



Acterschap op zijn best. Individuele en collectieve verantwoordelijkheid en autonomie

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# English Summary

## **Agency at its best**

### **Individual and collective responsibility and autonomy**

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In 2010, BP caused the biggest oil spill in human history, when the oil rig *Deepwater Horizon* exploded. The damage was massive. Afterwards, it was impossible to determine exactly what had gone wrong and who had caused the disaster.

In this dissertation I give an argument for the possibility of collective moral responsibility. This means that it is possible that a collective (like BP) is morally responsible for its collective actions and that this responsibility cannot be reduced (completely) to the moral responsibility of the individuals involved. The second argument is that collectives can also be autonomous.

The main conclusion is that the conditions for individual moral responsibility and autonomy are more or less the same as the conditions for collective moral responsibility and autonomy. Individual and collective agency are the same in that respect.

In part I of this dissertation I first discuss the conditions for individual autonomy and moral responsibility, and the relation between these concepts.

Moral responsibility requires a 'robust' form of agency. This means that the agent's actions issue from his will (they can clearly be ascribed to the agent), but they are not necessarily autonomous actions.

An agent is morally responsible, if his actions issue from a mechanism that is moderately responsive to reasons, and if he takes responsibility for that mechanism. This condition does not exclude responsibility for impulsive actions, as long as this mechanism is operative and the agent has guidance control.

The conditions for autonomy are more demanding. That is why autonomy cannot be a necessary condition for moral responsibility. Autonomy can be defined as 'agency at its best' (according to the liberal ideal). Autonomy is self-governance, or the capacity and freedom to live one's own life according to one's own principles. There are two kinds of conditions for autonomy. Firstly, the agent has to be minimally rational and capable of self-reflection. These are the competency conditions. Secondly, the agent's actions have to be caused by desires that have come about in way that is acceptable to the agent (the historical dimension of autonomy). And the agent has to make these desires part of his will by giving them a certain 'weight' in his practical deliberation, by means of his self-governing policies (the future-oriented dimension of autonomy). These are the authenticity conditions of autonomy. This is why a sufficient amount of self-reflection is needed.

In part II I assert that the conditions for individual responsibility and autonomy apply to some collectives as well.

After different theories of collective intention have been discussed, the first step of the argument is that collectives can have intentions that are not reducible to the individual intentions of its members. At the collective level of group decisions, the collective can rationally intend to do something in a way that is irreducible to individual intentions (even though the former supervenes on the latter).

In this way, a collective agent can be a 'robust' actor and, therefore, can be held morally responsible. If a corporation acts collectively rational, then its action mechanism is responsive to reasons. The collective then acts based on a reason that only has causal influence at the collective level. Moreover, this is the collective's own mechanism, because it is based on the decision procedures of the collective. If a corporation is able to act, based on its own intentions, then it is morally responsible for those actions. This collective responsibility does not, however, abdicate its individual members from their individual responsibility.

Collective autonomy is possible when certain conditions are met. A collective can meet the competency conditions. We have already seen that a corporation can act rationally. And collectives can also reflect on their own intentions and policies that are expressed in its decision procedures. It is more difficult to meet the authenticity conditions of autonomy. This requires that a collective's actions are based on intentions that have come about in way that is acceptable to the collective. And the collective has to be able to guide its practical deliberations by its own self-governing policies.

In part III I discuss three questions that are connected to my discussion of collective moral responsibility:

1. the question of how responsibility is distributed over both the collective and the individual agents. This includes the question of whether 'dissident' members are co-responsible for the actions of the collective.
2. the question of whether a collective is responsible for historical crimes.
3. the question of whether collectives can and should be punished.

The answers to these questions are complex, and they are tentatively formulated. Answering these questions from a collective perspective yields different answers (and new questions) than if we approach these questions from an individual perspective.

The conclusion is that collectives can be morally responsible for their actions. They can also be autonomous, and, under certain conditions, this is desirable.