'decisive voter' can feel a bit beside the point (e.g. Bernett 2020).

⁴⁰ Compare Gutman (2005, 529).

Conclusion

Reflecting on the importance of human recognition in ethics yields some practical strategies for dealing with collective action situations. We should aim to enhance recognition by assigning recognisably worthwhile responsibilities to individuals where possible (as in lots of cases of production and consumption) and by localising the collaborative response (as in localising strike action) or both (in the case of municipalist economics) – and we should otherwise aim for transparent recognition of the technological unavailability of either such approach, and perhaps avail ourselves of extrinsic motivations to promote conformity to the optimal pattern.

It is worth drawing out another attractive implication of this approach, which is that there is value in making improvements by degrees. Even if full collaborative management of the means of production is infeasible, for instance, we can certainly still opt for more control in particular workplaces, and also across particular professions. To take one example, the Collaborative Care model for pharmacists in Scotland aims to restructure the ethos and expectations of professional pharmacists in ways that assign each worker recognisably worthwhile responsibilities.⁴¹ Or as noted, we can empower particular municipalities, for instance by pursuing community wealth building projects, and generally with more subsidiarity.⁴²

This way of approaching collective action can come as a bit of a relief. It is natural for philosophers to feel despair in the face of collective action problems, especially as one oscillates between one's individual insignificance and the opacity of massive institutional demands. There is often nothing much one can recognisably do to make society more equal, or more free, or more valuable overall. But one can do something significant to make society better, by honouring one's role in a collaboration that assigns recognisable responsibilities, where possible, and is transparent about why not, where not possible. One can realise care in one's professional life, in one's life as a citizen,

⁴¹ Cf. Forsyth et al, 2023.

⁴² Cf. Guinan & O'Neill *op cit.*; on subsidiarity see, e.g. Melé 2005.

as a neighbour, a friend, a parent. This might not be much in the grand scheme of things. But why should anyone think it is their responsibility to make some big impact in the grand scheme of things?⁴³

⁴³ Thanks to [many people].

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