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RESPONSIBILITY, ORDER ETHICS, AND GROUP AGENCY

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Abstract

Those who invoke the notion of moral responsibility in ethical discourse seem to be faced with a dilemma. Apparently, they either have to violate the "control principle" which says that nobody can be held responsible for what is beyond one's control. Or they have to concede that in many cases there is a "responsibility void" which means that nobody is responsible. The first option seems unjustifiable. The second renders the concept of moral responsibility useless. This dilemma may be taken to suggest that thinking about moral issues in terms of responsibility is an unproductive way of doing ethics. In our paper we offer a solution which, we hope, can rehabilitate responsibility as a moral concept. It combines order ethics (which is a kind of ethics that primarily focuses on the institutional structure of society) with a recently developed account of group agency.

Keywords: Responsibility, order ethics, group agency, social choice theory, global warming

1. Introduction

Responsibility is a widely used concept in societal discourse. It is frequently employed to address social, economic and environmental problems. E.g., investment bankers are held responsible for the financial crisis. Politicians are seen as responsible for economic growth. Citizens are seen as responsible for saving up for retirement and so on.

It can be questioned, however, whether the notion of responsibility really provides an adequate concept for framing modern-day ethical problems. Here is why. Most ethicists subscribe to the so called "control principle" (Nelkin 2008). It states that agents ought not to be seen as responsible for factors over which they have no control. Now most, if not all, of today's most pressing ethical problems result from the interactive choices of individuals and cannot be controlled by single agents. The control principle is violated, then, when responsibility for such problems is ascribed to individual agents. This has an unwelcome consequence for those who believe that thinking about moral issues in terms of responsibility is a good way to do ethics. If we want to fulfil the control principle, we cannot hold anyone responsible. It seems, then, as though any conception of responsibility faces the following dilemma (cf. Heiss 2011): When it comes to the most pressing ethical challenges of our time, it either violates the control principle or it leads to a "responsibility void" (Braham and VanHees 2011), holding nobody responsible. In the former case the conception is unjustifiable. In the latter case it is plainly useless.

In this paper we look at a solution to the dilemma which is supposed to rehabilitate the concept of responsibility. It has been proposed by philosophers who work in the tradition of order ethics which is a kind of ethics that takes the institutional structure of society – the social order – to be the "primary evaluative focal point" (Kagan 1992). We conclude that the order-ethical take on responsibility can resolve the dilemma. It can fulfil the control principle *and* avert the problem of a responsibility void. We show, however, that the very same dilemma resurfaces at a different level and conclude, somewhat surprisingly, that in order to ultimately resolve it order ethicists have to argue for a thesis in a totally different branch of philosophy. They have to argue that we should accept a richer social ontology and acknowledge the existence of group agents. This seems not to be an easy task. The idea of group agency apparently sins against methodological individualism. It may strike us as metaphysically queer,

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since it seems to postulate the existence of supra-individual entities. We suggest, however, that recent work in the theory of group agency can help tackle this problem. Drawing on contributions by Christian List and Philip Pettit we sketch an explanation of group agency which is not metaphysically dubious and which order ethicists can embrace without embarrassment.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, we elaborate on what we shall call the "dilemma of responsibility". Then, we present the order-ethical solution. After that, we show that the dilemma resurfaces at a different level. In order to address this problem we propose, then, to augment order ethics with the notion of group agency and we sketch an account of this idea which is compatible with methodological individualism. The last section sums up and concludes.

2. Responsibility

How can we determine whether a person can be seen as responsible for an action she has performed? Kant suggests that we should ask ourselves the following question: Would she have performed the act had she known that a gallows has being erected and that she would be executed if, in fact, she did perform the act? If and only if the answer to this question is yes, then she ought not to be seen as responsible for her action (cf. Kant 1788).[1]

Kant's "gallows test" makes an important point about responsibility. In effect, it makes clear that nobody can be seen as responsible for factors which are beyond her control.[2] This principle holds good for actions (cf. Nida-Rümelin 2011). But, of course, it also holds good for the outcomes that result from actions. As Beckmann and Pies (2008) point out, a person can be held responsible only for those outcomes that she can actually control. Let us call this idea the "control principle" (Nelkin 2008).

Now what are the limitations that the control principle imposes on ascriptions of responsibility? The control principle allows us, surely, to hold a person responsible for an outcome that can unequivocally be attributed to her as an individual agent in the sense that her action was a necessary and sufficient condition for it. Take the case of a surgeon who performs surgery on a patient. Her patient dies, because she does not do the operation as well as she could have done it. In this case the surgeon can clearly be held responsible for the death of the patient, because she could have acted in a way that would have avoided this consequence. At least, this would not be a violation of the control principle.[3] However, when the actions of many individuals determine the outcome in what has been called a "problem of many hands" (Thompson 1980), it is not clear whether the agent is in control. To be sure, even in cases where many agents are involved a single agent might be said to have a certain degree of control over the outcome. This is clearly the case if the action of a single individual is necessary for a given outcome to be brought about. E.g., if a committee requires unanimity to reach a decision each committee member can control whether a particular decision is reached. We might even be inclined to think that an agent can be seen as being in control if her action is merely sufficient but not necessary to bring about an outcome. E.g., each member of a mafia gang can, in a certain sense, control whether a person they have captured dies by shooting her in the head.[4] However, in certain interactive settings an individual's action may be

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1 Nida-Rümelin (2011) suggests that the relationship between action and responsibility is so close that it would not make sense to talk of an "action" in this case. This intricacy shall not concern us, however.

2 Note that prominent authors, most notably Bernard Williams and Tom Nagel, have put forward a different view (cf. Williams (1981); Nagel (1991)). They hold that under certain circumstances individual actors can be assessed on the basis of factors which they do not control.

3 Note that the appropriateness of ascriptions of responsibility may not only depend on the control principle. There may be independent reasons why we might find it unjustified to regard someone as responsible for something she did or caused. It seems sensible to follow Aristotle who in his *Nicomachean Ethics* acknowledges an epistemic constraint (cf. Aristotle 2000/2004). This, however, is an issue we shall put aside.

4 There is, of course, no formal difference between cases in which the agent's action is necessary and cases in which the agent's action is sufficient for a particular outcome ("Action A is necessary for outcome O" is logically equivalent to "Action ¬A is sufficient for outcome ¬O"). There might, nevertheless, be a normative asymmetry between such cases. Usually responsibility is attributed for bad outcomes. So we can distinguish between cases in which the action of a given individual is necessary for a bad outcome and cases in which the action was sufficient. And our evaluations in such cases may differ.

neither necessary nor sufficient for an outcome. And in such a case the person is clearly not in control.[5] To hold her responsible in such a situation would violate, then, the control principle.

Unfortunately, many, if not all, of the most pressing ethical problems of our time are interaction problems (cf. Homann and Lütge 2004). And many of those surely belong to the latter type in which each individual's actions are neither necessary nor sufficient for the problem. For the sake of illustration, consider global warming. Its leading cause is, as we know, the massive emission of greenhouse gases to which we all contribute, most importantly by consuming goods whose production involves the burning of fossil fuels. Each individual's acts, however, are neither necessary nor sufficient for global warming to take place. No individual can cause global warming on her own. And no individual on her own can prevent it either (cf. Sinnott-Armstrong 2005). By the control principle, then, we cannot hold individuals responsible for global warming. But who is responsible, then? It is implausible to hold that nobody is responsible. For, clearly, the emission of CO2 that leads to global warming is anthropogenic. But if the control principle is to be honoured (as we believe it should be), this seems to be the conclusion. There seems to be a "responsibility void" (Braham and VanHees 2011).

To sum up, then, it seems that any conception of responsibility faces the following dilemma when it comes to interaction problems: It either violates the control principle. In that case it seems arbitrary and unjustifiable. Or it fulfils the control principle. Then, it creates a responsibility void, since it cannot attribute responsibility to anyone. In the latter case it is useless.

One swift solution which might be tried before we proceed is to say that each individual has a *shared* responsibility for global warming, because we all contribute to the overall amount of CO2 in the atmosphere which is the cause of it. This view does not seem to create a responsibility void, since all of our shared responsibilities add up such that all of us, collectively, bear *full* responsibility for the problem. And it apparently does not violate the control principle either, because each of us can control how far she contributes to the overall amount of CO2. This take on the issue does not work, however. Shared responsibility clearly violates the control principle. Suppose there is this one guy, Paul, who just sits around meditating all day. He does that to the point that he sets off hardly any CO2. In addition, he grows plants to neutralise whatever little amount of CO2 he emits. In that case, surely, Paul cannot be seen as responsible for global warming – not even as *partly* responsible. But if responsibility is shared among all of us, it seems to follow that he is. Maybe the proposal can be modified to make more sense. How about we say that each has a responsibility for global warming in proportion to the share of CO2 which can be attributed to them? In that case, Paul would not be seen as responsible for global warming, but the rest of us would be (and to different extents). This approach does not work either, though. It, too, violates the control principle. Suppose there is this one guy, Saul, who causes as much CO2 emission as he possibly can. If global warming does not happen, because everybody else drastically cuts back energy consumption, Saul cannot bear any responsibility for global warming, because nobody can bear responsibility for something that does not happen. If, on the other hand, everybody goes on as they have and global warming does happen, Saul gets a high share of responsibility for it. This violates the control principle, because whether or not global warming happens is determined by other people's behaviour which Saul cannot himself control. The dilemma of responsibility cannot be solved, then, by drawing on the notion of shared responsibility. Views supporting this point are found, e.g., in French (1998) and Smiley (2011).

3. Order Ethics

A number of ethicists have recently proposed to approach responsibility on the basis of order ethics. In the following we shall consider their approach and look at their solution to the dilemma of responsibility.

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5 The issue of *control* seems to be distinct from the question of *causation*. On some accounts of causation which are used predominantly in legal studies a person can be seen as causing an outcome even if her action is neither necessary nor sufficient for this outcome (cf. Wright (1985)). The co called NESS test of causation sees an individual action as the cause of an event if it is a necessary element of a jointly sufficient set of conditions for this outcome. On this test it is possible to say that a particular person has (jointly) caused an event that, nevertheless, she did not control, as she was not in control of the other conditions that were necessary for the event.

At the outset, it is useful to introduce the concept of a “primary evaluative focal point” (Kagan 1992). The primary evaluative focal point of an ethical theory is the object on which this theory focuses for the most part. Traditional ethical conceptions have focused, e.g., on the evaluation of the agent's character (e.g. Aristotle 2000/2004). Others have focused on the moral assessment of acts, either on the basis of their intrinsic nature (e.g. Kant 1785, Ross 1930/2002) or on the basis of their consequences (e.g. Bentham 1907, Mill 1863, Sidgwick 1907). In contrast, *order* ethics, as its name suggests, is an ethics which focuses on the social order and regards it as the “systematic *locus* of morality” (Homann 2002). Many contemporary ethicists have emphasised the importance of the social order and the institutions which constitute it. John Rawls's (1971/1999) theory of justice which is an attempt to spell out the fundamental principles governing the basic institutional structure of a fully just society is, perhaps, the most famous example of an order-ethical theory.

Since order ethics is individuated by its primary evaluative focal point, it is compatible, in principle, with various moral-philosophical schools of thought. An order ethicist may hold, e.g., a divine command theory about the social order. Or she may be a utilitarian and may hold that the right order is the one which produces the most happiness for all. Most exponents of order ethics, however, have pursued a contractualist approach to ethical norms (e.g. Rawls 1971/1999, Buchanan 1975, Homann 2002, Lütge 2007). They have argued that we can gain insights about the right social order by a contractualist thought experiment. We should imagine an “original position” (Rawls 1971/1999) in which the various parties in society deliberate about and unanimously choose the social order which shall henceforth regulate their interaction in society. The various forms of contractualism (whose specifics shall not concern us here) can be distinguished by the way in which the original position is described. Following Buchanan (1975), one tradition of contractualism starts at the *status quo*. It asks what can be done *in the present situation* to improve life for all. Combine this idea with a primary focus on the social order and you get an ethical approach which asks which institutional rules need to be introduced or changed to make everyone better off.

Most proponents of this type of contractualist order ethics have put a lot of emphasis on the so called “implementation problem” in ethics (e.g. Homann 2002, Homann and Lütge 2004, Lütge 2005, Mukerji and Schumacher 2008, Mukerji 2009, Petrick and Pies 2007). They have argued that ethical theories have focused too much on what we ought to do and have commonly ignored the problem of how it can be ensured that agents will, in fact, live up to their moral duties. Their answer to the implementation problem is that moral agents should be given incentives to behave morally, either by making immoral behaviour costly or by rewarding moral behaviour. Incentives, they say, should be incorporated in the institutions of society to regulate people's behaviour.

Now one peculiar characteristic of an order-ethical approach of this type is that it does not attribute social, economic or environmental problems to the ill will of immoral, self-interested individuals, as many act-focused ethical theories do (cf. Homann and Lütge 2004). Rather, since its primary evaluative focal point is the social order, it attributes such problems to defects in that order. It recommends to amend the institutional structure that is incumbent in societal institutions, thereby giving individuals incentives to act in ways that are desirable from everyone's standpoint.

Having said this much, we can address the problem of responsibility from an order-ethical point of view and explain how order ethics enables us to avoid the dilemma that traditional conceptions of responsibility run into. On the order-ethical picture which we have just laid out, the systematic *locus* of morality is the social order. Hence, agents who interact within a social order that leads to problems are not themselves regarded as responsible for the bad results of their interactions (cf. Homann 2002, Homann and Lütge 2004). Hence, order ethics does not violate the control principle. However, it does not thereby create a responsibility void. The fact that individuals are not responsible for the results of their interaction does not mean that nobody is responsible for anything. The effects of interactions are attributed to the social order within which these interactions take place. Plainly, then, those who are responsible for the social order are also mediately responsible for the effects it leads to. Now in a democratic system individuals themselves make the rules. Hence, even though they cannot be regarded as responsible for the immediate consequences of their interaction, they can, as Homann (2006), Beckmann and Pies (2008)

and Heiss (2011) have argued, be seen as bearing a *mediated* responsibility for the social order in which they interact and which leads to bad consequences.

Homann (2006) offers a classificatory scheme which comprises three kinds of responsibilities.[6] In certain situations it may be appropriate to hold individuals responsible for the effects of their actions. This holds at least in cases where their actions are necessary to produce a bad effect. In interactive settings where individuals cannot control the effects of their actions, because they are partly determined by others, there are two types of responsibility individuals may nevertheless bear. They may bear a "regulatory responsibility" ("Ordnungsverantwortung") for the social order. That is, they can be seen as morally required to work towards changes that are beneficial to all. And they may bear a "responsibility for discourse" ("Diskursverantwortung"). The latter, it seems to us, is a backup for the former. There may be situations in which it is not possible for a single individual to influence the social order, since in a democratic society regulatory changes cannot be made by a single individual but require the cooperation of others. Now others may not be convinced that any changes are necessary. They may not yet understand that the social order produces bad effects. In that case those who do understand this are responsible for making this fact known and for communicating and explaining the need to change the social order.

Let us illustrate the order ethical approach using, again, the example of global warming. A realistic depiction of the issue would lead us far off track. So let us make a number of assumptions which, admittedly, are grossly idealised and oversimplified, but should suffice to illustrate how the order-ethical approach works. Suppose that, instead of the complex global-political order in which we actually live, we had just one country on the planet and one bottom-up democratic system where every political decision is made by the community of citizens according to a unanimous vote. Call this country Globania. Now it shall be assumed, somewhat implausibly, that each citizen of Globania currently consumes an equal amount of energy and let us assume further (even more implausibly) that this amount can be unequivocally attributed to her as an individual. As a result of all citizens consuming their current amounts of energy, the temperature in Globania increases. The overall amount of CO2 emitted would have to be cut by 50% to ensure that global warming is kept in a range that is acceptable to all. Everybody should agree, therefore, that it is a desirable goal to reduce CO2 emissions by 50%. Now, on order ethics, none of the citizens can individually be regarded as responsible for meeting the target, since, sure enough, each citizen on their own cannot accomplish this. But since each citizen can take part in the democratic process, each can be seen as responsible for a change in the social order which imposes on each individual a legal duty to cut their emission by 50%. (In addition, the trading of emission certificates may be allowed to make for an efficient outcome.) If the facts about global warming and how it can be controlled are not known to all citizens of Globania, regulatory changes might be difficult or impossible, because they do not garner the support of all. In this case the responsibility for discourse kicks in. Individuals who understand that a cut of 50% in per capita emissions would solve the problem are responsible for engaging in discourse with all others until a regulatory solution consented to by all can be implemented.

4. Group Agency

Let us now critically assess the order-ethical solution to the dilemma of responsibility. It seems that order ethics can, in fact, successfully resolve it. It can explain how it is possible to fulfil the control principle and prevent a responsibility void at the same time. On order ethics, individuals are not held responsible for the effects of their interactions, since they cannot control them. This does not lead to a responsibility void, though, because individuals are regarded as having a regulatory responsibility for the social order in which they interact and which makes the bad outcomes of their interaction possible in the first place. Obviously though, this is not an ultimate solution. The dilemma resurfaces, as we shall explain now.

6 In fact, Homann (2006) talks about the responsibilities of a corporate entities, thereby acknowledging the existence of group agents. We apply his scheme of responsibilities to individuals. After all, the point of our paper is to tease out whether order ethicists do, in fact, need an account of group agency. We do not want to simply assume this, as Homann (2006) does.

It is clear that individual agents cannot each on their own control what the social order looks like. This might be possible in a dictatorship. But it is not possible in a democratic society like ours. No matter how hard each of us tries to achieve a change in the social order, if our fellow citizens do not go along, we cannot accomplish anything. Hence, the control principle not only rules out individual responsibility for the outcomes of interactions. It also rules out individual responsibility for the social order. To fulfil the control principle order ethicists have to acknowledge that nobody is individually responsible for the social order. This leads, again, to a responsibility void. So it seems that order ethics faces the very same dilemma, albeit at a different level.

But not so fast. We mentioned above that in cases where it is not possible for the individual to effectively work towards a reformed social order, because others do not cooperate, she has a "discourse responsibility". She ought to communicate and explain the need for regulatory changes until others will eventually be convinced and cooperate in regulatory changes. This backup solution does not work either, though. To be sure, we do not want to say that the notion of discourse responsibility is useless. In fact, we believe that quite the contrary is the case. We simply wish to point out that discourse responsibility cannot ultimately resolve the specific dilemma that is at issue here. It is easy to see why. A single individual cannot be given the responsibility to communicate with others. Communication, after all, is a cooperative venture (cf. Nida-Rümelin 2001). If others choose not to cooperate in an individual's attempt at discourse, no discourse will occur. Hence, the individual cannot control whether discourse occurs and it would, yet again, violate the control principle to hold her responsible for discourse.[7] It seems to us that the only way for order ethicists to resolve the dilemma of responsibility is to accept a richer social ontology. They have to allow for the existence of group agents which can bear responsibility over and above the members that constitute them.

It is easy to see how the idea of a group agent can solve our dilemma. Consider, again, the issue of regulatory responsibility. We argued above that, by the control principle, no individual can bear regulatory responsibility, because she cannot, as an individual, control whether regulatory changes are made. The conventional order-ethical answer to this complication is to shove the problem to another level, invoking the notion of discourse responsibility. Our proposed solution which draws on the notion of group responsibility is to say this: Individuals do not bear responsibility for the social order or for discourse. But this does not lead to a responsibility void, since the *group* of individuals can be held responsible, even if *not a single* member of that group is considered responsible as an individual.[8]

The notion of group responsibility that we have introduced may, at first glance, bear a resemblance to the notion of shared responsibility which we have rejected above. But it is not the same. Group responsibility is a kind of responsibility that is borne by the group, while shared responsibility is a kind of responsibility that is borne by individuals. This crucial difference makes it possible to honour the control principle and to avoid a responsibility void at the same time. The group of citizens is seen as responsible for the social order. This does not violate the control principle, because the group as a whole *can* control the social order in which its members interact. And it does not create a responsibility void, because it is not the case that nobody is responsible. The group as a whole is. In view of this finding, we propose, therefore, to augment order ethics with the notion of group agency. The resulting normative-ethical approach, we believe, should enable us to address contemporary social problems more effectively than plain vanilla order ethics.

Admittedly though, our solution sounds very problematic, as the idea of group agency apparently sins against methodological individualism. In the remainder we shall attempt, therefore, to explain how it is possible to view a group as an autonomous and responsible agent in a way that is compatible with methodological individualism. In doing so we shall draw on a recent account of group agency by Christian

7 It might be objected that individuals may bear a shared responsibility for discourse. Our above remarks about shared responsibility apply *mutatis mutandis* here assuming that an individuals contribution to societal discourse is neither necessary nor sufficient for this discourse to occur. This is implausible in one-on-one-settings, but very plausible in a large society.

8 We do not suggest, however, that individual responsibility and group responsibility are mutually exclusive. They can, of course, co-exist (cf. List and Pettit 2011).

List and Philip Pettit (2011). Given the limited scope of this paper, we will have to make do with a few rough remarks which, we hope, will nevertheless suffice to make the point.

First up, what is methodological individualism? It requires, roughly, that we account for social phenomena in terms of the contributions of individual agents and their motivations and do not invoke any supra-individual entity (cf. e.g. Hayek 1942, Watkins 1952, Weber and Winckelmann 1980; Schumpeter 1909). On this view, talk of a "group agent" seems to be a metaphorical, shorthand way of referring to a sum of separate individual agents (cf. e.g. Austin et al. 1869, Quinton 1975-1976, Hobbes 1976). Why? An agent is defined as an entity which has her own beliefs and desires as well as a capacity to intervene in the world based on both. On methodological individualism, the beliefs and desires of a group have to be accounted for solely on the basis of individual beliefs and desires. It seems, then, as though a group does not have its *own* desires and beliefs and, hence, cannot be seen as an autonomous agent. This reasoning, however, is flawed. It presupposes that group attitudes derive from individual attitudes in a straightforward way. That is, it assumes that each group attitude can be reduced to a certain configuration of individual attitudes. This is not so – neither in the case of desires, nor in the case of beliefs. To see this, let us investigate how group attitudes derive from individual attitudes.

Group attitudes derive from individual attitudes in accordance with an aggregation rule. E.g., the unanimity rule says that a group desires (believes) that the world matches proposition p if and only if all members of the group desire (believe) p. The majority rule says that the group desires (believes) that the world matches proposition p if and only if a majority of its members desire (believe) p. As the theory of social choice as well as the theory of judgement aggregation make clear, some of these aggregation rules cannot be used to derive group attitudes "proposition-wise". The two following examples by List and Pettit (2011) make this clear.

In the first example a group of legislators is considering a budget proposal which currently is running a deficit. Legislators 1, 2 and 3 consider whether they should take measures to even out the budget which, as they know, means either increasing taxes or cutting spending. They have the following preferences:

	Increase taxes?	Reduce spending?	Even out budget?
Legislator 1	Preferred	Dispreferred	Preferred
Legislator 2	Dispreferred	Preferred	Preferred
Legislator 3	Dispreferred	Dispreferred	Dispreferred
Majority	Dispreferred	Dispreferred	Preferred

Note that every legislator has consistent preferences as an individual. But under this configuration of individual preferences their group has inconsistent preferences when they are aggregated using the majority rule. If the group's preference is determined by the majority rule, the group prefers a budget without a deficit which means that either taxes have to be increased or spending cut. But it also prefers taxes not to be raised and spending not to be cut which is inconsistent as an overall set of preferences. This, of course, does not mean that groups cannot form preferences based on their members' preferences. They can. But they cannot do so, as we have said above, in a way that is straightforward and "proposition-wise". They have to do it in a *holistic* way. This means that the "group's attitude on a particular proposition cannot generally be a function of the members' attitudes on that proposition." The group's preference on the issue of whether the budget ought to be evened out has to be determined on the basis of the members stances regarding tax increases and spending cuts. Or the majority for a balanced budget has to be taken as fixed which means that the group has to adopt a stance on tax increases or spending cuts which cannot reflect the majority view in both cases.

An analogous problem occurs when it comes to the aggregation of beliefs, as is made clear by List's and Pettit's (2011) second example which (coincidently) pertains to global warming. They introduce an intergovernmental panel on climate change which consists of three individuals. Each member holds beliefs regarding a number of related issues. The first is whether current emissions are above a given threshold. The second is whether temperatures will increase if emissions are above this threshold. The third is whether temperatures will, in fact, increase.

	Emissions above threshold?	If Emissions above threshold, then temperature increase?	Temperature increase?
Individual 1	True	True	True
Individual 2	True	False	False
Individual 3	False	True	False
Majority	True	True	False

A majority judges that emissions are above the threshold and that temperature will increase if emissions are above the threshold. Nevertheless, a majority judges that temperature will not increase. Overall, this is inconsistent. To resolve the inconsistency the group has to adopt a different method of aggregation. It cannot aggregate the attitudes of its members proposition-wise. It either has to determine its attitude towards the third proposition on the basis of its members' attitudes on that proposition. In that case it cannot adopt the majority view on the first two propositions. Or it can determine its attitude on the third proposition based on the majority views regarding the first and second proposition. In that case it will have to reject the majority attitude towards the third proposition.

As these two examples make clear then, groups can form beliefs and desires which, though they supervene on the inputs of their individual members, are nevertheless largely independent from these inputs. In order to show that groups of agents can themselves be agents the last thing to show is that they can intervene in the world based on their autonomous beliefs and desires. This is easily done. Groups of agents consist of agents. And agents can act. So a group of agents which has autonomous desires and beliefs can act through its members.

Let us conclude, then, that it does not appear to be absurd for order ethicists to augment their conception of responsibility by the notion of group agency. The augmented order-ethical account presents a very plausible solution to the dilemma of responsibility.

5. Conclusion

Let us sum up and conclude. In this paper we have pointed out that, apparently, any conception of responsibility faces a dilemma. When it comes to the most pressing ethical problems of our time it either leads to a responsibility void or it violates the control principle. Large-scale ethical problems are interaction problems in which no individual agent controls the outcome on her own. Rather, individual agents *jointly* determine the outcome. By the control principle, then, nobody can be seen as responsible for problems such as global warming which arise as a result of the interaction of many individuals. This, however, apparently leads to a responsibility void which means that nobody is seen as responsible. It seems, then, as though we face a choice between rejecting the control principle or creating a responsibility void. Both options seem equally unattractive. The former leads to morally arbitrary conclusions. The latter renders the notion of responsibility useless as a normative concept. In the next step we presented the order-ethical solution to this dilemma. On order-ethics, individuals are not to be seen as responsible for the outcomes of their interactions. This does not create a responsibility void, though, since ethical problems are attributed to the social order for which individuals are, in turn, seen as

responsible. As we saw, however, this is not an ultimate solution. It just pushes the problem to another level. Plainly, no individual can control the social order either. To address this problem we suggested order ethicists should adopt the notion of group agency. They should argue that the group should be seen as an autonomous agent which is responsible for the social order in which its members interact. If augmented with this idea of group agency, order ethics can, in fact, solve the dilemma of responsibility. Since the notion of group agency appears to violate methodological individualism, our proposal appears to depend on the metaphysically queer thesis that there are supra-individual entities. In the last section we explained that this need not be so, as it is possible to explain the existence of autonomous group agents in a way that is compatible with methodological individualism.

In conclusion, it is important to qualify what we have said. We have argued that a version of order ethics which is augmented by a conception of group agency is capable, *in principle*, of solving the dilemma of responsibility. We have not argued that this is the only solution. Nor have we suggested that it works in every single case. It might well be that there remain a number of responsibility dilemmas in practice which cannot be solved along the lines of the approach we have advocated. The reason for this is obvious. The solution we have sketched requires the existence of a group which can be seen as an autonomous agent. We have shown that *some* groups can be seen as autonomous agents. But this does not mean that *all* groups can be seen in that way. Perhaps there are interaction problems which defy our solution, because the relevant group of individuals does not fulfil the requirements for being an agent. What we have said leaves open, then, which cases can be solved on the basis of our approach. This is a question further research in the order-ethical tradition will have to address.

As a final remark, allow us to draw attention to a methodological issue in ethics. If our argument holds water it suggests that, at least sometimes, the normative plausibility of ethical theories depends on claims in a totally different branch of philosophy. In our case the normative plausibility of the order-ethical conception of responsibility depends on the social-ontological claim that group agents exist. This is a surprising conclusion which, it seems to us, is not in line with the mainstream view in moral philosophy. In a famous article on methodology in ethics John Rawls argued for the independence of moral theory, contending that “the theory of meaning and epistemology, metaphysics and the philosophy of mind, can often contribute very little” to ethics and that “preoccupation with the problems that define these subjects may get in the way and block the path to advance.“ (Rawls 1974-1975) If what we have argued is correct, it shows that at least sometimes moral philosophers are well advised to ignore Rawls's contention and to look beyond the traditional confines of their discipline.

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