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In Response to: Trudy Govier's *Collective responsibility and the fallacies of composition and division*

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As Trudy Govier points out, one of the ways in which attribution of collective responsibility may be mistaken, specifically as an instance of the fallacy of composition or of division, is through equivocal use of moral terms like "responsibility". This in turn may rely on a faulty analogy between the relevant characteristics of an individual person and a group or collective. Ordinarily when we speak of responsibility in a moral sense we imply something about agency as characterized by a capacity for responsibility. The charge that in attributing collective responsibility to a group the fallacy of composition has been committed may rest on the assumption that only individual persons can be agents, that is, only individuals can have a capacity for responsibility. Thus the attribution of collective responsibility to a group equivocates between a sense of the term "responsibility" that is meaningful (namely as it is usually applied to individual persons) and a sense of the term "responsibility" that despite appearances is in fact meaningless. This latter is the sort of charge we could expect from someone like Jeremy Bentham who famously said that to speak of a community is to speak of a fiction.

Now, Trudy Govier, seems not to want to be quite as fussy as Bentham regarding the propriety of using the moral terminology we use for individuals when we speak of groups. She says, "Though there are many problems, in the end I would defend this dual use of language—for various reasons, including the fact that resisting it in the name of metaphysical purity would require radical surgery of ordinary language were it possible at all." (page 1) Yet, there might be some point, at least as a temporary strategy, in resisting this sort of equivocation, in the name of metaphysical purity albeit not metaphysical purity of a Benthamite sort.

It occurs to me that in order to entertain the possibility that the equivocation occurs between two *meaningful* senses of "responsibility" rather than between a meaningful one and a meaningless one, it might be useful to recall medieval resistance to using language ordinarily applied to human beings to apply to the characteristics and behaviour of God. The motivation here *was* one of metaphysical purity as well as a desire to make both theological sense and ordinary logical sense.

Thinkers like Moses Maimonides, insisted on recognizing the misleadingly equivocal nature of speaking, for example of everything from the "hand" of God to God's "responsibility" for the fate of the inhabitants of the created world. Though Maimonides resists equivocal anthropomorphic language, it does not follow, for him, that the idea of divine responsibility is meaningless, or that the notion of a divine being who could possess such responsibility is meaningless either, but instead that human beings do not have full access to the meaning of such language. Reference to God's responsibility can only be a sort of place-holder in moral and theological discourse for something in which we can assert belief but not properly comprehend.

In the present context, that of considering collective responsibility rather than divine responsibility, we have something of an advantage over the medievals. The nature and characteristics of collectives are not unknowable to us in the way that knowledge of the nature and characteristics of God are in principle beyond our grasp. It is worth emphasizing that the nature of collectives are not unknowable even if in practice the characteristics of collectives are

not, in fact, well known within liberal democratic cultures which take the individual as ontologically prior.

But, in order to pursue understanding of collectives and their moral capacities in their own terms rather than in parasitic terms, perhaps we should resist easy acceptance of the assumption of the ontological priority of individuals over collectives. This is one of my few objections to the general line of argument taken by Govier.

Govier observes,

Ontologically, the collective is dependent on the individual, which fundamental fact of metaphysics has profound implications. Collectives must be composed of individuals; there will be no state or nation, no society, no ethnic group, no corporation, family, club, mob, or community unless there are individual human beings. Much terminology has as its primary context of application individuals and their relationships. Thus meanings at the purely collective level are parasite on the individual level and require clarification.
(page 4)

Yet, it can easily be argued that without the prior existence of collective social, political, cultural or linguistic entities there could be no individual human beings, where human beings are understood specifically as social or moral beings, political animals as Aristotle put it, or even as creatures essentially constructed by our linguistic capacities and the languages we speak.

Now, the question of the priority of the individual over the collective, or vice versa, seems to me to be a chicken and egg question, one that inevitably will lead to commission of the fallacies of composition and division. However, within societies dominated by liberal democratic traditions it is particularly pressing to get beyond the tendency to grant unquestioned ontological priority to the individual, in order to be able to imagine how we could meaningfully use terms like responsibility in our attempt to understand the moral significance of collectives.

The characteristics of collectives inform the identity of individuals by providing the context within which to make sense of their lives—the ground against which figure is outlined—while the individuals who participate in the life of a collective in turn contribute to its shape. In the case of both individuals and collectives, identity can at times appear as a robust phenomenon while at others as a fragile and elusive one. David Hume, for example, reduced the self to a bundle of impressions and ideas, perhaps in a way that is analogous to the reduction of a community to a bundle of individual community members. We might say that metaphysically, the individual self was as much a fiction for Hume as community or society was for Bentham. An important difference between these philosophers, of course, lies in their accounts of how things get bundled back together again, and the significance of doing so. What is it that, across time, ties together the bits out of which individuals and communities are made?

Such questions were of acute importance for Hume. And for him the answers seem to lie in the kinds of stories we tell ourselves in order to make sense of claims or accusations of moral responsibility. However fictional the self may be it turns out to be a necessary fiction for a species characterized by its use of moral language. Thus, in the case of personal responsibility we need to have some account of the self that will make sense of the belief I have about myself or that others have about me that at time T^2 I can be held responsible for an act committed at time T^1 because there is continuity of identity between the self at T^1 and the self at T^2 and both are parts of my unified self. Whether or not the stories we tell about responsible selves construct them rather than describing something ontologically prior to the description it seems to be

essential to our functioning to tell these kinds of stories. We need to talk about ourselves *as if* we have identity. Arguably we use moral language, the language of praise, blame, responsibility and so forth in order to consolidate our sense of identity rather than assuming identity in order to enable us to use moral language.

The same might be said of the moral discourse of communities. We need to talk about what our community has done in the past, for good or ill, as well as its aspirations for the future in order to make sense of the belief that the community has an identity in the present that unites it to its past and its future.

Thus it is very striking when certain members of a community resort as Govier has pointed out to committing the fallacy of division in order to resist being made to feel guilty. I think there is more to the commission of this fallacy than mere logical error, because as a strategy it looks to me like using a sledgehammer to swat a fly. And this makes me curious about the kind of cultural phobias that would motivate such an over-reaction. I call it an over-reaction because the resort to the fallacy of division cuts members of a community off from that community by denying it the past it manifestly has, at least if current critics of that past are to be counted as members of the community as it is currently constituted. My suspicion is that the motivating force here is an unwillingness to acknowledge the full membership of those members of the community who in the past would have been excluded, because inclusion of them requires rethinking the story of community identity—a process that is threatening to one's sense of identity if one has the cultural luxury of possessing one.

The resistance here is to constructing the identity of the community in a certain way, namely one that would include those who if they were recognized as members of the community in the present would stand in need of apology for their mistreatment or exclusion in the past. The apology retroactively includes those who historically were excluded. The collective thereby reconstructs itself.

Those who resist apology but wish also to avoid committing the fallacy of division must resist any form of identification with those who individually historically committed the exclusionary deeds and this resistance must be so thoroughgoing that it makes repudiation unnecessary. Thus in the case of Australian "Sorry Day", those who refuse to feel sorry would have to believe that their government and fellow citizens have so little to do with their identity that there is no need to distance themselves from the wrongness of historical misdeeds by publicly acknowledging that wrongness and expressing regret over it. This is do-able of course, but it would seem to make it difficult to construct oneself as an Australian, as someone with Australian national identity where Australia is understood as a nation whose history spans the period in which the deeds in questions were committed.

Assuming that it would be wrong to accept one's country and compatriots taking children away from their parents for racist reasons now, it must be unacceptable that one's country and compatriots did such things in the past. If one believes this one must either repudiate the evil deeds, and apologize on behalf of one's country and compatriots, or deny relationship with them altogether. Generally I would think the former would be easier to sustain than the latter, unless resistance to apology is really masking weak identification or total failure to identify with the historically excluded. Identification with the excluded as people whose past and present pain matters would generate the need to perform reconciliation where reconciliation means making sense of the relationship between victims and violators.

If my summary diagnosis is right, willingness to commit fallacies of division in the ways to which Trudy Govier has drawn our attention, may be symptomatic of a social malaise that runs deeper than a susceptibility to engage in faulty reasoning, and so I am especially grateful to Govier for providing such significant examples as well as her analysis of the reasoning processes they involve.