

# The Foundations of International Political Virtue

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Thesis submitted July 2013 for the degree of DPhil in Philosophy

Faculty of Philosophy, University of Oxford

90,000 words excluding bibliographic references  
(114,729 in total)

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## Abstract

This thesis provides the theoretical groundwork for a 'virtue ethical' account of international political conduct. The project begins by investigating the distinct patterns of normative theorising within international scholarship, noting not only that moral philosophical foundations are unpronounced and interchangeable, but that even in this diminished capacity the influence of virtue ethical thought is limited and fragmentary relative to its competitors. Redressing this underrepresentation is thus dually motivated: developing a fresh perspective on important global issues, whilst also subjecting the theory to an atypical angle of scrutiny. Adapting virtue ethics to the international realm requires, most essentially, that we settle the level at which its concepts should be applied. Can the theory's central focus on character be reconciled with the *collective* nature of global political interaction? Can we accurately ascribe virtues and vices to governments and states? These questions of group agency form the heart of thesis investigation. Beginning from abstract foundations, the possible justification for such ascriptions is sought in competing theories of joint action and attitude. The 'individualist' accounts of Searle and Bratman are ultimately rejected in favour of Gilbert's non-reductive 'plural subject' theory, and – presenting group-level accounts of intention, motivation, practical wisdom, emotion and disposition around her concept of 'joint commitment' – a general model of collective character is constructed. Allied to additional requirements of moral responsibility, this framework is then used to assess the virtue-capability of actual political bodies, considering the decision-making hierarchy of the United Kingdom as a case study for the modern state. Tracing the route of policy authorisation across cabinet, government and parliament, a sophisticated yet ultimately impermanent picture of group-virtue-ethical agency is established, in tension with the notion of enduring state liability. By shifting focus to the national level, it is argued that this fluctuating footprint of agency can nevertheless be unified, modifying Gilbert's notion of a 'population joint commitment' to tie institutional virtue and vice to a persisting state identity. This provides a template for international character evaluation.

The Foundations of  
**International  
Political Virtue**

## **Acknowledgements**

My thanks go, firstly, to my doctoral supervisors, Professor Roger Crisp and Dr Krister Bykvist, whose valuable insights, criticisms and general guidance have been indispensable in the development and completion of this thesis – I could not have asked for better supervisors. I am also grateful for the helpful suggestions of Professor Simon Caney and Professor Alison Hills, who kindly commented on earlier drafts of this work. For their generous funding of this project, I am indebted to the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the University of Oxford Vice-Chancellors' Fund, and the Society for Applied Philosophy. Finally, I would like to thank Dr Serena Sharma for her ongoing support and guidance.

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## Introduction

The ultimate aim of this thesis is to lay the philosophical foundations for a 'virtue ethical' account of modern international relations. As will be expounded in the course of this investigation, such an endeavour is highly original, but at the same time acutely challenging. Despite its prominence and authority within moral philosophy, where it is regarded as one of the three leading approaches to contemporary normative theory, virtue ethics has had surprisingly sparse influence upon the ethical analysis of global interaction. Indeed, across the multidisciplinary cluster of debates that take the global political realm as their focus, there exists – contrary to its major competitors – no systematic, normative perspective on international behaviour built upon the concepts of this important ethical tradition. This state of affairs demands urgent attention, and provides significant impetus for the construction of a coherent virtue ethical stance towards this critical domain of human conduct.

Nevertheless, given the nature of virtue ethics, and in particular its paradigmatic focus on the *character* of moral actors, adapting its central concepts to this atypical focus proves no easy task. Indeed, as will be demonstrated in what follows, accurately transplanting the evaluative apparatus of virtue and vice into the global realm requires an interconnected range of investigations which span the fields of moral and political philosophy, collective intentionality, International Relations theory, and the political-scientific analysis of governmental institutions. In light of these complex preliminary hurdles, the principal objective of this work is thus a facilitative one: to establish a firm conceptual grounding upon which a fully-developed framework of international virtue ethics might then be built, and in doing so demonstrate the distinctive nature and general plausibility of a character-centred mode of evaluation regarding global affairs. Whilst limited in overall scope, this endeavour remains a sizeable undertaking, and its import ought not to be underestimated. The conclusions drawn at this most fundamental level will go on to define the shape and structure of any subsequent theory of international political virtue, and at the

same time provide essential insights into political decision-making and organisational ethics more widely.

**Chapter 1**, 'Virtue and International Politics', serves as a fuller introduction to the thesis project, providing a comprehensive overview of the intersection of virtue ethics and the global realm. After first outlining the limited congruence between the theories of moral philosophy and the distinctive normative frameworks employed within international scholarship, the chapter then measures the underlying impact of virtue ethical thought, illuminating the tradition's stark under-representation relative to consequentialism and deontology. The potential benefits and theoretical necessity of a virtue ethical perspective on international relations are subsequently outlined.

**Chapter 2**, 'Group Conduct and Virtue Analysis', further refines the nature of thesis investigation, identifying the issue at the heart of its inquiry as one of collective political agency. At what level should the concepts of virtue and vice be applied internationally? Can the primary actors in global politics – group entities like governments and states – be subjected to character-analysis in their own right? To answer this question, we must first know if groups *in general* can possess such attributes. Accordingly, beginning from the abstract foundations of collective intentionality, this chapter begins an assessment of competing theories of shared agency, considering but ultimately rejecting the virtue ethical prospects of so-called 'individualist' accounts.

**Chapter 3**, 'The Possibility of Collective Virtue', advances from the preceding conclusions by turning instead to a 'non-individualist' account of joint attitudes, a framework found to be much more amenable to the nature of virtue ethical evaluation. From this non-reductive conceptual base, the chapter constructs an abstracted general model of collective character, allying group-level understandings of the constitutive elements of virtue with a set of more general conditions for shared moral responsibility.

**Chapter 4**, 'A Case Study for Political Virtue (Part I)', begins the thesis's move from theory towards practice, taking the developed model of group virtue and applying it to the political hierarchy of a modern state. Using the illustrative example of the UK's 'Westminster' system of parliamentary democracy, this first stage of investigation analyses the structure and practical operation of its centremost decision-making body, the cabinet, evaluating – and ultimately endorsing – its potential for collective virtue ethical agency.

**Chapter 5**, 'A Case Study for Political Virtue (Part II)', completes the investigation initiated in Chapter 4 by expanding the evaluation of political agency to wider political groupings. The capacity for collective character is firstly secured at the level of government, but a problematic tension between enduring responsibility and electoral change then leads analysis to the role played by parliament. Agency within the legislature is seen to be complex and variable, and can only be bound together at the national level by considering the shared attitudes of the population as a whole. Through this mediation, we settle upon a general template for state character, one on which a framework of international virtue and vice can be built.

# 1

## **CHAPTER ONE: Virtue and International Politics**

This chapter queries the resonance of virtue ethical thought within the normative study of contemporary international relations. As will be demonstrated, the role of virtue in this context is a much diminished one with respect to counterpart moral approaches, a state of affairs that demands serious investigation. The chapter is partitioned into three overarching sections. The first outlines the importance and characteristic nature of ethical investigation in the international realm, emphasising its limited congruency with moral philosophy. Leading on from this, the next section analyses in detail the alternative normative frameworks presented by writers on international politics, and attempts to map their underlying ethical foundations. The final section, proceeding from these conclusions, discerns and analyses a relative paucity of aretaic influence, concurrently outlining the advantages and imperatives for presenting a developed virtue ethical contribution to the field.

# I

## Morality and International Politics

### International Ethics

The importance of ethical investigation within the realm of international affairs should need little vindication. Whereas, in the majority of cases, the regular choices and actions of private citizens have the potential to affect only a relatively small number of individuals, decisions and policies made at the level of the state can have a scope and impact that, by comparison, dwarf those of the private sphere. The choices of politicians, both domestically and even more so internationally, not only have the potential to aid or endanger the whole of their own populace, but indeed can have truly global consequences. Whether they concern economic policy, humanitarian commitments, or perhaps most potently the waging of wars, the decisions and omissions of international conduct have the potential to impact upon millions – if not billions – of individual lives.

The international relations of the twentieth century have defined the way the world looks today,<sup>1</sup> and with the destructive power of the nuclear age, the agents of global interaction now have a quite genuine responsibility to mankind at large – on a daunting, planetary scale. Given such high stakes, the imperative for clear ethical assessment of international action, and moreover effective ethical *guidance* for such conduct, appears paramount. Answering these questions of ‘ought’ is the job of a normative theory.

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<sup>1</sup> Consequently, decisions undertaken in this area moreover play a particularly important role in determining the lives of *future* generations of people, and as a corollary the very makeup of a future populace – that is, the possible *identity* of potential future persons.

### **Normative Moral Philosophy**

Within the modern discipline of moral philosophy it is helpful to identify a broad division between those normative ethical theories that are ‘consequentialist’ in nature, and those that are non-consequentialist.<sup>2</sup> Consequentialism, as it has come to be termed,<sup>3</sup> is an approach that judges the moral rightness of action to depend exclusively on the value of outcomes – that is, on the balance of goodness and badness that will result from pursuing one course of action as compared to possible alternatives.<sup>4</sup> The specific content of a ‘moral’ outcome is provided by allying the consequentialist theory of the right with a particular theory of the good, the most common of which has proved to be utilitarianism. Developed primarily from the work of Jeremy Bentham and later John Stuart Mill, a utilitarian theory seeks to prescribe those actions that impartially produce the greatest quantity of subjective happiness or ‘utility’ overall – a ‘hedonistic calculus’.<sup>5</sup>

Non-consequentialist theories, by contrast, argue that moral evaluation rests upon more than outcomes alone, and ground important normative value in other sources. Within this category there are two preeminent traditions of ethical thought, the first of which is deontology. Deontological theories take a duty-based approach to ethics, the most prominent strand of which can be found in those systems owing their historical foundations to the work of Immanuel Kant. In the case of such ‘Kantian ethics’, the rightness or wrongness of an action is discernable *a priori* as a categorical imperative, and derives from the moral nature of the principle of action, or maxim,

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<sup>2</sup> The chapter’s central argument, nonetheless, does not over-rely on attempts to strictly demarcate the more specific categories here outlined. Rather, the key notion is simply that an important sector of moral ideas, understood in broad terms as ‘virtue ethical’, has not been greatly utilised within international normative discourse.

<sup>3</sup> The term coined by Elizabeth Anscombe, and used to retrospectively classify the theories of Mill and Sidgwick. G. E. M. Anscombe, ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’. *Philosophy* 33(124). London: Macmillan, 1958, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> At what level this comparison of action is made, whether on a case-by-case basis, or instead in reference to pursuing more general rules of conduct, represents an important distinction between act- and rule-consequentialism (on which more will be said later – see pages 20-21).

<sup>5</sup> See J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*. Ed. R. Crisp. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. Bentham’s less developed account attempted to utilise a cardinally-quantifiable reading of pleasure: see J. Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Eds. J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

that describes it. Maxims that pass the test of universalisability, and thus can be willed as general laws, are seen to hold absolute authority over conduct – a moral law to which it is our duty, as rational beings, to adhere.<sup>6</sup>

The remaining non-consequentialist approach to moral philosophical theory is that provided by virtue ethics, a contemporary reappraisal which finds its origin in the ethical considerations of the Ancient Greeks, and receives its central theoretic elements primarily from Aristotle. Virtue ethical thought, in contrast to the preceding alternatives, takes as its principal focus the *character* of the moral agent, in particular their behavioural dispositions, motivations and affections. As the name suggests, the arbiter of action's moral value under this approach lies in its manifesting a set of morally excellent character traits, *the virtues*,<sup>7</sup> which cannot be translated into appropriate conduct without a practically wise appreciation of particular circumstances. Uniquely, it is in itself the development and manifestation of these virtues that is understood as being the final, *non-instrumental* moral good – as being the necessary constituents of a life well lived. Moral 'rightness'<sup>8</sup> is thus defined *in terms* of the virtues, and derives from the character traits of the moral agent.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See I. Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Trans. J. W. Ellington. Third Edition. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993.

<sup>7</sup> Those theories within this categorisation are sometimes described as 'aretaic', from the Ancient Greek term for virtue or excellence, *areté*.

<sup>8</sup> If such a 'thin'-evaluative term is still appropriate. See Anscombe's discussion: Anscombe, *op. cit.* The concept of 'right' action within virtue ethics is explored in greater depth in Chapter 2.

<sup>9</sup> See Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. D. Ross. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

It is this non-instrumental value of the virtuous character that significantly differentiates the virtue ethical approach from most 'character-sensitive' versions of its competitors, such as Robert Adams's 'motive utilitarianism', which continue to ground the *ultimate* benefit of such characterological elements in the promotion of some other value (in Adams's case utility). See R. M. Adams, 'Motive Utilitarianism', *Journal of Philosophy* 73(14). Lancaster, PA: Lancaster Press Inc., 1976. Thomas Hurka's moral theory is perhaps a rare exception to this schema, assigning *intrinsic* value and disvalue to virtue and vice *within* an explicitly consequentialist framework. On his so-called 'recursive' account of the good, virtues are intrinsically valuable as appropriate higher-level attitudes towards a set of base-level goods and evils. It is the latter which remain the ultimate source of value in his consequentialist system, but in responding to them suitable agential attitudes can nevertheless produce further value of their own: T. Hurka, *Virtue, Vice and Value*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 42. Given this, we perhaps ought to strengthen the entry requirements of a virtue ethical perspective further by stipulating that virtuous character itself must moreover be regarded as the *primary*, non-derivative good. (The wider collection of moral approaches that

### **Dissimilar Frameworks**

Ethical discussions concerning the conduct of international relations (IR) are by no means unified. In itself this is not especially problematic, for on the evidence of the tripartite theoretical distinction just outlined, and the further degree of *internal* variability within each, the means by which one should philosophically appraise moral issues more generally shows a considerable lack of consensus. But within academic literature on global political interaction there is a much deeper lack of clarity. The normative apparatus of 'international ethics' is arguably more akin to a patchwork of different elements, populated by sometimes disjointed doctrines, concepts and norms, many with overlapping application and often disputed acceptance. This unfamiliar and uneven landscape can at first appear somewhat overwhelming to the philosophical purist, for as Burchill and Linklater note, 'there is bound to be some arbitrariness in any attempt to make sense of the discipline as a whole.'<sup>10</sup>

One facet of this disunity likely rests upon a divergence in the intellectual traditions from which international political scholarship proceeds. 'International relations theory' is not accurately characterised as a unitary, integrated or institutionalised corpus of thought, but is rather an umbrella term for significantly different approaches that share the global political realm as their subject matter. Accordingly, a discussion of ethics in IR theory obscures an important distinction between those scholars who approach the topic from the background and methodology of 'International Relations', as an academic tradition, and those others who write from angles more heavily grounded in the study of 'philosophy'.<sup>11</sup> Writers in these variant schools not only present

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include a significant appreciation of virtue are often grouped under the general term 'virtue theory', with *virtue ethical* accounts therefore a particularly-formulated sub-set.)

<sup>10</sup> S. Burchill and A. Linklater, 'Introduction', in *Theories of International Relations*. Ed. S. Burchill et al. Fourth Edition. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 18.

<sup>11</sup> In what remains, specific reference to the academic discipline of International Relations will be capitalised, whilst references to 'international relations' as a sphere of conduct will remain in lower-case. The term 'IR theorist' will be reserved for those working in the former, as opposed to internationally-focused political philosophers. Despite these important distinctions, the investigation of this piece aims to be open in its theoretical engagement, and will consider insights from either side of this disciplinary divide.

dissimilar forms of argument, but moreover tend to cluster around different types of topic. As a consequence the interplay between them is often limited, if present at all.

Whilst we must not lose sight of these important qualifications, it is nevertheless enlightening to consider the means by which writers on international politics have sought to consolidate some of its seemingly-disparate strands of ethical thought into useful categorisations. What is instantly clear about such attempts, however, is that delineation tends to proceed in a rather different manner to the above-outlined frameworks familiar to most discussions of 'personal' morality. Generally speaking, normative discussions of international affairs tend to shun the direct or straightforward application of moral philosophical theory, with the exception perhaps of those ethical flashpoints that focus on specific, and somewhat isolated, issues and themes. See, for instance, Tony Coady and Igor Primoratz's exchange on the morality of terrorism,<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Anscombe's analysis of innocence and noncombatancy,<sup>13</sup> as well as a body of literature deploying explicit deontological and consequentialist arguments in relation to issues such as nuclear deterrence<sup>14</sup> and global inequality.<sup>15</sup>

On the contrary, ethical discourse on international politics is typically presented in considerably altered form, one in which moral philosophical elements are frequently unpronounced, and occasionally unreferenced. For some writers,<sup>16</sup> the downplaying of such notions is a symptom of limited engagement with philosophical foundations more generally; but for those writers who do employ rigorous philosophical reasoning, the absence of direct moral theoretical application is

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<sup>12</sup> C. A. J. Coady, 'Terrorism, Morality, and Supreme Emergency', *Ethics* 114(4). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004; I. Primoratz, 'A Philosopher Looks at Contemporary Terrorism'. *Cardozo Law Review* 29(1). New York: Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> G. E. M. Anscombe, 'War and Murder', in *War and Morality*. Ed. R. A. Wasserstrom. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1970.

<sup>14</sup> G. S. Davis, *Warcraft and the Fragility of Virtue: An Essay in Aristotelian Ethics*. Moscow, Idaho: University of Idaho Press, 1992, p. 72 note 3.

<sup>15</sup> C. Brown, *International Relations Theory: New Normative Approaches*. Oxford: Columbia University Press, 1992, p. 15. A seminal example of the latter is Peter Singer's celebrated article on humanitarian obligation: see P. Singer, 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1(3). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971.

<sup>16</sup> Typically those working within the academic tradition of International Relations, as just noted.

often consciously endorsed via commitment to a specific intermediate theory of *political* philosophy. In this sense, many philosophers working within the sphere of international relations seek instead to globalise a pre-existing political theory in order to expand its application into the interstate realm. Resultantly, commitments and standpoints within normative moral philosophy are subsumed within a *global* political theory, and are employed as underpinning foundations or background assumptions for constructing sets of political – and now specifically international – principles, ideals and norms.

Given these distinctive patterns of theoretical construction, the analytical terrain of international ethics is instead widely codified under a collection of rather broad normative ‘perspectives’, an overarching structure that concentrates manifold individual accounts around some important commonalities. An orthodox demarcation of global political scholarship identifies ‘cosmopolitanism’, the ‘society of states’ tradition, and the various incarnations of ‘realism’ as the most important categorisations in this schema.<sup>17</sup> In this order, these perspectives represent somewhat of a sliding scale as to the possibilities of genuine moral action – as we commonly understand it – in the international environment.

## II

### International Normative Theory

#### **Cosmopolitanism**

Cosmopolitanism, then, is an appropriate place to start, for it represents a normative perspective on the international realm that is probably closest to the ethical landscape of private morality, as

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<sup>17</sup> S. Caney, *Justice Beyond Borders: A Global Political Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 3. Caney also cites ‘nationalism’ as a fourth alternative, but this category is less common in wider literature and so will not be discussed in its own right here. For a leading expression of this view, see D. Miller, *On Nationality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

it is commonly regarded. Caney identifies three central tenets that permeate throughout a particularly wide variety of actual cosmopolitan accounts: (1) the worth of individuals, (2) equality, and (3) the existence of obligations binding on all.<sup>18</sup> From this, it is clear that cosmopolitanism offers a *universalist* account of morality, one in which every individual, regardless of their national association or particular circumstance, is subject to the same ethical protection.<sup>19</sup>

This focus on the individual human being as the ultimate 'unit' of moral value is perhaps *the* defining feature of cosmopolitan outlooks, and strongly informs the accompanying facets of the approach. Accordingly, any importance granted to groupings or communities, of which the state is clearly the most relevant, derives value only indirectly, to the extent that it contributes to the maintenance or advancement of such individually-centred worth.<sup>20</sup> As Van Hooft notes, 'because this concern is transnational, national borders and national sovereignty are irrelevant to the scope of its concerns.'<sup>21</sup>

The most prominent contemporary expression of cosmopolitanism in global affairs is likely to be found in the burgeoning 'international human rights' tradition, of which Caney's already-cited work *Justice Beyond Borders* is a leading modern expression.<sup>22</sup> As Vincent highlights, in terms of popular usage and widespread acceptance, the vocabulary of human rights has now become so dominant in the international vernacular as to make other ways of thinking and discussing ethics

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<sup>18</sup> Caney, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> The accompanying ethical *responsibilities* of each individual will of course be qualified by their circumstances and capacities, not only in relation to, for example, the increased capabilities afforded to those in political office, but likewise to the pertinent cases of children and those with diminished mental ability, who we would not normally think of as being subject to the same degree of moral responsibility as others.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> S. van Hooft, 'Cosmopolitanism as Virtue', *Journal of Global Ethics* 3(3). Abingdon: Routledge 2007. However, Brown cautions against regarding cosmopolitanism as simplistically utopian, and stresses that its devaluing of the intrinsic value of national groupings does not *necessitate* the advancement of a 'world government' position: Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> Caney, *op. cit.* Other theoretical accounts of individual 'rights' may of course diverge from the universal, international conception identified here, perhaps utilising them in a more legalistic, nationally-qualified sense.

seem to require special justification, especially in the West.<sup>23</sup> The justificatory pervasiveness of this cosmopolitan framework is further demonstrable in the degree of international consensus towards the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, to which virtually all nations at least in principle subscribe.<sup>24</sup>

Cosmopolitan theories thus grant relatively little weight to the impact of a specifically international context upon the fundamental scope of moral concern. Whilst circumstance can certainly be a *practical* barrier to the achievement of ethical goals, the protections and entitlements to which every individual is morally subject are left undiminished by any such unfortunate realities, and it remains the overriding normative goal of international actors to seek to promote these values across the globe. The next perspective proceeds along a rather different track.

### **The 'Society of States' Tradition**

The 'society of states' (or sometimes 'international society') tradition is a collection of thought primarily associated with the so-called 'English School' of International Relations theory, and in particular the foundational work of Hedley Bull,<sup>25</sup> although earlier inspiration is often cited in the philosophical writings of Georg Hegel and Hugo Grotius.<sup>26</sup> Recent expression of this tradition can be found in the work of International Relations theorists like Mervyn Frost, Terry Nardin and Robert Jackson.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> R. J. Vincent, 'The Idea of Rights in International Ethics', in *Traditions of International Ethics*. Eds. T. Nardin and D. R. Mapel. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 250-51.

<sup>24</sup> D. R. Mapel and T. Nardin, 'Convergence and Divergence in International Ethics', in their (eds.) *Traditions of International Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 318.

<sup>25</sup> See H. Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*. Third Edition. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002.

<sup>26</sup> We can also see some confluence with the later work of John Rawls on international toleration: see J. Rawls, *The Law of Peoples: with The Idea of Public Reason Revisited*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.

<sup>27</sup> See, for instance, M. Frost, *Ethics in International Relations: A Constitutive Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997; and R. H. Jackson, *The Global Covenant: Human Conduct in a World of States*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

In contrast to a cosmopolitan outlook, and as its adopted name suggests, this next international normative perspective is avowedly 'statist' in its principal ethical focus, adopting a 'communitarian' position that identifies the moral value of human collectives and associations as being an important qualification to that of individual persons. Whereas the scope of cosmopolitan ethical prescription is universal, the community-centrism of the society of states account informs an understanding of the international realm as being a markedly *pluralist* domain. Accordingly, it argues that we ought to protect the tolerance and co-existence of divergent moral outlooks between national communities as the cornerstone of an ordered international system, the preservation of which is taken to be the primary – or at least prerequisite – good.<sup>28</sup>

On this view, the notion of equality is transferred to a collective level, and the global order is conceived of as consisting of a mutual association of equal and independent political authorities. At the heart of this 'procedural arrangement' lie two interlinking tenets: a central respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of each member state, imbued within which is a fundamental norm of non-intervention in another's domestic affairs.<sup>29</sup> Direct military involvement is thus precluded in all cases but self-defence.<sup>30</sup> In practice, this shared commitment to the regulation of international conduct is facilitated by the observance of international law and procedure – common 'rules of the game', the joint recognition of which symbiotically grounds the state-level sense of societal belonging that reinforces a sense of duty to such norms.<sup>31</sup>

It is important not to confuse the society of states tradition with a capitulation to moral relativism. The kinds of universal ethical concern that cosmopolitanism seeks to promote are not denied as unimportant, or as being unworthy of states' attention. However, the particular communitarian emphasis of this approach contends that, internationally, such concerns must play second fiddle to the primary moral goal of preserving and strengthening the self-regulating

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<sup>28</sup> Frost, *op. cit.*, pp. 112-114.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108; Bull, *op. cit.*, p. 67; Jackson, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

<sup>30</sup> Or in terms of a defensive alliance: Frost, *op. cit.*, p.108.

<sup>31</sup> Caney, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

society of independent states. Maintaining the order of the international system is of paramount value, 'desirable because it is the condition of the realisation of other values' and thus in a sense 'prior to other goals, such as that of justice'.<sup>32</sup> Certainly, cosmopolitan moral aspirations should be pursued where and when it might be possible to do so, but only if doing so first pays respect to the norms that regulate the interactions between states.<sup>33</sup> As Bull notes,

International society takes account of the notion of human rights and duties that may be asserted against the state to which particular human beings belong, but it is inhibited from giving effect to them, except selectively and in a distorted way. If international society were really to treat human justice as primary and coexistence as secondary... the result could only be to undermine international order.<sup>34</sup>

The society of states tradition is therefore inherently conservative in its outlook, and would appear to tend towards the maintenance of the international status quo in the face of any attempts to prosecute grand ethical reform. Indeed, as Jackson contends,

the *societas* of states is not fundamentally activist; it is basically laissez-faire... The ethics of statecraft reflect a greater concern about preserving a good that presently exists (preserving peace) than about pursuing a good that does not presently exist (eradicating world poverty). It is conservative more than progressive: it seeks to conserve existing values more than it seeks to create new values.<sup>35</sup>

Implicit within this understanding is Frost's assertion that within the norms of international society 'a sovereign state's first duty is to protect the interests of its own citizens. The well-being of its own citizens must be considered more important than the well-being of people elsewhere in the world.'<sup>36</sup> It is this hesitant attitude towards potential reform, and grudging contentment with a possibly unjust status quo, that serves to further differentiate the society of states position from the cosmopolitan drive for individual equality, even if a proponent of the latter perspective

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<sup>32</sup> Bull, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

<sup>33</sup> Jackson, *op. cit.*, p. 417.

<sup>34</sup> Bull, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

<sup>35</sup> Jackson, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

<sup>36</sup> Frost, *loc. cit.*

happened to converge on accepting the maintenance of order as a necessary constituent in promoting transnational justice.

Ethical 'progress', then, is considered an additional, voluntary enterprise, and one that can only be pursued with the joint agreement and co-operation of relevant international partners.<sup>37</sup> But under this normative perspective more generally, ethical norms and the international order they protect act as a *limitation* on what might, in the private realm, be morally desirable to pursue. The primary role of ethics in international relations is to mutually regulate and restrain the conduct of states by procedural means, not to act as a guiding star by which to motivate their destinies; 'a harness and a bridle more than spurs and a saddle.'<sup>38</sup> This emphasis on collective restraint and shared rules, however, lies in stark contrast to the 'gloves off' approach of the final normative perspective on international relations, realism.

### **Realism**

The tradition of political 'realism' has historically been, and despite recent challenges remains, one of the most influential – and at times dominant – outlooks in the study of international relations. Indeed, Donnelly claims it to be both the oldest and most frequently adopted theoretical standpoint in international political scholarship as a whole.<sup>39</sup> The founding principles of realist thought can be traced as far back as the Ancient Greek historian Thucydides, and since that time the tradition has encompassed some of the most important figures in both politics and philosophy. Contemporarily, whereas cosmopolitan approaches to international normativity may hold sway in popular discourse, realism continues to hold a powerful and perennial position in both the academic study, and perhaps many actual political considerations, of global action.

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 417.

<sup>38</sup> Jackson, *loc. cit.*

<sup>39</sup> J. Donnelly, 'Realism', in *Theories of International Relations*. Ed. S. Burchill et al. Fourth Edition. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 31.

Like the society of states tradition, realism can likewise be described as a 'communitarian' approach, for it takes its central theoretic focus to be the state. However, compared to both of the previously outlined perspectives it is much more radical in its attitude towards moral evaluation. At its base, realism displays a deep-seated scepticism as to the applicability of *any* moral standards upheld in other spheres of life to conduct in the international realm, and consequently draws a fundamental division between the two. As its self-styled name suggests, realism is set up as a reaction against the perceived undercurrents of idealism, occasionally utopianism, thought to be permeating large swathes of international political thought,<sup>40</sup> and takes its guiding rationale to be one of appreciating the world as it really is, to 'set aside fantasies... and consider what happens in fact.'<sup>41</sup> Thus against the hopeful proclamations of a harmony in interstate purposes, 'the clash of interests is real and inevitable' argues E. H. Carr, 'and the whole nature of the problem is distorted by an attempt to disguise it.'<sup>42</sup>

Accordingly, the realist outlook takes a strongly pessimistic view as to the possibilities of action and reform in a world of states, and in downplaying the role of ideals instead places primary emphasis on the essential variable of *power*, defined by Morgenthau as comprising 'anything that establishes and maintains the control of man over man'.<sup>43</sup> This international variant of *Realpolitik* contends that, in negotiating around the pitfalls of 'naïve moralism',<sup>44</sup> the unfortunate reality of power-driven interstate relations leaves little or no room for elsewhere-existing ethical values to be promoted in the realm of global affairs. Instead, 'pugnacity and self-assertion' become the

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<sup>40</sup> For major modern realists like Hans Morgenthau and George Kennan, the specific target of their criticism was the idealism they saw as being manifested in the U.S. foreign policy of the time.

<sup>41</sup> N. Machiavelli, *The Prince*. Ed. Q. Skinner, Trans. R. Price. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 55.

<sup>42</sup> E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*. Third Edition. Hong Kong: Macmillan Papermac, 1984, p. 60.

<sup>43</sup> H. J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. Revised by K. W. Thompson and W. David Clinton. Seventh Edition. New York: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2005, p. 11. Waltz defines power as 'the capacity to produce an intended effect': K. N. Waltz, *Man the State and War: A Theoretical Analysis*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1959, p. 205.

<sup>44</sup> M. J. Smith, *Realist Thought from Weber to Kissinger*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1986, p. 2.

valued qualities of state action.<sup>45</sup> Thus beyond the mere limitations on action claimed by society of states theorists, realism affirms that attempts to ‘change the world’, in a moral sense, are not only impossible, but normatively vacuous.<sup>46</sup>

But realism is a much more complex, and theoretically sophisticated beast than such casual insights reveal, and given its wide historical heritage there exists more of a ‘family resemblance’ between the multiple and nuanced strands of realist thought than a single uncontroversial statement of its detailed constitution.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, beyond sharing some rather general statements on the governing propositions of world politics, argues Smith, realist writers ‘sometimes prove to be inconsistent both internally and taken together’, and ‘reach surprisingly dissimilar conclusions on a wide range of issues more frequently than one would assume’.<sup>48</sup> The exact relationship between realism and morality – to which we will return in greater detail – is particularly multifaceted and variable, and yet has tended to be referenced rather ambiguously in the accounts of the past few decades – perhaps, Donnelly suggests, as a result of being peripheral to recent academic preoccupations with the more scientific aspects of realist theory.<sup>49</sup>

The only way to afford a clearer insight into the intricacies of the realist perspective is to begin to dissect some of the divisions and distinctions that populate the tradition. To this end, Caney helpfully distils the realist agenda into two paradigmatic claims: one empirical, and one ethical.<sup>50</sup> The first claim is descriptive: it contends that states *do* in fact act in the pursuit of power and the national interest, and that their conduct is motivated by such self-interested concerns. This claim also functions as the central explanatory (and predictive) facet of realist theory, aiming to postulate an accurate account of how and for what reasons states behave as they do, both as a means to understand observed action, and to envisage what behaviour to expect in the future.

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<sup>45</sup> Carr, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

<sup>46</sup> Burchill and Linklater, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

<sup>47</sup> Donnelly, *loc. cit.*

<sup>48</sup> Smith, *loc. cit.*

<sup>49</sup> Donnelly, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

<sup>50</sup> Caney, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

The validity of realism's empirical claim is disputed, and there is competing evidence on both sides of the justificatory divide. Historically, realism has certainly been a leading influence on the development of U.S. foreign policy, especially in the period between the ends of the Second and Cold Wars, and has undoubtedly informed the thinking of some very powerful political figures, sometimes administrations. Henry Kissinger's commitment to 'geopolitics', notes Smith, was realism by another name,<sup>51</sup> and Burchill and Linklater go as far as to anoint it 'the dominant ideology of the U.S. political establishment' during the Nixon years.<sup>52</sup> Even earlier evidence of realist thinking is discernible in the strategy of 'containment' the U.S. directed against the rising Soviet challenge, argues Welsh;<sup>53</sup> a policy in which leading realist, and at that time diplomat, George Kennan played no small part. Even today, the vocabulary of balancing power is never far away from the international stage.<sup>54</sup>

But against these observations, even if true in those particular instances, there is sizeable evidence of states acting on the basis of substantially 'moral' concerns, appearing at least to be motivated by altruism rather than self-interest. Donnelly cites instances of humanitarian assistance in the wake of natural or political disasters, such as the outpouring of aid after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami;<sup>55</sup> a list to which we could now add the international response to the 2010 Haiti earthquake and 2011 Japanese disaster. The empirical arguments of realism thus remain a topic of much debate in academic circles. Carr, himself a realist, admonishes the view that 'altruism is an illusion', and contends that although politics cannot be divorced from power,

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<sup>51</sup> See H. Kissinger, *Diplomacy*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994; Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>52</sup> Burchill and Linklater, *op. cit.*, p. 15. This would obviously cast doubt upon the descriptive society of states claim that members of the international community feel a sense of commitment to shared norms of conduct.

<sup>53</sup> J. M. Welsh, 'Edmund Burke's Theory of International Order: The Debate between Realism and Rationalism', in *The Realist Tradition and Contemporary International Relations*. Ed. D. Clinton. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007, p. 139.

<sup>54</sup> See 'Vladimir Putin Attacks U.S. Missile Defence', *BBC News Online*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/8433352.stm>, 29<sup>th</sup> December 2009.

<sup>55</sup> Donnelly, *loc. cit.*

‘the *homo politicus* who pursues nothing but power is as unreal a myth as the *homo economicus* who pursues nothing but gain.’<sup>56</sup>

The second claim of realism, however, is conspicuously normative in character. It argues that states *should* act in the self-interested manner empirical proponents claim to observe. The first duty of international actors is affirmed to be their *own* people and interests, and it is these concerns that *ought* to be promoted in the global realm, not cosmopolitan equality. Thus ethical considerations, as we would otherwise conceive them, become ‘a luxury in which the realistic, hard-nosed statesman or office holder cannot indulge’,<sup>57</sup> for instead they must ‘abandon any pretence of moral restraint to pursue their own selfish national interests.’<sup>58</sup> The only limited sense in which normative realism can advocate reform, then, is in a somewhat commandeered manner, arguing that states should move away from any misguided pursuit of ideals and instead actively embrace the tenets of realist power politics.

These two claims of realism are not inseparable, and it is quite possible to uphold either one or the other or both; indeed, elements of the two are often mixed to varying degrees in specific realist accounts. Whilst accepting that the explanatory account might influence the justificatory grounds upon which an ethical claim is made, Caney maintains that the two are conceptually distinct, and notes the possibilities of acceptance and repudiation:

One might, for instance, affirm the empirical claim but deny the ethical claim. One might, that is, think that states ought to pursue cosmopolitan ideals but also believe that they will not do so. One might, conversely, deny the realist empirical claim but hold to the realist ethical claim. One might, that is, think that states ought to pursue the national interest but that sometimes they do not.<sup>59</sup>

This distinction seems plausible, for even Kant, whilst vehemently upholding the absolute imperative that ‘all politics must bend its knee before the right’, appears nevertheless to accept

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<sup>56</sup> Carr, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

<sup>57</sup> Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

<sup>58</sup> Welsh, *loc. cit.*

<sup>59</sup> Caney, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

the empirical qualification that ‘the selfish propensity’ more often than not takes precedence in observed action.<sup>60</sup> For the purposes of the present inquiry, this division allows us to somewhat isolate the moral facets of realist thinking from the wider entanglements of the tradition. And in considering the overall character of realism’s moral prescription, whilst in one sense the overriding imperative of power would seem to make it the most restrictive perspective on international normative possibility, in terms of loosening the usual ethical constraints on action, it is in fact radically liberating.

### **Moral Theoretical Underpinnings**

As is evident, then, the patterns of normative theorising towards international relations do not clearly reflect those within moral philosophy. Yet as Mapel and Nardin note, whilst there may be limited self-conscious, or – in accounts heavily drawn from *political* philosophical theory – self-asserted, support for the abstruse ethical frameworks of the latter, discussions of international ethics are nonetheless permeated with underlying notions of a ‘utilitarian’ welfare promotion that is matched by an opposing ‘deontic’ vocabulary.<sup>61</sup> Locating the moral theoretic underpinnings of the three international perspectives thus requires us to look beneath the surface of these approaches; but as we shall see the two sets of theories do not conveniently map onto one another. Rather, each of the overarching normative stances towards global politics can be alternatively postulated on the basis of a different set of ethical arguments.

#### *Cosmopolitanism and Human Rights*

As a number of different commentators note,<sup>62</sup> the tenets of cosmopolitan thought can in practice be grounded upon a wide range of moral justifications. For instance, despite the preponderance of the tradition, the concept of human rights is often taken for granted in popular discourse, and acceptance is by no means matched by an equivalent scrutiny of their

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<sup>60</sup> I. Kant, *Perpetual Peace*. UK: Filiquarian Publishing, 2007, pp. 69, 57.

<sup>61</sup> Mapel and Nardin, *op. cit.*, p. 319.

<sup>62</sup> For instance: Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

foundations.<sup>63</sup> The idea of a *right* might initially sound deontological in nature, and indeed in some accounts this is the very basis of their normative force: as representing the intrinsic moral worth of a human being as a holder of fundamental ethical entitlements under the moral law, rights that ought to be upheld and protected for that very reason. But with other cosmopolitan approaches, notes Caney, the theoretical foundations are instead utilitarian in nature, and see securing a universal set of human rights as one effective means to maximize the welfare of all sentient beings.<sup>64</sup> Indeed Caney's own account, as a case in point, goes on to argue that it is consequentialist-minded well-being arguments that ultimately represent the most plausible grounding for a set of such civil and political human rights.<sup>65</sup>

This theoretical variety is taken by some to be a sign of arbitrariness,<sup>66</sup> with the underlying moral traditions in which they are embedded being the prime arbiter of such rights' content.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, the vagueness with which the underpinnings of human rights declarations are elucidated leads Alasdair MacIntyre to label them fictitious entities, belief in which is 'one with belief in witches and unicorns.'<sup>68</sup> Nonetheless, the ultimate status of rights-talk is somewhat beside our primary concern, and though most common, the formulation or construction of a human rights doctrine is not a necessity for a theory to be considered cosmopolitan. The main point here is in demonstrating how an allegiance to quite differing moral philosophical theories can regardless still be captured within one of the same broad normative perspectives on global political conduct.

This point can be equally noted by considering the declared academic heritage of cosmopolitan thought, and in particular the fact that both Bentham and Kant are regarded as foundational figures in the tradition (in particular the latter's conception of a universal right to hospitality in

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<sup>63</sup> D. Engster, *The Heart of Justice: Care Ethics and Political Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 162-63.

<sup>64</sup> Caney, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>66</sup> Indeed, the pervasive use of the concept as a legalistic tool has also arguably bred a sense of arbitrariness as to the basis of many human rights 'claims'. See, for instance, 'Internet Access is 'a Fundamental Right'', *BBC News Online*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/8548190.stm>, 8<sup>th</sup> March 2010.

<sup>67</sup> Vincent, *op. cit.*, p. 250.

<sup>68</sup> A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Second Edition. London: Duckworth, 1996, p. 69.

*Perpetual Peace*).<sup>69</sup> Yet the moral theories and conception of ethical value to which these two philosophers subscribe are radically divergent, and indeed are commonly presented as being in paradigmatic opposition on the moral spectrum. It would hence appear that the foundations of the cosmopolitan normative perspective are completely incongruent with any single theoretical counterpart within moral philosophy.

#### *The Society of States Norms*

Yet these proceedings are complicated still further by the fact that Kant is also claimed by some as forefather of the society of states approach. Drawing from the same scholarly source of *Perpetual Peace*, proponents cite the work's preceding article on the promotion of a 'federation of free states' as an early forerunner to the tradition's central tenets.<sup>70</sup> To deepen this Kantian association, the obligation to uphold the mutual norms of the tradition can be understood in deontic, rule-based terms, taking states' duties towards one another, and the imperative to uphold the international order, as deriving from the inherent moral value of equality, autonomy and independence that this sort of international community manifests. That this kind of ethic is at work in many accounts is demonstrable in the legal language of their justification, proposes Welsh.<sup>71</sup>

There are a number of points at which Bull's terminology alludes to this ethical perspective. In one passage he argues that the modern theory of international society tends to ground its norms in a 'contemporary equivalent' of natural law principles,<sup>72</sup> whilst elsewhere he describes the *rights* of all states to sovereignty and self-determination as being moral rules,<sup>73</sup> having previously defined moral ideas as those 'which treat human actions as right in themselves and not merely as

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<sup>69</sup> Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, p. 21.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>71</sup> Welsh, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

<sup>72</sup> Bull, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

a means to an end, as categorically and not merely hypothetically imperative'.<sup>74</sup> The echoes of Kant in such phraseology are surely clear to see.

But once again, an alternative justification for such mutual restraint can be presented. Rather than taking the norm of non-intervention as protecting and respecting the intrinsic moral entitlements of political communities, a plausible consequentialist foundation can also be advanced, as Welsh again notes.<sup>75</sup> In particular, it seems as though a rule-utilitarian account could just as successfully ground the importance of observing general norms of state sovereignty and non-intervention, arguing that the long-term detrimental impact on the stability of the international order, were states to abandon their restraint and tolerance towards other members, outweighs any positive welfare gains that could result from engaging in short-term ethical interventions.

Indeed, although he ultimately rejects this option within his own account,<sup>76</sup> Frost considers this potential consequentialist justification as an alternative reading of Bull's foundations, perhaps encouraged by some perplexing – and ostensibly contradictory – statements elsewhere in the latter's work: that, for example, order and a sense of common interest 'may derive from a *rational calculation* that the limits necessary to sustain elementary goals of social life must be reciprocal'.<sup>77</sup> Frost outlines the basis of the argument:

actors adhering to the norms listed (without any utility maximizing exceptions attached to them) will have the effect of maximizing aggregate utility... by the parties involved following rules and not basing each of their actions on independent utility

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<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>75</sup> Welsh, *loc. cit.*

<sup>76</sup> Along with a number of other alternatives – the variable potential grounding of the society of states norms is thus stark in Frost's analysis. Ultimately, he develops his own account, 'constitutive theory', which regards the recognition of state sovereignty and autonomy as necessary to fully actualise the rights and individuality of their citizens. Frost, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

<sup>77</sup> Bull, *op. cit.*, p. 51. Emphasis added.

calculi... that out of all the sovereignty preserving actions of states, utility will be maximized, without any state actively pursuing global utility maximization.<sup>78</sup>

It seems, therefore, that the society of states perspective, like cosmopolitanism before it, is equally miscellaneous in its potential moral theoretic membership. Not only is it possible to underpin its norms on the basis of different moral priorities, but as suggested by Nardin's employment of the protection of diversity *and* the provision of order as important grounding claims,<sup>79</sup> some accounts even appear to take both deontological *and* consequentialist elements as supportively valid foundations.

### **Realist Ethical Scepticism**

Turning to the final international normative perspective, realism can be seen to exhibit a similar, if more readily categorised, degree of theoretical fragmentation. The foundations of realist thought are worthy of a thesis in themselves, and yet are surprisingly obscure in many realist statements on the international limits of morality.<sup>80</sup> On investigation the ethical dimension of the realist approach is supported by two central, paradigmatic themes: egoism and anarchy. Yet whilst these underpinnings may appear relatively unified, the degree to which each is stressed is considerably heterogeneous across the tradition as a whole. The result of this non-uniformity is a continuum of realist positions that reflect the comparative importance granted to each element,<sup>81</sup> but which can be helpfully approximated<sup>81</sup> to two prominent 'strands' of realist ethical thought.

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<sup>78</sup> Frost, *op. cit.*, pp. 123-24. This aligns with what Rawls terms a 'practice' (as opposed to 'summary') conception of utilitarian rules: J. Rawls, 'Two Concepts of Rules', *The Philosophical Review* 64(1). Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1955. In this sense the rules and procedures of international society can be seen as defining the very 'practice' of interstate relations, and the kinds of requirement we understand as constituting it.

<sup>79</sup> Caney, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>80</sup> Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 235.

<sup>81</sup> Donnelly, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

*Classical Realism*

'Classical realism' begins with an appreciation of the limitations of human nature, and its pessimistic influence upon international conduct; this is what the taxonomy of Waltz terms a 'first image' account of action, one contending that 'the locus of the important causes of war is found in the nature and behaviour of man'.<sup>82</sup> Hans Morgenthau is the preeminent modern proponent of the classical outlook, along with fellow IR theorists E. H. Carr, Reinhold Niebuhr and George Kennan;<sup>83</sup> but the tradition has much earlier roots in the political philosophies of Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes.

It is a general feature of this outlook, then, that mankind's nature is inherently selfish, and aggressively driven by its passions, paramount amongst which is the desire for power and self-preservation. It is an intuition of (psychological) egoism famously professed by the character of Glaucon in Plato's *Republic*, who contends that 'the desire to outdo others and get more and more... is what anyone's nature naturally pursues as good', and which no one would deny given the chance.<sup>84</sup> In Machiavelli's words, 'men generally... are ungrateful, fickle, feigners and dissemblers, avoiders of danger, eager for gain',<sup>85</sup> and on the basis of the inevitable competition the mutual pursuit of such ambitions produce, the Hobbesian notion of a state of nature is conceived, a condition of war 'of every man, against every man' in which respite from conflict is never assured.<sup>86</sup>

In such a circumstance, lacking 'a common Power to keep them all in awe',<sup>87</sup> the possibility of ethical conduct becomes untenable, for without the threat of coercion to deter self-interested behaviour in others, to unilaterally act upon altruistic motives is to leave oneself open to the potentially fatal exploitation of one's good will. As Hobbes argues,

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<sup>82</sup> Waltz, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>83</sup> See, for instance, Morgenthau, *op. cit.*; and Carr, *op. cit.*

<sup>84</sup> Plato, *Republic*. Trans. G. M. A. Grube and C. D. C. Reeve. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992, pp. 35-36.

<sup>85</sup> Machiavelli, *loc. cit.*

<sup>86</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*. Ed. R. Tuck. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 88.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

the bonds of words are too weak to bridle men's ambition... For he that should be modest, and tractable, and performe all he promises, in such time, and place, where no man els should do so, should but make himself a prey to others, and procure his own certain ruine.<sup>88</sup>

For classical realists, the international sphere is just such an environment, for unlike the hierarchical political structure of the domestic realm, in which a framework of enforceable law substantially restrains the egoistic tendencies of the population,<sup>89</sup> and provides firm foundation for moral action and inter-subjective cooperation, the overriding reality of the interstate world is an enduring condition of *anarchy*: 'a multiplicity of independent sovereign states that acknowledge no political superior, and whose relationships are ultimately regulated by warfare.'<sup>90</sup> The kinds of sanction that regulate behaviour domestically, it is argued, are much reduced in the context of international interaction, for not only is there no world government with the power to enforce compliance with ethical norms, but the power of states is both more pronounced, and consequently more resistant to the threat of community retribution, than that of a private individual.

states are not vulnerable to violent attack to the same degree that individuals are... One human being in the state of nature cannot make himself secure against violent attack... Groups of human beings organised as states, however, may provide themselves with a means of defence that exists independently of the frailties of any one of them.<sup>91</sup>

Classical realism thus argues that the lawless, anarchical reality of the international system plays a facilitative role in allowing man's inherent nature a relatively free rein, the result of which is that conventional moral concerns are simply 'crowded out' by the demands of power and survival,

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 96-110.

<sup>89</sup> Donnelly, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

<sup>90</sup> Welsh, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

<sup>91</sup> Bull, *op. cit.*, p. 47. From this, however, Bull argues not for realism, but instead for an 'anarchical society'. He also qualifies the ability of states to withstand an anarchical existence with the advent of nuclear weapons, which *do* have the destructive potential to reduce the state's vulnerability to that of an individual: *Ibid.*, p. 48.

which are naturally pursued by all states and from which none dare opt out. For to do the latter, argues Morgenthau, would be to undertake 'a policy of national suicide'.<sup>92</sup>

### *Neorealism / Structural Realism*

The second, more recent, strand of the realist normative perspective is the tradition of so-called 'neo' or 'structural' realism, which takes a much more exclusive focus on the overriding influence of anarchy within the international system.<sup>93</sup> Kenneth Waltz, who is incidentally its foundational figure, terms this outlook a 'third image' account of international action, in which it is primarily the existence of 'many sovereign states, with no system of law enforceable among them' that is the cause of wars and conflict.<sup>94</sup>

Structural realism represents a system-level constraint on action, and conceives of state actors as no more than particular elements, functionally undifferentiated in seeking their own survival, within the much larger superstructure of anarchical interaction. From this theoretical perspective, states are thought to pursue rational preferences in the promotion of their own power and interests, and as actors are rewarded or punished by the global system to the extent to which this actually occurs.<sup>95</sup> Above all it is the distribution of *capabilities* within the anarchic structure that determines the scope and possibilities of such action. To this end, the theory abstracts away from all other attributes and characteristics of individual states, and argues that conduct is chiefly

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<sup>92</sup> H. J. Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest: A Critical Examination of American Foreign Policy*. First Edition. New York: Knopf, 1951, p. 35.

<sup>93</sup> The latter term more properly refers to its most recent theoretical incarnations. It is curious that this seems almost a backwards explanatory progression, moving from the classical conjunction of both human nature *and* anarchy to simply the latter.

<sup>94</sup> Waltz, *op. cit.*, p. 159. Second image accounts seek to explain international action on the basis of domestic factors such as internal state structure, that 'peace and war are the products, respectively, of good and bad states': *Ibid.*, p. 114. And at the risk of terminological confusion, 'neo-classical realists' have more recently probed the interaction of the second and third images: Donnelly, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

<sup>95</sup> Frost, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

prescribed by the interaction of a state's individual capacity with the wider configuration of that variable in the global system.<sup>96</sup>

This latter notion concerns the 'polarity' of the international realm at that particular time, that is, the number of great powers – or 'poles' – around which capability is concentrated. According to Donnelly, 'the central theoretical conclusion of structural realism is that in anarchy states 'balance' rather than 'bandwagon',<sup>97</sup> they cumulatively react to *counter* the challenge of a rising power in order to keep its influence in check, and do so, almost mechanically, by seeking to concentrate comparable power around an opposing pole – another great power competitor. To do the alternative, and bandwagon around an increasingly powerful state, would be to bolster a potential threat to one's own interests. Hence, in contrast to an apparent clash of ideologies,

The Cold War, in this account, was not 'caused' by anyone but was the 'natural' result of bipolarity. Soviet expansion into Central and Eastern Europe arose from neither vicious rulers in the Kremlin nor rabid anti-communists in Washington.<sup>98</sup>

As should be apparent, there is a strong determinist undercurrent to the structural approach, something that is very worrying for ethics in general.<sup>99</sup> It is not arguing that states *want* to further their self-interest, in the sense that classical theorists attribute to egoistic human nature, but rather that international actors are *unable* to do otherwise, as they are inescapably subject to the interactive currents of the global system, and its tendency to create equilibrium. In Waltz's terms,

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<sup>96</sup> Donnelly, *op. cit.*, p. 36. Some more recent structural accounts have sought to qualify abstraction by instead assigning a *consistent and uniform* motivational assumption as driving state action. Respective presumptions of survival vs. domination are reflected in the so-called 'defensive' structural realism of figures like Steven M. Walt, and the 'offensive' alternative pre-eminent in the work of John J. Mearsheimer. The latter argues that whilst the appropriate motivation will depend on an individual state's circumstances, it is in the interests of great powers to in general pursue an 'offensive' strategy of power maximization: see J. J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: Norton, 2001; S. M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*. London: Cornell University Press, 1987.

<sup>97</sup> Donnelly, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> That it is similarly worrying for Carr – who labels the 'scientific prediction' of rigid cause and effect as leaving thought and action 'devoid of purpose' – demonstrates once more the internal divisions that the general umbrella of 'realism' can mask. 'Such a conclusion is plainly repugnant to the most deep-seated belief of man about himself. That human affairs can be directed and modified by human action and human thought is a postulate so fundamental that its rejection seems scarcely compatible with existence as a human being.' Carr, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

‘the requirements of state action are, in this view, *imposed* by the circumstances in which all states exist’,<sup>100</sup> with the balancing reaction to another’s drive for ascendancy ‘quasi-automatic’ in nature.<sup>101</sup> Structural realism thus presents a materialistic account of international behaviour, and if state actors lack a sufficient quantum of freedom in their choices then it would seem that more essentially they lack the capacity to be considered *moral* agents at all. As Brown contends,

The first assumption of normative analysis – prior to discussion of the content of norms – is that individuals (and states) have a choice about what to do; they can follow a particular standard of behaviour or not... If actors have no choices, then the setting or advocacy of standards – of whatever kind – is a pointless exercise; to set standards and establish norms is to assume that action is *goal-directed* but not *goal-*(or otherwise) *determined*.<sup>102</sup>

On account of the anarchic forces that pervade it then, structuralists take the international realm to be beyond the capture of ethical evaluation. The conditions for moral action simply do not exist. This apparent immunity leaves little room for the maintenance of normative scrutiny, except perhaps in the very limited sense of states accepting the pursuit of ideology as redundant, and concentrating their resources most effectively on the inevitable balancing of global polarity.<sup>103</sup> For as Waltz notes, ‘if a condition of balance becomes the conscious goal of states, then one would expect the balancing process to be one of greater precision and subtlety.’<sup>104</sup>

### *The Status of Morality*

Given the variability outlined, the shared normative claim of realism – that states *ought* to act in pursuit of their national interest – admits of a number of nuanced differences in understanding, much akin to the alternative postulations of the other two normative perspectives. As we have

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<sup>100</sup> Waltz, *op. cit.*, p. 160. Emphasis added.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

<sup>102</sup> C. Brown, ‘The Normative Framework of Post-Cold War International Relations’, in *The New Agenda for International Relations: From Polarization to Globalization in World Politics?* Ed. S. Lawson. Cambridge: Polity, 2002, pp. 147-48. This certainly goes against Sartre’s conception of the radical and undeniable freedom of every choice, and chimes with Kant’s depressing observation that for humanity to be conscious of such a lack of freedom would make them ‘in their own judgement, the most miserable of all beings in the world’: Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, p. 56.

<sup>103</sup> Donnelly, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

<sup>104</sup> Waltz, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

noted, some realists, on the basis of the classical argument, contend that within the international realm established ethical values are practically unachievable, and obdurately so. If 'ought' implies 'can', such commitments are rendered superfluous to an environment defined by perpetual and unconstrained interstate competition. The necessity of survival in such circumstances makes the pursuit of power the imperative of an effective foreign policy, the success of which must be judged on these terms alone.

In recognition of this implacable reality, classical realists thus maintain that a distinct and separate set of evaluative standards exists for conduct in the international sphere,<sup>105</sup> to which external ethical criteria are normatively inappropriate. This attitude is particularly notable in Machiavelli's account, and his repeated refusal to equate the expedient with the good.<sup>106</sup> Rather, whilst never losing sight of the negative ethical character of certain action, he maintains that its performance is nonetheless demanded at the level of the state:

it cannot be called virtue to kill one's fellow-citizens, to betray one's friends, to be treacherous, merciless and irreligious; power may be gained by acting in such ways, but not glory... how men live is so different from how they should live that... a ruler who wishes to maintain his power must be prepared to act immorally when this becomes necessary.<sup>107</sup>

There is a strong temptation – indeed not bereft of cogent foundation – to read in these assertions the postulation of an amoral outlook towards the behaviour of states, one in which political action is wholly segregated, divorced, from the dominion of morally-constrained conduct. Yet despite the sizeable support this interpretation has garnered in the extensive historical literature on Machiavelli, it remains too hasty a dismissal of ethical significance. In his seminal contribution to this debate, Isaiah Berlin argues that such amoral analyses seriously misread the

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<sup>105</sup> For Machiavelli of course, not merely the international sphere, but the political sphere more generally.

<sup>106</sup> B. Crick, 'Introduction', in *The Discourses*, N. Machiavelli. Trans. B. Crick. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970, p. 62.

<sup>107</sup> Machiavelli, *op. cit.*, pp. 31, 55. The reference here to 'virtue' perhaps implies that Machiavelli understands morality in terms similar to that of the Aristotelian tradition. However, as will be discussed at a later point, the constitution of his political virtue brings into question its actual congruence with virtue ethics proper.

position Machiavelli advocates. Rather than an incompatible clash between the ultimate values of 'morality' and the demands and necessities of 'politics', Berlin attests, it is instead a tension between two very different conceptions of the former that the author of *The Prince* confronts.<sup>108</sup>

On this understanding, Machiavelli's realism is targeting a specifically *Christian* conception of morality, one that fails to appreciate the social value of the community, and the identification of final human ends – pursued for their own sake – that are *public* rather than individual.<sup>109</sup> His account of ethics is implicitly dualistic, with personal and state action not normatively autonomous domains – one morally constrained and the other not, but instead inhabiting two *moral* worlds, as embodying two *ethical* codes, two conflicting systems of *ultimate* values.<sup>110</sup> Accordingly, whilst the 'truth' or 'validity' of personal moral commitments is never denied internationally, realism here postulates that it is simply wrongheaded to allow this realisation any kind of prescriptive force, for the individual and state exist in two distinct realms of action, and are thus subject to two fundamentally different standards of conduct:

For when the safety of one's country wholly depends on the decision to be taken, no attention should be paid either to justice or injustice, to kindness or cruelty, or to its being praiseworthy or ignominious. On the contrary, every other consideration being set aside, that alternative should be wholeheartedly adopted which will save the life and preserve the freedom of one's country.<sup>111</sup>

We are now in a position to better understand such assertions. The evaluation of effective political action as violating ethical norms, and the claim that our usual normative commitments should be circumvented, do not characterise a position of *amoral*ity in international politics, in which ethical value is itself neglected, but rather a stance best understood as merely *conventionally immoral*. A different standard of conduct exists, but its nature is nonetheless ethical.

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<sup>108</sup> I. Berlin, 'The Question of Machiavelli'. *The New York Review of Books* 17(7). New York: A. W. Ellsworth, 1971, p. 2.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3-7.

<sup>111</sup> N. Machiavelli, *The Discourses*. Trans. B. Crick. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970, p. 515.

In other classical realist accounts this latter outlook is supported more explicitly, and in resisting the amoral interpretation it is clearly denied that conclusions in favour of a state's survival involve putting morality 'aside'. Rather, they seek to bring the normative claim of realism *within* the scope of moral consideration, to accommodate and reconcile the two. Morgenthau upholds just such a position, arguing that the national interest of a state is *itself* is a paramount ethical value, and that its promotion thus has 'moral dignity'. Accordingly he seeks to dispel 'the stigma of immorality upon the theory and practice of power politics', contending that a foreign policy grounded in the national interest is 'in fact morally *superior*':<sup>112</sup>

The fundamental error... is the antithesis of national interest and moral principles. The equation of political moralizing with morality and of political realism with immorality is itself untenable. The choice is not between one set of moral principles and the national interest, devoid of moral dignity, but between one set of moral principles divorced from political reality, and another set of moral principles derived from political reality.<sup>113</sup>

Ethical value thus exists within the interstate realm, and indeed it ought to influence the conduct of international actors; but such value is grounded differently from its grounding in the domestic sphere, in *raison d'état* and national survival,<sup>114</sup> justifying behaviour that would in the latter context be prohibited. Accordingly, the necessities of interstate action and power politics are seen to be captured and subsumed within the concerns of moral deliberation more generally, and, rather than being conceived of as *overriding* the constraints of morality, the realist normative claim is effectively 'moralised' itself, taking ethical precedence over 'normal' standards of conduct.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> H. J. Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest*, pp. 34, 38. Emphasis added. Here then we see a move from mere *psychological* egoism about state conduct to a claim of *ethical* egoism.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.* p. 33. Though of course how *the* national interest is itself defined is inevitably value-laden, requiring justification: Smith, *loc. cit.*

<sup>114</sup> Morgenthau describing the state's self-preservation as 'a moral duty': Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest*, p. 38. Again, it seems possible to propose competing deontological and consequentialist arguments for the importance of state survival.

<sup>115</sup> T. Nardin, 'Ethical Traditions in International Affairs', in *Traditions of International Ethics*. Eds. T. Nardin and D. R. Mapel. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 15-16. Kant, however, is clearly opposed to any such accommodation of self-interest within morality: 'I cannot conceive of a political

In pushing the influence of the anarchical variable to its limit, however, complete *structural realism* can appropriately be considered an 'amoral' perspective on international relations, but in the atypical and somewhat peculiar sense of taking moral agency out of the picture altogether. As Waltz attests, 'A foreign policy based on this image... is neither moral nor immoral, but embodies merely a reasoned response to the world about us.'<sup>116</sup> Unlike its classicist counterpart therefore, the realist ethical claim is here not so much embodied in the normative proposition that states ought to pursue their power and national interest, for that much is presumed systemically inevitable, but rather the claim that the misleading decoy of the influence of values and ideals should be abandoned once and for all.

Each of these morally-sceptical positions is theoretically interesting, and there is no requirement to plump for one over the other in our discussions of political realism. Each outlook, in different ways, does the same job of devaluing the international capacity for what we would normally conceive of as moral action, and thus there is no need to artificially unify this perspective on global affairs for the purposes of discursive convenience. What is important is that on any realist account, for a state to act on the apparent basis of conventional, altruistic moral principles can only be endorsed to the extent that such action contributes, or at the very least does not detract, from the chief pursuit of power and self-interest (or, conversely, when failing to adhere to such standards would be detrimental to them).<sup>117</sup> But standards of this sort ought not themselves to be endorsed beyond this limited space, and one should be prepared to sweep them aside, as either a moral imperative or systemically irrelevant, in those cases in which it is expediently advantageous.

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moralist, one who forges a morality in such a way that it conforms to a statesman's advantage': Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, p. 49.

<sup>116</sup> Waltz, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

<sup>117</sup> Donnelly argues that in actuality most realists tend to 'hedge' their accounts to allow for the pursuit of such values in cases where they do not conflict with power and interest: J. Donnelly, 'Twentieth-Century Realism', in *Traditions of International Ethics*. Eds. T. Nardin and D. R. Mapel. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 96. See for instance, Carr, *op. cit.*, p. 159: 'a state should indulge in them in so far as this is not seriously incompatible with its more important interests'; and Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, p. 6: 'Political realism does not require... indifference to... [conventional] moral principles, but it requires a sharp distinction between the desirable and the possible'.

In general terms, then, we have seen that the leading normative ‘perspectives’ on contemporary international relations are particularly broad in their foundational catchment, and multiple moral theoretical arguments can be utilised as alternative supporting elements. Given this, it is perhaps best to consider cosmopolitanism, the society of states tradition, and realism as representing a wide range of theoretical positions, but respectively categorised on the basis of their shared, or at least similar, normative prescriptions. Thus whilst not representing a developing mass of common moral thought, these categories are useful groupings of ideas and emphases, brought together by their ultimate conclusions, not their foundations.

Yet whilst for some writers such normative labels are clearly retrospective, in other cases it is clear that philosophers and IR theorists consciously write ‘in’ one of the three traditions.<sup>118</sup> Moreover, as already noted, some important figures are much harder to classify, and appear to confound attempts to place them in a single normative category. Although classificatory disputes are similarly prevalent in moral philosophy, in comparison with the latter’s relatively concentrated theoretical fulcra the role of ethical categorisation in global political thought appears to be a much more diminished one, as beyond allegiance to some rather general central tenets of ethical thought, the traditions remain considerably ‘permeable’ in nature.<sup>119</sup>

To impose a further degree of philosophical structure upon this collection of perspectives, it appears possible – in mirroring the earlier analysis of realism<sup>120</sup> – to divide the claims of each international normative framework into empirical and ethical constituents. This process allows us to map some interesting convergences between the outlooks:

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<sup>118</sup> See, for instance C. Fabre, *Cosmopolitan War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

<sup>119</sup> Caney, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>120</sup> See pages 14-16.

	Empirical	Ethical	
		<u>Fundamental Principles</u>	<u>Derived Principles</u>
<b><i>Cosmopolitanism</i></b>	Unspecified	Individual equality, mutual moral protection and obligation.	Cross-border promotion of universal values or human rights.
<b><i>Society of States</i></b>	States observe rules of international society, which restrain their conduct.	The maintenance of international society is of primary ethical value.	Political sovereignty, a norm of non-intervention.
<b><i>Realism</i></b>	The international environment is anarchical. States act primarily to further their power and secure their survival.	Private moral values are inappropriate or irrelevant in the international realm.	States ought to pursue their own national interest and the management of power.

Unpacking the perspectives in this manner uncovers a number of potential reconciliations between their claims, and suggests that the tracks outlined above are not the only coherent progressions. For instance, accepting the realist empirical claim seems entirely compatible with upholding the unremitted ‘validity’ of cosmopolitanism’s fundamental ethical principles. We may agree that human beings are morally equal, and that their interests *ought* – in a more amenable world – to be impartially promoted, but we can at the same time accept that the current reality of interstate competition makes attempts to pursue this endeavour doomed to failure. This outlook could nevertheless deny any dualistic philosophical moralisation of the national interest, and maintain that power politics is merely a stubborn practical barrier to the achievement of singular moral values, rather than an ethically justified practice in its own right.

As touched upon earlier,<sup>121</sup> the fundamental ethical commitment of cosmopolitanism could likewise converge with both the empiricism and derived principles of the society of states perspective. If it were demonstrable on a practical level that states’ observance of a non-intervention norm, and the maintenance of a stable international community, tended to best promote the values of individuals, then a cosmopolitan could accept the principles of

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<sup>121</sup> See pages 11-12.

international sovereignty as the most effective route by which to fulfil their foundational commitments. The communitarian primacy of the society of states tradition would however be denied, with justice now reducible to those states' members. The preservation of a sovereign state community would here only be valued as a *means* to securing the moral entitlements of individuals, not as an ethical goal in itself.

It is instructive to note the ease of reconciliation between this last interpretation and the possible rule-utilitarian grounding of international restraint.<sup>122</sup> Not only does this demonstrate how close the points of overlap can be between perspectives, but it also emphasises once more a degree of classificatory gradation, with the potential for perspectives to collapse into one another around important points of interaction. What can be taken in general from this analysis of constitutive claims is that disagreement between international outlooks often occurs at rather specific levels; variance towards the appropriate moral values in the global realm may mask actual agreement as to the relevant empirical facts of international interaction, or alternatively proponents may endorse dissimilar practical policies despite holding the same fundamental ethical commitments to be true.

By arguing at the wrong level, therefore, it is conceivable that some inter-perspective debate likely mischaracterises its intended target. To guard against this, and isolate the genuine elements of theoretical divergence, the conflict between approaches must be understood as more than a case of holistic antagonism, but rather a sophisticated interplay between distinct layers of thought.

### **Just War Theory**

For the sake of clarity, and as somewhat of a side note, the 'Just War' tradition is worthy of brief comment as another important string to the normative bow of international relations scholarship. Indeed, Just War Theory has been the focus of much important work in the academic history of

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<sup>122</sup> See pages 20-21.

international political thought, and even today is often at the forefront of its moral debates. However, theoretically speaking, constrained discussions of justice in war exist at a level below that of the *framework*-level accounts of international interaction already outlined, having a far more limited scope than those wider normative perspectives.

Whilst the Just War tradition is not so much an 'island' of self-sufficient theoretic thought – for it does exhibit informative links with wider views on international politics<sup>123</sup> – it nonetheless remains, in important respects, a somewhat free-floating body of ideas. The tradition has its original roots in Christian moral thought, and as Rengger consequently notes, 'its formulations, characteristic modes of discussion and some, at least, of its central concerns were rooted in Christian, and indeed sometimes explicitly ecclesiological, concerns.'<sup>124</sup> Yet the subsequent development of Just War thinking seems to have proceeded in a somewhat ad hoc, at times fragmented manner, the result being that in its modern incarnation the role played by competing moral values is in even greater disunity than that exhibited in wider perspectives on the global realm.

Indeed, to look in more detail at the normative criteria of Just War Theory, we come to see not only a similar influence from disparate moral theoretical views, but furthermore the presence of such differently-grounded justifications as simultaneous, *coexisting* foundations. Influenced heavily by Thomas Aquinas' account in the *Summa Theologiae*,<sup>125</sup> the criteria of the Just War tradition are divided into two tracks, and typically include the *jus ad bellum* standards of 'just cause', 'proper authority', 'just intent', 'proportionate response', 'last resort' and 'reasonable hope of success' in the decision to engage in war, coupled with the *jus in bello* standards of 'discrimination', 'proportionality', and 'military necessity' in the conduct of war itself.

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<sup>123</sup> See, for instance, Walzer's close ties to the communitarianism of the society of states tradition: M. Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*. Fourth Edition. New York: Basic Books, 2006, p. 58.

<sup>124</sup> N. Rengger, 'The Judgement of War: On the Idea of Legitimate Force in World Politics', *Review of International Studies* 31. London: Butterworths, 2005, p. 157.

<sup>125</sup> T. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: A Concise Translation*. Trans. T. McDermott. London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1989.

Amongst this set of standard constraints, it is yet again possible to offer competing accounts of underlying moral value. The importance granted to criteria such as 'just cause', 'just intent' and – on one potential reading – 'discrimination' would seem to sit quite easily with them being the subjects of deontological, consequence-independent concern, as the rule-based presentation of the clauses more generally may suggest. Yet at the same time, the dual criteria of 'proportionality', along with the concern with 'hope of success' appear starkly consequence-oriented in their nature, and hence suggest a contrasting moral viewpoint. The criterion of 'proper authority' could likewise be afforded justification from either perspective.

The main precepts of Just War thinking thus appear to draw upon a number of distinct ethical intuitions, coalescing moral ideas that would normally be at home within differing philosophical schools of thought. As Philippa Foot in particular has noted, the combination of such intuitions need not be incoherent,<sup>126</sup> but to the extent that such elements lack a unifying clarification or hierarchy the tradition runs the risk of an almost schizophrenic reading of normative value. Where the balance between these competing conceptions lies is therefore a defining element of modern Just War accounts, with a particular focus upon those difficult cases that present apparent 'moral dilemmas' – instances in which there is inherent difficulty in fulfilling the demands of each ethical focus.

Despite its partial isolation from the larger perspectives to which we are primarily concerned, an analysis of Just War Theory can provide us with some important insights into the utilisation and deployment of ethical arguments within international scholarship more generally, encapsulating something of the wider spirit of global moral-political discourse. Indeed, the confrontation between deontic and consequence-based notions that is evident in the limited context of the Just War criteria proves to be microcosmic of more widespread tension within international ethics – the possibility that grave consequentialist calculations might pressure the violation of

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<sup>126</sup> See P. Foot, 'Utilitarianism and the Virtues' [Revised]. *Mind* 94(374). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.

deontological norms, brought to the surface most readily in popular and academic debates on warfare, and other 'issue-centred' analyses. On encountering this friction, there is a tendency within much academic literature to treat the international realm as one permeated by exception and mitigation, and in which appeals to 'get-out' clauses such as the Doctrine of Double Effect are granted major and recurrent normative roles.

The full spectrum of these observations are no more evident than in the most influential Just War contribution of recent times, Michael Walzer's *Just and Unjust Wars*, in which a split conception of underlying moral value is openly explicated:

The morality I shall expound is in its philosophical form a doctrine of human rights... considerations of utility play into the structure at many points, but they cannot account for it as a whole. Their part is subsidiary to rights; it is constrained by rights.<sup>127</sup>

Yet the apparently subordinate role Walzer grants to consequence-based considerations remains an importantly qualified one, and the tension between competing moral impulses comes to a head once more as his argument develops. In a further moral theoretical turn, his account incorporates the possibility of exemption from the restraining primacy of rights in certain limited circumstances, seeking to justify a utilitarian threshold for the violation of settled constraints as existing in cases of so-called 'supreme emergency', in which the very survival of a state is threatened by a serious and immediate threat.<sup>128</sup> The interrelation and hierarchy of ethical values is here a puzzlingly complex one, with the element constraining consequentialism itself potentially overruled by it.

To sum up then, the philosophical base of Just War Theory is fragmented, variegated and disputed, and is perhaps best employed merely as a 'framework for debates', as Davis suggests.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Walzer, *op. cit.*, p. xxiv.

<sup>128</sup> Though Walzer does not fully account, beyond a loose 'intuitionism', the exact moral theoretical basis for the legal paradigm rights 'supreme emergency' overrides: *Ibid.*, Chapter 16.

<sup>129</sup> Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

As we have already seen, this is representative of the normative traditions within international thought more generally, which in addition to the theoretical miasma tend to have their elements combined in 'a rather haphazard way' by actual practical political discourse.<sup>130</sup>

### III

## Virtue Ethics

The primary aim of the preceding sections has been not to evaluate the plausibility of competing normative arguments concerning international relations, but to dissect their myriad foundations for the purposes of locating the role of moral philosophical thought. As identified, this role is far from straightforward. Yet whilst we have found repeated reference to two of the leading contemporary moral theories identified at the outset – consequentialism and deontology – the third, virtue ethics,<sup>131</sup> appears to be conspicuous by its absence.

#### **Virtue Ethical Literature**

Use of the *term* 'virtue' is more prevalent in global political literature than work that may properly qualify as belonging to the moral tradition. Beyond such loose employment of the expression there exists no extensive virtue ethical account of contemporary international relations, described as such. As the father of this moral outlook, Aristotle himself has few mentions of foreign affairs in his *Politics*, and what he does say is largely restricted to rather technical matters of defence:

a city should employ not only such instruments of war as are serviceable in its own territory but also such as are serviceable for use abroad... it is... essential to be

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<sup>130</sup> Mapel and Nardin, *loc. cit.*

<sup>131</sup> A number of different forms of virtue ethics have been advanced by various moral philosophers, each differing in subtle but important respects. For the purposes of initial comparison, the discussion of this section takes a broadly Aristotelian framework as its principal touchstone; nevertheless, the overarching aim of this project is to remain neutral between these differing virtue ethical outlooks, a standpoint which will be more fully developed in subsequent chapters.

formidable to enemies both when they are invading one's territory and when they are in retreat.<sup>132</sup>

The depth of knowledge that is evident in Aristotle's varied examples of political communities, and the actions of their members, suggests that he took a keen interest in happenings beyond the borders of Athens.<sup>133</sup> Yet whilst he obviously gave much thought to the relationships between different societies, his international normative insights are mainly directed at issues of internal – that is, domestic – constitution:

the proper amount [of property]... should not be so large that neighbouring and more powerful cities will covet it, while its owners are unable to repel an attack: on the other hand, it should not be so small that those who own it are unable to sustain the burden of a war even with cities equal and similar to their own.<sup>134</sup>

Yet along with this difference in emphasis, and the relative paucity of 'external' inter-societal thought, it is equally important to consider other more tangible differences between the world inhabited by Classical Greek political theorists and that of the present. Writers on virtue like Plato and Aristotle considered an 'international' system that has long since departed, one in which well over a thousand independent city-states formed the basic units of political organisation, and which were tiny by present standards.<sup>135</sup> Given this, it is likely that only limited insights could be successfully transferred onto the structure of the modern nation state, the contemporary interstate system, or indeed the character and interconnections of our modern world more generally.

But outside of the foundational texts of the tradition, virtue ethical thought concerning the realm of international relations becomes no easier to identify, with Chris Brown contending that

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<sup>132</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*. Trans. E. Barker and R. F. Stalley. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 53.

<sup>133</sup> R. F. Stalley, 'Introduction', in *Politics*, Aristotle. Trans. E. Barker and R. F. Stalley. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. vii.

<sup>134</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, p. 60. He also gives some discussion to the motives of war, as being aimed at the achievement of peace and leisure: *Ibid.*, pp. 285-88.

<sup>135</sup> Stalley, *op. cit.*, pp. vii-xiv.

thinking of this kind 'has not yet penetrated deeply' into the field's literature.<sup>136</sup> As a result of this realisation, Brown himself seeks to draw attention to the perspective of virtue, but his focus is limited to the confines of the cosmopolitan-communitarian debate.<sup>137</sup> As was alluded to earlier, this distinction is a somewhat parallel discussion to the process of delineating the normative positions within global political scholarship, and takes issue as to whether the individual or the community is the most suitable subject of moral concern.

This question is of undoubted importance, and indeed Molly Cochran goes as far as to place it at the very centre of normative theorising within the modern discipline of IR.<sup>138</sup> However, the extent of this investigation alone is somewhat limited, and does not – in Brown's treatment at least – approach a more encompassing account of global interaction. Quite obviously, where one ultimately grounds moral importance is heavily linked to the basis of that valuation, and this is clearly dependent upon what one takes the underlying theoretical constitution of value to be. But as Caney notes, merely confronting the first issue, and coming to a conclusion as to the level at which justice operates, can obscure major underlying differences in accounts; both the society of states and realist traditions value the state, and yet they exhibit significantly different – perhaps mutually exclusive – positions on international normativity and its foundations.<sup>139</sup>

For this reason, presenting a particular yet isolated analysis of the cosmopolitan-communitarian debate, even if Brown is right in claiming that a Neo-Aristotelian perspective 'explodes' such categorisation, in itself tells us relatively little about what a larger virtue ethical account of international normativity might be like,<sup>140</sup> and directly tackling this latter challenge does not

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<sup>136</sup> Brown, 'The Normative Framework of Post-Cold War International Relations', p. 163 note 29.

<sup>137</sup> See C. Brown, 'Towards a Neo-Aristotelian Resolution of the Cosmopolitan-Communitarian Debate', in *Value Pluralism, Normative Theory and International Relations*. Eds. M. Lensu and J-S. Fritz. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000.

<sup>138</sup> M. Cochran, *Normative Theory in International Relations: A Pragmatic Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 4.

<sup>139</sup> Caney, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>140</sup> Brown, 'Towards a Neo-Aristotelian Resolution of the Cosmopolitan-Communitarian Debate', p. 88. And as we shall later see, the distinctive virtue ethical take on this wider framework ventures into much deeper philosophical waters than Brown perhaps realises.

appear to be in Brown's limited remit. Furthermore, the direction in which he nudges our attention, the 'capabilities approach' of Martha Nussbaum, tends to be directed towards developmental issues *within* states as opposed to being a standpoint on the wider interactions of the global realm.<sup>141</sup>

In any case, Brown's treatment is self-avowedly no more than introductory, a 'preliminary account' or 'sketch' that is merely suggestive of further work proceeding in this direction, and hopes for a similar shift in perspective at the framework level.<sup>142</sup> Fellow IR theorist Kirsten Ainley offers a similarly broad advocacy of the merits of bringing virtue to bear upon the international realm, but here limits her analysis to the theory's devaluing of obligation and rule-following.<sup>143</sup> Clearly, then, these accounts – by their own admission – are not to be considered major contributions to this moral tradition's presence within global political scholarship, whilst other work with a 'virtue ethical' flavour, such as that of Stan van Hooft and Pedro Tabensky, proves to be rather peripheral to the chief normative concerns of international relations.<sup>144</sup>

A considerable proportion of modern literature on global politics, especially that emerging from within political philosophy, is devoted to questions of global distributive justice, a debate that has been profoundly influenced by the work of John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* and subsequently *The Law of Peoples*.<sup>145</sup> Given that Aristotle lists 'justice' as an important moral virtue,<sup>146</sup> we might

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<sup>141</sup> For her developed position, see M. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

<sup>142</sup> Brown, 'Towards a Neo-Aristotelian Resolution of the Cosmopolitan-Communitarian Debate', pp. 85, 95.

<sup>143</sup> In her discussion she claims rather sweepingly that 'There is no literature on virtue in IR – no body of work that systematically or otherwise applies the insights of virtue ethics to the international realm.' As the present discussion hopes to demonstrate, this claim deserves a fuller investigation, and (even aside from subsequent literature) ought to be importantly qualified. K. Ainley, 'Virtue Ethics and International Relations' (working paper), [http://www.academia.edu/362959/Virtue\\_Ethics\\_and\\_International\\_Relations](http://www.academia.edu/362959/Virtue_Ethics_and_International_Relations), July 2010, p. 17.

<sup>144</sup> The former delimits discussion of cosmopolitanism to a stance within the personal morality of private citizens, whilst the latter, besides a promising title, proceeds no further than a questionable negative argument against the internal consistency of anti-idealism within realist theory, offering no positive account: Van Hooft, *op. cit.*; P. A. Tabensky, 'Realistic Idealism: An Aristotelian Alternative to Machiavellian International Relations', *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory* 113. Oxford: Berghahn, 2007.

<sup>145</sup> J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*. Revised Edition. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: 1999; Rawls, *The Law of Peoples*.

instead hope to find an overt discussion of aretaic concepts in this important body of work. But yet again such virtue ethical potentiality fails to find fruition, for such discussions of justice in contemporary political scholarship tend instead to focus upon the concept in its relation to 'just states of affairs', rather than its nature as a characterological attribute of the moral agent – as 'that kind of state of character which makes people disposed to do what is just and makes them act justly and wish for what is just'.<sup>147</sup> Discussions of the former can therefore operate without any engagement with ideas of virtue.<sup>148</sup>

Perhaps the closest the literature on global politics has come to an explicit virtue ethical reading of contemporary international relations may be, firstly, Grady Scott Davis's *Warcraft and the Fragility of Virtue*, and secondly, David K. Chan's *Beyond Just War: A Virtue Ethics Approach*. The comparable limitations of each are, nonetheless, overt. In the first instance, Davis's book purports to present the *first instance* of 'a well-developed and effective Aristotelian perspective' on reasoning in the international sphere;<sup>149</sup> but although his account is a genuinely enlightening one, in terms of its contribution to international normative theory as a whole it is once again a work of rather constrained scope and impact.

The focus of Davis's Aristotelian critique is not the normative landscape of international relations at large, but instead the earlier-outlined confines of Just War Theory, a tradition of thought in which he self-consciously takes his account to be located.<sup>150</sup> In place of undertaking a ground-up construction from new normative foundations, Davis instead aims to provide an alternative justification for *existing* Just War principles, drawing upon the support of the virtues as a means to augment the role of such criteria within international ethical deliberation. The major motivation behind this project is an attempt to reformulate the tradition in a manner that

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As can be expected, the various perspectives on international relations take dissimilar views on the scope and requirements of justice in the international realm.

<sup>146</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Book V.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>148</sup> Rawls's moral theoretical allegiances are, after all, deontological.

<sup>149</sup> Davis, *op. cit.*, back blurb.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

liberates Aristotelian underpinnings from their obfuscating appropriation by Christian theology, thus providing a mainstream secular grounding upon which discussions of war and conflict can proceed.<sup>151</sup>

Chan's account, as its title suggests, likewise takes Just War Theory as its sole focus, though in contrast to Davis the principal thrust of his argument is instead to *undermine* its (in his view, overly-permissive) principles, rather than reformulate them. Chan proposes an alternative and more restrictive 'philosophy of co-existence' for reasoning about war, grounded upon the claim that virtuous agents ought to hold a strong – and in all but the most extreme cases, overriding – aversion to killing. He argues that this single claim about human good, regardless of what else is taken to be virtuous, is all that is needed to model virtuous choice about war.<sup>152</sup>

Though war is perhaps justifiably seen as one of the most paradigmatic issues in international relations, these virtue-referencing accounts are still some way off informing the kinds of framework-level normative theories as were earlier examined, and make little gesture towards what such overarching structures, informed by virtue, might be like. Indeed, in seeking to provide practical guidance in situations of conflict, significant sections of Davis's account in fact shift their focus in the opposite direction, and consider instead the *individual* perspectives of combat and military service, examining the challenges that are presented to 'fragile' moral character by the stresses of such participation. Whilst certainly worthy of investigation in their own right, such concerns are somewhat removed from the remit of political decision-making to which theories of international interaction are primarily concerned. Whilst Chan's approach does raise analysis to the level of state-*leaders*, it offers no further insight into virtuous choice and action in wider contexts, grounding conclusions about warfare chiefly upon the consideration of a single disposition.

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<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>152</sup> D. K. Chan, *Beyond Just War: A Virtue Ethics Approach*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 103-6.

It seems then that virtue ethics has little direct representation in international normative literature at the broad, systematic-level with which we are concerned. But as we have already noted, this is by no means exclusive, for it is likewise a feature of its moral theoretical competitors to lack obtrusive application within the sphere; rather, their position tends to be underlying, and even at times uncredited. Perhaps in a similar manner, then, virtue ethical thought is merely shrouded beneath the surface differences of this domain's theoretical landscape, and informs its broader normative perspectives in ways that may not be readily apparent. A survey of international political scholarship and its development shows this to be a promising avenue, for on deeper examination the study of this area is littered with thoughts and ideas that appear remarkably 'virtue ethical' in character, scattered across its historical expanse.<sup>153</sup> Most prominent amongst these is the recurrent notion of 'prudence'.

### **The 'Prudence' Tradition**

Elements of a tradition of 'prudence' within international scholarship can be seen to inform the normative thinking of a number of modern accounts, particularly those of a realist and society of states perspective.<sup>154</sup> The concept of 'prudence' is representative of a much older body of literature within political thought, one that concentrates heavily upon the ethics of leadership and statecraft, an area that is perhaps less prominent in work of more recent times. In a manner clearly resonant with the virtue ethical focus, an emphasis on the *character* of ruling figures proved an important historical feature of this approach.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> At a push we could perhaps read the society of states emphasis on the protection of pluralism in the light of MacIntyre's virtue ethical view on the coexistence of different moral traditions, although his somewhat controversial position on this issue is by no means an orthodoxy within virtue ethics, and is furthermore primarily concerned with traditions *of virtue*, rather than the domestic values of particular states. See MacIntyre, *op. cit.*

<sup>154</sup> See, for instance, Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, p. 12.

<sup>155</sup> A number of authors, including Morgenthau, stress the *general* importance of a leader having a strong character, but *which* character is of course the key question here. Not many would happily endorse the type of character that Machiavelli suggests!

For the purposes of our present investigation, the importance of the notion of ‘prudence’ is that it seems, initially at least, to play a remarkably similar role to that of ‘practical wisdom’, one of the central structural elements of virtue ethical deliberation.<sup>156</sup> For Aristotle, practical wisdom or *phronesis* is an important intellectual virtue, developed and perfected via repeated experience, by which a virtuous agent correctly judges the appropriate moral response to any particular set of situational circumstances, ‘a reasoned and true state of capacity to act with regard to human goods’.<sup>157</sup> Where it has appeared throughout the historical literature on international relations, prudence is similarly taken to be a ‘political virtue’ or practical skill, although as Alberto Coll notes its specific function has often been the subject of ‘vagueness and imprecision’.<sup>158</sup>

Aristotle, as we have noted, and also his partial theoretic successor Thomas Aquinas, tend to concentrate their conceptions of practical wisdom to decisions *within* a political community, rather than in terms of its external relations.<sup>159</sup> Furthermore, the latter somewhat diverges from the main body of virtue ethical thought through his association with the natural law tradition, in which his analogous concept of *prudentia* is employed in a rather different manner to traditional *phronesis* – as a means of resolving indeterminacies in the application of moral *principles* after deductive rational analysis has been exhausted.<sup>160</sup> Whilst duty to consistently uphold such principles perhaps has some resonance with Aristotle’s discussion of the rules of friendship in books IX and X of *The Nicomachean Ethics*,<sup>161</sup> Aquinas’s inclusion of a number of distinctly Christian precepts, along with the claim that they are accessible via reason alone, is fairly alien to

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<sup>156</sup> The concept is analysed in more detail in Chapter 3, pages 143-52.

<sup>157</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 143.

<sup>158</sup> A. Coll, ‘Normative Prudence As a Tradition of Statecraft’, in *Ethics and International Affairs: A Reader*. Ed. J. H. Rosenthal. Second Edition. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1999, p. 93.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>160</sup> J. Boyle, ‘Natural Law and International Ethics’, in *Traditions of International Ethics*. Eds. T. Nardin and D. R. Mapel. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 125-26.

<sup>161</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, pp. 215-227.

the mainstream body of virtue ethical understanding, even if the irreducible capacity to practically reconcile them rests on ‘character, experience, and a feel for moral subtlety’.<sup>162</sup>

### *Machiavelli*

Instead, perhaps the earliest substantial example of a prudential concept in international thought is Machiavelli’s notion of *virtù*, which places central emphasis on the need for political actions to be suited to the circumstances in which they are implemented, and for a ruler to be able to adapt to the shifting exigencies of his situation as they present themselves. As is noted,

he must be prepared to vary his conduct as the winds of fortune and changing circumstance constrain him...<sup>163</sup> we are successful when our ways are suited to the times and circumstances, and unsuccessful when they are not... The reason for these different outcomes is whether their ways of acting conform with the conditions in which they operate.<sup>164</sup>

But beyond sharing the virtue ethical concern for the context-sensitivity of appropriate action, the content of Machiavelli’s *virtù* is far removed from that of practical wisdom proper, as its substance is ordinarily understood in the Aristotelian-inspired tradition. Whereas the latter notion represents a capacity to locate the best *moral* course of action, the motivation of *virtù* reflects pure expediency – the ability to perform most effectively in the unadulterated pursuit of power, with a willingness to disregard almost any conventional moral constraints for the purposes of self-preservation.<sup>165</sup> Though this Machiavellian conception of prudence – as a skilful and often surreptitious aptitude to fulfil egoistic ambitions – may very well still cohere with what *he himself* counts as ‘moral’ in the political realm,<sup>166</sup> it is a distorted if not perverted analogue to

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<sup>162</sup> Mapel and Nardin, *op. cit.*, pp. 306-307. Indeed, the conception of such principles of *moral law*, and which include the notion of double effect, suggests a framework closer to deontological ethical thought.

<sup>163</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 62.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>165</sup> Q. Skinner, ‘Introduction’, in *The Prince*, N. Machiavelli. Ed. Q. Skinner, Trans. R. Price. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. xx.

<sup>166</sup> See the earlier discussion of Machiavelli’s dual morality on pages 27-28.

anything found within mainstream virtue ethical writing, and as Coll identifies it has more in common with Aristotle's conception of a merely 'shallow cleverness' than *phronesis*:<sup>167</sup>

There is a faculty which is called cleverness; and this is such as to be able to do the things that tend towards the mark we have set before ourselves, and to hit it. Now if the mark be noble, the cleverness is laudable, but if the mark be bad, the cleverness is mere smartness.<sup>168</sup>

Yet as Coll concedes, despite its dissociation from the richer meaning of earlier conceptions, it is this realist equation of 'prudence' with self-interest – its reduction to 'mere pragmatism' – that has to an extent become the orthodox understanding of the term in modern political discourse.<sup>169</sup> Indeed, it is certainly on these grounds that Nardin envisages the term, setting up the force of prudential consideration as a competing pressure *against* established morality in the deliberation of international conduct.<sup>170</sup> Nonetheless, this convention is not without dissenters, and the prudential conceptions of some later writers in this area have, at least on the surface, a distinctly moral tone.

### *Burke*

The writings of politician and political theorist Edmund Burke can be suitably placed in this latter category, for his exposition of the role of prudence in international affairs is one in which the guidance of morality is never far removed.<sup>171</sup> Burke's normative categorisation within international thought is a matter of some dispute; he is regarded by some as an early modern realist, whilst Welsh argues that his views on communities of states as bearing rights and duties, and of directing power to the maintenance of order, 'straddle the line' with a society of states

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<sup>167</sup> Coll, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

<sup>168</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 156.

<sup>169</sup> Coll, *op. cit.*, pp. 77-78.

<sup>170</sup> Nardin, *loc. cit.*

<sup>171</sup> Coll's delineation of this as 'normative prudence' is perhaps unwise, as even the expediency of a Machiavellian conception is 'normative' in the sense that it guides what one *ought* to do as a means to successfully achieving egoistic ends – that is, hypothetically (versus categorically) normative: Coll, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

perspective, and perhaps push him closer to the latter.<sup>172</sup> Certainly, his claim that the social state of mankind is more 'natural' than an anarchical state of war would seem to challenge one of the load-bearing foundations of classical realist thought.<sup>173</sup>

However, the degree of uncertainty as to Burke's appropriate theoretical positioning is perhaps a symptom of his wider scepticism for intellectual theory in general, which he saw as an unreliable guide to practical human action.<sup>174</sup> This deflationary attitude is recurrently evident in his most lauded work, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*:

What is the use of discussing a man's abstract right to food or medicine? The question is upon the method of procuring and administering them. In that deliberation I shall always advise to call in the aid of the farmer and the physician, rather than the professor of metaphysics.<sup>175</sup>

Whilst it is partly this resistance to theorisation that grounds his advocacy of international prudence, viewing successful statesmanship as a skill irreducible to generalised maxims, his theoretic underdevelopment and limited interest in 'the intricate logic of moral philosophy' make his eventual formulation of the concept somewhat obscure in its details and ethical foundation.<sup>176</sup> Thus the fact that Burke 'did not treat prudence with a high degree of intellectual precision'<sup>177</sup> is somewhat problematic when attempting to inspect its virtue ethical credentials. Though likely indirectly, Burke clearly took inspiration from 'Aristotelian' thinking. His distinction between the deliberative capacities of professors and statesmen for instance, which he sees as resting on the importance of the latter's practical experience, would certainly be at home in the tradition's

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<sup>172</sup> Welsh, *op. cit.*, pp. 141, 151.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>174</sup> Coll, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

Aristotle also urged caution as to the prospects of theory alone, though as the detail and sophistication of his ethical account demonstrate, this was evidently meant in a more qualified sense than Burke's wider scepticism. 'It is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits': *The Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 3.

<sup>175</sup> E. Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003, p. 51.

<sup>176</sup> Welsh, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

<sup>177</sup> Coll, *loc. cit.*

understanding of moral development.<sup>178</sup> The science of government, he argues, cannot be taught *a priori* but is 'practical in itself, and intended for such practical purposes, a matter which requires experience'.<sup>179</sup>

Nevertheless, and perhaps as a result of his exposure to Thomistic natural law, it seems that the structural role of Burke's prudence is in reality closer to that of Aquinas than Aristotle, for it is again regarded as a key component in an overarching ethics of *principle*.<sup>180</sup> On this understanding, the function of prudence is one of *mediation*, a means by which to reconcile the imperative of general moral precepts with 'the infinitely variable and complex circumstances to which those principles must be applied', with this appeasement of the universal and particular fed into the process of situational policymaking and political action.<sup>181</sup> This is not the role of practical wisdom as virtue ethicists standardly understand it, for virtue is regarded as much more than a skilled capacity for the intricate and thoughtful application of guiding axioms; it is an educated yet significantly *autonomous* moral authority, a judgement that transcends the conscious consideration of interacting duties and guidelines.

The manner in which Burke conceives of such resolution, furthermore, lacks all but linguistic consonance with its Aristotelian equivalent, for his concern with finding the *via media* or 'golden mean' is for him a rather arithmetically minded enterprise, an aim to find the middle result of the greatest number and variety of considerations, in which the competing claims of morality and expediency are quite literally 'balanced'.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Coll suggests that his exposure to Aristotelian and Thomistic ideas came through the mediation of the Anglican theologian Richard Hooker: *Ibid.*

<sup>179</sup> Burke, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-52.

<sup>180</sup> Indeed, Welsh suggests that Burke's moral views are likely founded in a variant of natural law rooted in custom rather than religion: Welsh, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

<sup>181</sup> Coll, *op. cit.*, pp. 91-92.

<sup>182</sup> Welsh, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

when the equipoise of the vessel in which he sails may be endangered by overloading it upon one side, [one] is desirous of carrying the small weight of his reasons to that which may preserve its equipoise.<sup>183</sup>

As Welsh suggests, this preoccupation in Burke's thought likely flows from his 'deeper aesthetic preference for harmonious proportion',<sup>184</sup> but it is far removed from the fuller conception of the 'virtuous mean' employed within the moral philosophical tradition. On this latter (at least Aristotelian) reading, *phronesis* represents a reliable capacity to locate circumstantially-appropriate action as lying intermediate between respective vices of excess and deficiency.<sup>185</sup> But unlike Burke's conception of prudence such a 'mean' of action is not considered a literal equidistance between these extremes, but a flexible judgement that is irreducibly sensitive to the features of a particular situation:

the intermediate relatively to us... is not one nor the same for all. For instance, if ten is too many and two is few, six is the intermediate, taken in terms of the object; for it exceeds and is exceeded by an equal amount... according to arithmetical proportion. But the intermediate relatively to us is not to be taken so.<sup>186</sup>

Hence, despite its moral associations, and close as it may be to the general spirit of practical wisdom, the Burkean conception of international prudence differs significantly from the deliberative work of its Aristotelian forerunner, and once more cannot be seen as a genuine equivalent. The concept in many ways resembles more of a virtue ethical 'fragment', somewhat isolated from its formative starting point in the tradition, and which fails to carry over any of the wider moral insights of its theoretical heritage. Given this, Burke's focus on international character cannot be thought comparable to the full requirements of a virtue ethical perspective, which demands more than the superficial resemblance his account displays.

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<sup>183</sup> Burke, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

<sup>184</sup> Welsh, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

<sup>185</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 39. Modern virtue ethicists have nevertheless tended to move away from Aristotle's over-simplified claim that the relationship between virtue and vice can be understood along this single dimension of excess and deficiency.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

*Jackson*

Aside from these particular shortcomings, it is also important to remember that our primary concern is to locate potential virtue ethical thought within *contemporary* international normative theory, within which the somewhat dated account of Burke is perhaps more formative than enduring. To this end, it is informative to consider the work of society of states theorist Robert Jackson, who in *The Global Covenant* can be seen to take up the mantle of the prudence tradition and give it an instructive modern reading. Jackson draws upon the insights of Burke, and in this respect can perhaps be generally linked to his Aristotelian influences via a rather tenuous intellectual progression.

Jackson's account of the international realm is perhaps more theoretically developed than the pronouncements of his predecessor. At the heart of his approach is the division of international normativity into two spheres: *international procedure* and *international prudence*. The former is taken to be part of an ethics of principle, dealing with the accepted norms and procedures of international interaction – with the observance of state sovereignty and international law. The latter, however, is considered part of an ethics of *virtue*, and takes its concern to be the more indeterminate matters of statecraft and the national interest.<sup>187</sup> Through this demarcation, Jackson is able to move the concept of political prudence away from its problematic entanglement with ultimate *moral* principles, and instead shifts its focus onto the customary and legal standards of state interaction.

In specific terms, the latter prudential sphere of ethical action is seen as operating in the space left open by the procedural obligations of the former, and is subject to the important notion of *discretion* on the part of political leaders – of choosing in what circumstances and in what manner the agreed regulative values of the international community are to be observed and applied. As Jackson outlines:

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<sup>187</sup> Jackson, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

The rule of non-intervention is not open to serious doubt as to its legal form or existence. However, it is open to stateleaders to decide when and where and how it shall be enforced... If a superpower is engaged in an act of intervention which violates another state's right of non-intervention it may be impossible to do anything about it. Even if something could be done it might still be unwise if it involved an unacceptable risk of major war. In that event discretion might be the better part of valour.<sup>188</sup>

Jackson therefore accepts that normative procedure may be violated on the basis of prudential judgement, and argues that the appropriateness of such discretion – given the particularity of circumstance – simply cannot be reduced to 'fixed and permanent' ethical principles.<sup>189</sup> Statespeople thus cannot have their choices made *for* them by deference to some external standard, but they can be given bearings and direction by the qualities of their character.<sup>190</sup> This understanding, in placing much greater authority upon the autonomy of individual choice, appears much closer to the virtue ethical conception of practical wisdom, and indeed is rather similar to Aristotle's own dual appreciation of political conduct:

Rightly constituted laws should be [the final] sovereign, but rulers, whether one or many, should be sovereign in those matters on which law is unable, owing to the difficulty of framing general rules for all contingencies, to make an exact pronouncement.<sup>191</sup>

The seeming affinity between Jacksonian prudence and the tradition of virtue is strengthened still further by his account's repeated emphasis on the *development* of this discretionary capacity, which, even more so than in Burke's account, stresses the inexorable essentiality of experience. In labelling international ethics a 'craft discipline', Jackson draws a fundamental distinction between 'the practical world of foreign policy and the theoretical world of academic analysis' as being 'categorically different modes of understanding'.<sup>192</sup> Knowledge of the former requires immediate experience of the situation being faced, replete with all the depth and subtlety with which the

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<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 20, 147.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 418.

<sup>191</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, p. 112.

<sup>192</sup> Jackson, *op. cit.*, pp. 91, 80.

decision-maker faces it, and moreover knowing what to *do* in such a context can only result from an accumulated familiarity with that very process of deliberation.

Political science graduates are not guaranteed solely by their academic credentials to become successful politicians. That clearly is absurd, for they would still have to acquire practical political know-how which can only be derived from experience in a political role... We cannot say or write down everything we know about an art or a craft that we have mastered. Much that we know will remain unarticulated.<sup>193</sup>

All of this has much that is amenable to a virtue ethical outlook, and at the same time there are no conspicuous moral theoretic divergences that would make this confluent reading of Jackson unsustainable, as was the case with earlier prudential accounts. But it is in regard to *content* of prudential judgement that virtue ethical comparisons become slightly redundant. Jackson's reading of prudence is of course tailored to his own society of states view, in the context of which he sees the primary employment of political discretion to be the careful management of power, in a manner that limits potential harm. The Cold War, he claims, demonstrated this very kind of appropriate and responsible discretion on behalf of both American and Soviet leaders, for despite dangerous crises they 'always managed to contain the dangers of such moments before events spun entirely out of control'.<sup>194</sup>

But apart from regarding their decisions as 'responsible', there is little insight as to what political virtue actually involves, as to what makes any particular decision in the discretionary space of international relations an example of prudence, beyond rather generally being 'the best choice the circumstances permit'.<sup>195</sup> As Jackson articulates,

exercising political judgement means filling that area of discretion with a decision or policy that is wise and not foolish, that is thought through and not arrived at impulsively, that is timely, that is suited to the task, that shows foresight and not shortsightedness, that accurately anticipates the reactions and repercussions which

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<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 88-90.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

are most likely to be provoked by it, that correctly estimates its chances of success, that is fully alert to its opportunity costs, and so forth.<sup>196</sup>

These requirements, along with statements elsewhere that decisions ought to disclose ‘care and judgement’ rather than recklessness,<sup>197</sup> are exceedingly unspecific. In itself this cannot be regarded as a particularly stringent line of criticism, for Aristotle himself is similarly vague as to what the demands of virtuous action are in concrete circumstances. As the latter attests, a practically wise decision is simply to act towards ‘the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way’.<sup>198</sup> But where Jackson’s account falls short is in its additional degree of *structural* vagueness. That moral action requires an informed contextual judgement is certainly an essential ingredient of a virtue ethical account, but it alone is not *enough* to mark one out as a virtue ethicist. Disconnected from other theoretical commitments, that behaviour should be ‘wise and not foolish’ is so trivially the case that surely any normative outlook would recommend it; likewise a consequentialist viewpoint would certainly regard good timing, foresight, and anticipation as essential components in moral decision-making.

Jackson does not therefore say enough about the nature of his ‘ethics of virtue’ to rule out integration within other, competing, moral frameworks. If the Cold War example of keeping harmful confrontation in check – ‘the least damaging choice’<sup>199</sup> – is the only standard by which to interpret discretionary conduct, then political prudence could quickly collapse into a skilful mastery of some utilitarian goal.<sup>200</sup> To deflect this possibility a more explicit elucidation of virtue and its constitution is required, one that makes clear that it is valued for its own sake – as the primary good in itself – and not merely as a means to the fulfilment of some independent ethical goal.

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<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>198</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 45.

<sup>199</sup> Jackson, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

<sup>200</sup> Jackson elsewhere outlines states as having both ‘the negative responsibility to forbear from inflicting *needless or unjustified* hardship or damages or suffering on others’ and ‘the positive responsibility to come to the assistance of others *when the occasion demands* and it is possible and *wise to do so*’: *Ibid.*, p. 139. Again, what the key terms (emphasis added) actually consist in, with respect to prudence, is left unspecified.

This position would likely require a fuller discussion of the attributes of virtue *as* a character trait – outlining how the possession and manifestation of moral dispositions tie-in with motivational, perhaps emotional components,<sup>201</sup> and some investigation of the relationship *between* the virtues and vices of global political conduct.

These important philosophical elements are missing in Jackson's account, and as such its theorisation fails to reach the required critical mass that could properly qualify it as truly 'virtue ethical'. Its compatibility with some potentially more developed aretaic framework leaves open its charitable appraisal as perhaps 'proto-virtue ethical' in nature, but as long as prudence remains no more than a very general call for good judgement, *The Global Covenant* could equally be read as a basically consequentialist account of international normativity. This latter possibility precludes it as a serious candidate for virtue ethical contribution.

The likely reason for these shortcomings is that Jackson does not self-consciously draw upon the virtue ethical tradition. Beyond his vocabulary, and his debt to Burke, any potential 'Aristotelianism' in the underpinning of his account is at best unpronounced; there is no reference to virtue ethics as a moral theory, perhaps no awareness, and very little talk of Aristotle or his academic successors in general. If the moral tradition of virtue does inform his outlook, then it certainly does not do so to the same degree, or on as direct a track, as other moral theories have been seen to underlie the frameworks of this realm, or indeed the society of states view specifically.

In general, then, it would appear that virtue ethical thought has a rather fragmented representation within international normative theories. Elements and emphases of the virtue tradition are scattered throughout the historical development of international political discourse, and across its contemporary ethical frameworks, but these notions either are theoretically incomplete or have deviated from their original structural roles. The concept of 'prudence' is both

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<sup>201</sup> See the respective discussions of these elements in Chapter 3.

variable and vague across the literature it permeates, and would require an explicit and coherent place within a larger virtue ethical enterprise in order to do the work of practical wisdom in its fully-formulated sense. An account of this kind has yet to be presented in either political or philosophical literature.

Nevertheless, in their shared concern for the specific situational character of decision-making, the various incarnations of the prudence tradition can certainly be regarded as capturing an important virtue ethical 'intuition' about the nature of practical judgement, even if its philosophical heritage is not frequently acknowledged. Prudential accounts, furthermore, tend to exhibit a general scepticism towards the extent of moral possibilities in constraining circumstances, with an emphasis on the regrettable inability to fulfil all competing ethical demands. This handle on 'limitation' is an important characteristic, and perhaps one that a fuller virtue ethical account could maintain and build upon.

### **An Absent Perspective**

The scarcity of developed virtue ethical thought within the normative study of international affairs must strike us as a quite perplexing state of affairs, and, moreover, it seems inescapable to ask *why* this might be the case. That a major moral approach could be coincidentally overlooked in relation to such an important sphere of conduct seems unsustainable, for in recent times the perspective of virtue has been applied to a wide and diverse variety of topics – ranging from abortion, to the environment, and even the philosophy of Buddhism.<sup>202</sup> Given this, can its puzzling under-representation within global political discourse be satisfactorily explained?

Perhaps it can. Depending on the perspective taken, 'virtue ethics' is at the same time both the oldest *and* the youngest of the three main normative moral theories. Whilst the Platonic and

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<sup>202</sup> For the first issue see Rosalind Hursthouse's important contribution: R. Hursthouse, 'Virtue Theory and Abortion'. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 20(3). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991. For the intersection of the latter two issues, see the work of David Cooper and Simon James: D. E. Cooper and S. P. James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005.

Aristotelian roots of its major concepts are clear, the tradition's Ancient Greek origin disguises the endurance of a fairly substantial fall from grace in Western ethical thought following The Middle Ages. As we noted at the outset, the contemporary body of virtue ethical work represents a relatively recent modern revival of the approach, occurring only after 'highly significant changes' in the landscape of moral philosophy during the second half of the twentieth century,<sup>203</sup> and making virtue a relative newcomer to the contemporary normative scene. Indeed, Elizabeth Anscombe's article 'Modern Moral Philosophy', taken by many to be the key progenitor of a return to ideas of virtue, was published as late as 1958.<sup>204</sup>

This date is worthy of attention, for as Brown notes the modern academic discipline of International Relations, along with the development of its own theories and concepts, flowed out of 'a sweeping critique' of past thought that followed the upheaval of the First World War.<sup>205</sup> Owing to the absence of a strong virtue ethical perspective during this vital developmental period, perhaps it is not as surprising as on first consideration that the tradition's integration into international normative theory remains rather dilute; could it be that virtue ethics simply missed the boat? With the subsequent crystallisation of ethical strands within IR discourse, perhaps it was the case that the lack of virtue-based contribution at the outset made it particularly difficult for a dissimilar, Aristotelian-inspired framework to then enter the market at a much later stage.

But this potential explanation proves deficient in two respects. Firstly, it fails to explain the lack of virtue ethical engagement from scholars operating outside the academic schools of International Relations, those who – as earlier noted – tend instead to approach questions of global ethics from backgrounds more heavily grounded in the study of political philosophy. For this latter group of thinkers, any consolidation of settled patterns of thought by *IR* theorists would be of little if any import for their own modes of discourse. Secondly, this very assumption of established languages

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<sup>203</sup> R. Crisp and M. Slote, 'Introduction', in their (eds.) *Virtue Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 1.

<sup>204</sup> Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy'.

<sup>205</sup> Brown, *International Relations Theory: New Normative Approaches*, p. 15.

or methodologies within the normative thinking of *either* academic discipline seems counter-evidential; discussions of global politics have in fact been considerably influenced by engagement with new ideas. Many important perspectives upon which contemporary IR theorists now draw, such as the postmodern ideas of Derrida, Foucault and Rorty, or the 'discourse ethics' of Habermas, came to prominence only in the 1970s, as did the Rawlsian account of justice that so heavily influenced political philosophical developments in the global realm.<sup>206</sup>

It seems, then, that barriers to entry into this field of study have proved minimal, even for radically different approaches. That these theories could successfully impact upon the normative discussion of international affairs, and indeed within the same timescale as the re-emergence of virtue ethical thought, leaves the absence of the latter without a clear rationalisation. Whilst explanatorily dissatisfying, it seems we can offer little more reason for the lack of this perspective beyond a failure of relevant scholars to – as yet – present one. International Relations theorists just have not drawn upon this sector of ideas in a significant manner, whilst philosophers who already hold virtue ethical sympathies simply have not applied its moral concepts to this area of political conduct; indeed, an *immediate* causal hurdle is perhaps the minimal role the tradition has played in contemporary political philosophy more generally. The foremost culprit may thus merely be a reality of academic specialisation.

Nevertheless, any incidental failure to so far intersect virtue with the international realm does not mean that attempting to do so need be unprofitable, and whatever historical or scholastic contingencies may have contributed to the tradition's deficient representation, it is even more important to outline why we should want *at this present time* to attempt a virtue ethical reading of international ethics. As we shall see, there is a dual incentive for applying a framework of virtue to this sphere, with the construction of a comprehensive positive account both a beneficial, and at the same time necessary, enterprise.

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<sup>206</sup> I am indebted to Professor Simon Caney for bringing these considerations to my attention.

### **The Potential of Virtue**

The first motivation must be an expedient one, for it is a reasonable expectation that virtue ethics might offer a valuable fresh perspective on some of the pressing ethical questions that are encountered in the realm of international politics. In providing an unfamiliar theoretical standpoint from which to critique the various embedded norms of current approaches, the insights provided by focusing on the concepts of virtue could be a means by which to facilitate renewed debate in areas where the opposition of deeply entrenched perspectives have resulted in intellectual stalemate and deliberative stagnancy. As Burchill and Linklater contend, 'the great proliferation of theoretical approaches should be applauded rather than lamented', for it is only by critically engaging with a wide variety of contrasting theories that any one of these accounts can be properly appraised.<sup>207</sup>

Different conceptions of the scope of the inquiry, its purpose and methodology mean that issues... are conceptualized and analysed in increasingly diverse ways... to see the world from different theoretical vantage-points, to learn from them, to test one's own ideas against them and to think carefully about what others would regard as the vulnerabilities of one's perspective, whatever it may be... the truth about international relations will not be found in any one of the traditions but in the continuing *dialogue and debate* between them.<sup>208</sup>

Indeed, Cochrane identifies just such a stalemate with regard to the cosmopolitan-communitarian debate, which she describes as being at a 'substantial', even 'irreconcilable' impasse,<sup>209</sup> but towards which Brown, as we earlier noted, promotes a shift in perspective towards virtue as the potential but relatively unexplored means to resolve it.<sup>210</sup> The hope is that a virtue ethical account of international conduct could be an enzyme of similar reappraisal, and perhaps resolution, across the field of global politics more widely – an opportunity to re-engage with issues like individual rights, interstate order and the national interest from a new ethical grounding, and see whether

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<sup>207</sup> Burchill and Linklater, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 26, 30.

<sup>209</sup> Cochran, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

<sup>210</sup> Brown, 'Towards a Neo-Aristotelian Resolution of the Cosmopolitan-Communitarian Debate', p. 84.

original insights or perspectives are afforded. There is much to recommend an ethics of virtue for this particular task, for it is a philosophical approach that appears particularly well-tailored to adapt advantageously to the nature of interaction encountered in the global realm.

For a philosopher like Kant, political maxims must be deduced 'from the pure concept of the duty of right, from the ought whose principle is given a priori by pure reason'.<sup>211</sup> The upshot of this understanding, argues Brown, is 'that theory produce practice', and 'that politics give way to morality'.<sup>212</sup> As realists justifiably argue, a normative framework built upon this kind of outlook is likely to confront some difficult challenges, and likely conflicting intuitions, when it meets with the harsh practical realities of international existence – for 'as soon as we try to put the theory to work, it clashes with the details'.<sup>213</sup> Similar – if somewhat converse – clashes with intuition likewise complicate the unimpeded application of a utilitarian axiom, which under the pressures of international reality might, if followed consistently, condone action that rides roughshod over ingrained ideas about the limits of acceptable conduct.

Short of a blind obedience to standards that could prove either politically disastrous or intuitively unpalatable, therefore, the problem then becomes one of trying to adapt one's set of moral principles to the complex and non-ideal circumstances to which they must be applied, perhaps mitigating a set of deontological obligations with respect to an overriding principle, or a get-out clause brought on by the special circumstances of their enactment.<sup>214</sup> In the consequentialist case, perhaps constraining the pure application of a utility-maximizing principle in the hope of ring-fencing certain avenues of conduct as off-limits<sup>215</sup> – in either eventuality, searching for a means by which to reconcile predetermined ethical standards with a troublesome field of application.

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<sup>211</sup> Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, p. 57.

<sup>212</sup> Brown, *International Relations Theory: New Normative Approaches*, p. 39.

<sup>213</sup> Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>214</sup> For instance, the Doctrine of Double Effect, or Walzer's concept of 'Supreme Emergency'.

<sup>215</sup> See the earlier reference to Foot regarding this issue on page 35, note 126.

Virtue, however, allows practice to inform theory to a much greater degree. Whilst Aristotle similarly begins with an abstract theoretical notion, the ‘pure concept’ of a flourishing human being, the transference of this concept into ethical content is inseparable from an appreciation of empirical reality. Aristotle seeks to ‘first ascertain the function of man’,<sup>216</sup> his *ergon*, before appropriately asking what a *good* instance of such a being would therefore consist in. Accordingly, the entry point for ethical deliberation is an appreciation of the kind of existence a human life actually *is*, the often complex social environment in which such lives are located, and how it is possible to live in a better or worse way – to choose well or defectively – in light of these things.<sup>217</sup> We must appreciate the world *as we find it*, the experiential reality of human life and relations. The issue of trying to adapt a set of theoretic principles, or to uphold an already-decided standard of action in light of a seemingly incompatible context, is thus reversed, and the central ethical question becomes how one should most appropriately behave *given* the international environment in which we must act.<sup>218</sup>

On the basis of this important grounding in reality, a virtue ethical perspective perhaps has the potential to undercut some of the perceived appeal of the realist approach, namely its claim to alone properly represent the pragmatic actualities of the international circumstances decision-makers must confront. As Smith notes, realists sought to define their alternative approach to international relations as one reflecting ‘a truer understanding of people and states’,<sup>219</sup> but it is

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<sup>216</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 12.

<sup>217</sup> M. Nussbaum, ‘Non-Relative Virtues’, in *Moral Relativism: A Reader*. Eds. P.K. Moser and T. L. Carson. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 202.

<sup>218</sup> It is that the global environment is thought a morally-incompatible context that the motivation to apply virtue ethics at the *international* level is of particular urgency. Whilst the insights of virtue could similarly enlighten political theory more generally, the domestic context – where conventional moral values are usually thought to be more readily realisable – appears less reliant on some of the unique insights of a virtue ethical approach to which this thesis hopes to draw attention. In similar spirit to the methodology of Plato, who first sought to understand justice at the level of the city as a means to understanding it in the individual, it may likewise be the case that it is easier to discern political virtue and vice in the interactions *between* states before considering these qualities within them. Following his line of thought, the conclusions of this ‘external’ investigation may give us better access to the concepts needed to shed light on the latter ‘internal’ one. (The model developed in this thesis will nevertheless cast light on the relationship between domestic and international levels of analysis: see Chapter 5 page 256.)

<sup>219</sup> Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

likewise a concern with these two concepts – the nature of man and the nature of the collective – that are at the heart of Aristotle’s work. Indeed, they can be understood as the central foci of his two related projects *The Nicomachean Ethics* and *The Politics* respectively.

Yet in placing a paradigmatic emphasis on the *sociability* of human beings, Aristotelian-inspired thinking can be seen to crucially diverge with the realist understanding of man’s nature, and consequently on the limitations on conduct that ‘reality’ need impose. For Hobbes, ‘men have no pleasure, (but on the contrast a great deale of grieffe) in keeping company, where there is no power able to over-awe them all’,<sup>220</sup> with political association subsequently forged out of fear, as a necessary protection against the enmity and egoism of others. For Aristotle, by famous contrast, *ho anthrōpos phusei politikon zōon* – ‘man is *by nature* a political animal’,<sup>221</sup> and it is only through association with others that man can, in a positive sense, live the good life, one of flourishing or *eudaimonia*.<sup>222</sup>

By building upon its alternative account of human nature and association, perhaps a virtue ethical approach to international normativity could maintain some of the important insights of realism, which are of undoubtedly of value,<sup>223</sup> without a need to endorse the realist agenda of downplaying the role of ethics in global affairs. For whilst the virtue ethical tradition can likewise accept the often power-driven realities of the interstate realm, it can concurrently maintain a conception of ethical conduct as what it is to respond excellently *in light* of the limitations and pressures of the international system, taking them as the given landscape to which moral deliberation must seek to best respond, rather than viewing such realities as inherently antagonistic to moral ideals themselves. As Coll notes, the exercise of virtue is about managing

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<sup>220</sup> Hobbes, *loc. cit.*

<sup>221</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, p. 10. Emphasis added.

<sup>222</sup> Berlin argues that a similar appreciation of men’s communal nature, and the intrinsic value of political association to a successful human life, underpin Machiavelli’s understanding of state-informed moral values dissimilar to those derived from a personal, individual focus. But far from resisting the realist slide towards inter-subjective hostility, Machiavelli instead utilises the importance of upholding community as *carte blanche* for unconstrained political conduct. Berlin, *loc. cit.*

<sup>223</sup> Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

the inherent complexities and difficulties of social and political realities. Unlike abstract speculation or theoretical wisdom, practical wisdom is concerned with “human affairs and with matters about which deliberation is possible”. The realm of prudence is that of the contingent, the relative, and the uncertain; it is fraught with fluidity, ambiguity, and “might have beens”.<sup>224</sup>

With a difficult reality the very focus of ethical deliberation, then, a virtue ethical framework could potentially add a much needed aspirational element to consistently ‘realist’ underpinnings. Far from necessitating an idealised future alternative to the present world system as the required constituent of genuine moral action, virtuous conduct can be conceived of as a practically wise response to the *current* circumstances that confront states, whatever such behaviour might in actuality consist in. On this understanding, moral action in the international realm is something that can indeed be strived for *now*, an ethical standard towards which international actors can aim without wishful naïvety. In this manner, virtue ethics could present a realist-idealist synthesis of sorts, with Stalley referring to Aristotle’s method as a mixture of idealism *and* ‘realistic empiricism’.<sup>225</sup>

On a general level, we might also hope that virtue ethical accounts of state conduct could provide richer, longer-term modes of evaluation than competing theoretical approaches currently allow. Virtue ethics is a moral tradition often distinguished from its contemporaries for its focus on life as a whole, on the development and maintenance of a character over the course of one’s existence, with the projects and commitments around which one identifies. As Aristotle attests, ‘one swallow does not make a summer’,<sup>226</sup> and overconcentration on particular ‘moments’ of normative choice, on moral dilemmas or ‘limit situations’, fails to appreciate the overall state of a life. Transferring this insight from the individual level to that of global politics, we are furnished with the potential to evaluate international actors as beyond entities acting merely in the here and now, but as persisting moral agents with a history and a future – to give real meaning to the

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<sup>224</sup> Coll, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

<sup>225</sup> Stalley, *op. cit.*, pp. xxxiv-xxxv.

<sup>226</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 14.

question “what kind of state do we want to be?”.<sup>227</sup> This appears a more complete angle of moral scrutiny.

### **An Imperative for Virtue**

It seems, therefore, that virtue-centred theory has much to offer the normative evaluation of contemporary international relations. But concurrent to such positive motivations for the development of a virtue ethical account is an equally important, if somewhat more ‘internal’, imperative for doing so – one that is alternatively grounded in moral theoretic concerns. In a manner that complements the beneficial use of virtue as a means to ethically scrutinise international conduct, the converse perspective can be seen as equally valid – for international relations represents an important moral sphere in which we can, in a somewhat reflective turn, evaluate the prospects of virtue ethics *itself*.

From this standpoint, the conjunction of virtue with the international realm presents an innovative and perhaps atypical angle of scrutiny, one from which – on the basis of preceding investigation – this moral theory has yet to be properly appraised. That it is subjected to this particular examination is essential, for virtue ethics needs to justify its aspirations to be regarded as a plausible alternative to counterpart moral approaches.<sup>228</sup> To meet this challenge successfully, and indeed to have the right to confront its underrepresentation in this field, it seems that virtue ethics really *needs* to be informative about the moral themes and controversies that international interaction brings forth, and to be able to demonstrate this capacity effectively. As such a crucial and potent field of human conduct, the realm of global affairs simply demands a coherent moral standpoint.

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<sup>227</sup> The possibility of this particular evaluation will be determined by the conclusions of the remaining chapters, which concern the appropriate level of moral agency to which virtue concepts can be applied. For the culmination of that investigation, see Chapter 5, pages 296-301.

<sup>228</sup> Points to which Roger Crisp and Michael Slote draw attention: Crisp and Slote, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

Inability on the part of virtue ethics to present a distinctive and constructive contribution to this area invites a damaging suspicion of more extensive failings within the approach – a worry that wider, inherent flaws in the underlying framework of a virtue-based ethics are foreclosing the possibility of doing so. On this reading, perhaps the lack of virtue ethical literature on international relations is not coincidental, but instead betrays a much deeper set of problems; the relative absence of aretaic influence on the major normative perspectives on global politics may be symptomatic of significant theoretical shortcomings in the very applicability of this moral approach.

If this suggestion proves to be the case, then the implications would be sizeable. Such a realisation would seriously undermine confidence in the overall plausibility of an ethics of virtue, something that would have wide-reaching impact upon the theory's position and standing within moral philosophy at large. After all, given the particular nature of virtue ethical approaches, with – as was just noted – their distinguishing focus on life as a whole, it is particularly unacceptable for the theory to be silent on such an important sector of human interaction, one that has the potential to affect our lives more than most.

### **Chapter Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter was to explore the relationship between virtue ethics and the normative analysis of international relations. We are now in a position to overview some important conclusions. As has been identified, ethical investigation within the global realm rarely implements, in a direct manner, the theories of moral philosophy. The leading normative perspectives on world politics instead employ moral theoretical arguments as underlying foundations for dissimilar deliberative frameworks, delineated by their shared normative conclusions but demonstrating potential moral philosophical justifications that are variable, overlapping and disputed.

Yet despite this generally less-pronounced role for moral theoretical argument within global political discourse, virtue ethics remains especially underrepresented. Relative to its consequentialist and deontological contemporaries, virtue-centred influence here fails to align with its comparable philosophical standing, and what does exist of aretaic thought within international scholarship is disjointed and underdeveloped. Whether or not this is the result of mere contingency or deeper theoretical obstacles remains to be seen, but resolution of this question, along with the positive hope of generating an unexplored and potentially beneficial perspective on international affairs, together form a binary motivation for the development of a systematic virtue ethical account.

Working in the investigative space between major academic disciplines, it is often tempting – if perhaps unintentionally – for the various sides to caricature one other. The reality is that the work of International Relations theorists, political philosophers, and those writing within moral philosophy is perhaps more nuanced and intricate than casual analysis on behalf of any individual perspective may reveal. Hopefully the exposition of this chapter has gone some way to doing partial justice to such complexity, but the imperative in what follows must now be to cut through it. The chief aim of this thesis project is not to challenge or evaluate the outlined normative perspectives head-on, but to enable the construction of a different and perhaps enlightening alternative. The rationale of this latter approach is to see whether an account comprising a different moral theoretical starting point, and a different set of guiding assumptions, might in parallel identify elements of those existing frameworks as lacking. If so, reappraisal and revision might prove advantageous.

Building such an account from the starting points and assumptions of virtue ethics, given that there is little precedence, is likely to require considerable imagination. The initial preference of this enterprise must be to build a virtue ethical account ‘from the ground up’, rather than as a reformulated foundation for an existing normative framework. For instance, in a similar manner

to Davis's modified take on Just War Theory, it might likewise be conceivable to offer an alternative virtue ethical justification for something like the human rights tradition, perhaps on the grounds that they help individuals to 'flourish'.<sup>229</sup> But even if we ultimately find this to be the best approach to global political ethics, we should not at the outset aim at such compromise. It is surely best to discern the most crystalline form of a virtue ethical account before polluting it with the complicating addition of external concepts, for in reality we may find that such baggage is not needed for the account to do its work successfully.

The question of which, if any, of the international normative perspectives a virtue ethical or virtue-ethically-informed framework would ultimately fit into is hard to predict. Perhaps, in a similar manner to Brown's earlier suggestion,<sup>230</sup> any such account might more widely defy existing classifications. In any case, potential resolution of this matter lies beyond the foundational aims of this present project. Developing a full and comprehensive account of international virtue ethics is a sizeable and multifaceted undertaking, and not one that can be adequately achieved within the limits of a work such as this. Instead, the principal endeavour of this thesis is more modest in scope, aiming to provide the core theoretical groundwork for such a perspective; to settle the most important preliminary questions that will shape the structure of any such grander account. Paramount amongst these issues is the level of agency that virtue ethics, with its paradigmatic focus on character, would take in the international context – the question of what we are ascribing virtue and vice *to*. The remainder of the thesis will be devoted to that enquiry.

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<sup>229</sup> Indeed, a version of this argument is a key element within Nussbaum's earlier-noted 'capabilities approach'.

<sup>230</sup> See page 39.

# 2

## CHAPTER TWO: Group Conduct and Virtue Analysis

*I've thought about that phrase quite a bit in recent days – the character of our country. One of the unique and wonderful things about America has always been our self-reliance, our rugged individualism, our fierce defence of freedom... That large-heartedness – that concern and regard for the plight of others – is not a partisan feeling. It's not a Republican or a Democratic feeling. It, too, is part of the American character... Because that's who we are. That is our calling. That is our character.<sup>1</sup>*

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The aim of this chapter, along with the three that follow, is to settle the central question of agency confronting a virtue ethical account of the international realm: are virtue-based evaluations of global politics more appropriately directed at an individual or a collective level? The most effective way to answer this essential enquiry is to see if a coherent, potentially superior model of group-level virtue can actually be constructed for relevant international

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<sup>1</sup> Remarks made by President Barack Obama to a joint session of Congress on healthcare, [http://www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/Remarks-by-the-President-to-a-Joint-Session-of-Congress-on-Health-Care](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-to-a-Joint-Session-of-Congress-on-Health-Care), 9<sup>th</sup> September 2009.

entities. This endeavour requires a number of stages, and must first establish a set of key theoretical foundations before developing progressively towards more concrete political claims.

Investigation must therefore commence in the abstract, and ask whether it is possible for *any* group to be the proper subject of virtue ethical concepts in its own right. To this purpose, Chapters 2 and 3 build up an incremental picture of what any such account would require. The present chapter, beginning from the more general foundations of agency, first considers competing 'individualist' notions of collective intention, and the differing prospects offered by each to a virtue ethical analysis of group conduct. From these conclusions, the investigation of the next chapter then proceeds to explore a 'non-individualist' alternative, considering the possible grounds upon which the more specific character-related properties of virtue, and indeed moral agency more generally, might be collectively founded. Chapters 4 and 5 then complete the investigation of agency by applying these philosophical standards to actual political groupings relevant to international interaction.

## I

### Conceptualising Group Behaviour

#### **Virtue Ethics and Agency**

Our first concern in constructing an account of international virtue is to know the level at which it can, and should be applied. In the 'personal' realm of ethics, individual people are readily accepted as the paradigmatic foci of moral virtue. To be sure, it is an investigation into the nature of a human being that forms the very basis of Aristotle's foundational account.<sup>2</sup> But concerning international relations, and even in more general contexts, we *do* frequently speak as if

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<sup>2</sup> Though as we noted previously, far from a socially-isolated individual.

The concept of *areté* itself of course, understood as excellence in a general sense, is applicable to anything that enables good functioning, and is limited neither to human subjects nor the common association with morality.

collectives can be moral actors, and moreover we sometimes assign virtue and vice terms to them in their own right. Indeed, in the global political context such collective agential ascriptions may even represent our predominant mode of speech, as these examples demonstrate:

*“North Korea acted belligerently towards its southern neighbour.”*

*“China intends to expand its regional influence.”*

*“Belgium mounted a courageous defence of its territory in 1914.”*

*“The decision of the Security Council to pass the resolution was a morally right one.”*

*“The government in Washington believes a new period of rapprochement is possible.”*

*“The international community’s humanitarian response was compassionately motivated.”*

*“The country’s new leadership acted from pride in increasing military spending.”*

*“The sudden breakdown in talks owed to the irascible nature of both negotiating parties.”*

Such locutions are familiar enough, but the real question is how many of their assertions, if any, can be understood literally – as agential references that genuinely attach to the *groups* in question. For there are others that deny the veridical legitimacy of statements such as these, and argue that we should instead speak only of individuals as the ‘real’ agents in these and other contexts. Aristotle noted this very dissonance in relation to the actions of a city, with some attesting that it is not that entity itself that acts but only the ruling oligarch or tyrant,<sup>3</sup> whilst in more modern literature an analogous opinion can be found in Robert Jackson:

sovereign states are not agents or actors in themselves. They are abstractions, ideas... Ideas are not actors. States cannot act on their own. They cannot observe norms. They have no responsibilities. That belongs to statespeople, the agents and representatives of sovereign states who act on their behalf.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, p. 84.

<sup>4</sup> Jackson, *op. cit.*, pp. 131-2.

Taking a cue from Aristotle himself, who recognised accepted opinion and practice as an important starting point for subsequent analysis, the best way to test the validity of such collective attributions is to try to construct an appropriate philosophical account of them – to see if we, like him, can ‘render coherent’ the *endoxa*.<sup>5</sup> The success or failure of this project should then present the answer to the discord at hand, and more fully, to our overarching inquiry. Our initial focus rests most heavily on the *content* of the above sentences, with the group reference itself taken only in the most abstract terms. We firstly want to know whether a ‘collective body’, ‘social group’ or ‘collectivity’ *in general* can have the agential properties necessary for virtue analysis. Subsequent investigation will then move to analyse the more specific requirements placed on the *subjects* of such attributions, the culmination of which is to examine the agential possibilities of actual political bodies – whether a state, country, nation, government, ruling council, cabinet, executive, parliament or congress might have virtue-enabling qualities, and whether or not such judgements can be generalised.<sup>6</sup>

The examination of agents and action within virtue ethics is nuanced and multilayered, and there are differing degrees of evaluative depth that it can bring to bear in any situation. Though virtue ethics has an expanded focus on the character of agents, this in no way rules out the importance of action within the theory. Virtues are active, not passive states – propensities to act or feel, and given this a virtue-based analysis of conduct ranges from accounts of merely right action, to notions of action that can manifest excellence in fuller senses. As the discussions of this chapter will reveal, there is often a distinction drawn by virtue ethicists between acts that may be considered only ‘incidentally’ virtuous, and those that are instead performed *from* virtue. Whilst the details of this categorisation are the topic of later discussion,<sup>7</sup> the former can in rough terms be understood as action that has some morally valuable relation to virtue but, unlike the latter, is performed by an agent who is not themselves virtuous.

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<sup>5</sup> C. Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Or else dependent on case-to-case constitutional circumstances.

<sup>7</sup> See page 92 onwards.

The richness of such analysis, allied with the wealthy vocabulary of virtue, is to be seen as an advantage of the virtue ethical approach, and we can see some extent of this evaluative range in the subtle differences in virtue terminology between the example sentences. The third sentence speaks of a group performing a virtuous *action*, the sixth of a group possessing virtuous *motives*, the seventh of group action flowing from a virtuous, or perhaps vicious, *state*, whilst the last statement makes reference to the character of groups, of them *being* a certain way. Each of these ascriptions can potentially mean a different thing, and may call for differing moral evaluations. In the course of these chapters the legitimacy of each, in a collective context, will be investigated.

However, in addition to the stages on this 'vertical' axis of act evaluation, each level of virtue progression is likewise subject to an intersecting 'horizontal' axis of differing theoretical standards. Just as virtue ethics is itself a subset of more general virtue theory,<sup>8</sup> so too there are multiple forms of the former, which Christine Swanton likens to the relationship between some specific utilitarian theory and overarching consequentialism.<sup>9</sup> The requirements of virtue across this two-variable matrix are therefore complex, and range from bringing about external states of affairs, to possession of fine inner states and capacities, to 'full-blooded' Aristotelian habitual dispositions at the 'top-right' limit of the axes: stable, enduring, and affective in nature.

With these intricate distinctions in mind, we will build up an incremental model of collective behaviour that evaluates the prospects of virtue analysis at each stage. Our aim is to be broad in theoretical catchment, for neutrality on other debates between forms of virtue ethics must be seen as advantageous, and will result in an account that provides the widest possible appeal. Moreover, moving towards some of the more demanding requirements of virtue evaluation, this stage-by-stage review of possibilities may also provide a set of useful fall-back positions in the event that some standards prove too difficult for collectives to meet. Whether we can apply

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<sup>8</sup> See Chapter 1, page 5, note 9.

<sup>9</sup> Swanton, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

virtue ethics at the collective level need not, therefore, be an all-or-nothing judgement, but instead one that is graduated and specific. This is again to be desired.

### The Nature of Action

Assessing the prospects of group virtue analysis needs to begin at the most basic level. In order for any substantive evaluative criteria to operate beyond the conduct of mere individuals, we first need an account of collective agency, of some sort.<sup>10</sup> But what, in turn, does collective agency require?

Foundationally, it is a definitional requirement of any agent that it can *act*. Beyond a merely causal understanding,<sup>11</sup> carrying out action in this genuine sense is frequently distinguished from the case of a simple ‘happening’, or from behaviour that may qualify only as ‘activity’, in some diminished sense. As an instance of the latter, Harry Frankfurt gives the example of a purposive movement, such as the dilation of a person’s eyes, which although under the guidance of certain mechanisms is not identified with a person’s performance in a sufficient way.<sup>12</sup> A sizeable literature within the philosophy of action engages with these most general questions, and although there is considerable disagreement between the details of competing accounts, there is general agreement that action in this required sense necessitates *intention*.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> As will be discussed in later analysis, it is perhaps the case that in some contexts what is morally required is not so much action, but simply being or feeling a certain way. Perhaps then it is plausible that *some* evaluative criteria might indeed operate outside of the remit of *action*, and this could potentially qualify the claim that an account of collective *agency* must be required. Nevertheless, action surely remains the most central and important subject of moral evaluation, and cases in which other qualities have either no bearing upon, or relation to it, are rare exceptions. See, in this chapter, pages 103-5, and in Chapter 3, the discussion of collective emotion on pages 152-60.

<sup>11</sup> For instance, that ‘the enzyme *acted* as a catalyst for the chemical reaction’.

<sup>12</sup> H. G. Frankfurt, ‘The Problem of Action’, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15(2). Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1978, p. 159.

<sup>13</sup> Seminal contributions by Elizabeth Anscombe and Donald Davidson see intention as some relation between action and the desires and beliefs of the performing agent. Despite disagreement on the causal nature of this relationship, the so-called Desire-Belief Model was for a time the theoretical orthodoxy: See G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*. Second Edition. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963; D. Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events*. Second Edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001. Michael Bratman’s later critique, by contrast, conceives of intention as instead a separate pro-attitude, distinct but not independent from these other

Now that we have a concept of what it is to perform an act in the general instance, what of performing a collective act? The analogous requirement here should be clear. If individual action requires intention, then collective action must require *collective intention*.<sup>14</sup> How this latter concept might be understood will be the focus of much that follows.<sup>15</sup>

## II

### Individualist Accounts

#### Collective Intention

The philosophical landscape of collective agency, and the metaphysics of groups, is complex, but the terrain can be better mapped when understood as running along two main lines of debate. The first of these debates is that between proponents of ‘summativism’ and ‘non-summativism’, positions which concern the appropriate content-reference of a collective intention.

#### *Summativism*

As the name suggests, the summativist position argues that the relevant properties of a group are simply a summation of the singular properties of its members. Group attitude ascription, therefore, is nothing more than an aggregation of the *individual, personally-directed* attitudes of those people that constitute it. When considering intention, then, a group is understood to hold an intention of a certain content when its comprising members hold intentions of that content – that is, intentions about their own, *personal* action. To paraphrase a famous example presented

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attitudinal states: See M. E. Bratman, *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason*. London: Harvard University Press, 1987.

<sup>14</sup> Some authors instead refer to this notion as a ‘shared’ or ‘joint’ intention. I will take these terms to be synonymous with ‘collective’ intention, and will thus use them interchangeably with reference to intention, action and other attitudes.

<sup>15</sup> Another option is of course to deny the possibility of collective intentionality altogether, and argue that collective ascriptions are merely metaphorical, or else made mistakenly – varieties of what Christian List and Philip Pettit term ‘eliminativism’: C. List and P. Pettit, *Group Agency: The Possibility, Design, and Status of Corporate Agents*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 3. The discussion of this chapter will hopefully show why this position is a mistaken one.

by John Searle, a group  $[M_1, M_2, \dots, M_n]$  has the intention to run for shelter from the rain if *individuals*  $M_1, M_2, \dots, M_n$  each have the (personal) intention to run for shelter from the rain.<sup>16</sup> In more complex readings, the proviso of common knowledge between group members concerning their congruent intentions might also be included.

In accounting for collective psychological properties, therefore, the summativist account requires only the mere aggregation of singular, personally-directed, attitudinal states, each of which make no reference to the intentionality of other agents. Group intention simply consists of the set of individual 'I intend that I run for shelter' intentions. There is no reference to the group here, for both the subject and the content of these summed intentional statements<sup>17</sup> are individual in nature:

**M<sub>1</sub>:** 'I intend that I J (run for shelter)'

**M<sub>2</sub>:** 'I intend that I J (run for shelter)'

**M<sub>3</sub>:** 'I intend that I J (run for shelter)'

Therefore, the group consisting of  $[M_1, M_2, M_3]$  has a *collective* intention to J (run for shelter).

But this proposed explanation of our common group ascriptions has met opposition on a number of fronts.<sup>18</sup> In modifying his above example, Searle shows how the summativist understanding fails to capture an important 'we'-intention, one that is essential to our understanding of

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<sup>16</sup> J. R. Searle, 'Collective Intentions and Actions', in his *Consciousness and Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 92.

<sup>17</sup> Such 'intentional statements' are of course best understood merely as the linguistic reporting of a person's associated mental state, the intention proper. According to Raimo Tuomela they should be more accurately referred to as 'thought representations', a way of expressing the 'mentalese' content of the intention itself: R. Tuomela, 'The We-Mode and the I-Mode', in *Socializing Metaphysics*. Ed. F. Schmitt. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003, p. 102. Perhaps then we can think of 'I intend that I run for shelter' as a statement that the relevant group member would consent to, or endorse, as best representing the mental state of affairs that actually constitutes their intentionality.

<sup>18</sup> In general, to assume (without further justification) that what is true of individual constituents will also be true of the group as a whole is to commit the fallacy of composition. Critics of summativism demonstrate that, for relevant agential properties, there is indeed no further guarantee of such correspondence.

collective action. If the same observed behaviour<sup>19</sup> of these people was instead part of a *joint* acting performance, he argues, the nature of the group's intention to 'run for shelter' is now not fully explained by a mere sum of the isolated 'I'-directed intentions held by each individual member. Instead, there must be an intention somewhere that '*we* run for shelter':

The notion of a we-intention, of collective intentionality, implies the notion of *cooperation*. But the mere presence of I-intentions to achieve a goal which happens to be believed to be the same goal as that of other members of a group does not entail the presence of an intention to cooperate to achieve that goal.<sup>20</sup>

Nonetheless, possibly the most decisive counterexample against the acceptability of summativism is offered by Margaret Gilbert.<sup>21</sup> As she argues, the set of individuals comprising a college's Food Committee may exactly match the set of individuals comprising its Library Committee. Each member of the Food Committee *individually* intends to use less starch in meals. Given that their membership is the same, it is necessary that each member of the Library Committee likewise *individually* intends this. Summativism therefore suggests that both the Food Committee *and* the Library Committee intend to use less starch in meals, whereas intuitively only the former properly has this goal – the amount of starch in meals is simply not within the remit of the Library Committee. Coextensive groups thus do not always share the same attitudes merely on account of their membership doing so.

Most theorists now agree that summativism is an insufficient explanation of group-level attributes. That is not to say that summativist group ascriptions are incoherent, or in all cases without mandate; in contrast, they continue to usefully express the *distributive* properties of

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<sup>19</sup> That is, when the group's 'external bodily movements are indistinguishable in the two cases': Searle, *loc. cit.*

<sup>20</sup> Searle, *op. cit.*, p. 95. His emphasis.

Indeed, were the personal intention instead 'I intend that I get to the shelter *first*', there would hardly be cooperation here at the group level. In contrast, there is competition.

<sup>21</sup> M. Gilbert, 'Modelling Collective Belief'. *Synthese* 73. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1987, p. 189.

For the purposes of the chapter's progression, Gilbert's counterexample is here modified from its original form, which concerned collective *belief* rather than intention. However, it can be seen to have force against any summativist aggregation of attitudes, in either basic or complex (i.e. with a common knowledge condition) form.

collectives – those attributes common to members *as individuals*, which in certain contexts may indeed represent the desired implication of our group talk.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, the further claim that such aggregation reveals properties held by the group distinctly – on a genuinely collective plane – must be deemed false. A mere summation of personally-directed intentions cannot account for collective intention proper, and, for this reason, neither can it account for collective *action*. Summativism therefore cannot form the basis of any degree of virtue ethical analysis at the non-individual level, as for even minimal virtue scrutiny to get off the ground requires outward action to be identified as intentional. Summativism cannot provide a coherent understanding of joint intention, so no *joint* action can be evaluated.<sup>23</sup>

The point here is not that virtuous individuals would fail to manifest virtue in their conduct, or would act in ways that could not be scrutinised via virtue ethical concepts, but that summativism fails to explain how the nature of such action – whether right, good, or otherwise – would be *shared* in the relevant sense. The situation under a summative conception would merely represent the aggregation of individual virtuous behaviour within a particular set of people; the mutual correspondence of personal attributes and conduct. Indeed, one potential reading of the chapter's opening Obama quotation is along these very lines, with 'America's character' properly referring to the common characteristics of population members – that is, a claim that *individual Americans* possess the attributes outlined, not the country itself.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Saying that "the students of Oxford University are hardworking", for instance, is most naturally (though not necessarily) understood as a distributive claim about *each* student, rather than one about the collective body they together constitute. See also M. Fricker, 'Can There Be Institutional Virtues?', in *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*. Volume 3. Eds. T. S. Gendler and J. Hawthorne. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 240.

<sup>23</sup> At this stage, whether or not any such intention is 'virtuous' is not yet of relevance.

<sup>24</sup> Peter French similarly discusses the difference between referring to 'all Americans' versus 'the American people': P. A. French, *Collective and Corporate Responsibility*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984, p. 11.

*Non-Summativism*

If the summativist project falls short, what then is the ‘non-summativist’<sup>25</sup> alternative? In general, non-summativists agree that collective attitudes cannot be reduced to the *self-directed* attitudinal states of individuals. Instead, a ‘we’ reference is needed in the *content* of a joint intention at least. As was brought to light by Searle’s criticisms, in cases of cooperation a subject must ‘intend that *we J*’ – the content of the intentional statement must be relational, and reference the action(s) of others in the joint enterprise. At minimum, this content must be attendant to the cognition of the individual participants in collective action.

Summativism, by contrast, only references the individual in the content of an intention; it is an aggregation of attitudes each of the form ‘I intend that *I J*’. Returning to the earlier example, we might attempt to modify a statement of this form so that it reads ‘I intend that I run for shelter *whilst avoiding others*.’ In this case the intention does indeed make reference to other agents in its content. However, this is not sufficient to elicit the necessary reference to ‘we’ that non-summativists require, for here the reference to others in no way involves them in the shared endeavour, it does not reference them *as a part of it*. The content is thus still self-regarding, and singular in form.

Before moving on to properly examine non-summativist possibilities, and in order to aid the clarity of that discussion, it is prudent to provide further illumination through the introduction of another important distinction, as was earlier forecasted. The ‘individualism’ vs. ‘non-individualism’ debate, which operates on both ontological and conceptual levels,<sup>26</sup> is moreover an aspect of inquiry rendered fairly inconspicuous by the nature of summativist analysis.

The ontological aspect of this controversy centres upon whether collective terms like ‘the group’ properly refer or not, with ontological individualists arguing that such terms fail to accurately

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<sup>25</sup> Some authors use the alternative term ‘anti-summativism’. See, for instance, Fricker, *op. cit.*

<sup>26</sup> For a detailed discussion see F. Schmitt, ‘Introduction’, in his (ed.) in *Socializing Metaphysics*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003.

refer to ‘real’ entities, existing above members and their properties. The conceptual debate, meanwhile, is concerned with how it is appropriate to *understand* our group ascriptions, with conceptual individualists arguing that ‘group talk’ ultimately analyses into talk of individuals and *their* attitudinal states.<sup>27</sup> On this latter account, properties ascribed to groups like acting, thinking and intending in fact reduce to the non-collective properties of their members. Non-individualists clearly take up opposing positions with respect to either of these accounts.

These two perspectives on the individualism/non-individualism debate are distinct, but are not without linkage. Conceptual individualism entails ontological individualism: if talk of groups reduces completely to talk of individuals, then ontologically groups *are* these individuals.<sup>28</sup> Given that summativism *does* reduce group talk in this manner it thus appears necessarily individualist on both accounts, perhaps to the obscuration of these important distinctions on that analysis alone. However, it is important to note that the latter position does not similarly entail the former; ontological individualism does *not* entail conceptual individualism. That groups are not genuine entities in social ontology does not rule out explanatory need for collective concepts. Or likewise, to take up the converse angle, conceptual *non*-individualism need not necessitate its ontological counterpart: even if we *cannot* reduce group talk to talk of individuals, it is another matter whether a ‘group’ *really* exists.<sup>29</sup>

With these distinctions in hand, we can now more accurately distil our specific aims. We are primarily concerned with the conceptual notions at issue – how do we account for the *notion* of group agency?<sup>30</sup> We speak of groups acting; we speak of groups having psychological attributes. To take an alternative reading of the chapter’s opening quotation, what is being claimed could instead be that the collective ‘America’, *as a group entity*, authentically displays such attributes of

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<sup>27</sup> Whatever the content of those states might be, it should be stressed.

<sup>28</sup> Schmitt, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> Tuomela, for example, explicitly upholds just such a distinction: R. Tuomela, *The Philosophy of Sociality: The Shared Point of View*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 120.

<sup>30</sup> ‘Individualism’ will from now on be taken to refer to conceptual individualism, unless otherwise stated.

‘self-reliance’ and ‘large-heartedness’.<sup>31</sup> Can we systematically explain these attributions in a manner that could make the wider application of virtue terms coherent? Nothing at the outset demands that an account of collective virtue must apply to a genuine ontological entity. Instead, what is essential for any such account is that it can successfully explicate the *concept* of shared virtue.

### **Interrelation and Planning**

According to non-summativism, then, a ‘we’-referencing intention is necessary for collective action – and by extension, collective agency. How then have such accounts sought to understand this notion, and how fertile to collective virtue evaluation are these various characterisations? As expected, non-summativist theories differ significantly in their answer to the conceptual debate outlined in the last section, and as a result it is best to consider the individualist/non-individualist question as a spectrum of positions rather than a dichotomy. For this reason we will steer clear of ‘holism’ as a potential label for standpoints opposed to individualist reduction, for many positions are finely distinguished, and some accounts are multi-dimensional in their ultimate answer to this disagreement. Just as we noted in relation to virtue analysis, then, answers to this issue might not be ‘all or nothing’, which in itself may prove a more enlightening conclusion.

#### *Searle*

At the most individualistic end of this spectrum, Searle’s own non-summativist account is presented in response to his earlier outlined objections. Flowing from his controversial requirement that all intentionality might be solipsistic – and thus real-world independent, he

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<sup>31</sup> This is upheld for the purposes of argument. Given the context of these passages in the speech as a whole it is probably more likely that in actuality it is the first, aggregative, interpretation that was intended. An example more clearly professing the second interpretation can be found in Prime Minister David Cameron’s statement to the House of Commons – in relation to the welfare provision of the *state* – that Britain is a “Generous, tolerant and compassionate country”: Hansard HC, 15<sup>th</sup> June 2011, volume 529, column 771.

presents a highly atomistic understanding of collective action in which a primitive group subject-reference<sup>32</sup> can be held, rather intriguingly, by an individual person *alone*. As he argues:

I could have all the intentionality I do have even if I am radically mistaken, even if the apparent presence and cooperation of other people is an illusion, even if I am suffering a total hallucination, even if I am a brain in a vat. Collective intentionality in my head can make a purported reference to other members of a collective independently of the question whether or not there actually are such members.<sup>33</sup>

According to Searle's formulation, then, although a collective intention references the group in both its subject and content, such relational references nonetheless do not depend on any *actual* relations existing – an individual person in isolation personally has all that is needed to act on a *collective* intention. To return to his original example, the type of intention held by each of those running for shelter in the context of the acting performance is indeed of a different kind to when they are doing so without that background volition. Unlike summativism, the intention in those people's minds is now no longer a personal one – it *is*, he states, of the form 'we intend that we perform act [J]',<sup>34</sup> and thus does not represent a reduction to the mere individual 'I'-directed references of the former approach.<sup>35</sup> Thus we might represent the situation as such:

**M<sub>1</sub>**: 'We intend that we J'

**M<sub>2</sub>**: 'We intend that we J'

**M<sub>3</sub>**: 'We intend that we J'

Therefore, the group consisting of [M<sub>1</sub>, M<sub>2</sub>, M<sub>3</sub>] has a *collective* intention to J.

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<sup>32</sup> Searle, *op. cit.*, p. 90. He thinks, more generally, that collective behaviour is itself a 'biologically primitive form of animal life', which does not require specialist knowledge in order to recognise: *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>33</sup> Searle, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96. Emphasis Added. 'A' substituted for 'J' in order to maintain consistency.

<sup>35</sup> Searle notes that an overarching intention that 'we' intend will be supplemented with further intentional content of the form 'I am doing act B as part of our doing act A', where individual action, as a means, is yet still *part* of the collective act itself: *Ibid.*, p. 97. The structure of action is thus of the form 'we intend to achieve collective goal B by means of singular means A' (In Seale's precise notation 'i.a. [intention-in-action] collective B by means of singular A (this i.a. causes: A stirred, causes: B mixed)). For a detailed discussion see *Ibid.*, p. 98-103.

On this reading, therefore, each participant has the collective intention, but given that the other intentions may not in fact exist – that the presence of other participants might be imaginary – there is no relation *between* the intentional states of (potential) group members. Clearly this understanding is highly individualistic, for the necessary ‘we’-referencing content of a non-summative intention is achieved without even the existence of others being required; the ‘we’ subject is held by each simply as a primitive phenomenon. Collective concepts can therefore be reduced to individual attitudinal states.

*Bratman*

Searle’s account is, however, fatally flawed, and faces a number of criticisms. One of the most decisive is that a primitive, isolated conception of a ‘we’-referencing intention fails to guarantee the requisite degree of planning and coordination that Searle himself noted as essential to a collective enterprise. Acting in unison during the performance of running for shelter, even if each participant independently intends that the group do so, would here be highly fortuitous, their doing so *together* accidental at best.<sup>36</sup> How, for instance, would the actors know when to begin the performance, whether they should seek shelter at random or in the same direction, and whether they should do so calmly or feigning alarm? If collective intentions are solipsistic, then there is no way for their mutual content to interact towards these variables. The account does not, therefore, represent an appropriate grounding for shared action.

Building from this important criticism, yet maintaining the individualist foundation of Searle’s approach, Michael Bratman has presented a much more developed non-summative account.<sup>37</sup> In particular, Bratman stresses the need for more significant *interrelation* and connectedness between the intentional states of participants, a degree of mutual interaction and *causality*

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<sup>36</sup> D. Tollefsen, ‘Collective Intentionality’, *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/coll-int/>, 4<sup>th</sup> August 2004.

<sup>37</sup> For the now-classic article outlining the foundations of his account, see M. E. Bratman, ‘Shared Cooperative Activity’, in his *Faces of Intention: Selected Essays on Intention and Agency*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

between the group-referencing content of their attitudes. Under his ‘planning conception’ of cooperative agency, therefore, collective action results not just from the shared relational content of individually-held intentions – the fact that each intends that ‘we’ act – but from the positive influence such intentions have *upon each other*.

Unlike Searle, Bratman’s reduction is not only in terms of attitudinal states *belonging* solely to individuals (that is, the conceptual individualist reduction), but furthermore in terms of the subject-reference of those intentions, which on his account also concern the individual alone – being of the form ‘*I* intend that...’. Consequently, for Bratman, shared intention consists in a complex of highly interdependent, mutually and reflexively responsive, ‘*I*’-subject intentions. Each participant in a ‘shared cooperative activity’ intends that the group so act in part *because of* the intentions and sub-plans of the other participant(s), and by extension – as a participating, intentional agent themselves – the reflexive efficacy of their own.<sup>38</sup>

To restate the key components of his formulation, two people perform joint action *J* if and only if:

- (1)(a)(i) I intend that we *J*.
- (1)(a)(ii) I intend that we *J* in accordance with and because of meshing subplans of (1)(a)(i) and (1)(b)(i).
- (1)(b)(i) You intend that we *J*.
- (1)(b)(ii) You intend that we *J* in accordance with and because of meshing subplans of (1)(a)(i) and (1)(b)(i).
- (2) It is common knowledge between us that (1).<sup>39</sup>

Though Bratman only considers the two-person case, his analysis is presumably expandable – at the risk of an inarticulate level of complexity<sup>40</sup> – to relations between greater numbers of people.

On his account, what is fundamental for the unification of joint action is the *meshing together* of

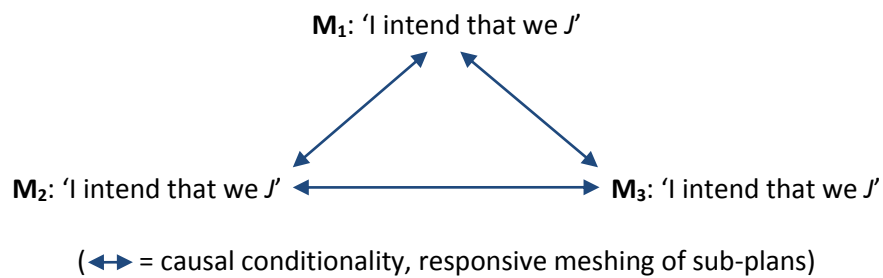
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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 100-102.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105. For brevity, additional qualifications regarding lack of coercion and ‘cooperative stability’ have here been excluded. The potential toxicity of coercion within joint action, an issue that for reasons of space will not be discussed in this work, is nevertheless a point of major disagreement between Bratman and Gilbert.

<sup>40</sup> Tuomela agrees that for large groups this characterisation of attitude formation seems unrealistic: Tuomela, *The Philosophy of Sociality*, p. 273 note 30.

relevant participatory intentions between individual group members – that their so-called ‘sub-plans’ of action, the means by which they *individually* aim to contribute towards the group goal, are sufficiently coordinated with those of others so as to ensure that goal is successfully tracked. The maintenance of this mesh, grounded in a reciprocal responsiveness to one another’s intentionality, may require negotiation between participants and the potential modification of their personal roles.<sup>41</sup> A ‘group’ intention is thus the state of affairs in which individual member attitudes interact and ‘interlock’<sup>42</sup> in this appropriate manner:



Therefore, the group consisting of [M<sub>1</sub>, M<sub>2</sub>, M<sub>3</sub>] has a *collective* intention to J.

On this account, then, a shared intention cannot be explained by reference to a *single* individual, as Searle believed, but only to a genuine plurality of them; as Bratman attests, ‘it takes at least two not only to tango but even for there to be a shared intention to tango.’<sup>43</sup> Yet at the heart of this account it is still only individuals that can actually act, and hold intentional states – in this case, states of a special relational content, *and* which are causally interdependent. Conceptual individualism is therefore maintained; his account does not give us a group agent capable of having its own intentionality, and so we cannot really say ‘a group’ did something in a *non-*

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<sup>41</sup> Accordingly, Bratman’s account would seem to regard the process of sharing an intention as an essentially temporal one: an initial, personal intention on behalf of each participant that we J subsequently relies upon the shaping and responsiveness of relevant sub-plans of action in order for the *joint* intention to be properly constructed and maintained. Bratman himself also notes the possibility of ‘temporal asymmetry’ between participants in the formation of their initial, personal intentions that we J: see M. E. Bratman, ‘I Intend That We J’, in his *Faces of Intention: Selected Essays on Intention and Agency*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 157.

<sup>42</sup> Bratman, ‘Shared Cooperative Activity’, p. 102.

<sup>43</sup> M. E. Bratman, ‘Shared Intention’, in his *Faces of Intention: Selected Essays on Intention and Agency*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 116 note 17.

*reductive* sense. In addition, within these individually-held states Bratman also denies the need for any ‘we’-subject of intention that cannot be reduced to individual ‘I’-subject components. In the end then, Bratman conceives of collective intention as a set of individual commitments, which, despite collective content and mutual responsiveness, represent nothing above and beyond *their* (total) analysis. You and I may intentionally act *together*, but there is no ‘we’ that is accurately doing so.

### III

## Virtue Ethical Analysis

### Limited Virtue

Bratman’s account provides a unity to action that both the summativist approach, and the atomism of Searle, were unable to account for. His ‘planning conception’ of cooperative action allows us to say that an action was indeed collectively intended, and, hence, that it makes sense to evaluate it in its own right. This opens up the possibility of applying virtue ethical analysis, above the level of individual or ‘personal’ action, for the first time. But some reservations nevertheless present themselves, and potentially place a limit on the possible scope of any such analysis.

As we just noted, Bratman’s formulation of collective action consciously opposes any non-reductive attitude ascription for groups themselves;<sup>44</sup> groups do not literally intend, their ‘intention’ is merely a useful expression for what in reality is a ‘web’ of interacting, personal subject-directed intentional states existing across individual members.<sup>45</sup> In this sense the shared

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<sup>44</sup> Indeed he explicitly rejects the non-reductive account of Margaret Gilbert, which will be considered in the next chapter: Bratman, ‘Shared Cooperative Activity’, p. 108 note 25.

<sup>45</sup> Bratman, ‘Shared Intention’, p. 123.

intention itself does not belong to any particular agential entity, but is rather the relationship between certain attitudinal states:

shared intention, as I understand it, is not an attitude in any mind. It is not an attitude in the mind of some fused agent, for there is no such mind; and it is not an attitude in the mind or minds of either or both participants. Rather, it is a state of affairs that consists primarily in attitudes (none of which are themselves the shared intention) of the participants and interrelations between those attitudes.<sup>46</sup>

For Bratman, then, although collective action results from collective intention, there is *no* agent – collective or otherwise – for whom this intention itself can be properly ascribed. A group of people, if their individual intentions are suitably composed and enmeshed, may perform action that is ‘shared’ in a manner that personal action is not, but beyond the performance of that action there is no agential subject for which relevant attitudinal properties might attach – the shared intention just *is* the joint relational complex,<sup>47</sup> something of a rather abstract and intangible existence. This result flows in part from the nature of Bratman’s approach. The ‘planning conception’ of collective action is essentially functional in spirit;<sup>48</sup> it aims to outline those factors that play a corresponding role to that of intention in the individual case:

Our shared intention, then, performs at least three interrelated jobs: It helps coordinate our intentional actions; it helps coordinate our planning; and it can structure relevant bargaining... Thus does our shared intention help to organise and to unify our intentional agency in ways to some extent analogous to the ways in which the intentions of an individual organise and unify her individual agency over time.<sup>49</sup>

In equating what is usually understood as an inner attitudinal state with a mere ‘state of affairs’, however, the capacity of Bratman’s approach to give an adequate account of other relevant properties is potentially curtailed. Whereas a functional reading of collective *intention* may conceivably be tied to coordinated patterns of action, it is much less clear how collective readings

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

of other ‘agential’ attributes – such as motivation, feeling, judgement or character – might be similarly constructed. Unlike intention these elements appear difficult to characterise solely in terms of behavioural configurations or output; in contrast they appear much more inherently agential: they are, on the standard understanding, *about* the agent and its internal qualities.

No one has yet provided an account of how *these* kinds of attribute might be understood on Bratman’s terms, as functional components in inter-personal planning, and until such an account is adequately presented we may remain sceptical as to the prospects of a non-agential reading of these qualities. Yet as we noted at the outset, and as Robert Adams similarly attests, a specific concern for virtue-based analysis is often ‘the ethical significance of *what lies behind our actions*’,<sup>50</sup> those inner elements that cause and shape its ultimate enactment. In this sense, we must consider how far virtue analysis can get without access to such features.

#### *Virtue Theory to Virtue Ethics*

For a theorist like Julia Driver, constructing her account of virtue within an explicitly consequentialist framework, it is possible to attribute virtue independently of the kinds of internal states here taken to be problematic. Her account is committed to what she terms ‘evaluational externalism’,<sup>51</sup> whereby it is solely properties *outside* of an agent’s nature that form the basis of relevant moral appraisals:

I argue that none of those internal qualities traditionally associated with virtue is necessary for it... when we ask ourselves the question “Why is x a virtue?” we do not respond by saying things like “x displays good intentions”; rather, we point to external factors, that is, those consequences actually produced by the trait in a systematic fashion... The mental states leading up to the actions instantiated by the trait are not themselves intrinsically valuable, though they will certainly be

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<sup>50</sup> R. M. Adams, *A Theory of Virtue: Excellence in Being for the Good*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 9. His emphasis.

<sup>51</sup> J. Driver, *Uneasy Virtue*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. xv.

extrinsically valuable. Their value, however, will be understood in terms of external features – that is, the consequences produced<sup>52</sup>

Accordingly, Driver's virtue *theory* consciously separates virtue-based evaluations from any 'good psychological states' of the performing agent.<sup>53</sup> The moral value of action is here grounded solely upon consequentialist considerations – the extent to which it maximises the good. If a tendency of action promotes her consequentialist criteria, producing 'more good (in the actual world) than not *systematically*',<sup>54</sup> it counts as a virtue. On this reading, then, an inability to assign certain qualities of motivation, knowledge or feeling to a collective would not be a barrier to ethical attribution, and we could conceivably assess joint actions in their absence.

However, there are a number of respects in which the present adequacy of Driver's account can be doubted. The first concerns an important background assumption in the characterisation of virtue outlined above – that virtue rests upon a *tendency* of action; that it is essentially dispositional. This resurrects familiar problems for a Bratmanian model of collective action, for even if moral value itself can be defined independently of internal agential states, it remains an important practical question as to how the 'systematic' production of appropriate action could be secured without reference to at least some collective agential properties. For Driver, who is of course only discussing the case of individual human beings, denying the *moral* relevance of human psychological states does not equate to a denial of the general features and capacities of that psychology. Action being the result of habit may not be of direct relevance to its ethical

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xvii-xviii.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxi.

This isolation from psychological states is not, however, a general feature of all non-*virtue ethical* virtue theories. For instance, as we earlier noted (see Chapter 1 page 4, note 9), Thomas Hurka, whilst likewise presenting a consequentialist reading of virtue, maintains that certain agential qualities are in fact constitutive of virtue and vice, and that such attributes can be valuable in their own right: 'A person's having virtuous desires, motives, and feelings by itself makes her life better, and her having vicious attitudes makes it worse.' Hurka, *Virtue, Vice and Value*, p. 3.

<sup>54</sup> Driver, *op cit.*, p. 82. Her emphasis.

value, but the very notion of assessing recurrent *patterns* of action does seem to rest upon the supporting assumption that habitual character traits can exist.<sup>55</sup>

Given the outlined nature of Bratman's model of collective intention, and its denial of non-reductive group ascriptions, it is an open question as to how the notion of a behavioural disposition could be conceived on these terms. Even if we imagine that a stable tendency of good-producing action could be somehow secured between cooperating individuals, what exactly this subsequent 'trait' – the virtue itself – belongs to remains disputable. If the repeated production of appropriate joint action results only from a fortunate convergence of private virtuous motives across individual participants, each reliably seeking the same good ends on each occasion, then we are nevertheless talking about the output of personal and not collective virtue.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, such a state of affairs falls short of a tendency that can be understood as *systematic*.

If, on the other hand, a recurrent pattern of joint action is the result of some purposive agreement between participants – perhaps a longer-term meshing of sub-plans in the maintenance of an *ongoing* behavioural end – familiar qualms may arise concerning what exactly this resulting 'disposition' attaches to. Even if we are happy to accept that collective intention is nothing more than an interlocking network of attitudes, can we say the same for virtue itself? Can we support the assertion that group virtue, unlike its individual counterpart, is not an agential property at all but merely a quality or configuration of interpersonal planning? This latter reading, despite its departure from our usual understanding, is certainly not outside the realms of defensibility; nevertheless, two further issues ought to curtail our pursuit of a Bratman-Driver reading of collective virtue.

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<sup>55</sup> Indeed, virtue is explicitly identified as a character trait or disposition at a number of points, for example: *Ibid.*, pp. xvi-xviii, 67-8, 74-5, 82.

<sup>56</sup> For as we noted, given the truth of non-summativism a collection of personally virtuous individuals does not itself equate with a virtuous group.

To begin with, Driver's claim that ascriptions of virtue are independent of internal agential states is a significantly qualified one. At a number of points she does indeed link virtue to the possession of psychological attributes, claiming that it is in fact 'a complex *psychological* disposition (or disposition cluster) to feel, behave, and/or act well',<sup>57</sup> suggesting that agential qualities like emotion, or states that are not tied directly to action, can after all be important elements of virtue. Her principal claim, it becomes clear, is simply that such states are not *necessarily* connected to its possession. Some *particular* virtues may require *particular* internal components – generosity, she notes, may require realisation of helping the needy<sup>58</sup> – but such states are nevertheless not required for virtue 'across the board'.<sup>59</sup>

How to reconcile these occasional internal requirements with the consequentialist core of Driver's theory conceivably rests upon her earlier-noted claim that certain mental states may be *extrinsically* valuable. One reading of this claim points to the possible causal role of particular psychological qualities: even if we deny that a person's inner attributes are relevant to the moral worth of their subsequent action, instead measured only by its contribution to good consequences, such feelings may nonetheless play essential facilitative roles. Taking the example of a courageous disposition, though it may only be external states of affairs that are relevant to consequentialist appraisal – that people in danger are rescued, for instance – at the same time it is not clear that just any kind of person is capable of bringing about these consequences. It does not seem psychologically plausible that an agent bereft of confidence and consumed by fear would be able to perform the good-producing actions associated with this particular virtue. Accordingly, such feelings – despite lacking value in and of themselves – may nevertheless be valuable for the outcomes they promote or enable.

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68. Her emphasis.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxi.

A further, more contestable interpretation of this extrinsic value – somewhat foreshadowing a similar but distinct point in the later discussion of Swanton’s account<sup>60</sup> – is that certain agential states might be included within the scope of what in fact counts as the most appropriate outcome: treated, that is, as *part of* the evaluable consequences themselves. Perhaps in a given situation exhibiting a certain psychological quality actually has an effect on the overall balance of good produced. A feeling of joy on receiving a thoughtful gift may not only constitute the utility of the recipient, but recognition of that state may moreover illicit similarly positive feelings in the giver, contributing to a better state of affairs than would be possible in the emotion’s absence. An ‘internal’ agential state may therefore be valuable, not because of some general and inherent connection to moral worth, but because in the situation at hand exhibiting it is a *component* of the best possible state of affairs – more good is produced with its manifestation than without.

On either interpretation, agential states can clearly play an important role in the patterns of conduct taken to constitute virtue. An account of joint action unable to account for *shared* agential states would therefore place some considerable limits on the virtues it is conceivable to ascribe to collectives.<sup>61</sup> The preceding discussion of consequences also brings us full circle to perhaps the most evident shortcoming of Driver’s account, for in making the consequentialist promotion of an external good the ultimate criterion of moral value, and defining virtue merely in the instrumental service of that end, it appears to break with the main tradition of virtue-centred thought propagating from the foundations of Aristotle. Whatever the merits of Driver’s formulation, finding a collective role for ‘virtue’ in this diminished, derivative sense must be the last resort of our endeavour, as for virtue *ethics* – understood as a distinct moral theoretical approach – the agent is not merely a vehicle productive of independently ‘moral’ action, but is an important focus of evaluation in their own right.

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<sup>60</sup> See pages 103-4.

<sup>61</sup> Or else, modification of the nature of those virtues in a collective context. For a discussion along these lines see pages 106-7.

Acknowledging these points, one of few virtue *ethical* understandings able to accommodate relevant attribution in light of individualist reduction is that of Anscombe, whose (proposed) theory of virtue applies its concepts *directly* to actions themselves, not referencing the inner states of the performing agent.<sup>62</sup> An action being just or unjust, she argues, is just a fact about it,<sup>63</sup> with just or unjust agents simply those who are disposed to undertake them – ‘a just man is a man who habitually refuses to commit or participate in any unjust actions’.<sup>64</sup> How the habitual performance of such acts could be insured without such reference to inner states might – as with Driver’s account – remain a practical reservation in the collective context, but importantly this would here concern only whether an *agent* could be considered virtuous – the virtue or vice of action itself would still be so regardless:

To arrange to get a man judicially punished for something which it can be clearly seen he has not done is intrinsically unjust... there can be absolutely no argument about the description of this as unjust. No circumstances, and no expected consequences, which do *not* modify the description of the procedure... can modify the description of it as unjust. Someone who attempted to dispute this would only be pretending not to know what “unjust” means: for this is a paradigm case of injustice.<sup>65</sup>

Given that justness here represents an autonomous quality of an act, any relation to a *state* of virtue is for Anscombe relevant only to an agent’s *reasons* for action – specifically, that being virtuous ultimately contributes to their flourishing.<sup>66</sup> It is therefore what Thomas Hurka terms a ‘rationality’ version of virtue ethics – one that uses the concept of agential virtue not to establish ethical claims, but only what people have reason to do.<sup>67</sup> On this understanding, the *morality* of action – its nature as virtuous or vicious – can be independently evaluated. All that is required for some joint action to be subjected to virtue-based analysis is thus solely that a group properly intends it, and therefore on Anscombe’s proposed understanding a Bratman-envisaged collective

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<sup>62</sup> Hurka, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

<sup>63</sup> Anscombe, ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’, p. 17.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>67</sup> Hurka, *op. cit.*, p. 221.

conceivably *could* perform fully virtuous (or vicious) acts. If a group of judges form the joint intention to punish an innocent man, and such a conviction is indeed intrinsically unjust, then we can accurately say that the collective in question has acted viciously.

However, as Hurka notes, such rationality accounts of virtue are much less prominent in current literature;<sup>68</sup> instead, the leading modern expressions of virtue ethics are indeed so-called ‘morality’ versions – utilising virtue to establish ethical claims about action, not vice versa. It is perhaps due to this dissimilar focus of Anscombe’s account, and her conviction that the proper investigation of ethical concepts firstly requires a more substantive philosophy of psychology,<sup>69</sup> that she says so little about the constitution of virtuous and vicious properties themselves, the exact moral nature of which remains unacceptably opaque. Why is it, beyond mere intuition, that certain acts simply *are* (un)just or – to reference her other limited examples – (un)truthful or (un)chaste?<sup>70</sup> Though influential, it seems that her understanding of virtue evaluation needs considerable further explication in order to be treated on par with other mainstream accounts, and in this sense it cannot serve as a suitable moral framework for our current model of collective action.

On most developed virtue ethical accounts, by contrast, such inner states *are* essential for acting virtuously in the fullest sense.<sup>71</sup> However, as we noted at the outset, this requirement need not rule out *all* levels of virtue ethical evaluation. Whilst some notable modern virtue ethicists, such as Michael Slote, appear to collapse the distinction,<sup>72</sup> most instead differentiate between the

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.

<sup>69</sup> Anscombe, ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’, p. 15. She later contends that the philosophers of the time lacked the adequate ‘philosophic equipment’ for such enterprises to be undertaken. *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>70</sup> Indeed, it is worth noting that the particular virtues Anscombe chooses to discuss are all tied to concepts that can be understood in relative abstraction from the agent; whether something is truthful most centrally depends on whether a statement conforms to fact. But this ability to simply recognise the ethical nature of an action faces far greater challenges when we move from her somewhat-cherry-picked examples to consider ‘fuller-bodied’ virtues and vices. Is it plainly discernible, independently of considering agential states, that a certain action simply *is* compassionate, for instance?

<sup>71</sup> Swanton, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

<sup>72</sup> Hurka, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

moral 'rightness' of an action, and its more expansive moral or ethical 'goodness' – with evaluation of the former depending, at least partly, on the objective properties of the act itself, aside from the actual qualities of the performing agent.<sup>73</sup>

Aristotle allows that non-virtuous individuals can nonetheless perform *the acts* that virtuous people do, for as he states, 'we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts'.<sup>74</sup> Such actions are understood as being only 'in accordance with' the virtues, as virtuous in some incidental manner, either carried out by chance, or maybe owing to guidance, mimicry or emulation on the part of the performing, non-virtuous, agent. Yet whilst granting such occurrences, Aristotle notes that such actions are not good in the same sense as those enacted *in the way* that virtuous people do them, in the latter as behaviour that expresses some further excellent state within them.<sup>75</sup>

Such 'virtuous acts' may therefore provide a less stringent level of moral analysis for group-level virtue analysis, one that could be more applicable to the kind of shared agency we are currently considering. Yet whilst Aristotle hints at the possibility that acts of this nature are in some sense 'right', the exact nature of his understanding of 'rightness' is a matter of scholarly dispute. Given the strong emphasis on character within Aristotle's writings, his full position towards action itself – while clearly important within his theory – is open to some debate.<sup>76</sup> Slote, for instance, interprets Aristotle as an intuitionist, considering actions to be right independent of their relation to character. On this reading, virtuous agents are merely in the best position to *perceive* what is right, and pursue appropriate action *because* of that recognition.<sup>77</sup> By contrast, he claims the

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For Slote both moral rightness *and* moral goodness are understood solely on account of the quality of an agent's motivations – so-called 'agent-basing'. See Chapter 3, page 142 for an extended discussion.

<sup>73</sup> Hurka, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

This does not of course mean that analysis of the act itself need be *independent of virtue analysis*, as will now be demonstrated.

<sup>74</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 28.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 34-5.

What these further excellent states consist in will be explored in the course of things.

<sup>76</sup> M. Slote, *Morals from Motives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 5.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 7.

opposite interpretation by Rosalind Hursthouse – rather, that Aristotle considers acts to be *made* right by the very fact that a virtuous person would perform them. On this second reading, then, the evaluation of action is *derivative* from aretaic character evaluations.<sup>78</sup>

So despite clearly distinguishing evaluation of them from that of genuine acts *from* virtue, the precise details of Aristotle's own position towards the moral worth of mere 'virtuous acts' remains unclear. Within the modern resurgence of virtue theory, however, two more explicit criteria of virtue ethical rightness, each building upon this Aristotelian distinction, do prove informative for our present purposes.

#### *The 'Qualified Agent' Account*

The first of these accounts of 'rightness' is that of Hursthouse herself, which in developing her above-outlined interpretation accordingly claims the following, which has been termed a 'qualified agent' account of virtue ethical rightness:<sup>79</sup>

An action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstances.<sup>80</sup>

Hursthouse's approach to rightness maintains an important connection between the moral evaluation of virtuous action and a state of virtue. In a given set of circumstances, a genuinely virtuous agent would wisely perform appropriate action, and furthermore would do so with suitably fine inner states – fine motives, suitable emotions, and the like. Such action would be both right, and moreover, proceed *from* the virtue of the performing agent, the manifestation of their excellence. But in appealing to the notion of a *hypothetical* virtuous agent – what a suitably

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<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

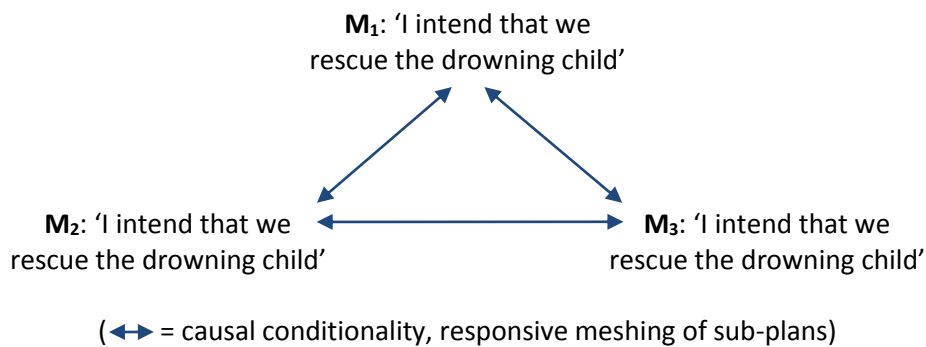
<sup>79</sup> Swanton, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

<sup>80</sup> R. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 28.

Hurka argues that 'would' is here too strong, and implies that there will always be one action a virtuous person will prefer to all others. He argues instead for 'might', which would allow a plurality of right actions under a satisficing approach to virtue: Hurka, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

endowed individual *would* do were they in that situation – any relevant fine inner states or capacities need not be the origin of *actual* action for it to be more minimally ‘right’.

In severing this link for so-called ‘thin’ moral evaluation, it becomes possible to meet the requirements of rightness without agential virtue. In such a case, a non-virtuous person can perform the same act as a virtuous person, acting rightly, but without the additional moral goodness of virtue itself. In a group context, then, incidentally virtuous action (what a hypothetical virtuous agent would do) minimally resulting from collective intention, *can* be right on virtue ethical terms. Hence, to consider a classic ethical scenario in light of Bratman’s understanding of shared intention:<sup>81</sup>



Therefore, the group consisting of [M<sub>1</sub>, M<sub>2</sub>, M<sub>3</sub>] has  
a *collective* intention to rescue the drowning child.

If rescuing the drowning child represents the outward action that a singular virtuous agent would do in those circumstances (an agent actually acting *from* a state of, say, benevolence), then there exists a collective intention to perform what turns out to be a virtuous act, one that is *hypothetically* linked to a state of virtue (benevolence) – that of a qualified agent, were *they* to perform the action. If this shared intention is followed through to cooperative action, the group performs an action that is right.

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<sup>81</sup> The case of rescuing a drowning child has become recurrent moral philosophical thought example since first appearing in Peter Singer’s seminal article ‘Famine, Affluence, and Morality’: Singer, *op. cit.*

As Bratman's account reduces the subject of 'the group' to the intentional states of individuals, how might we conceptualise what is 'really' going on here when we say the collective acts virtuously? In contrast to summativism, the situation here is not that each individual member of the group is personally acting virtuously. Rather, each individual is instead intending to act, *with others*, towards a common cooperative goal, and it is this ultimate action *of the collective as a whole* – the child being rescued – that here fulfils the requirements of a virtuous act (whether or not it is known by any of the participants in the joint intention that it so qualifies). The actions of each member in pursuing this collective intention contribute to the act's achievement, but their *individual* contributions are not in themselves the joint virtuous action, even if their behaviour in bringing it about might *also* be virtuous on a personal level.<sup>82</sup>

A potential reservation might be raised against Hursthouse's formulation, as applied to such shared action. If in the individual context an act is right when it is what a virtuous *person* would do in the circumstances, in the collective context is the correct analogue not instead what a virtuous *collective* would do? However, *this* hypothetical qualified agent would be a problematic entity on the account of shared agency thus far presented, for the reason we are considering less demanding forms of virtue analysis is exactly because Bratman's reductive account does not posit the existence of a genuine group subject of agency. Hence, if there are no real 'collective virtuous persons',<sup>83</sup> possessing full excellence, by which to measure action against, how are groups of people to identify what their collective enterprises should be, if seeking to be morally right? If *no* collective could actually possess virtuous inner states, such as appropriately fine motivation, then it seems the link to even hypothetical virtue risks being broken.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> See the next section, 'Towards a Plural Subject' (pages 107-14), for a critical expansion of these points.

<sup>83</sup> In reference to earlier points (see pages 77-78), it is worth reinforcing that the main focus here is not on the conditions for the *ontological* existence of group entities, or what it would mean for a certain type of group to exist as a distinct ontological entity. Rather, and whatever the ontological status of our group descriptions, can our conceptual talk of groups maintain the possibility of them possessing virtuous or vicious inner states?

<sup>84</sup> Moreover, in logical terms Hursthouse's criterion would in these circumstances produce a trivially true counterfactual. If the antecedent that something is 'what a virtuous *collective* would do in the

Two potential responses might be proposed. Firstly, perhaps the actual non-existence of a virtuous agent suitable to this context is not a fatal blow. Instead, could we not simply utilise the imagined *concept* of an idealised group virtuous agent, one that *was* able to possess inner states, akin to an individual, in which hypothetical states could be situated?<sup>85</sup> ‘External’ virtuous acts could then still be identified by which real collectives could be measured. However, as Swanton notes, it is clear that Hursthouse has actual qualified agents in mind in her formulation,<sup>86</sup> for if the idealised concept does not really exist, then how we would go about identifying virtuous acts is unclear. In such a case, on what would our understanding of the acts virtuous collectives perform be based? If virtuous action was easy to identify in abstraction, without the need for examples, then the virtue ethical emphasis on practical wisdom and moral development would appear redundant. Instead, it is precisely because the non-virtuous are not always in a position to perceive the appropriate ethical action that the identification of agents that *are* fully virtuous is thought essential.<sup>87</sup>

An alternative response might be to deny that the paradigm of virtue need be uniquely collective. In our example the act of rescuing a drowning child, which might manifest the virtue of benevolence, can be easily understood either in an individual *or* a collective context. To illustrate, one person may act in a manner that rescues the child, pulling them out of the water by lifting their arm; or, two people *together* may cooperatively act in a manner that rescues the child,

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circumstances’ is impossible (i.e. virtuous groups simply cannot exist), then any counterfactual with that antecedent would – on the common understanding – be vacuously true. Every joint action would therefore be right or wrong, without proper discrimination.

<sup>85</sup> Perhaps, as a substantive basis for this concept, we could imagine a group that possessed a so-called ‘hive mind’ – an idea so far confined the realms of science fiction, but not beyond useful comprehension. By linking the brain processes of constituent individuals, whether by telepathic or electronic means, such groups are imagined to possess genuinely collective consciousness, akin to that of a single organism.

<sup>86</sup> Swanton, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

The qualification ‘characteristically’, an addition to earlier forms of Hursthouse’s right act criterion, reflects this point, and is recognition of the fact that, for a variety of reasons (such as false information), *actual* virtuous agents may fail to achieve their characteristic ends in every case: Hursthouse, ‘Virtue Theory and Abortion’, p. 225.

<sup>87</sup> For Aristotle’s discussion of the moral expert or *phronimos* see Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI, Chapter 7.

lifting an arm each.<sup>88</sup> That only an individual might be able to possess the inner states required for an act *from* benevolence does not seem to rule out that both the individual and collective instances are indeed benevolent acts. In the collective case, the same outcome is achieved, only with the greater efficiency of joint action. It can still be claimed that rescuing the drowning child is what the virtuous *person* would do in the same circumstances, only here it is being carried out jointly – the virtuous act is being shared.

Other actions that are likely to manifest virtuous states can be similarly understood. If it is a generous act to give money to charity, an individual *or* group donation can meet this standard. If an individual can act liberally in spending their earnings, so too can a family making purchases together. If an individual comedian can tell a witty joke, so too a comedy double-act can perform a witty joint routine. If an individual acts truthfully in telling the facts, so too a board of inquiry can in the contents of its final report. Indeed, as Aristotle attests, ‘The courage of a city, and the justice and wisdom of a city, have the same force, and the same character, as the qualities which cause individuals who have them to be called just, wise, and temperate.’<sup>89</sup>

There is, however, an important limitation on the extent of this correspondence between group and individual action, for as Peter French notes there exists a multitude of action predicates that by their very definition are exclusively the remit of collectives. To ‘disband’, for instance, is possible only in reference to more than one person, for such a term is irreducibly collective in character – saying that ‘John disbanded’ would be clearly nonsensical.<sup>90</sup> Similarly, it seems that no *single* individual could ever hope to ‘converse’, nor could they undertake some relatively simple

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<sup>88</sup> Picking which arm each person would lift so as not to get in each other’s way is an example of the need for meshing sub-plans of action, a particular emphasis of Bratman’s account.

<sup>89</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, p. 235.

<sup>90</sup> French, *op. cit.*, p. 5. Congruent with some later examples, he likewise includes ‘lost the football game’, ‘elected a president’, and ‘passed an amendment’ as belonging to this class of predicates. Tuomela likewise argues that certain games and rituals (like tennis or the conferral of degrees) must be many-person actions as a conceptual necessity: Tuomela, ‘The We-Mode and the I-Mode’, p. 113.

physical movements such as to ‘scatter’ or to ‘split up’.<sup>91</sup> Such ascriptions are what we might term *constitutively collective*; they are attributions that simply cannot be understood outside of referencing a plural body.

Accordingly, even if it is standardly possible for groups to bring about the same ends as a virtuous or vicious individual,<sup>92</sup> and thus perform action liable for ‘thin’ virtue ethical assessment, it seems that there remains some group conduct that necessarily lies outside the scope of that analysis. If the rightness of an action is anchored to what a virtuous person would do in the circumstances, but a virtuous (or indeed vicious) *person* could never disband, then it appears that there is little we might say about whether a *group’s* decision to do so was right or wrong. Disbanding is never what the virtuous individual would do in a situation, but nor is it something that the vicious individual would do either; instead, it seems not to be captured at all by Hursthouse’s criterion. Given the range of constitutively collective actions that we might consider to be ethically relevant,<sup>93</sup> particularly in the international context, the extent of this normative ‘neutrality’ could prove a significant limitation.<sup>94</sup>

This qualification aside, however, it seems at least possible to tie an important proportion of *collective* virtuous actions not to the character of some distinct ‘group virtuous agent’, but to

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<sup>91</sup> Although such latter cases might not always be coordinated and thus subject to a collective intention – indeed, they might just be like the first, summative reading of ‘running for shelter’.

<sup>92</sup> Though on reflection there are perhaps, conversely, actions that only individuals can perform. A group cannot sing a solo, or win a singles tournament, or give birth. For other ostensibly singular attributions, such as ‘singlehandedly’ performing some action, or ‘going it alone’, it may indeed be possible to think of corresponding group actions (a pair of soldiers ‘singlehandedly’ holding off an enemy assault, for instance). However, given that such individual-only actions will simply not be relevant to group-level conduct, and may of course be performed by a constituting member, this issue proves less troublesome than its counterpart.

<sup>93</sup> Taking only this example, we clearly might consider the disbandment of a company (as a recent example, the News of the World newspaper) as potentially having major ethical import.

<sup>94</sup> One avenue through which Hursthouse might respond to this point, we could speculate, is to compare it to another type of case that she explores at length, one in which an agent faces a dilemma no virtuous paradigm would ever have gotten into (for instance, having made incompatible promises). Asking what a virtuous person would do in such circumstances – and hence what action is right – is problematic, as the qualified agent would never be in such a position to begin with: See Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, pp. 50-1. If a decision concerning some constitutively collective action – like disbanding – is relevantly similar, in that a virtuous person would never themselves face that choice, then perhaps Hursthouse’s resolution of the first type of case – which distinguishes action *guidance* from action assessment – can shed light on the latter too. For the purposes of space, this will not be explored further here.

anchor them instead in the hypothetical virtuous states of *individuals*. Whether this is true of *all* virtues to a large extent depends upon whether there are moral excellences that are unique to group contexts. Answering *this* question, in reference to the collective interactions of global politics, lies beyond the agential focus of this foundational project, and must be the subject of future work.<sup>95</sup> Nevertheless, tackling this additional inquiry will firstly depend upon the *types* of group most relevant to that setting – the topic of Chapters 4 and 5. Awaiting the investigation of those chapters, and the further inquiry which can then follow from them, the evaluative scope of this right action criterion – in relation to actual collectives – must be left unresolved.

#### *The ‘Target-Centred’ Account*

An alternative virtue ethical criterion of rightness is presented by Swanton, who likewise affirms that virtue involves expression of the fine inner states of the performing agent.<sup>96</sup> But as with Hursthouse’s take on the Aristotelian distinction, she again assigns the concept of moral rightness not to acts *from* virtue (‘full excellence’) but to virtuous acts.<sup>97</sup> Rightness, she claims, turns out to be less agent-centred than goodness.<sup>98</sup> Rather than appealing to the concept of hypothetical virtues, however, Swanton instead dissects the constitution of virtue, distinguishing the different facets that comprise its manifestation. The result is what she terms a ‘target-centred’ virtue-ethical account of rightness.<sup>99</sup> Her two-stage formulation of a virtuous act (action virtuous in respect V) is as follows:

‘An action is virtuous in respect V if and only if it hits the target (realises the end of) virtue V.’

‘An action is right if and only if it is overall virtuous.’<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> See page 307.

<sup>96</sup> Swanton, *op. cit.*, p. 293.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 231.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 246.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228.

This formulation requires some explanation. For Swanton, a virtue is a disposition of acknowledging or responding to items in its appropriate field in an excellent way.<sup>101</sup> Such items may include people, objects, situations and actions.<sup>102</sup> While action *from* virtue displays, expresses or exhibits *all* the excellences comprising virtue in this sense:<sup>103</sup> excellent action, appreciation, feeling, motivation, and so on – all *modes of moral response*,<sup>104</sup> successfully ‘hitting the target’ of a virtue represents a more limited responsiveness, an ‘aspect’ of excellence appropriate to the aim of a particular virtue in a given context.<sup>105</sup>

The target of a virtue is understood as the (usually external) end that would manifest a particular virtuous disposition. As Swanton notes, in cases where the aim of a virtue is simply to promote some good for individuals, the notion of ‘hitting its target’ is relatively easy to understand – for it is clearly the *successful* promotion of that good.<sup>106</sup> Accordingly a conceivable ‘target’ of justice could be the even distribution of money, or rewarding according to merit, while the end that realises the virtue of benevolence might be rescuing a drowning child, or donating to charity. Which aspects of a virtue, or ‘modes of moral response’, end up determining its correct target is highly dependent on situational context.<sup>107</sup> Indeed, some targets of virtue may be plural, with multiple ends needing to be ‘hit’ in order for action to count as virtuous.<sup>108</sup>

Persons acting *from* a state of virtue would not only hit this target or targets but would moreover do so in a fully excellent way. Their action would be an *expression* of their fine inner qualities, exhibiting those further praiseworthy motivations and feelings that, in relation to the items in that virtue’s field of operation, constitute the full depth of moral acknowledgement and response. In other words, as well as meeting that aspect of virtue constituted by its appropriate

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<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>103</sup> Or on a satisficing threshold of virtue, a sufficient number: *Ibid.*, p. 233.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 238.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 233, 294.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 234, 294.

end, virtuous agents likewise respond excellently in relation all other modes in addition. Nevertheless, it remains quite possible that action may merely hit the target of a virtue without also exhibiting these other states, as is the case in performance by non-virtuous individuals – Aristotle’s virtuous action.<sup>109</sup>

The second aspect of the formulation, concerning ‘overall virtuousness’, goes on to define the stringency of right action, and additionally entails that the target of a relevant virtue must be hit in the *best way possible* in order for that action to be morally right.<sup>110</sup> Thus, it is not merely conduct that avoids the target of a related vice that meets these demands – such action would only be ‘all right’, but not ‘right’ all things considered. As Swanton states, ‘Assuming that no other virtues or vices are involved, we could say that a given act is right insofar as it is the most generous possible. The target of generosity on this view is very stringent: there is no large penumbra such that any act which falls within it is deemed right.’<sup>111</sup>

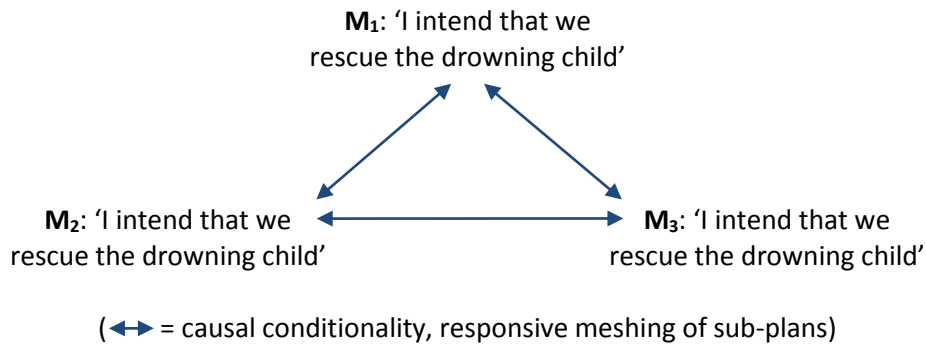
We can see in Swanton’s criteria a compatibility with Bratman-envisaged agency that rests on reasoning similar to that employed for Hursthouse’s approach. Corresponding to that analysis, to restate a possible shared intention:

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<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 232, 294.

<sup>110</sup> What features make an action ‘the best’, and thus ‘overall virtuous’, is understood holistically by Swanton, taking inspiration from Jonathan Dancy (though not committing to his larger particularist enterprise): *Ibid.*, p. 242. This outlook is particularly relevant in those cases where *more than one* virtue or vice is involved: ‘Disagreement about *overall* virtuousness centres on the resolution of conflict when an action is said to be virtuous in respect V and non-virtuous or even vicious in respect W. Given that an act can be virtuous in respect V if merely certain aspects of the profile of V are displayed, it is not necessary that such an act is in all ways excellent.’ *Ibid.* Her emphasis.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239. Her emphasis.



Therefore, the group consisting of [M<sub>1</sub>, M<sub>2</sub>, M<sub>3</sub>] has  
a *collective* intention to rescue the drowning child.

If rescuing the drowning child hits, in the best way possible, the contextual target of a relevant virtue – one that responds to the items (persons, situation) being considered: say, benevolence – then there exists a collective intention to perform an act that turns out to be 'overall virtuous', one that hits the target that is the end of the virtue (of benevolence), in the best way, in the given circumstance. If this shared intention is followed through to cooperative action, 'the group' performs an action which is right.

However, a limitation to this analysis again presents itself. As Swanton notes, though the targets of many virtues, in many contexts, are external to the agent, the targets of others appear to be ends that are instead 'entirely internal'. In particular she notes the virtue of 'determination', the target of which is 'trying hard in a sustained way'.<sup>112</sup> In this case, the end in question appears not to be any observable action in itself, but seems instead to represent a certain type of *motivational state*, what it is that lies behind whatever action is ultimately produced. This target can be hit, she notes, even if an agent fails consistently in their outward endeavours.<sup>113</sup>

Her claim seems plausible, for outward behaviour alone cannot genuinely reveal whether or not it is a 'determined' endeavour on behalf of the agent. This is especially clear if the goal in question is not a physical one, but perhaps mental in itself, such as trying to understand a difficult

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<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 233-35.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 235.

theoretical concept. Hence, if success in hitting the target of such a virtue cannot be measured by external action, the target *must* then be internal, and collectives – bereft of distinct inner states under Bratman – face a problem. More commonly, she notes, the targets of virtues may be a mixture of both external *and* internal elements. The target of caring, for instance, standardly involves feeling, behaving *and* succeeding in appropriate ways, and perhaps only in certain specific, less stringent, contexts would the external element alone be salient.<sup>114</sup> In terms of vice, too, Swanton notes that whether or not acts are ‘cruel’ may or may not reference inner states depending on the circumstances at hand.<sup>115</sup>

Hence, it seems that although a large number of virtue targets could be hit on Bratman’s account of shared agency, those that only require success in fulfilling an ‘external’ requirement, some – those with either entirely internal ends, or those contextually requiring additional internal states – could not be met by collective action understood in this manner, as reducible to individual-subject-directed intentions. If determination, care or cruelty was in some way demonstrated by group action,<sup>116</sup> it could only be the case that the personal participatory conduct of members so qualified – individuals themselves performing acts that were singularly virtuous, aside from their collective contribution. The *joint* action of the collective working together could not itself meet this standard, and thus the group, in its own right, could not.

These observations could likewise be carried across to our analysis of Hursthouse’s criterion, for it seems that in some cases what the virtuous agent ‘does’ in a circumstance is indeed not some action or outwardly-achieved goal, but simply a way of *being* – of genuinely feeling, of responding internally, to a person or situation. As Walter Schaller notes, ‘on some occasions... what is required in such circumstances is not some external good... but sympathy itself’.<sup>117</sup> Again, without

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<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 237.

<sup>116</sup> Ruling out those possibly less-stringent cases in which care and cruelty only require external ends.

<sup>117</sup> W. E. Schaller, ‘Are Virtues No More than Dispositions to Obey Moral Rules?’, *Philosophia* 20(1-2). Ramat-Gan, Israel: Bar-Ilan University, 1990, p. 200.

the possibility of assigning inner states, collectives could not *do* what a virtuous agent would characteristically do in these contexts. Both virtue ethical approaches therefore curtail the range of 'right' virtuous acts that Bratman-envisaged groups can perform, and this must remain an important qualification to their collective efficacy.

*Collective Virtue Ethical Rightness*

Here then we have the first possible level of a virtue ethical analysis of collective action. We can see that the demands of either formulation of 'rightness' can be imperfectly met by joint action understood in Bratman's terms: people can jointly intend action that turns out to hit the target of a virtue, or that a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances. Such action is independent – in a highly qualified sense of independent – from the actual possession of virtue. On either set of criteria, the intentions of individual group members can cooperatively interact to produce such states of affairs; the participants acting together represent the cause of the action, but no additional 'group' attitudes, belonging to any conceptual entity above those individuals, are required.

It is not our aim here to adjudicate between these understandings of virtuous action, nor must they be considered exhaustive, as the only conceivable accounts of moral rightness. They demonstrate, nevertheless, how virtue ethical accounts could engage with collective agency as thus far conceived. If collectives are capable of *jointly* performing at least a considerable range of virtuous acts, then it makes sense to morally appraise their action by the extent that they actually do so – to criticise groups that do not cooperate in a manner that produces these right actions, as virtue ethically understood.

However, as we have seen, this analysis is not without its limitations. On each account, the lack of collective inner states, our initial reason for exploring a lower level of moral appraisal, still raises

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And as Robert Adams adds, the territory of such a state also extends to 'feeling sympathy for what deserves sympathy in the past, about which, in the most important respects, we cannot *do* anything.' Adams, *A Theory of Virtue*, p. 9. His emphasis.

potential problems. Hursthouse's criterion of rightness is reliant on the virtues of the collective matching those of the individual, in order for there to be a *fully* virtuous agent by which 'right' virtuous actions can be hypothetically motivated.<sup>118</sup> And on either set of criteria, the possibility that some virtues have internal ends acts to limit the potential range of collective virtuous action. We are therefore left with a dilemma – either we constrain each criterion of rightness so that collectives *can* meet their demands:

Perform the *outward behaviour* that a virtuous person would characteristically do in the circumstances.

Act so as to hit the contextually appropriate *external element* of the target of virtue.

In which case such diminished, constrained formulations may no longer be morally accurate – external ends alone, as we have seen, are not always what is virtue ethically right in a situation, and we therefore risk ignoring the 'truth' of the theories. Or alternatively, leaving each criterion in its original form, we accept that collectives *cannot* fully meet their demands, and thus cannot always perform right action. In this latter case, holding groups even to a less stringent standard of virtue then seems to violate the philosophical principle that 'ought' implies 'can', and whilst it would surely still make sense to appraise collective action when it *did* so happen to meet the requirements of rightness, any prescriptive element, of *holding* groups to either of these standards, seems unjustified.

The only way out of this dilemma appears to be to deny the relevance, in a *particular* collective context (that is, a substantive rather than abstract one), of those virtues and vices that manifest in entirely internal states, while at the same time also claiming that, in that context, the internal elements of 'mixed' virtues simply do not prove salient to rightness; in general, 'trimming' our virtues to exclude those ends that violate 'ought' implies 'can' for groups. This undertaking would not be a modification of the 'truth' of either right action formulation, but would instead represent

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<sup>118</sup> And, as noted, may also not be able to assess actions that are irreducibly collective in nature.

a contextual modification of the list and standard profile of right virtuous acts so as no conflict emerges.<sup>119</sup> Groups could still do what is right, on the standards presented, but what is right would not circumstantially involve internal states. For our overarching focus, perhaps in the context of international relations certain virtues prove not to be relevant, and would not be manifested by a virtuous agent in that realm of action; and on Swanton's criteria in particular, perhaps the global political circumstances are such that the 'usual' internal elements of some virtues simply aren't salient.<sup>120</sup>

Whether we are happy with this mitigating conclusion depends on how comfortable we are to exclude the relevance of some virtues for particular groups' conduct. Clearly this is a reduction in the scope of ethical evaluation. But, as we entertained in the first chapter, might it be the case that the scope of ethics just *is* reduced in particular contexts? As Swanton notes, for instance, when operating on a large-scale, sometimes the internal facets of acting generously appear to be of diminished relevance to the 'rightness' of alleviating need, in comparison to more personal contexts in which the recipients are known to a specified giver.<sup>121</sup> As with that earlier issue concerning the inventory of collective virtue,<sup>122</sup> prior to further inquiry of the virtues relevant to particular group contexts we must likewise leave this wider question pending.

### **Towards a Plural Subject**

Whatever our ultimate conclusions regarding Bratman's potential to accommodate virtue ethical rightness, there remain clear reasons to push our investigation of collective agency further, and to see if we can enlarge the evaluative scope of both right action itself (beyond the limitations just outlined), and further, to see if there is any way to conceive of collectives acting from virtue

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<sup>119</sup> This does not yet *necessitate* collective additions to the list of virtues, as in the first point concerning Hursthouse's account. Group virtues could turn out simply to be a reduction of our list of private virtues, or may indeed include entirely new, non-internal, excellences.

<sup>120</sup> In seeming contrast to his earlier claim that the virtues of a city are of the same nature as those of the individual, 'the temperance and justice required for ruling have a different character': Aristotle, *Politics*, p. 94.

<sup>121</sup> Swanton, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

<sup>122</sup> Whether a Hursthouse-based conception of collective rightness could be anchored in *individual* virtue.

in a richer sense. These endeavours suggest one set of reasons to explore the terrain beyond conceptual individualism.

But there also emerges a more general concern with Bratman's model of shared agency, an inherent tension within the very structure of the individualistic intentional statements that his account utilises: that for each participant in a collective action '*I* intend that *we*...'. What is at issue here is that the subject-reference of such an intention, '*I*', does not match that which can be understood as responsible for fulfilling it, '*we*', and this seems to violate a foundational requirement in the philosophy of action – that for an act to be intentional, it must be within the power of the agent in question to determine its occurrence. This condition is often termed the Settling Condition – '*I* can only intend what I take to be up to me to decide or settle.'<sup>123</sup>

Accordingly, I can intend that I do something; perhaps we can intend that we do something, non-reductively speaking; but I intending that *we* act seems to demand something that the former simply lacks the power to bring about. If they did, the intention would no longer be a genuinely collective one, for as J. David Velleman notes, the notion of *shared* intending is supposed to be a matter of equal participation; if one such participant is able to determine action alone then the intention would in effect still be singular – other 'participants' would not have any real freedom of choice in the outcome:

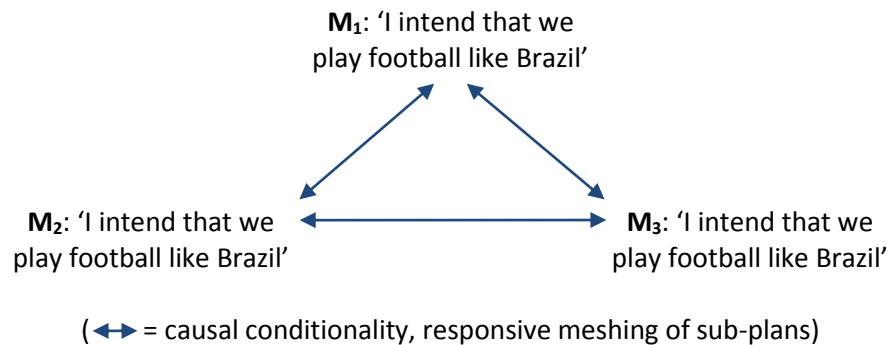
The problem with sharing this role is that one person's exercise of discretion over some issue would seem to exclude any other person from exercising discretion over the same issue. That is, if I decide that you are going to do something, then I cannot think that whether you're going to do it remains up to you; whereas if I want to leave

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<sup>123</sup> A. S. Roth, 'Shared Agency', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/shared-agency/>, 13<sup>th</sup> December 2010. This settling requirement, Bratman notes, is closely related, but 'subtly different', to the requirement that an agent cannot intend actions they do not *control* – what he terms the 'control condition' on intention: Bratman, '*I Intend That We J*', pp. 148-50. Frankfurt seems to imply this latter condition: 'What is not merely pertinent but decisive, indeed, is to consider whether or not the movements as they occur are *under the person's guidance*. It is this that determines whether he is performing an action.' Frankfurt, *op. cit.*, p. 158. His emphasis. As the Settling Condition is the more commonly invoked formulation within relevant literature, and subject to broadly parallel lines of debate as to those concerning control, the latter reading of this objection will not be discussed in its own right here. A third formulation, which Bratman terms the 'own action' condition, proves much easier to dispel: Bratman, '*I Intend That We J*', p. 150.

it up to you, I cannot simultaneously regard myself as having decided it... The model seems to require the exercise of more discretion than there is to go around.<sup>124</sup>

A sports team may be said to have agreed on a tactic, an 'intention' to play a certain way during a match. Let us imagine that the intention is to 'play football like Brazil'. On an individualist account like Bratman's, this team intention can be conceptually reduced to those of its players:



Therefore, the group consisting of [M<sub>1</sub>, M<sub>2</sub>, M<sub>3</sub>] has a *collective* intention to play football like Brazil.

The problem here lies in the personal intentional statement of each player; for it seems that an individual football player, its subject, cannot themselves intend that *the team* ('we') 'play like Brazil'. He or she can personally (intend to) play, we might say, 'like a *Brazilian*' – that is, in a certain style, with individual flair. But it is not any individual who 'plays like Brazil'. The subject of *this* ascription can only be the team as a whole, and an individual cannot play like a team. Rather, the latter is a group attribute that only a group can produce; its content, like those examples discussed earlier,<sup>125</sup> is constitutively collective, and cannot be understood without a plural reference. Given this, no individual player can themselves claim to be bringing 'the plan' to fruition, 'I' intending 'we', for without the equal cooperation of their teammates the ultimate group aim cannot be achieved.

<sup>124</sup> J. D. Velleman, *The Possibility of Practical Reason*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000, p. 205.

<sup>125</sup> See pages 98-99.

A Bratman-minded individualist could attempt to re-describe the situation in terms of relevant sub-plans:

**Player 1:** 'I intend to pass to the wing on the understanding that Player 2 intends to be in that position.'

**Player 2:** 'I intend to play on the wing on the understanding that Player 1 intends to pass to me.'

And so on with great complexity for remaining team members and tactics.

Acting in accordance with the above would represent the (here partial) meshing of sub-plans as part of an overall joint intention that 'we play like Brazil', but it is hard to see how this would go any way to solving the problem of incongruity between subjects. Even if an individual player's plan of action includes causal, reflexive appreciation of others' plans, it remains beyond any *individual's* intentional power to ensure this supporting action by the other players actually occurs. The whole team's effort is required, but producing the cooperative effort of others is beyond personal determination. Hence, it is only the 'we', the team of players, that can truly intend to 'play like Brazil', because only the 'we' subject has the joint capability to do so, to bring that end of action about.

The team playing like Brazil can of course act as the end *goal* for an individual's action, as a state of affairs that they hope will occur as a result of their participatory behaviour, and towards which that behaviour is aimed. But the team playing like Brazil cannot be a genuinely *action-guiding* intention for any individual player, as something they themselves mean to do. Instead, it is this very *participation* in the group aim that seems to be the true intention of individual action, an intention to 'play one's part', to contribute, to fulfil one's role as a component of that supra-individual end.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Similarly, a team manager's intention that his team play a certain way is perhaps in reality the lower-level intentions to convince his players to follow his plans, and to personally contribute from the touchline.

This intention, however, is not the same as *literally* intending the overall goal. Importantly, it is of the form ‘I intend that I participate (in order to jointly achieve J)’, enabled by meshing inter-personal sub-plans of coordination.<sup>127</sup> The distinction here is analogous to that seen in an election. An individual voter can *participate* in an election, voting with the aim that their preferred candidate will win. But only the collective ‘the electorate’ (or more specifically the supporting proportion of it) can actually elect that candidate to office, for it is beyond the power of any one voter to bring about the desired end – they cannot as an individual ‘intend to elect Obama’.<sup>128</sup> If they could, then it would not count as a genuine (democratic) election.

Cases of constitutively collective action usefully bring out the ‘I’ intending ‘we’ objection, but the problem is by no means limited to action of this sort; it is in fact pervasive to Bratman’s individualism. The reason this more widespread concern slipped under the radar in earlier analysis is because, unlike ‘playing like Brazil’, or ‘disbanding’, intentions such as to ‘rescue the drowning child’ had a content that *could* also be fulfilled individually, or so it seemed.<sup>129</sup> That the child was rescued, we noted, could be a benevolent end realised either singularly *or* jointly. But in fact, that in both cases a virtuous act would be performed somewhat obscures their distinctness, for a person intending to rescue the child *alone*, and a person intending to do so *together with another* involve intentions to do different actions – they may both qualify as virtuous acts, but they are *different* virtuous acts.

Indeed, on considering the structure of their intentional statements, the very constitution of these performances can clearly be seen to differ. In the former case the individual intention is of

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<sup>127</sup> C.f. Searle’s discussion of executing a ‘pass play’: Searle, *op. cit.*, pp. 92-3. Again, given non-summativism, the aggregation of these personal, participatory intentions does not add up to the intention of the collective as a whole, he argues.

<sup>128</sup> Though in this particular example we must also note that, if the election is carried out as a secret ballot, there is moreover unlikely to be the required scope for interaction and causality between individual voters’ intentions for the electorate to actually *jointly intend* to elect Obama either. Indeed, List and Pettit think in the case of electorates ‘deciding’ things, such group talk is indeed mere ‘metaphorical shorthand’ for what is at base only a pattern of *individual* votes: List and Pettit, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

<sup>129</sup> This is also the case with Bratman’s own example of ‘painting the house together’, the payoff of which need not be the group: See Bratman, ‘Shared Cooperative Activity’, p. 95.

the form 'I intend that I help', whilst in the latter the proposed intention is once more of the troublesome form 'I intend that we help'. Equating the two therefore shows ignorance of their *full* intentional content, including, in the collective instance, the secondary reference to 'we' as an ingredient of the very action to be performed, as the subject of the goal being pursued.<sup>130</sup> Hence, even though *similar* action could be performed individually – action that *is* within an individual's power to fulfil, acting *in cooperation* to help is, as a special instance of helping, just as constitutively collective as playing like Brazil.<sup>131</sup>

The import of these observations is more powerful than earlier moral theoretical reservations about Bratman's individualism. The problem with examples demanding that 'I' intend 'we' is not, as previously, that they involve inner states, for the examples discussed do not demand anything beyond external action in order for terms to be successfully attributed. Likewise, whether or not 'playing like Brazil', some other constitutively collective action, or collective forms of certain actions qualify in given circumstances as virtuous acts – as hitting targets of virtue, or being what a virtuous agent would do,<sup>132</sup> and so on – is only of secondary concern here. Instead, the issue represents a more sweeping criticism, concerned with action in general.

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<sup>130</sup> See Gilbert's example of travelling alone or with another: M. Gilbert, *On Social Facts*. London: Routledge, 1989, pp. 157-64.

<sup>131</sup> What makes action constitutively collective *in itself*, as with 'playing like Brazil', and intending to 'disband', is that there is no individual analogue at all, owing to the very meaning of the attribution. Such actions are inherently group-focused. Collective *forms* of other action, like 'helping together', often have a less visible group reference because the meaning of 'helping', unlike 'disbanding' or 'playing like a team', does not itself reflect back upon a particular subject. The discussion of constitutively collective action has important parallels with Bratman's own distinction between 'cooperatively neutral' and 'cooperatively loaded' joint-act-types, the latter of which already include the notion of acting *together*. In order to avoid a charge of circularity in the analysis of cooperative activity, Bratman argues that we should – at least in constructing a basic account – appeal only to intentions that characterise collective activities in cooperatively neutral ways – that is, in ways that leave the question of cooperation open: Bratman, 'Shared Cooperative Activity', p. 97; see also Bratman, 'Shared Intention', p. 114; Bratman 'I Intend That We J', pp. 146-8; c.f. Gilbert, *A Theory of Political Obligation: Membership, Commitment, and the Bonds of Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 138. Whilst an activity like 'disbanding' could indeed be understood as cooperative or otherwise, it is unclear whether the same is true of 'playing like Brazil', which does seem to have the inbuilt assumption of cooperation. Nevertheless, a cooperatively neutral content – as Bratman himself notes – does little to solve the separate problem of 'I' intending 'we', which is not concerned with issues of circularity but rather the fulfilment of intentions when the collective context *is* a cooperative one: Bratman, 'I Intend That We J', p. 146.

<sup>132</sup> Though see the earlier discussion regarding the possible limitations of each formulation on pages 105-6.

A set of people *can* perform activity as a group – a team of players *can* play football like Brazil. We know this is the case because the football team *Brazil* plays football like Brazil; it is an informative, non-distributive description of observed behaviour that, as we have seen, can *only* have the group as its subject. Playing like Brazil must furthermore be deliberate (indeed, cooperative) behaviour, action in the proper sense, for it is not something that can happen just by chance or accident – it must therefore, as philosophers of action earlier noted, be intended. A correct account of collective agency must therefore be able to say how this is so, to reconcile these two elements:

(1) An action is performed that has the group as its (non-distributive) subject

(2) Action must be intended

Bratman's individualism cannot explain how this is so; it cannot reconcile these two notions. As has been demonstrated, we are unable to reduce our conception of group-subject-directed action to the intentions of individual members, for 'I' intending 'we' is a category error: it violates a foundational aspect of what it *means* to intend something. In contrast to the reservations of the last section, then, the problem here is not that some potentially moral acts are beyond the reach of collective intention, but rather the latter notion itself: Bratman's account cannot successfully explain how *any* actions are collectively intended. Therefore, unless we completely deny the sense of saying the team in front of us is 'playing like Brazil', or that a committee intends to disband, or that two people are rescuing someone *together* – and as a result counter-intuitively abandon the use of such collective ascriptions as incoherent – it seems that Bratman's individualist account is an insufficient model of collective agency.

The expectation must be on supporters of an 'I'-subject in collective intentional statements to mitigate the challenges outlined. Doing so, however, whilst maintaining a non-summative 'we' content, must overcome some particularly high hurdles, and as Roth notes those responses that

have been presented have so far failed to settle the issue decisively.<sup>133</sup> Thus in the absence of a definitive resolution to this controversy, one that would compellingly reinstate the plausibility of Bratman's schema as a universal model of collective action, its limited degree of compatibility with virtue ethical analysis – itself the subject of unresolved moral theoretical reservations – must remain mothballed. Whilst stopping short of a complete repudiation of the Bratmanian approach, which continues to be highly influential within the study of collective intentionality, the difficulties accumulated in the preceding analysis suggest sizeable reasons to move beyond its reductive framework.

Both forms of conceptual individualism have thus fallen short of our overarching requirements. If a suitable basis for collective virtue ethical analysis is to be found, then, it seems the notion that a group *itself* can be the subject of relevant psychological attributes must be taken seriously.

### Chapter Conclusion

This chapter began with an investigation into the notion of collective intention, the essential building block of any account of group agency. A coherent understanding of this concept, it was discovered, must be non-summative – group attributes are distinct from the mere aggregation of its members' personal properties, and must instead be founded upon attitudes that are themselves relational in content. One set of non-summative theorists, termed individualists,

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<sup>133</sup> See Roth, *op. cit.*

While there is no space here to fully critique the range of responses to this issue, Bratman's own reply to the 'I' intending 'we' objection is to argue that what an individual intends *can* extend beyond what that person can settle alone, so long as there is reasonable prediction as to the actions of other parties: Bratman, 'I Intend That We J'. Tollefsen argues that this appeal in effect moves the goalposts of the debate, shifting away from our normal understanding of what intention consists in: See Tollefsen, *op. cit.* In what might be understood as an intermediate position, Tuomela argues that the settling conditions for collective intentions as understood by Bratman (so-called 'I'-mode we-intentions) are indeed importantly different to those involved in merely personal action. Whereas the latter are genuine 'action-intentions', and *do* require the agent to reasonably believe they can themselves bring about the result, 'I'-mode we-intentions are instead merely 'aim-intentions', requiring only an assumption that the individual agent's actions will *contribute*. Nevertheless, Tuomela thinks that this kind of intention is insufficient in relation to joint actions like those discussed here (e.g. playing like Brazil), which involve an inherent 'for-groupness', and unity as a body, over mere interpersonal cooperation towards a shared private group goal. Such cases, he thinks, require a fuller 'we'-mode joint intention closely resembling the Gilbertian account of 'joint commitment', which is next discussed: Tuomela, 'The We-Mode and the I-Mode', pp. 94, 113; *The Philosophy of Sociality*, pp. 84-86, 98-99.

attempt to reduce group-level psychological states to the individually-held attitudes of comprising members. Whilst this perspective conceivably enabled a limited engagement with virtue ethical analysis, in particular an imperfect application of virtue ethical conceptions of moral rightness, its lack of a postulated group agent in its own right precluded fuller readings of collective virtue possession, and the approach was furthermore subject to serious theoretical reservations. For the purposes of the present inquiry, therefore, these conclusions suggest the exploration of alternative, non-individualist foundations.

# 3

## **CHAPTER THREE: The Possibility of Collective Virtue**

The conclusions of the previous chapter suggest a move away from conceptual individualism, the theorem that collective attitudinal states can be reduced to the individual attitudes of comprising members. Such approaches proved limited in their capacity to accommodate virtue ethical analysis above the level of the individual, allowing – and only if surpassing serious structural concerns – no more than a partial employment of virtue ethical concepts and evaluation. The present chapter builds from these important findings to explore the virtue ethical prospects of an alternative, non-reductive model of joint attitudes, utilising these foundations to construct informative group-level understandings of the wider agential properties of virtue. Allied to the corresponding standards of shared *moral* agency, this framework provides a constructive general account of ‘plural virtue’ that is applicable to collective bodies in their own right.

# I

## A Non-Individualist Account

What a move towards non-individualism would involve is best illustrated by reviewing the accounts of collective intentional statement presented so far. Observe the table below:

Attitude Possessor	Subject-Reference	Content-Reference	
Individual	I	I	Summativism
Group	we	I	Summativism
Individual	I / we	we	Non-Summativism
Group	we	we	Non-Summativism

On the top line, the summativist model of collective intention aggregates participant intentions of the form ‘I intend that I act’. Here the reference of both the subject *and* the content of relevant intentions are singular, directed at the individual. Individuals, moreover, are necessarily the only holders of any intentional states (the far left-hand column).<sup>1</sup>

Non-summativist accounts, which are explanatorily superior, instead employ a content-reference that is collective: an intention that ‘we’ act. On the third line, non-summative individualists like Searle and Bratman, whilst differing on the subject-reference of a collective intentional statement (a primitive ‘we’ for the former, a causally-interacting set of ‘I’s for the latter), nonetheless maintain that only individual participants can actually possess such attitudes.

All of these accounts have disappointed as a basis for group virtue analysis. Taking the final line then, the remaining option is an account that is both non-summativist *and* non-individualist – one that allows that entities above the individual can properly possess intentional states, and that

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<sup>1</sup> The second line, included for completion, is nevertheless impossible, for as we noted earlier summativism is *necessarily* individualist. ‘We intend that I act’ would represent a very confusing notion, and seems nonsensical.

statements of the form ‘we intend that we act’ must then be explained by reference to collectives themselves, over and above their members.

An account of this sort *denies* that ‘group’ talk is really a disguise for the analysis of individuals alone. It instead requires a non-reducible concept of a collective that is *itself* the subject of certain attitudinal states. Yet the assignment of psychological attributes to any grouping above individual people often meets strong resistance. One of the foremost worries fuelling this opposition is the contention that only an analogue to the singular human brain could be the bearer of similar capacities collectively, and that any such attribution would thus necessitate the postulation of some ontological ‘group mind’, of a strange metaphysical nature, and which we believe there not to be.<sup>2</sup> This kind of thinking, which Gilbert labels ‘psychologism’ about group attitudes,<sup>3</sup> chimes with Hobbes’s characterisation of the state in *Leviathan* as an ‘artificial man’,<sup>4</sup> and meets with clear counteraction from Searle:

any account we give of collective intentionality, and therefore of collective behaviour, must be consistent with our overall ontology and metaphysics of the world, an ontology and metaphysics based on the existence of individual human beings as the repositories of all intentionality<sup>5</sup>

Not all ‘group mind’ phenomena need be as mysterious as this characterisation suggests, however. And indeed, in what follows in this chapter we will consider some – highly constrained – contexts in which very specific forms of rational deliberation *can* be seen to operate at a uniquely collective level. Such deliberation can recommend outcomes that differ from the conclusions that would be reached by individual reflection on the part of any of a group’s members, and thus in a

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<sup>2</sup> Searle, for instance, terms such talk of group minds ‘at best mysterious and at worst incoherent’, and argues against their empirical existence: Searle, *op. cit.*, p. 93. We can see here a degree of re-engagement with the *ontological* individualism/non-individualism debate that was earlier outlined.

<sup>3</sup> In particular she refers to the attitude of belief, and juxtaposes this claim with that of ‘anti-psychologism about social groups’ – the claim that collectives do not have minds: Gilbert, *On Social Facts*, p. 238.

<sup>4</sup> Hobbes, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Searle, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

sense represents ‘group thinking’ in its own right.<sup>6</sup> An all-encompassing, holistic group mind is, nevertheless, worthy of scepticism, and few, if any, broad accounts of collective agency seriously consider this a suitable *general* template for joint action. That our mental autonomy is somehow ‘given over’ to the interactive currents of the group in *every* case of collective action, even small-scale, fleeting, relatively unstructured enterprises, seems an implausibly strong assertion to uphold.

### **The Plural Subject Model**

Instead, our search for a fruitful non-individualist approach to group agency brings us to an account that demands no such recourse to supra-individual mentality, no ‘single centre of consciousness’.<sup>7</sup> The account in question is The ‘Plural Subject Model’ of Margaret Gilbert, arguably the most prominent departure from the mindset of those perspectives so far considered.<sup>8</sup> As the name suggests, Gilbert’s theory indeed argues that a collective itself, the group, can be the appropriate, non-reducible subject of important attitudinal properties like intention. In fact, argues Gilbert, all groups properly termed ‘social’, even down to the ephemeral coming together of two people in conversation, are best understood to be so-called ‘plural subjects’ in this sense.<sup>9</sup> Her account is therefore ambitious in scope, and suitably general.

The key element to Gilbert’s account is the notion of ‘joint commitment’, a special relation existing between the members of a social group whereby they are unified as a single body. A joint

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<sup>6</sup> See this chapter’s later discussions of collective practical wisdom (pages 143-52) and Pettit’s ‘discursive dilemma’ (pages 171-82).

<sup>7</sup> Gilbert, *A Theory of Political Obligation*, p. 134.

<sup>8</sup> As noted in the previous chapter (see page 114, note 133), Raimo Tuomela also presents a non-individualist account of joint attitudes, arguing that in cases of full-blooded, ‘we-mode’ group action, collectives themselves can be the proper subjects of attitudinal states: ‘Social groups are not agents in an ontological sense, but they can often usefully be treated as agents and persons, and therefore, for example, beliefs, goals, intentions, and actions can be attributed to them... the we-mode (the group level) is not reducible to the I-mode (the private level)... The we-mode thus conceptually involves the group as an actor’: Tuomela, *The Philosophy of Sociality*, pp. 10, 38. See also, *Ibid.*, p. 120. Given that Tuomela’s framework is in many ways a development and modification of ideas first presented by theorists like Bratman and Gilbert, his account will not be discussed here in its own right. Nevertheless, his insights will prove useful at a number of points in the work that follows.

<sup>9</sup> Gilbert, *On Social Facts*, pp. 17-18.

commitment represents readiness across all members of the group in question to accept or uphold some specified feature, such as an end of action, *as a body*. Accordingly, individuals who are party to such agreement commit *in their group member capacity* to be bound to that collective goal, effectively consenting to a 'pooling of wills' towards its achievement.<sup>10</sup>

Performing a collective action therefore begins with the formation of a relevant plural subject. As individuals, each prospective member expresses, in some form, personal willingness to enter into a specific joint commitment with other members.<sup>11</sup> The necessary explicitness of such expression will depend upon the situational context, and need not be verbal.<sup>12</sup> For illustration let us recycle a previous example and suppose that the final collective goal is to rescue a drowning child. At the initial stage, the only attitudes in play *are* individualist – each individual expresses that 'I am willing to enter into a joint commitment with others to rescue the drowning child'.<sup>13</sup> This attitudinal state can be understood by reference to the individual alone, and it is a willingness that may be expressed only implicitly by suggestive action, or perhaps speech in addition. Gilbert presents an analogous example:

three people are running towards the scene of an accident, apparently jointly committed to espousing as a body the goal of helping the victims. Lee, a bystander, works out what is happening, moves towards them, and begins running with them, joining in the conversation as to 'I wonder how bad it is' and 'it's a shame none of us is a doctor'. Lee thus expresses his readiness to jointly commit with the others to helping the victims... At no time did the original three make an agreement with the former bystander.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

<sup>11</sup> In her earlier work, Gilbert's account of plural subject formation was more complex, and involved individuals first expressing a *conditional* 'quasi-readiness' to share in an action or attitude as a body, which was then converted into the 'joint readiness' of all by the presence of other individuals' quasi-readiness. In contrast, in the more recent formulation outlined here, individual willingness can be expressed *unconditionally*: See Gilbert, *On Social Facts*, pp. 186-198 and Schmitt, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> Gilbert, 'Modelling Collective Belief', p. 199.

<sup>13</sup> Unlike intention, mere willingness appears free of a belief element. There is therefore no corresponding requirement – brought troublesomely to the fore in the 'I' intending 'we' problem of the previous chapter – of believing oneself able to 'settle' or fulfil the content of that willingness.

<sup>14</sup> Gilbert, *A Theory of Political Obligation*, p. 139.

Despite the critical differences in their overarching accounts, Searle also supports the claim that language is not always necessary for the initiation of joint action: 'In humans, collective behaviour typically involves

The subject of this attitudinal statement, willingness to jointly commit, remains singular. The content does include a collective reference, jointly committing with others, but this reference manages to steer clear of an important potential concern. Namely, Gilbert evades a charge of circularity – that the concept of a joint commitment involves reference to this very concept in the attitudes comprising it.<sup>15</sup> Being in a state of joint commitment is understood to be a primitive notion;<sup>16</sup> a grasp of what joint commitment entails, for those individuals expressing their willingness, does not rest upon appreciation of its precise theoretic role within a plural subjecthood, nor does it require that such technical terms are actually part of one’s vocabulary<sup>17</sup> – something that is evinced by those cases in which there are non-verbal expressions of willingness.<sup>18</sup>

Instead, she argues, the concept rests upon an implicit understanding of what it is to do something *together*, a piece of familiar knowledge that we may nevertheless not always be able ‘to spell out’.<sup>19</sup> To employ Gilbert’s famous example, if, having agreed to walk together, one supposed participant then proceeds to head off in a different direction, then they have misunderstood, on a basic level, what it *means* to share in this action. Raimo Tuomela appears to concur on this point, arguing that thinking and acting in a group-focused manner represents a

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language, but even for humans it does not invariably require language or even conventional ways of behaving. For example, I see a man pushing a car in the street in an effort to get it started; and I simply start pushing with him. No words are exchanged and there is no convention according to which I push his car. But it is a case of collective behaviour.’: Searle, *op. cit.*, pp. 91-2.

<sup>15</sup> See Schmitt, *loc. cit.*; Tollefsen, *op. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> Gilbert argues that a ‘reductive analysis’ of the concept is not possible: Gilbert, *On Social Facts*, p. 301; Roth, *op. cit.* Tuomela similarly supports this claim: Tuomela, *The Philosophy of Sociality*, pp. 110-11. It is worth stressing here that this does not equate with Searle’s appeal to primitivism, which concerned not only collective action but collective intention itself. Gilbert, by contrast, does not claim that the latter, ‘we’-intention is a primitive concept, as will become clear.

<sup>17</sup> Gilbert, *A Theory of Political Obligation*, p. 139.

<sup>18</sup> Gilbert gives the example of two people dancing together as one that perhaps requires no verbal element in order for joint commitment to come about. See Gilbert, *On Social Facts*, p. 217.

<sup>19</sup> Gilbert, *A Theory of Political Obligation*, p. 139.

natural and coevolved human capacity, one that develops from a very early age and moreover does not rest upon any further set of underlying attitudes:<sup>20</sup>

joint action is ingrained in common sense... Due to their socialisation, people understand what jointly carrying a table or walking together are, even though they might not have a sophisticated understanding of the notions themselves. They may just act jointly as more or less a routine matter... If we take single-agent action as a conceptually primitive notion, the analogous statement plausibly applies to joint action as well.<sup>21</sup>

An important facet of this pre-theoretical notion of commitment is its attendant normativity, the idea that agreeing to do something together is concomitant with understanding that one *ought* to follow through on that expressed willingness – that one is in some sense bound to the fulfilment of the established group goal (at least, one's part in it). That such obligations are incurred through joint commitment, and subsequently violated by participants who renege on an agreed group attitude is, thinks Gilbert, evidenced by the natural appropriateness of rebuke in such instances.<sup>22</sup> In the case of the individual who breaks away from the agreed sharing of a walk together, and hence discontinues their required 'posture of support' for the joint endeavour,<sup>23</sup> a reproach of their conduct appears justified on behalf of the other member(s).

The precise nature of this participatory 'ought' is a matter of some debate.<sup>24</sup> Gilbert argues that it is grounded a *sui generis* kind of social normativity, a unique 'associational' responsibility distinct in nature from moral or legal obligations.<sup>25</sup> Bratman, by contrast, denies any such intrinsic outlook, and maintains that commitment to joint activities can rest only upon a separate *moral* principle of fidelity to agreements, one that may not always be valid.<sup>26</sup> Seeking to avoid the

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<sup>20</sup> Tuomela, *The Philosophy of Sociality*, pp. 9, 110. He cites research from developmental child psychology suggesting that children as young as nine are capable of simple joint attention activities.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>22</sup> Gilbert, *On Social Facts*, p. 292.

<sup>23</sup> Gilbert, 'On Feeling Guilt for What One's Group Has Done', in her *Living Together: Rationality, Sociality, and Obligation*. London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1996, p. 382.

<sup>24</sup> For a useful overview see Roth, *op. cit.*

<sup>25</sup> Gilbert, *On Social Facts*, pp. 411, 413, 427.

<sup>26</sup> He draws this principle from Thomas Scanlon, who grounds its normativity in the purposive creation of expectation between participants. Bratman argues that it can nevertheless fail to ground mutual

potential quagmire of this controversy, we can remain relatively neutral on the nature and strength of mutual obligation by appealing instead to a merely instrumental sense of 'ought', a base level towards which Tuomela appears to gesture.<sup>27</sup> Regardless of any further – perhaps more categorical – stipulations, it seems that one ought to fulfil an agreed participatory role simply on the basis that if one does not, the joint enterprise will break down, and the group fall apart. Commitment between group members is, in Tuomela's words, the 'social glue'<sup>28</sup> that enables group thought and action to be bound together, and it is therefore a necessary means by which successful shared endeavours can occur.<sup>29</sup>

Unlike our concerns in the previous section, being 'willing' to enter into a joint commitment does not encounter the same fulfilment problem as would 'I' *intending* that 'we' enter into a joint commitment, for there is no claim in the former case that any of the individuals alone has the power to bring the joint commitment about. Indeed, it is only willingness *across* the members of a collective that can result in the attribute's production. To be *jointly* committed, in virtue of its very definition, is a state that can be possessed only when it is shared with all others in the group. As with our discussion of constitutively collective action, therefore, its category of reference must be plural.<sup>30</sup> At this point then, we have an attitude that is not reducible, that moves beyond singular characterisation. How then does Gilbert envisage the step from mutual *individual*

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obligations in the presence of coercion or associated disavowals, or indeed in cases where the common knowledge of others' intentions nonetheless fails to result from any purposive aim of participants to so assure: M. E. Bratman, 'Shared Intention and Mutual Obligation', in his *Faces of Intention: Selected Essays on Intention and Agency*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 135-40. For Gilbert too, of course, there may be *additional* moral requirements as to why one should uphold relational commitments. See M. Gilbert, 'On Feeling Guilt for What One's Group Has Done', p. 381.

<sup>27</sup> Tuomela, 'The We-Mode and the I-Mode', p. 97. He argues that this understanding 'functionally resembles' Gilbert's notion: Tuomela, *The Philosophy of Sociality*, p. 45, note 53.

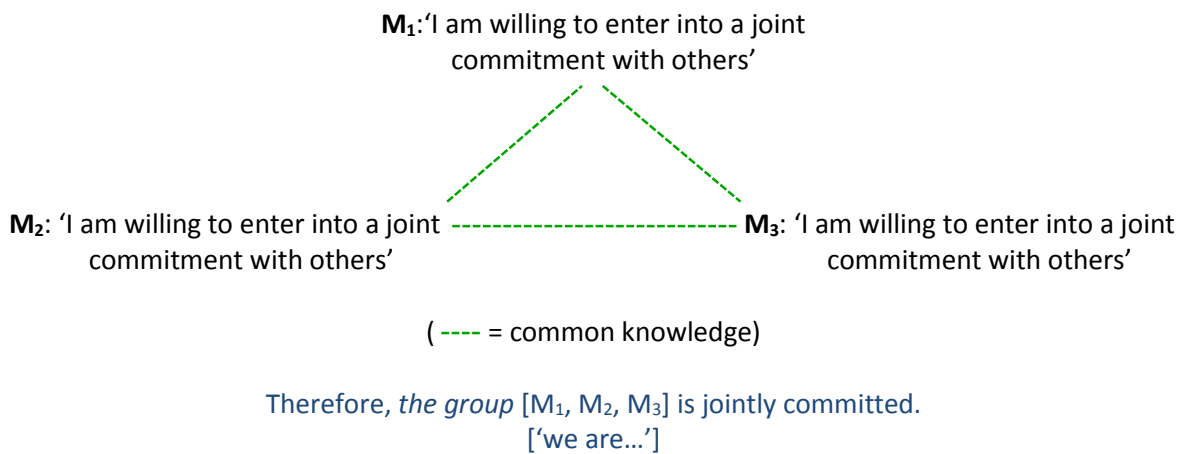
<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>29</sup> To take a Wittgensteinian perspective, perhaps we can think of joint activity as an instance of a 'practice', with a set of rules into which successful participants must be initiated. See L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. New York: Macmillan, 1953. Playing the game of chess, for instance, comes with a set of participatory rules and assumptions. Though we are free to break them in a general sense, doing so will mean that we are simply not playing chess anymore. The same may be thought true of behaving as a group member.

<sup>30</sup> In Gilbert's terms, 'those who comprise its [joint commitment] creator also comprise its subject': Gilbert, *A Theory of Political Obligation*, p. 135.

willingness to shared joint commitment? How do we move from, or in Frederick Schmitt's terms 'convert', individualist personal attitudes into a non-individualist shared attitude?<sup>31</sup>

The binding concept here is that of *common knowledge*, a requirement that this relevant fact – that all members have expressed willingness to jointly commit – is 'out in the open' among this very set of individuals, and that each is aware of this state of affairs.<sup>32</sup> Thus, in the abstract case:



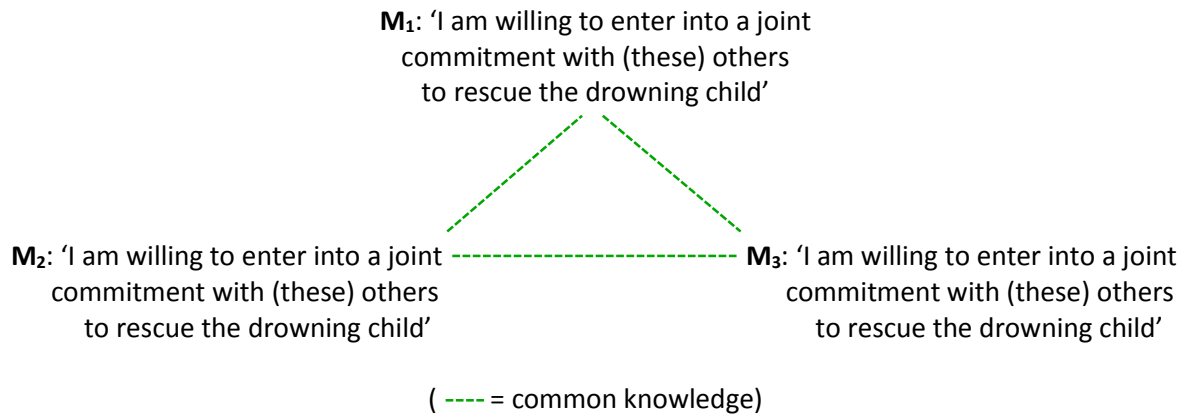
Consciousness of this fact, unanimous willingness, is all that is needed for the joint commitment to be in force, and for the group to be unified, as one body, around the agreed purpose. In such circumstances, a plural subject has now been formed, and the use of 'we' as the subject of the relevant attitude becomes appropriate for members. In contrast to Searle's primitive and solipsistic use of 'we' as a subject, Gilbert's plural reference clearly relies on the analysis of others, of a collective, and it is therefore evidently non-individualist in character. Whilst for Searle an isolated individual can hold the intention 'we intend that we act', for Gilbert only the group, a composite of individuals, can hold an intentional state of this form.

Let us now retrace this account in terms of our example case:

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<sup>31</sup> Schmitt, *loc. cit.*

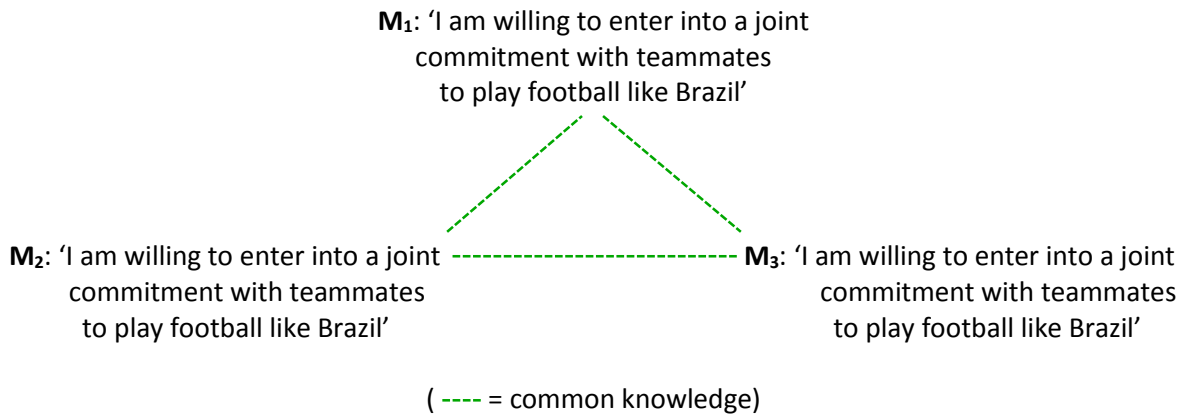
<sup>32</sup> Gilbert, *On Social Facts*, p. 162.



Therefore, *the group* [M<sub>1</sub>, M<sub>2</sub>, M<sub>3</sub>] is jointly committed to rescue, as a body, the drowning child.  
[‘we intend to help...’]

In this case, when it is common knowledge amongst all members that each is appropriately willing, a plural subject of *action* has been formed, around the joint commitment to *together* rescue the drowning child. The intention to help now belongs to the group as a whole. As parties to this joint commitment, individual members of the plural subject, on behalf of all members, may express that ‘we intend to rescue the drowning child’, or in its full form – ‘we intend that we rescue the drowning child’. The subject and content of the statement now match, and the body which intends the action is that which we can understand as responsible for fulfilling it, for bringing it about. Accordingly, the tension apparent in Bratman’s individualism is here resolved.

Finally, let us consider our example of an attribution that must in all cases be conceived of collectively, that which was so troublesome for Bratman’s approach – intending to play football like Brazil. On Gilbert’s model, this state of affairs can be understood with much greater ease:



Therefore, *the group* [M<sub>1</sub>, M<sub>2</sub>, M<sub>3</sub>] is jointly committed to playing football like Brazil.  
[‘we intend to play...’]

Here no individual is themselves intending to play football like Brazil. Instead, each is willing to enter into a joint commitment, with the others, to achieving this goal *as a team* (via their personal contributions, cooperation, and coordination). The fact that each player is willing to become part of this group commitment is commonly known, an awareness that in this context is quite easily conceived of – likely an explicit tactic agreed prior, verbally, and *en masse* in the dressing room or on the training ground. Asked after the match as to the rationale behind their observed style of play during the game, any member of the team could quite genuinely attest that ‘we intended to play like Brazil’.

In Gilbert’s approach, then, we have a reading of collective intention that overcomes many of the difficulties confronting the other perspectives outlined. What is more, speaking generally, the possibility of a positive commitment to do something *as a body* perhaps strikes a more natural note, in many cases, than the persistent undertone of conditionality in instances of cooperative action conceived along Bratman’s lines.<sup>33</sup>

On a conceptual level, the Plural Subject Model confers psychological attributes – attitudinal states – to collective groupings themselves; yet at the same time such attributions to ‘*sui generis*

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<sup>33</sup> As noted in the previous chapter (page 114, note 133) Bratman’s account certainly lacks the ‘oneness’ or ‘for-groupness’ that Tuomela sees as important for fuller group endeavours: Tuomela, *The Philosophy of Sociality*, pp. 72, 98-99.

syntheses<sup>34</sup> resist the postulation of supra-individual minds. Instead, ontologically speaking, analysis remains firmly grounded in the cognition of the singular human brains of members. Pooled wills are directed at some end ‘*as if* they belonged to a single person’, approximating the coherence of the latter, but are not literally so.<sup>35</sup> The unity of a social group, nonetheless, requires the existence of a *non-reducible* commitment existing between such members, and in this sense our *talk* of groups, at least, does indeed represent something above and beyond the mere analysis of individuals.<sup>36</sup>

## II

### Modelling Group Virtue

#### **The Scope of Joint Commitment**

The plural subject model proves to be much more amenable to virtue ethical analysis than its competitors. In particular, there are three ‘enabling’ features of Gilbert’s approach that open up the prospect of a much fuller employment of virtue ethical concepts. These are:

1. The range of potential joint commitments
2. The distinction between private and ‘group’-mode attitudes
3. The possibility of a group being the subject of multiple joint commitments

This section will outline these important notions; the next will demonstrate their virtue ethical import.

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<sup>34</sup> Tollefsen, *op. cit.*

<sup>35</sup> Gilbert, *On Social Facts*, p. 211. Emphasis added.

<sup>36</sup> For Gilbert’s own overview of the ontological and conceptual (in her terms, analytic) commitments of her account see *Ibid.*, pp. 427-36.

Firstly, though we have thus far been discussing, in correspondence with previous approaches, the notion of collective intention – plural subjects of *action*, constituted by a joint commitment to promote some shared behavioural end – the possibilities for joint commitment are by no means limited to this type of attitude. As Gilbert notes, joint commitments have the general form that parties commit to X as a body, but X can be substituted for a sizeable variety of different things.<sup>37</sup> Another attitudinal state that Gilbert studies at length, for instance, is that of collective *belief*. Analogously, a group of individuals can express their willingness to accept a certain belief as a body; that is, to uphold some agreed stance as being that of the collective as a whole. If there is common knowledge between the members that each is so willing to be jointly committed, then a plural subject of that belief is formed, and ‘we believe...’ becomes an appropriate member statement.

Whilst what it means, for each member, to be jointly committed to a certain group *action* seems relatively easy to grasp – playing one’s part in the achievement of the joint goal, willingness to cooperate with others when necessary, not acting contrary to one’s role in the collective enterprise nor attempting to sabotage the efforts of fellow members – perhaps what it means to uphold a group *belief* requires some additional explication. Gilbert provides the example of a poetry discussion group, who must decide what they, *as a group*, think about the last line of a certain poem.<sup>38</sup> After an open discussion in which competing personal interpretations are given voice, a proposed group interpretation, on the balance of the preceding debate, is presented, and no further objections are forthcoming. At this stage, she argues, each member is openly expressing willingness to jointly commit to that proposed group interpretation – a belief that ‘the last line of the poem is moving’, and accordingly, the members of the poetry discussion group form a plural subject of that belief.

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<sup>37</sup> Gilbert, *A Theory of Political Obligation*, p. 136.

<sup>38</sup> Gilbert, ‘Modelling Collective Belief’, p. 190.

We might imagine that their joint conclusions will be printed as a review in a local newspaper.

Upholding *this* joint commitment, that the group believes the last line is moving, involves a range of both appropriate action and utterance on behalf of each member: affirming the agreed belief in public, conducting oneself in a manner that presupposes its truth, whilst avoiding the contrary: publically denying the approved interpretation of the poem, or acting in a manner that suggests it is in fact false – like, we could imagine, laughing out loud when the supposedly moving final line is read.<sup>39</sup> In general then, jointly committed members must conduct themselves in whatever manner most effectively maintains the notion that this is what the group believes, and through this, to emulate on a group level the unity that would be observed in a single individual, were *they* to hold the belief in question.

A joint commitment of belief gives us clearer access to the second important feature of the Plural Subject Model: the possibility that members' personal ('I') attitudes may differ in content from that of the collective itself. In a case of collective action, to retread our previous discussion, quite clearly individual member attitudes *cannot* match those of the group as a whole. This was demonstrated in the earlier point about constitutively collective forms of action, which, on Bratman's individualist perspective, wrongly necessitated 'I' to intend 'we', sustained by the fact that *any* reading of an act performed *together* requires its fulfilment to be plural. Individual 'I'-directed intentions must therefore be to participate, which is a different intentional content. But by considering collective belief, which is not clouded by this particular idiosyncrasy of intention, we can see that the separation of member and group attitudes represents a wider point about the differentiation of modes.

Considering attitudinal states in general, the attitude of a group member need not match that of the group.<sup>40</sup> The former is not 'logically sufficient' for the latter.<sup>41</sup> This much follows from the falsity of summativism, the thesis that the aggregation of personal properties equals that of the

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<sup>39</sup> See *Ibid.*, p. 194.

<sup>40</sup> Again, to be clear, in cases of intention it moreover *cannot* match that of the group.

<sup>41</sup> Gilbert, 'Modelling Collective Belief', p. 189.

collective itself.<sup>42</sup> In theoretical terms, then, non-summativism can allow that: (1) a group can fail to believe something, *b*, even though every one of its members individually believes that *b*. And, vice versa, it seems that the converse can also, interestingly, be true: (2) a group can believe that *b*, even though not one of its members individually believes that *b*.<sup>43</sup>

Unlike intention, this result does not rest upon a category error in the content of an individual attitude; for the attitude of believing something, lacking any equivalent to the complicating notion of ‘fulfilment’, does not appear tied to any single or plural constitution. ‘I’ may not have the power to *intend* that ‘we’, but ‘I’ does have the power to *believe* that ‘we’ – one person can hold the attitude ‘I believe that we have taken a wrong turn’, just as two people can jointly hold the attitude ‘We believe that we have taken a wrong turn’, and in both cases the plural content of the statement is still appropriate to the subject. Moreover, the content reference of some belief statements is independent of the subject altogether, either referencing distinct agent(s) – ‘I believe that *they* have taken a wrong turn’, or not referencing any agent at all – ‘We believe that the economy is entering a recession’, and once more do not place any restrictions upon the subject of that attitude.<sup>44</sup>

For belief, then, it is perfectly *possible* that individual member attitudes can match that of the group. Each individual can hold the attitudinal state ‘I believe that we have taken a wrong turn’, and they may additionally have formed a plural subject of that belief – the group as a whole may be subject to the belief ‘we believe that we have taken a wrong turn’. But the essential point is that each fact is, in theory at least, independent of the other (we saw this in noting that groups

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<sup>42</sup> See Chapter 2, pages 73-76.

<sup>43</sup> Or indeed, that each member personally believes the opposite, that *not b*: see Gilbert, ‘Modelling Collective Belief’, pp. 192, 201.

Gilbert’s original committee example (modified in Chapter 2, page 75), serves as an instance of (1); for a case of (2) see the interest rate example on page 134.

<sup>44</sup> Intentional statements that mirror the structure of this last example appear instead to have, or at least coherently require, a hidden or implied agent-reference in their content. For example, ‘We intend to go for a walk’ is perhaps more fully ‘We intend that *we* go for a walk’ (unless the intended implication of ‘we’ is a distributive one, and each member of the group privately intends to go for a walk).

with coextensive memberships can have different group attitudes).<sup>45</sup> Gilbert's understanding remains true to this non-summativist pillar. Jointly committing to uphold some attitude as a group – be that belief or any other type – does not require that individual parties to the joint commitment themselves personally hold that attitude. As she notes, the joint commitment is to constitute *a body* that believes something; none of the individual members is that body, so their *personal* beliefs are not in question.<sup>46</sup> The latter cannot affect the degree to which they jointly commit to a belief.<sup>47</sup>

What *is* in question is what we might call their 'group'- or 'we'-mode attitudes, in this case what they believe *as a member of the group*, as a constituent of that 'we' that believes *b*.<sup>48</sup> It is when they are operating in this mode, when they take themselves or may be taken to represent the group, that their behaviour must reference the attitude to which they are jointly committed. They must behave so as to express that it is the case that the *collective* possesses the relevant attitude, and that their expression of it reflects their membership of that collective:<sup>49</sup>

"I'm afraid that you did not meet our needs" says the department chairman to one of the unlucky candidates. Conscious of his role as a representative of the department, he speaks as such. He may personally think that this candidate was the best. Or he may have no personal opinion on the matter.<sup>50</sup>

he may be aware of no insincerity, nor properly be characterised as insincere... when in that mode he does not have immediate access to, or interest in, his own personal views.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> See Chapter 2, page 75.

<sup>46</sup> Gilbert, *A Theory of Political Obligation*, p. 137.

If we *were* required to personally believe as a result of jointly committing, this would be highly problematic, for we cannot simply choose what we believe at will. Slote makes a similar point about motives and character: Slote, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

<sup>47</sup> Gilbert, *On Social Facts*, p. 309.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 303. What Miranda Fricker calls a different 'practical identity': Fricker, *op. cit.*, p. 238.

<sup>49</sup> When, in Gilbert's words, 'someone rightly sees his act of will as an expression of the 'cause' of a plural subject of which he is a member': Gilbert, *On Social Facts*, p. 422.

<sup>50</sup> Gilbert, 'Modelling Collective Belief', p. 196.

<sup>51</sup> Gilbert, *On Social Facts*, p. 303.

This example also demonstrates the importance of personal qualifiers when one is not willing to undermine the *group* attitude: 'He can of course *switch* modes, and say, for instance: 'Look, that isn't *my* view, you know that. But what am I to do? My hands are tied.'" *Ibid.* Her emphasis.

The category mistake we noted with respect to intention is thus an instance of a more essential variance, an error of reference in a wider sense. Individual, *personal* attitudes – that ‘I intend’, ‘I believe’, ‘I accept’, ‘I aim’, and so on, are *always* irrelevant to the attitudes one jointly upholds as a member of a plural subject,<sup>52</sup> because in the latter case one is not expressing the attitude of an individual, one is expressing the attitude of the social group to which one belongs, and all that matters in this context is how one maintains *that* notion – that *the group* has the attitude, not that oneself has it.<sup>53</sup>

When an individual believes that p, he grants the proposition that p the status of an assumption in his own private reasoning. When people jointly accept that p, they commit themselves to granting p the status of an assumption in their public reasoning, their discussions, arguments, and conversations with the relevant others in the contexts at issue... In the case of both groups (plural subjects) and individuals (singular subjects) when a proposition is believed, it is given a special status in relation to reasoning and to action. The proposition figures in the life of the group, or in the life of the individual.<sup>54</sup>

So we can see that, logically speaking, a social group as presently conceived can have an attitudinal property that none of its constituting members individually possess. But that this is theoretically the case does not guarantee that it is practically the case. Although our concern in this chapter, as with the last, is primarily with collectives in the abstract, our analysis cannot be completely abstract – for our conception of a social group cannot be limited to that of a plural subject *in medias res*; such phenomena have a history, in particular a history of formation that relies on the specific conditions outlined. If neither party to our joint commitment to believe ‘we have taken a wrong turn’ personally holds this attitude, then how is it that such a commitment

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 309-10. Group members may of course have ‘I’-directed *participant* attitudes through which they personally uphold a collective property – that is, individual attitudes that support their *qua* group member roles. Nevertheless, these individual attitudes are not only disconnected from those held in a *non-participatory* capacity, but also remain distinct from any expression of what attitudes *we* hold, as a collective entity. Any attitude with the individual as its subject cannot be expressing an attitude of the group.

<sup>53</sup> As Gilbert notes, upholding the latter may of course sometimes give the impression of the former: Gilbert, ‘Modelling Collective Belief’, p. 196.

<sup>54</sup> Gilbert, *On Social Facts*, pp. 309-13.

could have come into force? Where did the attitude 'come from'? Why would two people have been willing to make this the belief of their collective if neither actually believes it?

We need to consider, then, whether in practice it might still be the case that at least some individual members are required to possess a certain attitude in order for a plural subject to be fashioned around it, whether the *process* of jointly committing practically constrains its logical possibilities. Gilbert denies this conjecture too, however, and reinforces her riposte with a series of demonstrative scenarios by which we could arrive at just such a state of affairs – the existence of a plural subject in which zero of its members personally hold the attitude – to which they are, nonetheless, jointly committed.<sup>55</sup> One possibility is that a group belief *was* formed on the basis of alignment with some personal view(s), but that since being established as the attitude of the group – that is, since agreement to jointly commit – the personal views of those members have subsequently changed. Even though they are all still committed in their group capacity to this collective belief, then, no individual member is any longer personally committed.<sup>56</sup>

A more extreme case is one in which no individual members presently hold the established group attitude, and moreover, none have *ever* held it during any stage of the plural subject and its formation. To this end, Gilbert imagines a narrative whereby the personal view of one member, forcefully expressed, is unopposed by other members, who are willing to let it stand as the group belief – to jointly commit – even though it does not represent their personal views on the matter.

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<sup>55</sup> 'Not only in logic, but also in fact, the jointly accepted view need not reflect the prior or the concurrent personal view of the majority.' *Ibid.*, p. 300.

<sup>56</sup> Gilbert, 'Modelling Collective Belief', p. 192.

Whether in the long term this state of affairs could be sustained is another matter, of course. To this end, Gilbert notes the likelihood that upholding a group view will over time reflect back upon the personal views of members. 'One would expect the personal beliefs of many people eventually to mirror those of their group... conscious hypocrisy is probably harder on the nerves than sincerity... A jointly accepted view is a dynamic phenomenon, a phenomenon with consequences': *Ibid.*, pp. 198-200. See also Gilbert, *On Social Facts*, p. 304.

Unbeknownst to them, the member expressing the accepted view also does not believe it personally, but is merely professing it for some undefined purpose.<sup>57</sup>

More commonly, it might be the case that the agreed group attitude is a compromise, and that, consequently, it was not at any stage the personal belief of any individual member, but instead some negotiated position lying intermediate.<sup>58</sup> The members of a central bank committee might be divided, for instance, on whether to increase the interest rate by 0.5% or 1%, and may thus decide to split the difference at 0.75%. No individual member originally believed a 0.75% increase was optimal, and each may continue to personally back the benefits of their own position, but once the committee members have jointly committed that this is *the collective* decision, personal beliefs are a separate fact to the view that now guides their group-mode behaviour.

In any of these cases, then, all that matters for the purposes of a *collective* attitude is that individuals *have*, for whatever personal reason, jointly committed to uphold that state *as* group members. Why they might have done so when the joint attitude is at odds with their personal preferences perhaps lies more fittingly within the remit of behavioural psychology, but as Gilbert notes, plausible explanations are not hard to conceive of. Individuals might go along with a proposed view because they are apathetic, and lack a relevant opinion of their own, or they might see it as valuable that the group ultimately come to *some* agreement, and realise that being resolute to an unpopular personal view will only lead to stalemate.<sup>59</sup>

There is one final ‘enabling’ feature of Gilbert’s model that is worthy of emphasis, and this concerns the potential affluence of plural subjects. Whilst the expository nature of what preceded has recommended a focus on singular collective attitudes, a social group is by no means limited to holding just one joint commitment. By contrast, groups can be concurrently subject to a

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<sup>57</sup> As a concrete possibility she gives the example of an army commander, who thinks that he can increase the still meagre chances of victory by falsely declaring “we can win!” to boost his platoon’s confidence. If they commit to this as the group belief, their emulating behaviour, whether personally authentic or not, has the potential to embolden one another: Gilbert, ‘Modelling Collective Belief’, p. 197.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> See *Ibid.*, and Gilbert, *On Social Facts*, p. 299.

range of shared commitments, both within the same attitudinal category and across different types. Whilst some momentary collectives may have relatively few attributes, notes Gilbert, others are unified by rich tapestries of tradition and convention.<sup>60</sup> As they develop over time their members may jointly commit to a wide spectrum of beliefs, may agree to promote multiple ends of action together across varied circumstances, and there may be strong interactions, linkages and consistencies between all of these group features, both in the immediate and longer terms.<sup>61</sup>

Thus, the life of a plural subject need be neither myopic nor monomaniac – overlapping, connected joint commitment phenomena can indeed constitute the type of ‘richly textured’ social groups that we see around us in the real world,<sup>62</sup> collectives that can be as prosperous in their commitments as there are attitudes to uphold. And with each additional group attribute the shape of that relevant plural subject, the ‘we’ to which one is a member, is given an extra layer of depth, a finer degree of definition.

### **Plural Virtue<sup>63</sup>**

We are now in a much better position to evaluate the virtue ethical prospects of the Plural Subject Model. To begin with, it can be seen that even a very basic plural subject can equally be exposed to the level of virtue ethical evaluation open to (somewhat discredited) individualist approaches. By jointly committing to some action as a body, and thus forming a collective intention, a social group might at minimum *perform* an act that is virtue ethically right (or wrong), according to one of the conceptions earlier outlined.<sup>64</sup> But liberated from the conceptual restriction that only individuals can bear attitudinal states, the requirements of fuller notions of virtue and vice now become collectively accessible also.

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232.

<sup>61</sup> Gilbert, *A Theory of Political Obligation*, p. 167. She notes in particular the example of a family: *Ibid.*, p. 173.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> The term is Fricker’s: Fricker, *op. cit.*, p. 241.

<sup>64</sup> Though at this stage virtuous acts that have other ‘internal’ components may still be problematic.

The major virtue ethical limitation of earlier perspectives<sup>65</sup> was their inability to assign ‘internal’ states to collective bodies. The only agents capable of possessing psychological attributes were the individual members of such groups, but given non-summativism it was not possible for these personal properties to carry across to the shared level. For Bratman, an ‘intention’ to perform collective action could only be conceived of intangibly, abstractly, existing in the interplay and responsiveness between the plans of discrete participants, and not the attribute of any particular subject. The foundational component of virtue ethics, the agent themselves, therefore remained elusive, and this precluded conceiving of group behaviour as flowing from any *agential* state – for our purposes, virtue or vice.

But with the plural subject model, we now have an apperceptive resolution to this shortcoming, and a suggestive means by which to expand our virtue-based analysis of groups. Through the phenomenon of joint commitment it becomes possible for collectives to indeed be the genuine possessors of important attitudinal ‘inner’ states, states that – as already demonstrated – can be practical (intention), or indeed cognitive (belief), in nature.<sup>66</sup> The import of this should be clear, for it allows us – for the first time – to build up a conception of the collective itself as an agent, and moreover, an agent of a particular nature. The nature we want, of course, is that the collective is virtuous or vicious, that it manifests *a state of virtue or vice*. More specifically, we want to maintain that personally *non-virtuous* individuals can nevertheless express virtue at a group level, or indeed vice versa. But how exactly might we conceive of this?

The structure of Gilbert’s account suggests that the answer lies, again, in the utilisation of joint commitment, as this is the means by which plural attributes come into being. But this natural progression from cases already considered must be importantly constrained. That a group membership could simply ‘jointly commit *to virtue*’, ‘*to a virtue*’, ‘*to being virtuous together*’, or ‘*to acting virtuously as a body*’ are commitments too expansive in their catchment, for virtue is

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<sup>65</sup> Aside from their innate failings.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240.

not merely a singular state like intention or belief – it is a relation of attitudes and attributes, a condition in which these are well-ordered. Upholding virtue as a collective therefore requires upholding its constituting features.

The discussions of the last section provide the basis for this enterprise. As we have seen, more complex plural subjects can be constituted by a variety of simultaneous joint commitments; and, moreover, the attitudes to which these commitments refer, whilst wide in scope, place no demands upon the personal properties of that collective's membership. Given enough attitudinal range and depth then, perhaps a richly constituted plural subject, in its own right, can approximate the functioning of a well-rounded individual agent. To this end, our endeavour must be to populate the referent of 'we' with something akin to those features that make the individual person virtuous, and in doing so, provide the necessary base from which collective virtue might proceed.

With these possibilities in hand, let us move beyond the requirements of virtuous action and consider then whether groups might be capable of acting *from* virtue, in its fullest sense. The particular requirements of the latter, as with earlier conceptions of rightness, tend to vary across different forms of virtue ethics.<sup>67</sup> Accordingly, our analysis will proceed from the most common shared features of these accounts, to those required only by more stringent formulations. As suggested, our focus here will be on plural virtue, as opposed to its converse quality, plural vice. This is not to downplay the importance of the latter quality, but simply to recognise that in key respects it can be considered derivative of the former. Whilst virtue requires excellence across a number of agential attributes, vice represents a juxtaposed *deficiency* in one or more of them, and can thus be exhibited in the absence of some of the qualities about to be outlined.<sup>68</sup> There

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<sup>67</sup> Swanton, *op. cit.*, p. 293.

<sup>68</sup> For instance *not* feeling appropriate emotions, or showing a distinct *lack* of practical wisdom. A capacity to *develop* such fine attributes may nevertheless be a prerequisite for an agent to be liable for normative criticism of their viciousness: see page 167. In logical terms it is possible – turning the tables – to cast plural virtue as the derivative concept, viewing it as a state in which an agent fails to possess the particular

are, after all, more ways to go wrong, to fall short of the ethical ideal, than there are to fulfil it. In analysing the requirements of the more demanding state of virtue, then, the features of group-level vice should be concurrently ascertained.

### *Virtuous Motivation*

Thus far our plural subject is capable of intending action. On a Gilbertian reading this intention can be a non-reducible attribute of the group itself. But regardless of this, the attitude – as it stands – remains insufficient for anything beyond mere virtuous action. The first step in a move towards fuller virtue is for the intention itself to be of a certain moral quality; we need our group agent to have a *virtuous* intention, one that manifests an appropriately fine motivation.

To return to our earlier example, rescuing a drowning child may be virtue ethically the *right* thing to do: it is a virtuous end of action – it is what the virtuous paradigm would do, or it hits virtue's contextual target, and in bringing the intention to fulfilment I perform a virtuous act. Yet my motivation for undertaking this action could still be a great many things. Perhaps I rescue the drowning child only because I know its parents are wealthy, and I hope for a reward. Perhaps I help the child because other people are watching, and I fear they will think badly of me if I fail to assist.<sup>69</sup> For my intentional conduct to be more fully virtuous, however, I must also act as I do *in light of the right reason(s)*.<sup>70</sup> In the context of this example, my motivation must suitably be one of benevolence, or some comparable attitude such as care or kindness. I must be motivated by

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attributes of vice (e.g. lacks *the absence* of particular emotions). Nevertheless, such an approach would introduce an unnecessary degree of convolution, and is certainly less intuitive for our purposes.

<sup>69</sup> For an interesting discussion of acting from vicious motivations in the case of the drowning child, see R. Das, 'Virtue Ethics and Right Action', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 81(3). Sydney: Australasian Association of Psychology and Philosophy, 2003, p. 326.

<sup>70</sup> For important recent discussions of responsiveness to reasons see J. Markovitz, 'Acting for the Right Reasons', *Philosophical Review* 119(2). Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010; N. Arpaly and T. Schroeder, 'Deliberation and Acting for Reasons', *Philosophical Review* 121(2). Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012. The present claim that a virtuous agent must act *in light of* the right reason(s) aims to steer clear of the intricacies of these debates, as well as the controversy of whether certain qualities, most notably modesty, might in fact require a degree of self-effacement as to the reasons for relevant action: see page 143, note 89.

the fact that this person *needs* my help, and act out of concern for their welfare, for its own sake – not for some ulterior benefit on my part.

For a collective to be virtuous then, a joint commitment to perform a certain action needs to be supplemented by an additional commitment to perform it *because* of certain reasons.<sup>71</sup> Given the ample possibilities of joint commitment, mutually espousing the latter seems perfectly conceivable; and indeed as Miranda Fricker notes, the most effective manner in which to conceive of group-level motive is with a content simply in those terms – members jointly commit *to a motive*, or more completely ‘to achieving the good end of the motive *because* it is good’.<sup>72</sup> Analogous to the individual case then, if *together* rescuing a drowning child is to be more than incidentally virtuous (benevolent), the members of this collective must not only jointly commit to the actual action of helping, they must also jointly commit to doing so out of a *motive* of benevolence – agreeing to uphold and see to it as a body that this is the reason behind their conduct.<sup>73</sup>

But what, in practice, would it mean for group members to ‘uphold a motive’? Given that one’s personal reasons for action are available only to internal reflection, it might seem difficult to conceptualise a corresponding attitude in the collective context. But as with the case of belief, we must resist the temptation of too close an allegiance to *individual* cognition here, for once the attitude’s plural reference is properly acknowledged, there need be nothing mysterious about jointly expressing a property of this sort. Mirroring belief then, all that is required for a group to jointly commit to a motive is once more an array of appropriate ‘we-mode’ behaviour on behalf

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<sup>71</sup> Whether these commitments are actually separate, or instead incorporated into one another, will perhaps depend on the group and context in question.

<sup>72</sup> Fricker, *loc. cit.* Her emphasis.

As she also notes, this needn’t mean the agent must *conceive* of the motive as good morally, or indeed as being virtuous: *Ibid.*, pp. 245-6.

<sup>73</sup> As with other instances, this would first require common knowledge of unanimous willingness to jointly commit. If, for instance, one of the potential rescuers were to remark “That’s the mayor’s son drowning – with his money we’d be stupid not to help!”, then we would clearly doubt such willingness existed.

of constituents. To modify Gilbert's earlier statement,<sup>74</sup> the reason in question must be granted the *status* of motive in the group's public reasoning and action.

Understanding what this consists in must first recognise the usual direction of such reasoning. It is rare for an agent to intend an action and then following this decide upon its suitable motivation.<sup>75</sup> Instead, motive standardly serves as the causal precursor to an intention<sup>76</sup> – it is what makes the action seem worth performing, what guides the practical conduct we choose to undertake.<sup>77</sup> In one important sense, then, upholding a motive as a body firstly involves, in Fricker's terms, 'living up to it' – intending to do what will achieve the ends of that motive, or at least attempting to, in the context or contexts concerned.<sup>78</sup>

Confronted with the drowning child, a group of people may jointly commit to benevolence ("Look! That person is in trouble, so we should help."), and on the basis of that motivation decide, as a body, to provide assistance. In this case their collective intention would indeed live up to their agreed motivational state. But if instead, despite professing benevolence to be their reason for action, the group jointly commits to ignoring the victim, or to some other end of action that fails to render assistance, the members of that group would be failing to manifest benevolence as their impetus, and we would be at pains to say the collective had such a motive.

In general then, forming a plural subject of motive requires that motive to be both a guide, and background constraint, to the other joint commitments group members undertake. The motive should shape the deliberation and planning of the collective; like belief, individuals *as group members* should affirm the shared motivation when in a group capacity, presupposing it in their public utterances and deliberative contributions, presenting possible means by which to expand

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<sup>74</sup> See page 132.

<sup>75</sup> One exception could be a case where an immediate motivation changes during manifestation into action. One may begin to follow the aggressive order of a superior out of habit, duty, or fear, but as one carries it out come to value its fulfilment for oneself, a reason which subsequently overtakes the initial motive.

<sup>76</sup> Or perhaps in some immediate, 'instinctive' cases a near-concurrent, yet reinforcing attitude.

<sup>77</sup> For Aristotle, action aims at the good or the apparent good to the agent: Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 58.

<sup>78</sup> Fricker, *op. cit.*, p. 241.

or enrich the achievement of its end – perhaps, in the case of benevolence, suggesting the group check back in on the victim even after immediate concerns have been remedied. Conversely, individuals should<sup>79</sup> refrain from making statements or suggesting courses of action that detract from, or undermine, the agreed motive – for instance, flouting a motive of benevolence by remarking that the child “is wasting the group’s time”, or in being too hasty to move on once the minimum degree of assistance has been rendered.

As with previous joint commitment phenomena, and as should by this stage require no further reinforcement, the personal motives of individual participants, and whether they match that of the plural subject, is immaterial. All that matters is that the group has that motive, and this is ensured only by the ‘we-mode’ behaviour of constituents reflecting that notion – that between them they uphold the motive as the agreed reason for their collective action, and in doing so make it the touchstone around which their joint reasoning is conducted.

We have, therefore, a plural conception of motivation; and, by extension, if the motive in question is of a fitting moral nature – if the group’s reason for acting is for the sake of an attribute that turns out to be virtuous – we can have a virtuous group motive, and the foundation for virtuous group intention(s). However, Fricker’s assertion that on this basis ‘we have a collective virtue’ needs to be importantly qualified.<sup>80</sup> Fine motivation in action is essential for the possession of virtue on any developed virtue ethical reading, but such motivation is not always *sufficient* for virtue, on every account. Indeed, as this section will go on to demonstrate, some forms of virtue ethics require other important qualities in addition.

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<sup>79</sup> See the discussion of social normativity on pages 122-23.

<sup>80</sup> Fricker, *op. cit.*, p. 242. She also allies group motive to a ‘requisite reliability condition’, which likely equates to something like Hurka’s ‘conformity condition’ – the requirement that virtuous motives and intentions actually achieve their intended aim, and are not instead undermined by, for instance, false belief: See Hurka, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

Though Fricker attests that a notion of group-level motive meets the demands of an *Aristotelian* conception of virtue,<sup>81</sup> the collective components thus far accrued are perhaps better suited to the form of virtue ethics proposed by Michael Slote. Finding a dissimilar foundation in the moral sentimentalist tradition of Hume and Hutcheson,<sup>82</sup> Slote's theory is a self-consciously 'agent-based' reading of virtue, in which the ethical status of action is 'entirely derivative' from fundamental characterisations of an agent's motives – in particular, their conformity to an independent aretaic quality of 'admirability'.<sup>83</sup>

The structure of Slote's view, then, is akin to a non-hypothetical version of Hursthouse's right act criterion, in which the original distinction between virtuous acts and acts *from* virtue is effectively made redundant, and an act's entire ethical nature is now attendant only upon the absolute value of the agent's *actual* motives.<sup>84</sup> There is no differentiation here between acts evaluated in their own right and acts evaluated in light of their motives – between rightness and goodness, nor can right acts be carried out for the wrong reasons or vice versa. Instead, the moral value of an action just *is* the moral value of its motivation.<sup>85</sup> Encapsulated: action is morally good if it expresses a virtuous motive rather than a vicious one, a motive that has the aretaic quality of being admirable, rather than deplorable.<sup>86</sup>

Clearly, a plural subject of motive can meet these standards; and thus, on Slote's 'agent-based' view of virtue ethics, it is indeed possible that some collectives can act *from* virtue, in the fullest

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<sup>81</sup> Fricker, *op. cit.*, pp. 235, 243.

<sup>82</sup> For a useful overview see, amongst other entries, J. Driver, 'Moral Sense and Sentimentalism', in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Ethics*. Ed. R. Crisp. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

<sup>83</sup> Slote, *op. cit.*, p. 5. Other forms of virtue ethics, in which different concepts are foundational, he labels merely 'agent-focused': *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>84</sup> As opposed to the original grounding of mere rightness in the *hypothetical* motives of an imagined virtuous agent: Hurka, *op. cit.*, p. 223. See previous discussion of Hursthouse in Chapter 2. Slote notes the similarity in structure: Slote, *op. cit.*, p. 6 note 1.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 224.

<sup>86</sup> Swanton, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

Despite Fricker's inclusion of it, Slote does not demand a conformity condition in order for virtue to be manifested. So long as the agent in question has done all that they can be reasonably expected to, epistemically speaking, action can be fully virtuous even though due to false belief it might fail to achieve the intended aim of a motive – 'she cannot be criticised for acting immorally, however bad things turn out': See Slote, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-35.

sense.<sup>87</sup> If a set of individuals jointly commit to performing an action, and moreover to doing it because of an admirable motive, then that social group will have a virtuously motivated intention, one that is held *as a group*, via the behaviour of its members in their group capacity. When that collective intention is manifested, for those admirable reasons, the group will perform an act from virtue, and may be suitably evaluated in light of this.

At this point it is worth noting that our inquiry has reached an important stage. We have constructed a model of collective attitudes that allows a group, in the abstract at least, to meet the requirements for at least one form of virtue ethical agency. A group agent as thus conceived could be utilised as the foundation for our overriding aim: analysing actual political agents in the context of international relations. However, as we noted at the outset of the chapter, maintaining the possibility of theoretical diversity is to be seen as an advantage in this latter enterprise, and in this respect it makes sense to push our investigation further, and to see if a plural subject can possess the attributes required for more stringent readings of virtue.

### *Practical Wisdom*

Though Slote makes no mention of it as an element of his theory,<sup>88</sup> most modern virtue ethical accounts, following (though not always agreeing with) Aristotle, prescribe an essential role to some form of practical wisdom, the possession of which is seen as requisite for an agent to properly act from virtue, at least in the vast majority of cases.<sup>89</sup> As was outlined in Chapter 1,

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<sup>87</sup> Another motive-based form of virtue ethics is that of James Martineau, who formulates right action to be that which has been done from the *most* virtuous motive available to the agent: See J. Martineau, *Types of Ethical Theory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1885. However, whilst our plural subject of motive could likewise meet these demands, Martineau's historical account, in which motives are ranked into a number of distinct categories, is an inferior alternative to Slote's more developed line of thought. See Hurka's discussion: Hurka, *loc. cit.* Henry Sidgwick also considers, and ultimately rejects, Martineau's 'quantitative' analysis and ranking of motives: See H. Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*. London: Macmillan, 1874, Book III, Chapter XII.

<sup>88</sup> See R. Hursthouse, 'Virtue Ethics'. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue/>, 18<sup>th</sup> July 2007; Swanton, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6. Whether so-called 'virtues of ignorance', such as genuine modesty, actually require a *lack* of practical wisdom, a misreading of one's own worth, remains an ongoing debate within virtue theory. See Driver, *Uneasy Virtue*, pp. 16-24, and Swanton's reply, *op. cit.*, p. 238. For our purposes here, however, it suffices that practical wisdom is seen to be called for in relation to a great many virtues.

having practical wisdom entails the ability to know what being virtuous requires in a specified set of circumstances, and how to most fittingly manifest this in one's subsequent choice of actions. For Aristotle, we noted, *phronesis* is the experiential capacity by which one judges the virtuous mean of action that lies between deficient and excessive extremes.<sup>90</sup> For Hursthouse, it is the knowledge or understanding that enables one to follow through on an intention to act well, to 'secure real benefits effectively', in any given situation.<sup>91</sup> Whilst in Swanton's vernacular, we might understand practical wisdom as an agent's ability to judge the appropriate modes of response to those items in the field of a virtue.

We can see why this capacity is considered an important requirement of virtue given any of these interpretations. An agent acting from a state of moral excellence, even if their motives and intentions are good, cannot meet the demands of virtue purely by chance, or by accident; to be considered virtuous a person cannot be a well-meaning fool, or in Swanton's terms, a 'bungling do-gooder'<sup>92</sup> – somebody who, despite having perfectly valid moral motives, has no idea how to appropriately manifest them, and achieves their virtuous ends, if at all, merely fortuitously. In such a case it would be a matter of luck, rather than judgement, if they stumbled upon the circumstantial action that happened to best embody those motives, and bestowing virtue in this case – to a conformity beyond significant agential control, or indeed recognition – seems improper.

Rather, to authentically act from virtue, an agent must *know* that what they do will best manifest their fine motives, and achieve their ends effectively; they must act as they do *because* they recognise or perceive the important features of a situation,<sup>93</sup> and *because* they understand the ethical salience of these elements. Acting from virtue, then, does not only require the moral

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<sup>90</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 39.

<sup>91</sup> Hursthouse, 'Virtue Ethics'.

<sup>92</sup> Swanton, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

<sup>93</sup> Aristotle likens practical wisdom to perception in Book VI, Chapter 8 of the *Ethics*. See Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, pp. 148-9.

motivational component of correct reasons for action, but furthermore the moral epistemological requirement of fine discernment – the quality of knowing, case to case, what action it is in fact excellent to produce.

Indeed, though we have taken the requirements of Slote's 'agent-centred' account at face value, a number of commentators have questioned whether a similar capacity to practical wisdom is not, after all, demanded by his own schema of virtue.<sup>94</sup> Whilst Slote makes clear that excellent motivation takes ethical precedence over the outcome of action, and denies that motive must *always* achieve its appropriate end,<sup>95</sup> his conception of an admirable motive is such that it must take account of its practical surroundings. As he notes, 'the moral value of a motive... isn't free floating, but depends, rather, on the *kind* of internal state it is and, in particular, on the *aims and hopes it has, and the efforts it makes, vis-à-vis the world.*'<sup>96</sup> In this sense, he argues that judging the moral character of an action by the quality of its motivation is an evaluation requiring one's inner gaze to 'double back' onto the world – for a fine motive is one that itself makes important reference to situational facts in determining how to act:

If one is really benevolent... one doesn't just throw good things around or give them to the first person one sees. Benevolence... isn't benevolence in the fullest sense unless one cares about who exactly is needy and to what extent they are needy, and such care, in turn, essentially involves wanting and making efforts to know relevant facts, so that one's benevolence can really be useful.<sup>97</sup>

How might we conceive of practical wisdom on a collective level then? Unlike previous attributes, a capacity for fine moral judgement is not something the members of a group can jointly commit to – for situational insight is not an attitude, not something that can be upheld in an analogous way. Instead, practical wisdom serves as an important channel between motive and intention, the means by which, in reference to context, a virtuous motivation is transmitted into appropriate

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<sup>94</sup> See, for instance, Hursthouse, who claims that the extent of Slote's departure from other readings of virtue ethics is 'exaggerated': Hursthouse, 'Virtue Ethics'.

<sup>95</sup> Slote, *loc. cit.*

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18. His emphasis.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

action. What a virtuous collective jointly commits to, then, is not practical wisdom itself, but whatever motives and ends of action are forthcoming *because of it*.<sup>98</sup>

Given the truth of non-summativism, a group property does not equal an aggregation of its individual equivalents. Thus, group-level practical wisdom cannot be merely the state in which every member personally possesses this capacity, in their private dealings. It may indeed be the case that some members of a plural subject are practically wise *as individuals*, and perhaps, for the kind of reasons previously outlined, the rest of the group simply go along with their suggestions, jointly committing to whatever action such members' individual wisdom discerns to be ethically correct. In this case, the collective may jointly commit to performing virtuous action from a shared virtuous motive. However, it would be hard to maintain that *the group* knew what virtue required in these circumstances, for the insight in question is at no point operating on a group level. Rather, a number of individuals knew, and a number of other individuals either took their word for it, or perhaps let their opinion stand despite personally judging otherwise.

The group as an entity in its own right simply committed to an action, an action that the collective *hoped* would successfully achieve the ends of their virtuous motives, but not one that its members, *as a body*, could actually perceive as appropriate to that purpose. In this respect, the fact that some individual(s) discerned the group's action to be contextually apt, and that they also happened to be part of the group's membership, is *collectively* irrelevant. After all, a student may defer to the superior knowledge of a teacher, and in doing so agree to follow their lead in some endeavour. But that they share in accomplishing an end together does not then mean that they now also share in that original knowledge – it remains solely the teacher's.<sup>99</sup> Just as, similarly, a group of people agreeing to travel somewhere by car together do not on that commitment alone share the driver's knowledge of the route.

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<sup>98</sup> To pre-empt oncoming discussion, perhaps which emotions also.

<sup>99</sup> Of course, performing the act as the teacher does may contribute to *learning*, which in a teaching environment is the very impetus for acting this way.

Bearing in mind the extreme instance of non-summativism brings this point into even clearer resolution, for what of cases in which *no* members of the collective are personally virtuous – where no individual in the group has sufficient practical wisdom to judge and understand what virtue requires in the situation at hand? How, if we maintain that a group's attributes are significantly independent of its constituents', can such a plural subject still be envisaged as practically wise? How can a unified body of individuals, none of whom are themselves epistemically capable, regardless possess this quality – of non-fortuitous right judgement – upon their union? From what materials has this group-level practical wisdom been synthesised?

We may be tempted to think that this quandary represents a serious conceptual worry for non-summativism. But in fact, the notion that collective practical wisdom can surpass the capabilities of any particular member need not be as troubling as it first seems. Indeed, when we see this 'amplification' phenomenon in the light of similar, non-moral instances, it can be seen as representing a quite natural understanding of the way personal capacities can interact; for it proves to be the case in many shared endeavours that the skills and qualities of individuals, insufficient in isolation, are nevertheless brought together in a way that allows some larger end to be achieved.

In diagnosing and treating a complicated illness, for instance, the insight of a single doctor may sometimes prove insufficient for understanding the holistic character of a patient's ailment. Instead, specialists from different fields of medicine may likewise offer their knowledge and advice, building up a more complete 'shared' understanding of the possibilities than was available to any of them working as limited individuals. Indeed, in countless situations calling for problem-solving or judgement we often make a conscious effort to call upon the opinions and insights of others,<sup>100</sup> and in doing so to gather their expertise as a means of checking and fine-tuning our

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<sup>100</sup> Committees of public inquiry, for instance, are often deliberately populated with members that comprise a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds.

own perceptions of the issue at hand, in the hope of improving the outcome. The proverb ‘two heads are better than one’ is not without veracity.

Collective practical wisdom is no different in nature. Each individual member of a group may indeed lack the knowledge and insight to discern the virtuous course of action a given context demands. They may appreciate the moral significance of *some* features of the situation before them – perhaps they judge that the virtue of truthfulness is somehow of relevance – but left to their own devices they are unlikely to respond, in a full enough manner, to the complete range of ethically salient features. In a group context, however, the incomplete moral wisdom of any single member is at the same time balanced against that of all others in the collective – it is not the limited insights of one individual that is now brought to bear on the situation, but instead the limited insights of *multiple* individuals, each unique in their (imperfect) moral understanding.

In attempting to discern the appropriate virtuous response *as a group*, then, the ethical features of that context are now illuminated from more than one angle, as the overlapping individual sensitivities of members, whilst singularly insufficient, are amalgamated. This composite of personal wisdom, even in the smallest instances,<sup>101</sup> can produce a degree of perception at the group level that was not available to any member in isolation, with the oversight of the collective as a whole working to crowd out those personal moral blind-spots that are exhibited in deficient individual deliberation.<sup>102</sup> As Aristotle himself reinforces:

There is this to be said for the many: each of them by himself may not be of good quality; but when they come together it is possible that they may surpass – collectively and as a body, although not individually – the quality of the few best, in much the same way as feasts to which many contribute may excel those provided at one person’s expense. For when there are many, each has his share of goodness and practical wisdom; and, when all meet together, the people may thus become something like a single person, who, as he has many feet, many hands, and many senses, may also have

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<sup>101</sup> Consider how much clearer certain dilemmas can appear even on seeking the advice of a single other.

<sup>102</sup> Fricker discusses a similar (but not identical) ‘higher-level’ feature, terming it an ‘invisible hand’ case: Fricker, *op. cit.*, p. 239.

many qualities of character and intelligence... some appreciate one part, some another, and all together appreciate all.<sup>103</sup>

There are, of course, some implicit conditions to a shared capacity of this sort, and whilst it is not our focus in this chapter to evaluate specific instances of groups, it is worth noting here a limited set of criteria that are necessary for collective judgement to get off the ground. From the argument just presented, the key to group-level practical wisdom lies in the plural interaction of personal moral insight, and the possibility that, across the complete spectrum of ethical appreciation, shortcomings in the judgement of some individual members will be 'covered' by a lack of this specific deficiency in others.

For example, to take a very simple two-person case: in a group [A, B], Group Member A may individually lack adequate practical wisdom because he fails to appreciate a morally relevant feature of the situation,  $\alpha$ . Additionally, Group Member B may individually lack adequate practical wisdom because she fails to appreciate a morally relevant feature of the situation,  $\beta$ . However, when A and B deliberate *together*, their individual moral ignorance of  $\alpha$  or  $\beta$  does not carry over to the group's ignorance of either, for A recognises  $\beta$  and B recognises  $\alpha$ , and so between them *the collective* recognises both  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$ , chooses action that correctly responds to both (perhaps amongst further others), and is thus practically wise.

The first condition that we can discern from this analysis is the necessity for individual members to possess at least *some* degree of practical wisdom personally, imperfect and incomplete as it may be. If no participant in shared deliberation has even the slightest dimension of moral perception,<sup>104</sup> then there *are* simply no materials for this collective capacity to potentially emerge from. Collective practical wisdom, despite being distinct from its singular manifestation, cannot be summoned out of thin air. In a group composed of individuals who are each *utterly* morally

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<sup>103</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, pp. 108-9.

<sup>104</sup> Such a conceptual extreme is, nevertheless, practically unlikely.

incapable, the notion of overlapping oversight would be impossible, for no member would possess *any* moral sensitivity by which to cover the deficiency of another.

As a corollary to this, it seems that the less practically wise individuals are personally, the larger a group must be in order for the successful ‘crowding out’ of moral blind-spots to occur.<sup>105</sup> A dyad like [A, B], where each member lacks only a fraction of complete perception, consequently requires only that small number of people in order to conglomerate full practical wisdom at the group level. A group composed of individuals who each lack a much more considerable dimension of moral insight, however, would have to be of a comparably larger membership threshold in order for their partial but overlapping perceptions to adequately cover a full range of ethically relevant features. This seems to align well with our intuitive thinking, whereby we would expect a collection of relatively virtuous people to be more morally reliable as a body than a similarly-sized group consisting of relatively vicious ones. That this is quite a natural thought lends further credibility to the outlined account.

As should also be evident, another key requirement for such group-level insight is that the personal moral capacities of members are actually able to interact in the process of plural decision-making. That in the hypothetical case above the personal moral blind-spots of individual members did not carry over into a deficiency of the group’s perception relies heavily on how their collective deliberation actually unfolds. For the above example to be conceivable, A and B must both have a chance to state their personal views, and for such opinions to be taken on board by the other group member as potentially relevant to their joint plans. Accordingly, groups in which practical wisdom might be amalgamated seem to require some degree of internal freedom of

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<sup>105</sup> For the sake of simplicity, and merely to demonstrate the general conceptual point, we are not here considering groups in which there is a significant disparity between the personal practical wisdom of members – for instance, a group in which two members are highly perceptive, whilst the remaining ten are morally clueless. How such an occurrence might influence the moral deliberation of the group depends heavily on the practical details of its deliberative structure and operation, and thus will not be explored here.

expression, along with a mechanism whereby individual views or suggestions can be transmitted to other members, and fed into the decision-making process.

The details and possibilities of how these general conditions could be met of course raise a further set of practical questions: Must group-level decision-making be conducted in a completely open manner? Must equal weighting be granted to the deliberative insights of each member? Can genuine joint perception be achieved despite an internal group hierarchy? These inquiries into potential group structure are essential ones, and are the focus of the latter sections of this chapter, as well as the two that follow.<sup>106</sup> What is important here is simply the recognition that individual moral perceptions must be *allowed* to interact, in some form, as it is only from this interaction that collective perception evolves. Whether they will actually do so depends on case-to-case conditions, and furthermore, nothing that has been said in any way guarantees that a group perception, even founded on these grounds, will actually qualify as practical wisdom in the case of a specific collective.

Given the right conditions, then, it is indeed possible to conceive of collective practical wisdom, a capacity for fine moral judgement that operates distinctly at the group level, and which nevertheless none of that group's members need possess at a personal one. So long as members' deliberative faculties, as well as wills, are pooled in the decision-making process, a group can indeed have moral knowledge that the action it intends to perform is the appropriate contextual manifestation of its virtuous motivation. The requirement that a virtuous agent knows that their action is ethically correct is therefore fulfilled. In fact, given what has been said it is conceivable that some group-level insight might even be superior to that of any individual agent – like a more powerful computer processor, a composite of numerous individual minds can potentially allow for more deliberative ground to be covered, and for more possibilities to be considered, in

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<sup>106</sup> See, in this Chapter, page 166 onwards. Chapters 4 and 5 further the analysis via a detailed case study.

confronting a moral problem.<sup>107</sup> Thus on the condition that their constitution is enabling, collectives can be highly capable of meeting this more stringent component of virtue.

### *Emotion / Affective States*

Thus far, our collective agent is capable of performing virtuous action, from virtuous motives, and with the moral knowledge that each is contextually appropriate. But on many virtue ethical accounts, true possession of moral excellence also relies upon the *feelings* with which an agent so acts – a requirement that they also manifest appropriately fine emotions, correct affective states.<sup>108</sup> Indeed, our discussions of plural virtue have so far put off re-engagement with the earlier realisation that some virtues seem to require, perhaps amongst other things, the performing agent simply to *be* a certain way – to react to people or situations internally.<sup>109</sup> Having courage, for instance, involves not only the external handling of dangerous or threatening situations, argues Swanton, but also the regulation of internal emotional states: the control of fear and confidence.<sup>110</sup>

Likewise, though we have previously discussed the motive of *benevolence* as a fittingly virtuous impulse for helping someone in need (e.g. the drowning child), a richer description of what drives a virtuous agent to act in such circumstances is perhaps a state of *compassion*. Unlike benevolence, the latter represents not merely a motive to do good to others, but also an emotional state, ‘a feeling of deep sympathy and sorrow for another’, which accompanies the

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<sup>107</sup> This last point is not limited to virtue ethical readings of morality. A common criticism of act-consequentialism, for instance, is that human beings simply lack the mental capability and stamina to fully consider all the potential consequences of an action. Per Sandin also notes the greater information-processing capabilities of groups: P. Sandin, ‘Collective Military Virtues’, *Journal of Military Ethics* 6(4). Basingstoke: Taylor & Francis, 2007, p. 306.

<sup>108</sup> Following Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 34, see, for instance, Swanton, *op. cit.*, pp. 6, 293; Hursthouse, ‘Virtue Ethics’. Slote gives *some* consideration to types of inner state we may think of as emotions, for instance the ‘warm’ sentiments of compassion, kindness and caring. But his discussion of these qualities tends to be in the service of his overarching sentimentalist approach, and they are often conflated with, or take a back seat to, his primary focus on the admirability of motives. See, for example, Slote, *op. cit.*, pp. 20, 23, 60, 137.

<sup>109</sup> See Chapter 2, pages 103-5.

<sup>110</sup> Swanton, *op. cit.*, p. 235. See also Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, pp. 40, 63.

desire to alleviate their suffering.<sup>111</sup> Accordingly, a fully virtuous agent, acting from compassion, must not only act out of a desire to help a victim of misfortune, but must do so – and possess this motive – *because* of the way this person makes them feel, because they are moved by their plight, because it pains them to see it.<sup>112</sup> The importance of such affective elements is equally evident in related attributes like caring and sympathy,<sup>113</sup> whilst the significant emotional components of virtues like modesty, good temper and friendliness, and vices such as pride, cowardice, irascibility, and envy are also easy to discern.

We might expect the possession of emotional states to be one of the most difficult virtue ethical requirements for a collective to meet. After all, it is far from evident what it would be like for any group to ‘feel’ something; and as Gilbert notes, we might be inclined to think that feelings, conceived as on par with ‘sensations’, can only be experienced by a living organism.<sup>114</sup> As she argues, however, we *do* often quite comfortably ascribe a wide range of emotions to collective bodies.<sup>115</sup> Indeed, it is a quite common occurrence to hear governments claim to ‘care passionately’ about a given social problem, or for regulatory bodies to express ‘deep shame’ in the wake of failure or scandal. Like similar concerns regarding attitudes like belief, it turns out that our initial reservations about the mental exclusivity of such attributes can be offered a corresponding resolution. All that matters collectively is that a membership most effectively

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<sup>111</sup> See definitional entries for ‘benevolence’ and ‘compassion’, *Dictionary.com*, <http://dictionary.reference.com/>, accessed 30<sup>th</sup> August 2011.

Roger Crisp also draws important distinctions between compassion and ‘mere’ benevolence: See R. Crisp, ‘Equality, Priority, and Compassion’, *Ethics* 113(4). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003, pp. 12-20.

<sup>112</sup> In this particular instance the role of emotion, referencing our earlier discussion of motive being a causal antecedent to intention (see page 140), appears itself to causally precede motive. Whether this holds for all emotions, courage for example, is less clear.

<sup>113</sup> To briefly return to some of the issues left hanging in the previous chapter’s discussion of ‘right’ action then, whilst a virtuous *motivation* may be sufficient to ‘hit the internal target’ of Swanton’s earlier-discussed virtue of determination, a virtue like caring would, given what has been said, still require an additional emotional internal state to successfully do so. Hence, the conception of a virtuous agent built up before the present section may still have some limitations in performing a full spectrum of ‘right’ actions, were we to consider that more limited level of analysis.

<sup>114</sup> M. Gilbert, ‘Collective Remorse’, in her *Sociality and Responsibility: New Essays in Plural Subject Theory*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000, p. 125.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

maintains, through their 'we'-mode behaviour, that *the group* feels something. Gilbert considers the example of collective remorse:

*A group G feels remorse over an act A if and only if the members of G are jointly committed to feeling remorse as a body over act A... the joint commitment of the parties is (more fully) to constitute as far as possible by their several actions, including utterances, a single body that feels remorse.*<sup>116</sup>

Once again then, the basis by which a group-level attitude – here an emotional state – can be constructed is through the phenomenon of joint commitment. On the above, individual members of a collective body may or may not feel personal remorse over their own participatory actions ('I regret what I have done'); moreover, they may or may not feel what Gilbert terms 'membership remorse' over the actions of the collective as a whole – that is, being individually sorry for what has been done together ('I regret what we have done').<sup>117</sup> But neither of these attitudes reflect upon whether *the group*, as an entity in itself, feels remorse, for in both cases the subjects of the relevant attitude are separate individuals, not a unified body.<sup>118</sup> Aggregating the latter property of 'membership remorse' would, akin to discredited individualist accounts, represent a summation of individually-directed attitudes sharing a collective content. As we have seen, this does not produce a *plural* subject of that attitude.

What is needed, then, is a joint commitment between group members that, *as a body*, 'we regret what we have done'. Once such a commitment is in force, following common knowledge of mutual individual willingness to do so, a plural subject of that emotion – remorse – comes into being, and individuals *qua* group members must then act in whatever manner upholds the notion that the collective as a whole is subject to that feeling, to express that affective state in their group-representing behaviour. What it would practically mean to conform to this group-level emotion is not too hard to imagine. Not only must the subsequent actions and motivations of the

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<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135. Her emphasis.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134. See also M. Gilbert, 'On Feeling Guilt for What One's Group Has Done', pp. 383-6.

<sup>118</sup> Gilbert, 'Collective Remorse', p. 134.

collective move, where possible, to remedy or repay the past transgression, but moreover individuals acting in their group capacities would be expected to be forthcoming with contrite and penitent expressions of apology, sorrow, and regret, asserting such things as “What we did was truly terrible”,<sup>119</sup> and to do so willingly, without pressure from other parties.

As with the content of other joint commitments, Gilbert accepts that in reality there is a reasonable probability that upholding a certain emotional state in a group member capacity will, over time, influence one’s own personal attitudes in the direction of conformity:

If, by virtue of my participation in the prevailing collective remorse, I regularly allude to the wickedness of what we have done, express the wish that it had not happened, and so on, I may well come to reflect privately on the group act in question. I may myself judge it to be evil, myself wish that we had not acted so. In other words, I may come to experience membership remorse, my own remorse over what we have done.<sup>120</sup>

However, as with intention, belief, motivation, or indeed any other attitudinal property to which people may jointly commit, the presence of a comparable attribute at the individual level is independent of whether the group possesses it, and vice versa. Thus, ‘membership remorse can be widespread without collective remorse being present’, and likewise, ‘there can be collective remorse without membership remorse’.<sup>121</sup> The entities that are subject to these dissimilar attitudes are distinct, and it is only the maintenance of this emotion in relation to action performed *as part of* the group, via an appropriate joint commitment, that is required for the collective body to possess it in its own right.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.* As evidence of the former, we need only think of a case in which widespread membership remorse was nevertheless held in secret by each member. Even if the widespread presence of individually-held membership remorse was ‘out in the open’, however, this is not equivalent to there being widespread willingness to *jointly commit* to this attitude at a group level. The latter state of affairs, Gilbert thinks, is nonetheless ‘apt to give rise’ to that collective commitment: Gilbert, *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>122</sup> We will not comment here on the appropriateness or indeed rationality of individually-subjected ‘membership’ guilt or remorse, given that they are immaterial to attitudes held at the genuinely collective level, which is our main focus. Gilbert herself remains neutral on whether one *should* feel such things for

The means of upholding 'negative' group emotions like remorse or sorrow are perhaps more immediately apparent to intuition, but the scope of such an account is by no means limited to feelings of this sort.<sup>123</sup> Contrastingly, a group can manifest a feeling of pride in itself and its actions given that its members act so as to presuppose this prevailing attitude.<sup>124</sup> In this case, such appropriate group-mode behaviour might instead involve expressions of satisfaction as to the supposedly laudable conduct of the collective, a willingness to highlight the group's achievements and successes, and to do so in a manner that demonstrates a sense of esteem amongst its membership. Behaviour of this sort would indeed convey something more than the joint intentions, beliefs or motivations of the group; it portrays the existence of an internal affective state within the collective, a background attitude that underlies and relates these other properties to one another, and gives them structure and location within the group agent's overall nature.

It appears plausible, therefore, to uphold a wide range of emotional attitudes at the collective level. To tie the discussion back to virtue specifically, the emotional components of some of those excellences just noted can now indeed be coherently understood in a group context. Taking courage, a joint commitment to suitable confidence, and the control of fear, can be achieved despite personal trepidation amongst members. In line with our analysis of other joint attributes, maintaining a state of courage at the collective level requires the group to successfully emulate the unity that would be observed in a single courageous individual. As before, this may involve a range of apposite conduct and expression of behalf of members. Let us consider an example:

Deciding that they must be courageous, a group of firefighters may enter a burning building in order to rescue a number of trapped inhabitants. Though individually they may apprehend the

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what one's group has done, but maintains that such emotions are not ruled out merely because their object is the collective: Gilbert, 'On Feeling Guilt for What One's Group Has Done', p. 390 note 32.

<sup>123</sup> Gilbert makes an analogous point about those individual-level, 'membership' emotions: *Ibid.*, pp. 386-7.

<sup>124</sup> In implying that a feeling of pride is a 'positive' emotion it is not being argued that it is necessarily virtuous, just that it involves evaluating agents and their actions in a good light rather than a bad one.

immense danger of the situation, and experience great anxiety at the prospect of their joint intention, given that their group-mode behaviour – their actions and demeanour as a unit – is fitting, the firefighters *as a body* may yet demonstrate their collective courage and fearlessness. “We’re here to help you”, says one member assertively on discovering a victim; “Don’t be afraid, everything is under control” reassures another, despite the worsening situation; and together, the group continue to douse the flames without retreating, committed that they will not abandon one another despite their own fears. In such circumstances it is surely difficult to envisage how *the group* could command its fear any more effectively.

To see how this is different from the aggregation of personal courage, we may think of this case as analogous to the one we referenced in the earlier discussion of practical wisdom, whereby no group member in isolation has a sufficient degree of the quality in question. The firefighters in the example above lack an adequate measure of courage as individuals; were they to face a comparable situation alone their fears would likely get the better of them and as a result they would not be able to perform the action required of them in the circumstances. It is only when they come together as a group, and jointly commit to behave as courage demands, that each person’s partial bravery – singularly insufficient – is able to support and reinforce that of each other member. On this knowledge that they are jointly committed to the group endeavour, and that the fire crew acting together essentially ‘have each other’s backs’, the personal fears of members can be successfully managed so as to enable the conduct of a courageous agent to be achieved at the collective level.

This represents a clear qualitative jump from personal to collective courage. It is true that for the group to be courageous constituent members must in those circumstances control their personal fears – if a sufficient number of firefighters abandoned their participatory action the group itself would not embody the kind of unity required, and the courageous group enterprise would

collapse.<sup>125</sup> Nevertheless, in the situation outlined the requisite control comes not from the internal qualities of the individuals themselves, but exists only so far those individuals are components of the group, a group that is committed to controlling *its* fear. Individual firefighters may maintain the personal mentality that ‘if my colleagues were not here in support, I would surely flee’, but so long as they continue to uphold their *qua* group member modes of conduct, doing what they must to maintain the confidence and fearlessness of the body they make up, the collective itself can still exhibit the attribute they as separate individuals lack.<sup>126</sup>

A similar argument can be proposed in the case of compassion, an emotive state somewhat different in nature. Our group helping the drowning child out of mere benevolence must do all it can to assure that the ends of this motive are achieved most effectively. As we noted earlier, the members of such a group would be expected to look for ways to expand the fulfilment of benevolence, to make sure the assistance rendered was full and lasting, and to express this reason for their action in both internal planning and in public explanation.<sup>127</sup> But there is no demand on a collective acting upon this motivation to *feel* a certain way towards the victim, to have an emotional reaction towards their plight in its own right, beyond being an instance in which to demonstrate goodwill.

By contrast, a group acting out of compassion would here be expected to demonstrate that notion, the presence of an affective reaction, in a further range of expressive behaviour. “We’re so sorry that this has happened to you”, one group member might confide to the victim sombrely;

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<sup>125</sup> A more stringent claim would be that group-level courage collapses even if a *single* firefighter reneges on their participatory role. Nevertheless, some contextually-sensitive threshold is arguably more intuitive. We might imagine that over the course of the rescue, some individual firefighters momentarily lose their nerve and withdraw their supporting conduct; perhaps a near miss with some falling debris undermines a new recruit’s confidence and he pulls back from the burning building until – encouraged by his comrades – he feels ready to return. Presuming that a brief lapse of this sort is not critical to the group endeavour continuing (unlike, for instance, maintaining the flow of water to the hoses), we could reasonably maintain that over the course of the rescue the collective continues to display courage.

<sup>126</sup> The details of this example are, of course, designed merely to demonstrate a conceptual point about the personal/collective distinction of affective attitudes. This argument does not imply that if the firefighters – or indeed some proportion of them – *were* personally courageous that they could not also demonstrate this quality on a separate group level.

<sup>127</sup> See pages 140-41.

“We couldn’t just leave you like this” explains another; whilst even amongst one another the participants might be expected to uphold a fitting sense of solemnity and concern, regardless of whether they genuinely experience these emotions on a personal level. The compassionate atmosphere that results from such group-mode behaviour, despite individual independence,<sup>128</sup> is not empty or illusory; conformity to the emotion in question is a genuine anchor around which the conduct of the collective proceeds, and as participants in that plural subject it also genuinely guides the conduct of individual members when acting in that contributory capacity, even if it might not do so in other, private contexts.<sup>129</sup>

It seems clear, therefore, that social groups – envisaged as plural subjects – are equally capable of meeting those proposed affective requirements of virtue possession. Our collective agent thus has the capacity not only to intend virtuous action, for virtuous reasons, and on the basis of fine situational judgement, but to furthermore do so whilst in the right emotional state: to respond to a situation because of how they *feel* about it, and in a manner that reflects this. In some cases,

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<sup>128</sup> As was implied in the case of courage, and explicitly discussed in relation to the very different quality of practical wisdom, it seems that for collective compassion – or indeed any emotive state – to be possible, it must be the case that group members possess at least *some* personal degree of that relevant quality, even if it falls below the threshold of adequacy. If no group member had even the slightest pang of compassion, then it seems implausible that they would have the resources to undertake appropriate *qua* group member behaviour designed to uphold that attribute at a collective level. How, after all, would they know what ‘appropriate behaviour’ even consisted if they had no grasp of compassion’s relevance to a situation?

<sup>129</sup> Though we are, at this stage, only focusing on small-scale groups, this distinction between personal and group-level compassion is perhaps more clearly demonstrable in a larger, corporate context (if indeed relevant group agency can be shown to expand onto that plane) rather than one in which all group members are in direct contact with the target(s) of their joint affectivity. In the present case of the drowning child the circumstances are such that, aside from any influence on the demeanour between the rescuers as they wade out to help, they ultimately manifest the group’s collective sentiment much as they would personally – a particular member’s comforting of the victim (e.g. telling them it will be alright, putting an arm around them when they get back to shore), even if doing so in fulfilment of a group role, proceeds similarly to when it is done as an element of individual action, making it less easy to distinguish from personally-originating concern. In a more detached, ongoing setting we can envisage a split between personal and group sentiment more readily. A philanthropic organisation may make a quality like compassion its central ethos, and as such the group-representing behaviour of its employees – e.g. the wording of its correspondence, the portrayal of potential beneficiaries in its internal deliberation, the depth of inquiry into recipients’ needs and a willingness to (jointly) value that understanding non-instrumentally – will both reference and find direction from that core collective commitment. That said, we can still quite easily imagine that when those employees go home at the end of the working day these participatory facets of *the organisation’s* affective stance (that ‘we, as a body, care’) fail to carry over into their personal modes of behaviour, and *as* individuals they continue to demonstrate a lack of private philanthropic concern for either the people they specifically work to help, or those in need more widely (e.g. shunning charity donations or involvement in community projects).

perhaps like that of upholding compassion, it is possibly more intuitive that the relevant joint commitment is an implicit one between members, whilst in others, perhaps like our example of courage, the willingness to uphold a group emotion might be expressed more openly.<sup>130</sup>

### *Character Traits*

There is one remaining requirement for virtue possession that needs to be considered. Aristotle outlines the following conditions for acts that are performed virtuously in the full and proper sense:

The agent must also be in a certain condition when he does them; in the first place he must have knowledge, secondly he must choose the acts, and choose them for their own sakes, and thirdly his action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character.<sup>131</sup>

Allied to the emotional aspects just considered, this statement encapsulates the requirements for agential virtue that have so far been outlined. The first point highlights the need for practical wisdom, whilst the second references both the requirement that resulting action be intended, and moreover virtuously motivated. The final criterion, therefore, is that fully virtuous acts flow from a settled character trait, that they are the manifestation of a relatively permanent *disposition (hexis)*.<sup>132</sup> The stringency of this demand may be disputed, but its general force is that the intentions, motivations and emotions that characterise virtuous conduct are, at least to a significant degree, habitual; the agent can be expected to reliably possess and act upon such attributes across a range of relevant situations, and over an extended span of time.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Before tackling a dangerous fire, we might imagine the leader of the fire crew imploring his men and women that the situation they face will “demand that we control our fear, support one another, demonstrate our courage” and so on.

<sup>131</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 34.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36.

<sup>133</sup> A recent empirical challenge to this virtue ethical claim has been provided by the debate surrounding so-called ‘situationism’, which argues, via the experimental findings of behavioural psychology, that in reality human beings do not possess dispositions that are ‘robust’ enough for this purpose. See, in particular, the work of John Doris: J.M. Doris, *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behaviour*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. For some important responses see C. Miller, ‘Social Psychology and Virtue Ethics’,

Accordingly, those fine inner states that we have seen to constitute morally praiseworthy action cannot be simply occurrent, happening to just so arise in the situation at hand but without anything to secure their subsequent recurrence. The exercise of virtue, notes Hurka, of course depends on the actual attitudes that are attendant in given circumstances, but in order for such responses to be genuinely excellent they must additionally issue from a stable tendency of that individual<sup>134</sup> – they need to make important reference to the enduring nature of the agent themselves. As Aristotle claims, evaluation of behaviour must be made as part of a complete life, with recognition of the long-term ethical development of the person from which it proceeds, ‘For one swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; and so too one day, or a short time, does not make a man blessed and happy.’<sup>135</sup>

For Aristotle then, and likewise for Hursthouse and Swanton, the long-term, habitual nature of virtue is prominently affirmed.<sup>136</sup> Owing to his more restricted focus on the motives of action, dispositional elements are less pronounced in Slote’s account, but as with our earlier qualification regarding practical wisdom, it seems an analogous requirement might again be implicit within his virtue ethics. Though Slote is less concerned with the endurance of virtuous motivations in themselves, he argues against the evaluation of action on the basis of single occurrent good motives on the grounds that they are unlikely to reveal whether one is in fact acting morally ‘on the whole’ – that is, whether an agent’s ‘total’ or ‘overall’ motivation is genuinely virtuous.<sup>137</sup> He

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*The Journal of Ethics* 7(4). Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2003; R. Kamtekar, ‘Situationism and Virtue Ethics on the Content of our Character’, *Ethics* 114(3). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004. Such arguments will not be considered here owing to lack of space. Nevertheless, any force they have would presumably impact either upon virtue ethics in general, rather than any specific application to groups, politics, or the international realm; or, taking a stronger stance, we might conceive of groups as having the potential for *more* resistance to this kind of challenge, given that their character-based commitments must often be founded upon specific, lasting policies. Sandin also notes this possibility, arguing that collectives are ‘less fickle’ than many individual agents: Sandin, *op. cit.*, p. 306. Situationism’s omission from this particular inquiry can thus be reasonably justified.

<sup>134</sup> Hurka himself disagrees with this requirement, and his virtue theory, by contrast, downplays the moral significance of dispositions: Hurka, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

<sup>135</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 14. Similarly, Hursthouse deems as ‘reckless’ any attempt to attribute virtue on the basis of a single action: Hursthouse, ‘Virtue Ethics’.

<sup>136</sup> Hursthouse, ‘Virtue Ethics’; Swanton, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>137</sup> Slote, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

notes that one may have good motives towards a friend, for instance, but argues that this is insufficient evidence as to whether the motive in question appropriately expands to the interests of people more widely, which would be required for the motive to really be admirable in the sense required.<sup>138</sup> Whilst this point still ultimately concerns total motivation *at a given time*, the requirement that motives retain their admirable quality in light of differing circumstances could perhaps represent an alternative reading of a character trait.

Do collective agents have the capacity to meet such characterological demands? Can a group possess a virtuous character trait, a disposition that insures some level of stability and habituality to the occurrence of its virtuous attitudes? In the abstract, at least, there is certainly nothing to rule this out. All that would be required for this purpose is that the relevant joint commitments of a social group are suitably wide and long-lasting – that decisions to uphold virtuous attitudes, as a body, become an institutionalised part of what a particular collective takes its character to be. An enduring self-conception of this sort, a group's identification with a certain lasting nature or purpose, can perhaps be discerned experientially in such common collective utterances as "That's how we operate here" and "These are our values" – settled ways of, and reasons for, doing things, some of which may be enshrined in long-term policies and plans. Tuomela refers to such an outlook as the central 'ethos' of a group, 'the constitutive goals, values, beliefs, standards, norms, practices, and/or traditions that give the group motivating reasons for action'.<sup>139</sup>

The real challenge to the notion of collective character, nevertheless, lies not in the purely abstract case but in the specific constitution and organisation of particular groups. Whilst it may be generally conceivable for a plurality to form dispositions of virtuous attitudes, the practical realities may not always match such theoretical capacities. Some plural subjects, we have noted, may be relatively fleeting and unstructured in existence, and in this instance its members would simply lack the opportunity to develop settled patterns of behaviour and thought; their

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<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>139</sup> Tuomela, *The Philosophy of Sociality*, p. 16. Emphasis removed.

conception of the group's purpose or character may not expand beyond the matter immediately at hand. For other groups, the details and conditions of membership may prove problematic to the ascription of lasting traits.<sup>140</sup> The resolution of these more practical issues must in a large part proceed case-by-case, and, in relation to the kinds of political bodies most relevant to international relations, will form the basis of the next two chapters.

Before undertaking that more actualised investigation, however, there remain a further set of theoretical conditions that must fundamentally underpin our developed conception of group virtue. These additional constraints, though not exclusively tied to the outlook of virtue ethics, are nonetheless essential in enabling collective bodies to achieve the kind of agency we desire, and thus help to further discriminate the types of grouping towards which our ethical evaluations may be directed. Key to this enterprise is bringing in the more specific notion of *moral* agency.

### III

#### Moral Agency and Collectives

Plural subjects, as we have seen, can take many forms, differing in both their content and complexity. Some social groups may be transient and simplistic, like the collective agent that forms on performance of a one-off joint action, such as having a conversation, or the relatively anaemic plural subject that jointly commits towards upholding some merely minimal shared belief, such as “we believe we have taken a wrong turn”. Each of these examples, and countless others, indeed qualify as genuine instances of group-level attitude-ascription. And moreover, within the myriad groupings of political life – our eventual focus – there will undoubtedly be many collectives of this simplistic sort, both small and large in membership.

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<sup>140</sup> In relation to our overarching political focus, we may think here of groups whose membership regularly changes, as in the case of elections. See Chapter 5, pages 257-58.

However, analysis of groups such as these provides us with relatively little to work with morally speaking, especially if we hope to construct a substantial account of international *ethics*. Not all agents are moral agents.<sup>141</sup> The latter concept, unlike the first, requires that the actor in question is a proper subject of *moral responsibility*.<sup>142</sup> Collectives, clearly, can be *causally* responsible for certain actions – a number of bystanders, jointly intending, may together push a broken-down car to the side of the road, and such action can be attributable to the group as a whole in a non-reducible manner. Being responsible in this sense, however, does not necessitate that such a collective is likewise responsible in moral terms.

An analogy can make this point more clear. Young children can intend and act; they can also hold beliefs, have motivations and experience emotions. Accordingly they are relatively rich and complex agents, and can be causally responsible for many things.<sup>143</sup> Children, like groups, may even perform actions that we regard as having normative value – that are, as we discussed previously,<sup>144</sup> incidentally virtuous or vicious. A toddler, for instance, may angrily hit another child who has taken their favourite toy. Such action is clearly intentional and is not a mere ‘happening’ – the toddler is, on most understandings, an agent, and in this sense it is appropriate to hold them causally responsible for the action in question. To hold the child *morally* responsible, however, is to have a further evaluative reaction to such conduct – to regard them as being suitable for praise or blame, and this is something that we are standardly unwilling to extend to the actions of an agent such as this.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> V. Haksar, ‘Moral Agents’, in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Ed. E. Craig. London: Routledge, 1998.

<sup>142</sup> Given its holistic spirit, virtue ‘ethics’ often takes its remit to go beyond those areas covered by everyday understandings of ‘morality’, and especially those given particular prominence in theories that deal primarily with rights, duties and obligations. Aristotle, for instance, included ‘good wit’ and ‘friendliness’ on his list of *moral* virtues. However, many of the areas of conduct included within traditional notions of morality are equally of major significance to virtue ethical theories, and in this sense the concept and requirements of moral responsibility should not be considered alien to this approach.

<sup>143</sup> Certainly richer than some of the simplistic plural subjects we have outlined.

<sup>144</sup> See Chapter 2, pages 92-94.

<sup>145</sup> A. Eshleman, ‘Moral Responsibility’, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-responsibility/>, 18<sup>th</sup> November 2009.

Why is this the case? The reason, intuitively, that we exclude the actions of children from the remit of moral responsibility is that children have, at best, a limited and incomplete understanding of ethical requirements.<sup>146</sup> The toddler in our example does not fully grasp the concepts of right and wrong, does not consider that irascibility and vindictiveness are vicious in nature, and does not yet have the mental capacity to self-evaluate. Accordingly, if a young child cannot possibly respond to moral notions, then holding them to normative criteria that require such engagement is surely unwarranted. In practice we may still rebuke or congratulate such a child for their action, *as if* we were holding them responsible on a normative level, but such reactions on our part are usually meant as a means to ethical development and teaching, rather than a genuine ascription of moral blame or praise. The truth of our words should here not be taken too literally.

The standards on which we withhold or attribute moral responsibility are likewise applicable to groups. If not all human beings are moral agents, why must all social groups be? Though it has been argued that many groups may have – at least the potential for – the *general* sorts of inner state required for plural virtue, analogous to the case of our toddler such states – beliefs, motivations, intentions and the like – must also be of a particular sophistication if they are to qualify the agent on a normative level. What we are concerned with here are possible limitations to the *content* of these states, and the relations that exist between them. Whilst many groups, even very basic ones, will be capable of forming collective attitudes, it is not clear that every group can equally form *moral* attitudes – a belief, for instance, that something is good or bad, right or wrong – and moreover, have them interact in the kind of systematic fashion that is required to form a moral viewpoint.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Haksar, *op. cit.*

<sup>147</sup> Indeed, Gilbert treats moral beliefs as a special type of group belief, and likewise notes it as a condition for group moral responsibility: Gilbert, 'Collective Remorse', p. 123; M. Gilbert, 'The Idea of Collective Guilt', in her *Sociality and Responsibility: New Essays in Plural Subject Theory*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000, p. 144.

As was briefly intimated in the discussion of collective practical wisdom, not all groups will be constructed in a way that allows for substantive ethical dialogue amongst members.<sup>148</sup> A morally-capable social group needs to have the capability to appreciate and engage with ethical notions, to reflect on reasons,<sup>149</sup> to consider their import under variation and contingency,<sup>150</sup> and then be able to deliberate and respond to them – to have them *guide* their actions<sup>151</sup> – in the context of specific situations, doing all this in a relatively structured manner. Clearly not all social groups will be set up to do this at the collective level, even if their individual constituents are able to do so in their personal capacities.<sup>152</sup>

To illustrate, consider an accidental collection of people who have jointly committed to some relatively simplistic end or belief, such as our group of strangers pushing a broken-down car. Let us imagine that the car has foundered on a busy stretch of road during rush hour, and the clamour of passing traffic allows for only minimal communication between those providing assistance. In such a context, where intra-group discussion is ad hoc at best, there is simply no scope for proper moral dialogue to emerge; there is no clear framework in place by which group members might deliberate more complex, underlying commitments, including any potential ethical reasons for which their action should proceed.<sup>153</sup> Some participants may be helping out because they are personally charitable, others – more selfishly – because the immobilised vehicle

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Similarly, List and Pettit argue that responsibility and normative understanding requires an agent to form judgements on the relative value of options faced, to predicate desirability or rightness of them: List and Pettit, *Group Agency*, p. 158.

<sup>148</sup> See pages 149-51. As List and Pettit reinforce, more sophisticated group agents require – amongst other things – an established method of communication between members: *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>149</sup> C. Navari, 'When Agents Cannot Act: International Institutions as 'Moral Patients'', in *Can Institutions Have Responsibilities? Collective Moral Agency and International Relations*. Ed. T. Erskine. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, p. 101. See Arpaly and Schroeder, *op. cit.*, for an interesting discussion of whether deliberation about reasons is essential to rationality.

<sup>150</sup> List and Pettit, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>151</sup> O. O'Neill, 'Who Can Endeavour Peace?', in *Nuclear Weapons, Deterrence, and Disarmament*. Ed. D. Copp. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1986, p. 48.

<sup>152</sup> Again, given non-summative, individual members' moral liabilities need not equate to group-level liability.

<sup>153</sup> Such a 'casual collection', argue List and Pettit, has no 'single system of belief and desire', and is hence 'too thin' for fuller conceptions of agency to be justified: List and Pettit, *op. cit.*, pp. 34, 215 note 15. As Onora O'Neill argues, practical deliberation needs to be accessible to *actual*, and not just abstract or ideal agents: O'Neill, *loc. cit.*

is blocking their own, others still because they are concerned the crippled vehicle poses a safety hazard to other motorists. But aside from a rather trivial shared motivation – that they are pushing the car so as to move it aside, there is little capacity here for *the group* to agree and uphold a deeper normative stance.

To bring back in the specific demands of virtue ethics, the point here is not that some social groups might hold attitudes that fall short of virtue – that fail to be sufficiently fine, admirable, or responsive to circumstances – but rather that they may not even be capable of synthesising such sophisticated attitudes in the first place, or indeed integrated sets of them. To have even the potential for those *virtuous* (or indeed *vicious*) beliefs, motivations, intentions, feelings and dispositions necessary for plural virtue (or vice), and to judge and choose action on the basis of practical wisdom, a social group must at minimum have the reliable capacity to properly deal with moral considerations, and this is not something that is automatically endowed to any group that can share an attitude. If a group agent is able to engage on a moral level then it is right that we hold it to associated standards, just as we hold grown adults fit for ethical evaluation regardless of whether the content of their actual attitudes is virtuous or otherwise.<sup>154</sup> But without the foundational ability to engage with ethical concepts, to understand the possible requirements of morality and deliberate on them in deciding on a choice of action, it makes little sense to judge a plural subject – even one with a range of jointly committed attitudes – by normative values of conduct.<sup>155</sup>

What then is required for a social group, and hence political body, to be a moral agent rather than a mere causal one? What properties must the structure of a group exhibit in order to meet the standards of ethical deliberation and action necessary for collective moral responsibility, and thus

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<sup>154</sup> Haksar makes a similar point: Haksar, *op. cit.*

<sup>155</sup> As an aside, we might wonder where the accountability ultimately lies in cases where a morally *incapable* group non-reducibly intends collective action that turns out to be (virtue ethically) right or wrong. We can of course hold individual members responsible, but only in their *participatory* capacity – not for performance of the joint action itself (which, as was noted previous discussion, no member alone can perform – see pages 109-10). Accordingly, if the collective in its own right is not a moral agent, are we left with a *deficit* of moral responsibility for the collective act as whole?

to make it a credible candidate for plural virtue? As we shall see, two requirements are paramount – *rationality* and *endurance*. We will deal with these in turn.

### **Group-Level Rationality**

To deliberate, as moral responsibility requires, is to have a developed capacity to access and process information,<sup>156</sup> and to feed this into decision-making in a coherent manner.<sup>157</sup> More specifically, notes Onora O’Neill, such ‘coherence’ ultimately rests upon an agent’s ability to *integrate* its capacities to reason and act,<sup>158</sup> something that would allow for decisions to be made on a *rational* basis.<sup>159</sup> Our subject of plural virtue must therefore be a rational actor. Indeed, it is the possession of rationality – ‘an activity of the soul which follows or implies a rational principle’ – that Aristotle sees as the defining characteristic of human agency, and the basis of virtue itself.<sup>160</sup>

But whilst we might have at least an intuitive grasp of ‘rational behaviour’ when we speak of human agents, the precise criteria of rationality, and in what manner we might measure this notion when it comes to groups, requires further elucidation. Christian List and Philip Pettit plausibly suggest that our general understanding of agential rationality can in fact be broken down more specifically into three concomitant aspects: (1) attitude-to-fact standards; (2) attitude-to-action standards; and (3) attitude-to-attitude standards.<sup>161</sup>

- *Attitude-to-fact* standards concern an agent’s perceptions of the world and the representations it subsequently holds about it. To perform optimally in this respect is, by

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<sup>156</sup> T. Erskine, ‘Assigning Responsibilities to Institutional Moral Agents: The Case of States and ‘Quasi-States’’, in her (ed.) *Can Institutions Have Responsibilities? Collective Moral Agency and International Relations*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, p. 23.

<sup>157</sup> F. Harbour, ‘Collective Moral Agency and the Political Process’, in *Can Institutions Have Responsibilities? Collective Moral Agency and International Relations*. Ed. T. Erskine. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, p. 77.

<sup>158</sup> O’Neill, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

<sup>159</sup> M. Smiley, ‘Collective Responsibility’. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/collective-responsibility/>, 14<sup>th</sup> June 2010.

<sup>160</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I: 7, p. 13.

<sup>161</sup> List and Pettit, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

means of evidence, to form accurate beliefs that fit with the way things are whilst rejecting beliefs that do not. Doing this successfully rests firstly upon the capacity to effectively gather such evidence; beyond this, the accumulation of information needs to be carefully managed, and responded to in a measured and attentive manner.<sup>162</sup> Facilitating information pooling, List and Pettit argue, is a likely pre-requisite for these ‘truth-tracking’ standards to be met in the context of group agency.<sup>163</sup>

- *Attitude-to-action* standards deal, conversely, with an agent’s volitions *towards* the world, and the manner in which it seeks to affect change in it. Good functioning in this capacity entails the formation of intentions that are endorsed by agential beliefs and motivations, and likewise the dismissal of intentions that violate them.<sup>164</sup>
  
- The final strand of agential rationality concerns *attitude-to-attitude* relations. Meeting the requisite standards here involves, most essentially, that an agent’s attitudes are *consistent* with one another. Accordingly, an agent must not take mutually exclusive propositions to be true, nor hold motivations which require such propositions to be co-realised. In general terms, an agent must ensure that its set of attitudes form ‘a coherent whole’,<sup>165</sup> seeing to it that intention and motivation respect currently held beliefs about relevant propositions,<sup>166</sup> in addition to the necessary endorsement of any further attitudes that are entailed by those already held.<sup>167</sup> Reinforcing their import for moral reasoning, these standards are of particular clarity in dealing with evaluative propositions – ruling out the combination of a

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<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24. These standards appear to be a more general formulation of the earlier-discussed requirement that *virtuous* intentions must ‘live up to’ an agent’s fine motivations (see page 140). However, in the present case there is not the same requirement that the actions chosen are practically wise – an agent may meet attitude-to-action standards of rationality even if it forms intentions that aim to fulfil a vicious motive, or indeed in carrying out action that whilst aiming to conform to one of its motivations turns out to be a foolish judgement of the best means to fulfil it, owing perhaps to false information. Acting from virtue therefore imposes additional constraints upon this relationship between attitude and action.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>166</sup> Ruling out means-end failure: *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>167</sup> So-called ‘deductive closure’: *Ibid.*

belief that something is good or desirable, for instance, with attitudes that are in violation of such professed value.<sup>168</sup>

In technical language, then, we can see that the three sets of rationality requirements each cover a different ‘direction-of-fit’ concerning (here the collective analogue of) mind and world.<sup>169</sup> Attitude-to-fact standards are concerned with the direction ‘mind-to-world’; they require beliefs to fit the truth of how the world is. Attitude-to-action standards instead concern the ‘world-to-mind’ direction; they regulate intentions so that their effect on the world best fits with relevant agential ‘mental’ states. The final set of requirements, attitude-to-attitude standards, situate within neither of these standard schemas but seem instead to focus on what we might consider a ‘mind-to-mind’ direction; they secure a fit between ‘mental’ states and other ‘mental’ states. These differentiations do not preclude the presence of important connections *between* the outlined standards, however. To take one clear example, the successful digestion of evidential information – central to forming accurate beliefs about the world – will no doubt rely heavily upon subsequent attitudes being consistent with one another. In this sense, the outlined requirements perform their functions in a holistic context.

For a group to be an agent in the sense that we require, therefore, its members must be organised in a way that can satisfy each of these three important notions.<sup>170</sup> Indeed, any non-abstract collective might fall short of rational agency on account of deficiency in any – or indeed all – of these aspects. But of the three, it is the last set of standards, the maintenance of internal consistency between attitudes, which has the potential to most acutely challenge rationality at the group level. One particular collective phenomenon, which in a sustained body of literature

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<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>169</sup> Evidently the original distinction has human agents as its focus; ‘mind’ in the present context should therefore be taken to refer to the group equivalent of ‘mental states’ – i.e. the attitudes that are jointly committed to at a collective level.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

Pettit has termed the ‘discursive dilemma’,<sup>171</sup> demonstrates the potential of multi-member agents to confront a unique kind of rational pitfall, as well as the distinctive regulations that must be adhered to in order to sustain deliberative coherence.<sup>172</sup>

### *The Discursive Dilemma*

The dilemma to which Pettit refers comes to light in the context of ‘judgement aggregation’, the process by which a range of group *member* attitudes are transformed into the settled view of the collective as a whole – the latter being, in the vernacular of our account, that plural attitude towards which constituents agree to jointly commit. How the comprising members of a group come to decide upon their jointly committed attitudes has so far only been dealt with in rather conjectural terms, and whilst we have seen in that regard that there are no theoretical limitations upon possible narratives of acceptance,<sup>173</sup> when we start to look more closely at the potential workings of more formally-defined bodies, the details of such processes take on greater rational import.

Modifying a recent elucidation of the discursive dilemma to fit our broader international focus, imagine a political body that is deliberating its response to the actions of an antagonistic state, one thought to be threatening the peace and security of the surrounding region. To furnish the discussion with a real-world example, let us consider the decision confronting policymakers in the run-up to the 2003 war with Iraq, a case study we will revisit throughout subsequent chapters.<sup>174</sup>

In discerning the most appropriate policy amidst calls for military intervention, the members of this body express their judgement on three propositions, agreeing that the majority position on

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<sup>171</sup> First presented in P. Pettit, ‘Deliberative Democracy and the Discursive Dilemma’. *Philosophical Issues* 11(1). Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing, 2001. See also P. Pettit, ‘Groups with Minds of Their Own’, in *Socializing Metaphysics*. Ed. F. Schmitt. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003. The discursive dilemma represents a more general formulation of the so-called ‘doctrinal paradox’, of which the example case below moreover qualifies: see List and Pettit, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>173</sup> See pages 132-34.

<sup>174</sup> See, especially, Chapter 4, pages 220-24, 234-38 and Chapter 5 pages 263-70, 282.

each will be accepted and upheld as the collective attitude of the group itself. The propositions are:

- (1) That Iraq is in violation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1441;<sup>175</sup>
- (2) That a violation of Resolution 1441 ought to result in military action; and
- (3) That there should, on the basis of (1) and (2),<sup>176</sup> be military action against Iraq.

The decision-making proceeds as below:

	Is Iraq is in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1441?	Should a violation of Resolution 1441 result in military action?	Should there be military action against Iraq?
<b>Policymaker 1</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Policymaker 2</b>	Yes	No	No
<b>Policymaker 3</b>	No	Yes	No
<b>Majority</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>

We here have group-level irrationality. Taking the majority decision on each proposition (bottom line), the group concludes that they should not pursue military action against Iraq. Nonetheless, it is also the case that a majority of group members – and thus the group – *do* judge that Iraq is in breach of the relevant UN resolution, and moreover *do* judge that this is sufficient for military action to be required.<sup>177</sup> This is clearly inconsistent, for how can it be the case that a collective agent affirms each condition for military action to be met, and yet concurrently denies their necessary implication? In logical terms, the group judges that ‘p’, and that ‘if p then q’, and yet

<sup>175</sup> The resolution, adopted unanimously by the Security Council on 8<sup>th</sup> November 2002, declared Iraq to be in material breach of the disarmament obligations outlined in previous UN resolutions, and offered a final opportunity for compliance. Full text available at:

<http://www.un.org/depts/unmovic/new/documents/resolutions/s-res-1441.pdf>

<sup>176</sup> Presumed here to be both necessary and sufficient conditions.

<sup>177</sup> It is only *because* the members have agreed that majority voting will yield their collective attitude that this becomes the (jointly committed) group position. This is not equal to summativism about group attitudes, which was rejected in Chapter 2, for in the present case the members may still *personally* continue to believe their own individual conclusions on the propositions.

despite these premises still upholds the invalid conclusion 'not q',<sup>178</sup> a clear and basic violation of the *modus ponens* rule of inference. This result is furthermore in spite of the fact that each policymaker is, as an *individual*, completely consistent in their decision-making. As can be seen, Policymakers 1, 2 and 3 each follow a perfectly valid line of reasoning in reaching their own conclusions on the final proposition.

What the discursive dilemma thus illustrates is that when the propositions being deliberated by a group are *interconnected* (as they invariably are when deliberating normative issues), a majoritarian method of attitude formation fails to secure rationality and consistency at the collective level, even when every member is themselves perfectly rational and consistent.<sup>179</sup> Clearly then, groups unable to prevent themselves falling prey to this deliberative hazard cannot be suitable candidates for moral responsibility and agency, and are therefore not potential subjects of plural virtue. In that case, what groups *can* maintain a sufficient degree of rationality in their decision-making, and thereby remain in contention for virtue ethical evaluation? How might the problem posed by the discursive dilemma be avoided in organisational terms?

### *Restoring Consistency*

Breaking free of this quandary, List and Pettit argue, rests upon a group agent's ability to 'collectivise' reason, coming to derive its attitudes in a manner that displays autonomous, group-level 'thinking'.<sup>180</sup> The key to achieving this, they argue, is to relax the need for 'systematicity' between individual and group attitudes, under which the collective's stance on a proposition is

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<sup>178</sup> List and Pettit, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 8, 46.

Indeed, List and Pettit go further and show that *no* simple function of the individual attitudes of members is sufficient to guarantee the rationality of the group itself: *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 58, 8.

Their stronger claim that such autonomy leads groups to evolve 'minds of their own' is nevertheless disputed by Abraham Roth, who points out that the decision to collectivise reason is itself consented to by comprising members: 'Once we broaden our perspective to recognize that each individual aims to maintain rationality at the collective level, it's no longer clear that there is such a gap or discontinuity between the intentionality at the level of the individuals and of the group. Thus there would be no warrant for talk of group minds.' Given that this issue does not significantly impact upon our inquiry, we will not discuss these competing claims here. See *Ibid.*, p. 8; Roth, *op. cit.*

formulated solely on the basis of members' attitudes towards *it in particular*, and not also on their attitudes towards other propositions.<sup>181</sup> This feature is clearly adhered to in the example above, in that the agreed group judgement on each proposition is formed independently, without consideration of what the group thinks about any of the others.

How this collectivisation of reason might be achieved in practice firstly depends on whether a group's organisational structure is 'functionally explicit', or 'functionally inexplicit'.<sup>182</sup> The group in our example above is notably of the former type, in that the method by which group attitudes come to be decided upon has a clear and overt structure – members' contributions are mediated by a settled system of voting. In cases like this, where majoritarian and other simple aggregation functions have been revealed as rationally defective, group-level consistency can be sustained via the alternative implementation of a so-called 'sequential priority procedure'.<sup>183</sup> Unlike the systematic independence noted above, this kind of method allows instead for an essential *ordering* of the issues being considered, whereby some propositions are designated as 'prior' to others, and act as a constraint on subsequent reasoning.<sup>184</sup>

As a simple illustration that fits our presentation of the discursive dilemma, the policymaking group might thus choose to implement either a 'premise-based' or 'conclusion-based' priority procedure.<sup>185</sup> In the former case, the majority decisions on (1) Iraq's adherence to Resolution 1441, and (2) the consequences of its violation – the two 'premise' propositions – are considered first, and taken to form the group's settled attitudes on those issues. From this, the last proposition – the 'conclusion' of whether or not (3) responsive military action should be undertaken – is then derived from *the group's* view on those earlier premises, and not by conducting a separate majority vote:

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<sup>181</sup> List and Pettit, *op. cit.*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*

	Is Iraq in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1441?	Should a violation of Resolution 1441 result in military action?	Should there be military action against Iraq?
<b>Policymaker 1</b>	Yes	Yes	<del>Yes</del>
<b>Policymaker 2</b>	Yes	No	<del>No</del>
<b>Policymaker 3</b>	No	Yes	<del>No</del>
<b>Majority</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes*</b>

Accordingly, given that the group attitude on each premise was ‘yes’, the conclusion – in contrast to the original case – is now also ‘yes’. The group judges that Iraq is in violation of Resolution 1441 and judges that any such violation is sufficient grounds for military intervention; given this, it *does* conclude that military action should be initiated. This result *is* consistent: the group’s reasoning is of the *modus ponens* form ‘p’, ‘if p then q’, therefore ‘q’, and thus collective attitude-to-attitude rationality is maintained.

The alternative option for sequential prioritisation is for the group to instead adopt a ‘conclusion-based’ procedure, which in contrast holds the group’s majority decision on the final proposition as prior, and so dismisses any collective attitude formation towards either of the premises. The majority decision on the conclusion is now the constraining factor, and that which is upheld first and foremost by the group. Given that different combinations of premise-judgements could produce this conclusion (in the present example: no, no / yes, no / no, yes), the content of these now-subsequent propositions are left indeterminate, and the group forms no collective opinion on them – ‘accepting neither it nor its negation’ in each instance:<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*

	Is Iraq in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1441?	Should a violation of Resolution 1441 result in military action?	Should there be military action against Iraq?
<b>Policymaker 1</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Policymaker 2</b>	Yes	No	No
<b>Policymaker 3</b>	No	Yes	No
<b>Majority</b>			<b>No*</b>

As the majority decision on the concluding proposition was ‘no’, therefore, the group judges solely that military action against Iraq ought not to be undertaken: it concludes that ‘not q’. Whilst this approach likewise maintains consistency, and steers clear of invalid reasoning, it nevertheless does so in a rather eliminative fashion, by removing any potentially-conflicting propositions from the remit of the collective’s discernment. It therefore reduces the deliberative scope of our plural agent, and leads to the production of incomplete group attitudes.<sup>187</sup> This conclusion is undesirable in cases where the *reasons for* some ultimate judgement are significant, perhaps as a means of explaining a decision to non-members; or, in relation to our virtue ethical focus, in order for joint intentions to be the product of specific collective motivations. Depending on the particular distribution of individual judgements, our conclusion-based policymaking group will ultimately affirm that Iraq either is or is not liable for military intervention, and yet it will not form a joint attitude on *why* that particular conclusion has been reached. In light of the actual historical circumstances of the example case this kind of truncated attitudinal outcome appears particularly unsatisfying, with the justification and motivation for intervention in Iraq being a point of major political and legal controversy.

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<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.* List and Pettit argue that such attitude-suspension tends to be a feature of the decision-making of the UN Security Council and the EU Council of Ministers: *Ibid.*, p. 53.

Once the conclusion is settled, the group is of course technically free to go back and aggregate its members’ original judgements on the premises. However, to do so simply re-exposes the group to the risk of attitudinal inconsistency and irrationality.

This consequence of the conclusion-based priority procedure can prove particularly problematic in related cases of majoritarian *preference* aggregation,<sup>188</sup> which although focused on a different type of attitude are vulnerable to the same issues of inconsistency exposed by the judgement-centred discursive dilemma. To consider very briefly, imagine our political body is instead deliberating the best response to its country’s negative balance of trade. The members of the policymaking group this time express their *preferences* on three interconnected propositions, agreeing that the majority position on each will form the jointly-committed intention of the group itself. The propositions are:

- (1) That exports should be increased;
- (2) That imports should be decreased; and
- (3) That the trade deficit should be reduced, on the basis of either (1) or (2).<sup>189</sup>

The decision-making proceeds as below:

	Increase exports?	Decrease imports?	Reduce trade deficit?
<b>Policymaker 1</b>	Yes	No	Yes
<b>Policymaker 2</b>	No	Yes	Yes
<b>Policymaker 3</b>	No	No	No
<b>Majority</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes</b>

Taking the majority preferences on each proposition, we can once more note a clear inconsistency between the agreed group-level attitudes, and thus collective irrationality. The group jointly intends to reduce the trade deficit, achievable only by an increase in exports or a decrease in imports. Nonetheless the group does *not* intend to increase exports and equally does *not* intend to decrease imports. This is not a coherent set of attitudes to uphold; the collective

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<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>189</sup> Presumed for simplicity to be exhaustive and mutually exclusive policy options for reducing the trade deficit. Increasing exports whilst *also* decreasing imports is here taken to be politically or economically unviable – it would result in insufficient produce for the domestic population, we might imagine.

does not intend to carry out either policy option and yet concomitantly intends that one of the options is carried out. Logically, the group intends that ‘not p’ and that ‘not q’, but at the same time contradictorily intends ‘p or q’. Applying the premise-based procedure to this case would ‘lock in’ the majority’s rejection of both individual propositions concerning exports and imports, and would resultantly produce a valid, negative group preference (‘not (p or q)’) towards the ultimate question of reducing the trade deficit (i.e. group preferences no, no, therefore no\*).

Alternatively, applying the conclusion-based procedure would result in the following outcome:

	Increase exports?	Decrease imports?	Reduce trade deficit?
<b>Policymaker 1</b>	Yes	No	Yes
<b>Policymaker 2</b>	No	Yes	Yes
<b>Policymaker 3</b>	No	No	No
<b>Majority</b>			<b>Yes*</b>

The abridged attitude formation evident in the previous, judgement-centred Iraq example here takes on added import, for in this case it is not simply justifying reasons or motives that are absent from decision-making but the very *means* by which the concluding attitude is to be realised. This result is a particularly debilitating one; the group intends to reduce its country’s trade deficit, but has not formed an attitude on how to do so. In avoiding inconsistency a kind of deliberative stalemate has thus been reached, and given that we know there is not a majority backing for either of the policy options, not one that can be easily resolved on the basis of expressed member preferences.

On reaching this point of deadlock, perhaps the only way the group could move forwards with its decision-making would be to subsequently conduct a separate, second round of voting on the original premise propositions, with individual members this time expressing their preferences *in light of* the settled group-level conclusion. The collective intention for the trade deficit to be reduced would in this context constrain the field of their individual decisions to a straight-up

choice between the two policy options, without the possibility of a 'no' vote on each.<sup>190</sup> With cases of *judgement* aggregation this second stage appears less plausible, however, for as we noted earlier it is somewhat abnormal – and indeed, seemingly disingenuous – for an agent to decide on its motivations only after deciding on its intentions.<sup>191</sup> Settling upon a course of action 'no matter what', regardless of deliberation of justifying factors, seems to fly in the face of sincere moral consideration.

Whilst we may therefore prefer the 'premise-based' sequential priority procedure as a means of resolving such aggregation problems, the fact that the 'conclusion-based' alternative can lead to practical impasse and attitudinal disordering is a good point on which to bring in the earlier-forecast notion of 'functionally *inexplicit*' groups. The possibility of 'missing' attitudes and decision-making standoff demonstrates why in real life such rigid and restrictive processes of group deliberation, 'mechanical' in their operation and enactment, are not commonly utilised.<sup>192</sup> Furthermore, highlight List and Pettit, it may not always be the case that a neat division between premises and conclusions can be made amongst propositions; nor might such a division be uniform across all members, for 'the same proposition may figure as fundamental in one person's reasoning and as derivative in that of another'.<sup>193</sup> The latter is made all the more likely by the possibility that members may even adjust the relative importance of propositions as the process of deliberation ensues, coming to change their attitudes on earlier-settled issues as their implications for future choices becomes clear.<sup>194</sup>

Deliberative structures exhibiting this kind of inflexibility are thus poorly suited to fulfil the necessary operations of many groups. Indeed, Tuomela argues that concentrating on voting-based cases like these fails to appreciate the genuine group processes of discussion, negotiation

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<sup>190</sup> In an evenly-numbered group this may still not produce a decisive majority, we ought to qualify.

<sup>191</sup> See page 140.

<sup>192</sup> List and Pettit, *op. cit.*, pp. 60-61.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*

and bargaining – processes through which compromise attitudes can be generated that break the deadlock of first-choice divisions.<sup>195</sup> Consequently, many groups are built around less formal modes of practical reflection, in which the role of a prescribed decision-making procedure is instead fulfilled by a more heuristic and free flowing style of deliberative intercourse, with the group determining ‘the way to go on’ on a proposition to proposition basis.<sup>196</sup>

One suitable foundation for such functionally inexplicit reasoning might be the Rawlsian notion of ‘reflective equilibrium’, note List and Pettit, whereby group members engage in a to-and-fro process of attitude alteration, ‘going back and forth between different mutually inconsistent judgements... so as to decide where to adjust in order to achieve consistency’.<sup>197</sup> Here there are no defined rules of group attitude formation, but instead the freedom to amend the judgements and preferences of the collective wherever it is deemed most appropriate in a given context, decided on the basis of open discussion and consideration between members.<sup>198</sup>

What is essential for this more pragmatic, practically advantageous, mode of ‘collectivising reason’ to get off the ground is the availability of *feedback* between the group and individual level; the capacity for members to appreciate and interact with the body of collective attitudes they are involved in creating.<sup>199</sup> Unlike in a prioritised voting situation, where the group’s pursuit of rationality is to some degree ‘taken out of the hands’ of constituents’ considerations, the kind of self-regulation required for functionally inexplicit group structures necessitates that members take an active and vigilant view on the collective’s rational processing, intentionally generating the kind of checks that can guard against potential failures.<sup>200</sup> Such oversight may involve the

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<sup>195</sup> Tuomela, ‘The We-Mode and the I-Mode’, p. 126 Note 7.

<sup>196</sup> List and Pettit, *loc. cit.*

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*

List and Pettit give the more specific illustration of a ‘straw-vote’ practice: ‘If the attitude formed is not consistent with these [previously formed] attitudes, consider all the different possible ways in which previously formed attitudes or the new attitude could be revised so as to restore consistency. Take a vote under a suitable procedure, or deliberate, on which of the possible revisions to make.’ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 61-62.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 62, 178.

formation of second-order beliefs about those propositions being jointly endorsed – that is, beliefs *about* those propositions and their total consistency, in addition to any first-order judgements on their content.<sup>201</sup> Believing a progression of attitudes to violate the standards of rationality, as in the cases above, group members may then move to reconsider their original set of attitudes and modify them accordingly.<sup>202</sup>

Querying propositional consistency, whether in technical terminology or not,<sup>203</sup> can therefore be an effective means by which to supervise – and indeed augment – the coherence of group deliberation, safeguarding the attitude-to-attitude rationality of its decision-making output.<sup>204</sup> So long as this kind of second-order analysis is conducted openly, and members uphold together (i.e. jointly commit) that consistency concerns are the agreed reason for modifying other collective attitudes,<sup>205</sup> then it is accurate to consider any such processes of regulation to be those of the group as a whole, and a demonstration of strong rationality on the part of the plural agent itself. As List and Pettit assert, ‘if group members address such [higher-order] issues together – and in common awareness of doing so – then in effect the group addresses them. And when the group adjusts in order to avoid the inconsistency, this is naturally explained as a case of the group reasoning its way out of the difficulty’.<sup>206</sup>

We have now more fully outlined the first important condition for group-level moral agency. Groups must be able to exhibit rationality in a broad sense:<sup>207</sup> in the relation of their attitudes to belief, to action, and to other attitudes themselves. Upholding rational standards in the last

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<sup>201</sup> List and Pettit refer to these higher-order attitudes as ‘metalanguage’ beliefs: *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>203</sup> As in the form “Is ‘not-p, not-q, therefore p or q’ valid?”

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>205</sup> For instance, a (perhaps even implicit) commitment to the Rawlsian methodology just outlined.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>207</sup> It should be stressed that such agency is here being tied to the *capacity* for group rationality, rather than whether rational deliberation in fact occurs in joint decision-making. After all, most human beings are clearly capable of rational thought, but this does not preclude them acting irrationally in their actual lives. The latter does not absolve them of liability for moral praise or blame any more than a person who refuses to consider the ethical consequences of their actions. Similarly, whether a collective capable of securing attitudinal consistency actually implements necessary processes in its deliberation is immaterial to its status as a morally qualified agent.

respect is founded upon the maintenance of deliberative consistency, which is not guaranteed by the validity of individual members' reasoning. Instead, a coherent group agent must have the capacity to scrutinise its commitments at the collective level, engaging with its range of attitudes in a manner that allows them to determine or confine its positions on other propositions. Let us now move on to the remaining condition of moral responsibility, before ultimately assessing which political bodies might meet our accumulated requirements.

### **An Enduring Subject**

The second relevant requirement of collective moral agency, at least in the sense of normative expedience, is that of an *enduring subject* of responsibility.<sup>208</sup> Whilst the preceding conditions of rationality could conceivably be applied to a single instance of collective decision-making, with standards like attitudinal consistency being measured only in reference to the kind of 'snapshot' depicted in our policymakers' votes, we intuitively think that scrutiny of agents and their attitudes can also extend temporally. Indeed, the intuition that moral agency and responsibility in some sense persist underwrites much of the evaluation and prescription we direct towards the conduct of human beings. We criticise people for the past bad actions they have performed and attempt to dissuade them from performing similar deeds in the future. In doing so, we presuppose that the entity being censured or praised is *the same* entity as that which produced a previous action, and likewise that which has the potential to act for better or worse in instances yet to come.

In order to be part of the very practice of meaningful normative evaluation, a collective moral agent must therefore be the kind of grouping whose unified actions and attitudes can be tracked over occasion and circumstance, 'identifiable over time by the way its beliefs and desires evolve'.<sup>209</sup> The endurance of an intentional actor is an essential feature of what it is to be a member of the moral community, for it to make sense to hold such an entity to account, and to

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<sup>208</sup> Haksar, *op. cit.*

<sup>209</sup> List and Pettit, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

have claims against it. If an agent is momentary, or expires with the fulfilment of some single end, these practices are severely curtailed. Although we can still morally assess the joint conduct that was at some time and place performed by a collective, thinking such things as “those people were responsible”, “what they did there was wrong”, and “other groups should avoid those kinds of actions”, such evaluations are much less useful in relation to the broader role of accountability within ethical discourse.

Tied to our understanding and apportioning of moral responsibility, thinks Erskine, is the assignment of ‘retrospective blame and prospective burdens’ to an agential target:<sup>210</sup> the idea that a responsible actor remains answerable for previous conduct, in some cases perhaps obligated to redress past transgressions, or at minimum impelled to change its intentional outlook so as to avoid repeating them. If a collective agent does not endure, however, then what is it that we are appraising for actions performed? What is the target towards which we deploy our moral language if the author of that action no longer exists in an agential capacity? What hope have we for guiding “its” future actions, or dispensing punishment for “its” past ones? Our most developed conception of a moral agent is one that is capable of *sustained* ethical responsibility, and what this requires is a robust connection both to earlier deeds and possible later ones – as David Wiggins puts it, ‘a past accessible in experience-memory and a future accessible in intention’.<sup>211</sup>

The passing group of strangers jointly pushing a broken-down car to the side of the road is unsuitable for moral agency not solely because its underdeveloped structure does not provide for rational moral deliberation, but moreover because the collective lacks agential continuance – it is merely a ‘one-shot’ entity, one which by its very nature will subsequently disband. Whilst the individual members carry on operating in a personal sense after their jointly intended action has

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<sup>210</sup> T. Erskine, ‘Introduction: Making Sense of Responsibility in International Relations – Key Questions and Concepts’, in her (ed.) *Can Institutions Have Responsibilities? Collective Moral Agency and International Relations*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, p. 8.

<sup>211</sup> D. Wiggins, *Sameness and Substance*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1980, p. 171.

been completed, their agential unity as a group – and thus any attendant responsibility – lasts only as long as the joint commitment between them persists. Beyond this, whilst we can still pick out the set of people who at that time and circumstance formed and acted as a plural subject, their incorporation as a *social* group, as something that might be called to account or held liable for its conduct, does not outlive the occasion of action, and this transience would appear to disqualify groups like this from the sensible attribution of moral agency.<sup>212</sup>

We have accordingly outlined the second major condition of collective moral agency: for a group to be the potential subject of meaningful ethical responsibility it must, to an extent that can warrant relevant normative practices, endure. Adding reinforcement to the above points, this requirement proves coextensive with many of the particular demands of our virtue ethical focus, which not only places a strong general emphasis upon the development of agents over time, but as we have already seen relies on the existence of durable and cross-situational behaviour patterns for the reliable ascription of character traits. What the necessary scope of this agential persistence must be will depend upon the context of our normative evaluation, and the particular actions towards which we are seeking liability. In that vein, let us now consider our central focus of global politics, and attempt to find a collective body that can live up to the numerous conditions we have established.

### **Chapter Conclusion**

The overarching question of this chapter and the last was whether, in theoretical terms, a collective body could be the coherent subject of virtue ethical concepts and evaluation. Our answer to this enquiry has been a positive one. In response to the limited success of those theories discussed in Chapter 2, a shift away from individualism moved the present investigation towards the Plural Subject Model of Margaret Gilbert, which, via a central phenomenon of joint commitment, allows for attitudinal states to be non-reducibly held by collectives themselves. Not

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<sup>212</sup> Erskine, 'Assigning Responsibilities to Institutional Moral Agents', p. 22.

only was this approach found to provide a more plausible and coherent reading of joint intention, but moreover, its apparatus makes possible the expansion of virtue ethical possibilities to include important group-level understandings of motivation, practical wisdom, emotion and disposition. The operation of these elements on the collective plane, allied to an important set of conditions for group-level moral agency, makes it conceivable that group entities can indeed act from virtue and vice in their fullest sense, and thus justifies them being subject to virtue ethical standards and appraisal in their own right.

With these conclusions in hand, we must now move beyond a general critique of group agency and evaluate the virtue ethical prospects of actual collectives. Accordingly, the chapters that follow will investigate whether the model of plural virtue here developed might be successfully applied to important political entities within global affairs.

# 4

## **CHAPTER FOUR: A Case Study for Political Virtue (Part I)**

The previous chapter defended a general account of social groups that was able to accommodate the ascription of virtue ethical concepts at a level above that of mere individuals. Indeed, it has been shown that collective entities, properly conceived, have the potential to be genuine subjects of virtue ethical evaluations in their own, non-reducible right. In reaching this conclusion, we have established that groups *in theory* can go some way to resembling the depth and complexity of individual human agents, possessing their own group-level equivalents of intention, motivation, judgement, affection, and disposition. We have also noted the capacity of collectives to exhibit the more general features necessary for sustained moral liability. As such, the anatomy of an enduring, virtuous 'plural subject' will likely exhibit multiple and varied joint attitudinal commitments amongst comprising members, an important degree of epistemic interplay between these individuals, and the maintenance of rational patterns of deliberation within collective decision-making.

Having established these important conceptual conclusions, it is now appropriate to tie back the theoretical discussions of previous sections to our central inquiry, and to take the next step in moving from theory to practice. Accordingly, this chapter will investigate the prospects of virtue-capable social groups existing in reality; specifically, the reality of modern global politics – to discern whether or not the notion of a virtuous plural subject can find real-world application in relation to the kinds of political body relevant to international interaction. The chapter begins by noting the primacy of the state as a foundational focus for analysis, and proceeds to interrogate the possible agential catchment of state-based character evaluations. Situating this enquiry within the context of an actual political system, the hierarchy of UK parliamentary democracy is used as an illustrative case study by which to probe the application of the developed philosophical model. In the course of this chapter’s investigation, it is argued that the constructed account of collective virtue can be plausibly applied at the level of the cabinet. Chapter 5 then expands this analysis to the levels of government, parliament, and ultimately state.

## I

### Agency in International Relations

We are now at a point in our inquiry where we can begin to make substantial, tangible claims about the actual practice of political decision-making. The previous chapters, securing the theoretic building blocks of our account, have built up a detailed profile of the kind of group capable of shared virtue. Such a collective must be identifiable as an agent over time, have an organisational structure able to maintain group-level rationality, and possess the ability to form attitudes on sophisticated moral propositions, doing so in light of the amalgamation of individual perceptions. In the presence of these enabling conditions, the constituting members of such a group must jointly commit to upholding a range of fine attitudinal qualities: motivational, intentional, and affective. In such a case, we can accurately describe a group as virtuous (or in

cases of deficiency, vicious) in its own right, and apt for associated evaluations. We must now add definite form to this silhouette by transplanting these elements into the political context.

Chapter 2 began with an array of sentences that each assigned an agential property to a collective body in the international realm: “Belgium mounted a courageous defence of its territory in 1914”; “The international community’s humanitarian response was compassionately motivated”; and so on. As forecasted, we have so far dealt substantially with the content of these statements whilst holding the subject reference relatively abstract. We are consequently in a position to justifiably say that *a group* may have acted courageously, or that ‘we are compassionately motivated’, provided certain conditions are fulfilled, but the applicability of *specific* collectives as the subject of these attributions remains relatively unexamined. We are thus in need of further extensional analysis of a plural reference in relation to the context at hand. There are many group entities within international relations – which are most demanding of our moral scrutiny, and which, if any, might credibly be plural subjects of the kind our virtue ethical analysis requires?

### **Actors in Global Affairs**

The first stage of this enterprise lies mainly outside of philosophical analysis, and concerns the largely empirical question of the most important actors in global affairs. Are states,<sup>1</sup> as traditionally upheld, the fulcra of greatest import on the global political stage, or can other types of international entity be thought to have a significant influence on the proceedings of this

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<sup>1</sup> David Miller argues that an important distinction ought to be made between ‘states’ and ‘nations’, arguing that the latter (‘a community of people who share an identity and a public culture’) can persist either without the former (consisting of ‘formal organisation’ and ‘specific institutions’), or indeed throughout a number of them: ‘we can speak of the German nation, for instance, persisting through the Weimar Republic, the Nazi regime, the Federal Republic and the German Democratic Republic’: D. Miller, ‘Holding Nations Responsible’. *Ethics* 114(2). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004, p. 243. This distinction appears to have plausibility, and indeed may be reconcilable with the ultimate agential conclusions of this chapter and the next. Nevertheless, for the purposes of simplicity these two concepts will here be largely amalgamated, and the state – initially at least – taken to potentially encompass both a political infrastructure *and* the people who identify themselves as an associated political community. See the upcoming discussion.

realm?<sup>2</sup> Included amongst such alternative actors might be inter-state bodies like the United Nations (UN), the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) or the European Union (EU); perhaps inter-governmental economic institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), or the 'G8' and 'G20' economic groups. Likewise, attention might also be given to the power of prominent non-state entities that operate internationally – the World Bank for instance, certain large transnational corporations, and possibly world religious organisations.<sup>3</sup>

This particular question represents a large and ongoing area of debate within International Relations theory, one that has found particular relevance in relation to regional integration, notions of globalisation and the development of cross-border identity. Yet without disputing the importance of these inquiries, their impact upon the appropriate focus of *our* investigation, in the absence of what would be strikingly counterintuitive conclusions, can be manageably constrained. Even if descriptive evidence suggests that entities beyond the state can at times have an important influence on international activity, it seems strongly evident that states must at minimum remain the primary and most important points of reference.<sup>4</sup>

The most important treaties in global politics regulate relations between states; the vast majority of military power operates under the authority of states; agreements on trade, environmental policy and humanitarian assistance require the backing of states. Moreover, an important set of those alternative bodies noted above are themselves constituted by the governments of states. It seems then that a focus on state relations must form the backbone of any analysis of international collectives. Even if more philosophical questions of agency might eventually be expanded to entities beyond this focus, it would necessarily constitute an additional enterprise to

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<sup>2</sup> The Cosmopolitan-Communitarian Debate, outlined in Chapter 1, was contrastingly concerned with the issue of the most appropriate moral *patient* in international relations, not the most appropriate *agent*.

<sup>3</sup> On a more limited scale, private military contractors could potentially have an influence.

Nicholas Rengger also lists social movements amongst this list of 'private actors': N. Rengger, 'On 'Good Global Governance', Institutional Design, and the Practices of Moral Agency', in *Can Institutions Have Responsibilities?: Collective Moral Agency and International Relations*. Ed. T. Erskine. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, p. 208.

<sup>4</sup> Erskine, 'Introduction', p. 2.

the essential preliminary investigation of the former. Any account that ignored the central power of states in the international realm would be a severely deficient one.<sup>5</sup>

### **States as Collectives**

The state, then, must surely be the starting point for our investigation. Nevertheless, such a focus is still some way from providing us with a clear and settled target for virtue ethical scrutiny. Whilst in casual discourse we have a pretty intuitive understanding of states ‘doing’ things – the US invading Panama, India signing a trade deal with Pakistan, Japan and South Korea forming a regional alliance – it is less clear, philosophically speaking, the precise makeup of the entities we here evaluate. The term ‘state’ is itself a nuanced one, and can potentially refer to a number of related but distinct things – a geographical territory and its inhabitants, a sovereign political community, a centralised government, an international legal entity, or the institutions and infrastructure of a political system. Not all of these options will be suitable for agential analysis.

Moreover, it is not always clear that our actual usage of state names conforms to any exact definitional constraints. In some contexts we employ such names to refer in a wide sense to a country as a whole, as in “Germany still feels much regret over its Nazi past” or “the State of Israel reserves the right to defend itself”. In other contexts, however, we seemingly mean our reference to the state to be more limited in catchment, and to refer only to political bodies *within* that country, most often its government – as in “the Chinese state is fearful of internal dissidence”.<sup>6</sup> Our practical patterns of reference – to states as the subjects of actions and attitudes – can therefore be variable in their precision, and may not always reflect the strict meaning of what is being implied by an utterance. Whilst it is always important to bear such real-world usage in mind, and for it to serve as a useful check on more theoretical analysis, our main

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<sup>5</sup> As Christian Barry notes, ‘the importance of globalization is sometimes exaggerated by those who suggest that nation states have lost or are about to lose their power to govern.’ C. Barry, ‘Global Justice: Aims, Arrangements, and Responsibilities’, in *Can Institutions Have Responsibilities? Collective Moral Agency and International Relations*. Ed. T Erskine. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, p. 227.

<sup>6</sup> As was noted in Chapter 2, semantic uncertainty of this sort is particularly likely when the implied summative (distributive) or non-summative meaning of such ascriptions remains open to question.

concern here must instead be a philosophically cogent interpretation of our intuitive statements about agency.<sup>7</sup>

What then, in terms of *agency*, do we actually refer to when we say, for instance, that 'France' intends something?<sup>8</sup> We can accept that states are the primary 'actors' in international politics, in the same way that banks may be the most important actors in the financial markets, or tribes the most important actors in a traditional society. But beyond linguistic reference this tells us little about their genuine attitudinal capacities, or the agential level on which they should be understood to operate, and hence be appropriately appraised. When we say that 'France' intends, non-distributively, are we making a shared attitudinal claim about its population of sixty-six million? About those French citizens that vote in national elections? Those that support the ruling political party? Those that agree with a particular policy? The members of the French parliament? The ministers of the French executive? Can we find a suitable plural subject amongst these possibilities that could sustain the claim that states or some representative body within them are genuinely collective virtue ethical agents, or must our evaluation ultimately reduce to the personal characteristics of individual political office holders – that is, the Prime Minister currently in office?<sup>9</sup>

To emphasise the importance of this question, why might we in the first place desire a level of moral evaluation that goes beyond individual statespeople? The most basic reason is that this would seem to match many of our intuitive conceptions of 'state' conduct in modern international relations. Though we may on occasion draw a strong connection between the policies and behaviour of a state and a particular political figure – that Ronald Reagan, for instance, was a major driving force behind the end of *détente* with the Soviet Union – at the same

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<sup>7</sup> Onora O'Neill argues that our blaming 'international public opinion', for instance, proves to be an inaccurate ascription of agency: O'Neill, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

<sup>8</sup> In conceptual terms, at least.

<sup>9</sup> Miller notes that the reduction of responsibility for collective action to that of individuals is a common feature within certain strands of liberalism: D. Miller, 'Holding Nations Responsible', p. 242.

time we most often consider conduct at the national level to be more than a matter of the personal liability of a single human being; especially so when we are dealing with representative democracies.<sup>10</sup> Short of the Hobbesian notion of an absolute monarch as the sovereign embodiment of a nation at large, or Louis XIV's famed declaration that "L'état, c'est moi", we tend to think of state-level policy and action as something that is, to some degree, collective – the product of 'many hands'.<sup>11</sup>

States are, after all, understood to be what Peter French seminally terms 'conglomerate' rather than mere 'aggregative' collectivities – they have a robust corporate identity that is compatible with variation in the individual identities that constitute it over time.<sup>12</sup> The exact populations of most countries change by the minute, and yet we do not tend to think that 'Russia' or 'Spain' or 'Algeria' are entities that persist only momentarily and are subsequently replaced with the addition or loss of an individual citizen.<sup>13</sup> In a similar vein, the idea that the *agential* identity of states could be tied to singular individuals, and that all liability might be exhausted with a change in leader, seems strongly at odds with both intuition and practice. In agential terms, do we really want to uphold that the 'United States of America' effectively became a new international actor with the assassination of President Kennedy and inauguration of President Johnson?

On the contrary, states – however we ultimately understand the reference of the term, and perhaps *in addition* to the personal accountability of their leaders – are in most cases held to be

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<sup>10</sup> Perhaps in the case of dictatorships this is less of a jump – the Kim dynasty of North Korea is a case in point. But it is still not always clear that this one person *is* the agential state entity; it could alternatively be that they just hold a greater personal influence over state action than actually constituting it.

<sup>11</sup> Harbour, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

The Hobbesian case is more properly an instance of a 'corporately empowered individual', according to List and Pettit, a 'degenerate' group agent consisting of a spokesperson and their functionaries: List and Pettit, *op. cit.*, pp. 8, 76.

<sup>12</sup> French, *op. cit.*, p. 13. Aggregate collectivities are, by contrast, 'merely a collection of people', groups for which a change in membership always entails a change in identity: *Ibid.*, p. 5. 'Those five people standing at the bus stop', for instance, refers to a specific set of individuals; if one of those individuals leaves and is replaced by another, the five *now* standing at the bus stop have a different group identity.

<sup>13</sup> See French's discussion of the 'Gulf Oil Corporation', *Ibid.*, p. 27. As French more fully identifies, such conglomerate group names are, in Saul Kripke's sense, 'rigid designators' – picking out the same thing in all possible worlds in which that thing exists: *Ibid.*, p. 29. Kripke's original discussion can be found in S. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980.

responsible for conduct in their own right, and as an addendum to this in some cases continue to hold each other to account for actions or policies that pre-date any current membership.<sup>14</sup> As an extreme example, we might cite the blame and ill feeling still displayed by China towards Britain for the latter's imperial deeds in the Nineteenth Century.<sup>15</sup> Despite the fact that in this case political leaders, governments, and indeed entire populations have long since changed on both sides, there is a sense in which moral disapprobation continues to be attached to former actions done in the name of the state.

The legitimacy of upholding normative censure over a period such as this remains to be seen, but the fact that it does occur in practice is an important phenomenon that is worthy of investigation. More generally, the fact that we are at times willing to entertain the assessment of states in the longer term, and over a span of time that may exceed that of a particular political incumbency, demonstrates an important rationale for exploring higher-level forms of moral scrutiny, and the potential for political groupings themselves to be the genuine subjects of virtue ethical evaluation.

### **Plural Virtue and Political Bodies**

So can states possess the kind of agency towards which virtue ethical analysis might be directed? Can states really act and intend, hold motivations, demonstrate judgement, emotion and disposition, and thus conceivably have characters in their own right? Can (then-US Secretary of State) Hilary Clinton's likening of North Korea to an 'unruly child', for instance, go beyond mere rhetorical resonance and instead be a literal and coherent evaluation of *actual* character traits possessed by that international entity? <sup>16</sup> Furthermore, can it be accurate to consider states as

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<sup>14</sup> Indeed, notes Miller, this 'holding to account' may even extend to the seeking of apology or even reparation for past deeds. If collective responsibility is not a defensible concept, he argues, such practices would make little sense: D. Miller, 'Holding Nations Responsible', pp. 241-2.

<sup>15</sup> Most notably the forcible opening of Chinese markets via the Opium Wars, which are seen as having heralded in the former's so-called 'century of humiliation' (百年國恥).

<sup>16</sup> T. Zakaria, 'Clinton likens North Korea to unruly children', *Reuters Online*, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2009/07/20/us-korea-north-clinton-idUSTRE56J2FV20090720>, July 20<sup>th</sup> 2009.

appropriate and enduring targets for our normative scrutiny, able to consider and engage with requisite ethical concepts under a persisting moral identity?

As alluded to, our answer to these questions will rest upon how successfully we can transfer our *theoretical* model of group virtue, developed in the foregoing chapter, to actual state conditions. Where might our model of a rich and multifaceted plural subject, potentially virtuous, fit into the architecture of political decision-making? As Frances Harbour notes, state-level action is often publicly justified in moral terms, and furthermore national behaviour and policy are at times even adjusted in light of moral criticism.<sup>17</sup> There is, therefore, clearly some level of moral thinking going on when states ‘do’ things, but this alone does not guarantee that it is the state ‘itself’, understood in the most expansive, holistic sense, which may be operating as a moral – and thus possibly virtuous or vicious – agent.

Accordingly, which collectives relevant to state agency are able to meet the important range of requirements that have been outlined? Which have the appropriate supporting framework that if so animated might exhibit virtue (or vice) in a full and collective sense? In seeking to realise these attributes we are presented with a tension between smaller, more highly structured political bodies, where there is easy common knowledge and discourse amongst members, and larger, more general political groupings, which balance their abiding identity against a wider and less organised membership, one that may not be personally known to each other.<sup>18</sup> As a sensible middle ground, then, let us take the general notion of a ‘government’ as our starting point, and see in which direction our subsequent analysis takes us. Indeed, to touch base with practical usage, just as we might sometimes say that countries ‘do’ things, it is an equally common occurrence for international conduct to be attributed to the agency of states’ central authorities:

*“Washington intends to reduce troop numbers by the end of the year.”*

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<sup>17</sup> Harbour, *op. cit.*, p. 76. Or at least ostensibly so, if we take the claims of realism to be all-encompassing.

<sup>18</sup> See List and Pettit on larger groups: List and Pettit, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

*“Ankara reacted angrily to the French decision.”*

In such cases capitals serve as metonyms for particular national administrations. But looking further, we again encounter a degree of vagueness in such ascriptions. Just as we earlier noted that ‘state’ references are potentially variable in their catchment, it is likewise the case that explicit or implicit reference to a ‘government’ is open to variable interpretations. In a manner that may be influenced by the details of a particular political system, at times the term is taken to refer to all branches – executive, legislative and judicial<sup>19</sup> – of state organisation, whilst in others the reference is more limited shorthand solely for the first of these elements.<sup>20</sup> For ease of explanation then, it seems expedient to focus our attention on the particulars of a specified political system. Equally, a comprehensive treatment of multitudinous political configurations lies beyond the foundational scope of the present project, the main aim of which is to demonstrate the general structure and plausibility of a virtue-based mode of international ethical discourse.

## II

### The British Cabinet

Given the above points, we will concentrate our present analysis on the Westminster system of parliamentary democracy, the formative example of which is the governance of the United Kingdom. Under such a system, when bicameral, the political party in power is that which holds a majority of elected representatives in the lower chamber of parliament,<sup>21</sup> which in the British case corresponds to MPs in the House of Commons.<sup>22</sup> The ‘government’ under this structure

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<sup>19</sup> And sometimes even extending to the bureaucratic infrastructure of governance, i.e. the civil service.

<sup>20</sup> Where there is indeed a separation of powers. These distinctions may collapse in a dictatorship.

<sup>21</sup> For simplicity, we are ignoring the possibility of coalition governments.

<sup>22</sup> In such a multicameral system the Commons is therefore understood to be the ‘responsible house’, the chamber whose confidence must be maintained in order for an administration to remain in power. Support of the upper house, the House of Lords, is desirable in order for legislation not to be delayed, but is not essential for it to be passed. For our purposes, this justifiably allows us to treat the upper chamber of the legislature, and indeed the legal oversight of the judiciary, as *external* constraints on the main legislative powers of the lower house, and they can thus be excluded from our main agential analysis.

refers to the executive branch, consisting of an assemblage of appointed Ministers drawn from the party's parliamentary membership. The most senior of these Ministers go on to form the Cabinet, the government's supreme decision-making body.<sup>23</sup> The latter is chaired by the most high-ranking office holder, and leader of the administration, the Prime Minister (PM).

In investigating the agential possibilities of a Westminster government then, the Cabinet would appear to be the obvious first port of call. As the driving force behind the strategy and direction of an administration, and the focus of political leadership, the most important policies of a government – including consideration of significant international issues, including potential military action – have their origin here.<sup>24</sup> If collective virtue cannot be secured at this level, then, it could doubtfully be found at broader, less authoritative levels of the political hierarchy. Consequently, when we make an international agential claim about 'the United Kingdom', or 'the British Government', are we in fact making a more limited reference to that body of senior politicians that constitute the Cabinet? How accurate is the rhetorical support offered by such assertions as "Downing Street believes..."?<sup>25</sup>

In the sections that follow, we will assess the ability of the Cabinet to fulfil the host of conditions we have seen necessary for ascriptions of collective virtue, and thus query its general suitability for character-based ethical scrutiny. For such assessment to be compelling we must undertake two stages of appraisal. Progressing incrementally through the layers of agency we have theoretically outlined, the initial phases of investigation will adopt a fairly charitable stance towards the collective resources of the Cabinet, presuming a robust congruence between the 'ideal' constitutional setup of this political body and the details of its actual operation. Beyond this, however, a convincing evaluation demands that we then proceed to take up a more critical perspective on the practical realities of executive decision-making, with a final phase of inquiry

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<sup>23</sup> Senior Ministers being Secretaries of State, i.e. the heads of government departments.

<sup>24</sup> *The Cabinet Manual: A Guide to the Laws, Conventions and Rules on the Operation of Government*. London: The Stationary Office, 2010, §4.18-4.19.

<sup>25</sup> Or to find an analogous agency-level in a different political system, that 'the White House desires...?'

considering the likelihood of such capacities being maintained in light of pragmatic political behaviour.

### **The Cabinet as a Plural Subject**

As a constitutional entity, the British Cabinet turns out to be as perfect an example of political plural subjecthood as we could hope to find, and moreover one that has it well within its power to act on the basis of collective virtue or vice. The problem with many pre-defined collectives – that is, groups whose identity is externally set – is that the boundaries of their membership, perhaps decided on legal, procedural or constitutional grounds, may not necessarily match the extent of relevant shared attitudes within them. In more specific terms, the individuals that jointly commit to form a unified plural subject, a *social* group, may be only a proportion of those who are understood to be members of the group in a more ordinary sense.

To take a relatively trivial example, the students belonging to a university tutorial class are members of that formal grouping merely by virtue of their course registration, but this affiliation alone in no way guarantees that any unanimous joint commitment is maintained amongst these people.<sup>26</sup> As discussion unfolds, the decision of half the class to uphold their joint agreement on some topic – that, for instance, “we are compatibilists about free will” – does not necessitate that the remaining group members must likewise come to share in this collective belief. Instead, non-consenting members can properly remain what Fricker terms ‘stowaways’,<sup>27</sup> or in Gilbert’s less hidden – and in this example perhaps more intuitive – terminology, ‘holdouts’:<sup>28</sup> individuals who retain their orthodox membership of the externally-identified body, but who do not enter into the additional social grouping that now operates within it. In such cases, our *agential* evaluations

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<sup>26</sup> A foundational commitment that they will attend meetings and engage in conversation may be needed for the possibility of further shared attitudes, of course, but even this is not required for the students to remain formal group members – they may still be affiliated even if they fail to turn up, after all.

<sup>27</sup> Fricker, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

<sup>28</sup> M. Gilbert, ‘Reconsidering the “Actual Contract” Theory of Political Obligation’, in her *Sociality and Responsibility: New Essays in Plural Subject Theory*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000, p. 116.

may thus fracture group entities into smaller collections of people,<sup>29</sup> making the target of our normative claims more difficult to disentangle.

The Cabinet, by contrast, proves highly resistant to any such threat of reductive qualification, for it is a group which – on the basis of its official constitution, at least – necessarily aligns these two (formal and agential) understandings of scope. To be part of this collective *is* to be part of a social group; an upholder of shared attitudes, for it operates according to a set of rules that make unanimous commitment amongst constituents an explicit requirement of their continued membership. The basis of this assurance is to be found in the convention of ‘Collective Cabinet Responsibility’, under which any decisions made by the group are deemed ‘binding on all members’.<sup>30</sup> Accordingly, Cabinet Ministers are obligated to publicly endorse and support the stated position of the collective, doing so regardless of whether they agree or disagree with the chosen course of action in their personal capacity, and furthermore in spite of any contrary opinions they may have expressed during the process of forming that policy (or indeed may still hold). As stated in the Ministerial Code:

The principle of collective responsibility... requires that Ministers should be able to express their views frankly in the expectation that they can argue freely in private while maintaining a united front when decisions have been reached. This in turn requires that the privacy of opinions expressed in Cabinet... should be maintained.<sup>31</sup>

As should be clear then, the rules on which the Cabinet operates act so as to institutionalise those very stipulations of plural subjecthood that were outlined, abstractly, in Chapter 3. Each decision of the Cabinet represents a joint commitment amongst its ministers, a willingness to uphold the results of deliberation as what *the group* believes, intends, or is motivated by. Fulfilling this commitment requires that members behave in the ‘we’-mode outside of the collective’s internal

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<sup>29</sup> Fricker, *op. cit.*, p. 248.

<sup>30</sup> *The Ministerial Code: A Code of Conduct and Guidance on Procedures for Ministers*. 2010 Edition. London: Cabinet Office, 2010, §2.3.

The convention has been in force since an initial development in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries. See O. Gay and T. Powell, ‘The Collective Responsibility of Ministers – An Outline of the Issues’. House of Commons Library Research Paper 04/82. London: The Stationary Office, 2004, pp. 7-9.

<sup>31</sup> *The Ministerial Code* (2010), §2.1.

discussions. Not only must they refrain from suggesting contrary views to those that have been agreed upon, but, more demandingly, conform to a 'general implication of positive support' – a willingness to speak in defence of an agreed group policy if so required.<sup>32</sup> Practically facilitating this so-called 'unanimity principle'<sup>33</sup> is greatly aided by the fact that Cabinet proceedings are not publicly disclosed, with the account of how the group came to a particular shared decision thus kept confidential.<sup>34</sup> Maintaining this secrecy even extends to the minutes of Cabinet meetings being protected from publication for a period of thirty years after their occurrence.<sup>35</sup>

In a number of ways, the conditions of Cabinet membership are perhaps even stricter than those required for membership of a plural subject in general. Given that the extent of a social group is the extent to which a joint commitment is in force, an individual's refusal to uphold a proposed group attitude – their lack of willingness to enter into an agreement with others – corresponds to their exclusion from any plural agent that is subsequently formed; they remain outside of that relevant 'pool of wills'. Violating a group-level attitude once one *has* agreed to uphold it, we noted, infringes upon the social-normative import of jointly committing, and as such makes this individual liable to rebuke on behalf of the other participants.<sup>36</sup>

In the case of the Cabinet such instances are subject to even stronger censure. To refuse to jointly commit to a shared attitude does not simply result in conceptual exclusion from plural agency ascription,<sup>37</sup> but moreover requires exit from the pre-defined group itself, the resignation of one's ministerial position. Simply put, one cannot be a member of the Cabinet if one wishes to refrain from jointly committing – there is no option to be a 'holdout'. If an individual is not willing to even go along with the attitude the group has decided upon, and be prepared to uphold it, then their only option is to leave the group entirely, whereupon they are free to express their dissenting

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<sup>32</sup> Gay and Powell, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *The Ministerial Code* (2010), §2.3.

<sup>35</sup> The so-called 'thirty-year rule'.

<sup>36</sup> See Chapter 3, pages 122-23.

<sup>37</sup> As was the case in the tutorial class example above.

views. The resignation of Robin Cook from the British Cabinet in 2003 is a stark illustration of these very points. Upon standing down from his ministerial position as the Leader of the House of Commons, he offered the following explanation of his decision:

It is with regret I have today resigned from the Cabinet. I can't accept collective responsibility for the decision to commit Britain now to military action in Iraq without international agreement or domestic support.<sup>38</sup>

With similar force, the converse case – breaking rank with the agreed attitude of the collective when one *has* consented to a joint commitment – is subject not simply to reprimand, but to both agential and formal expulsion.<sup>39</sup> Speaking out against the views, intentions or motivations of the Cabinet is firstly to induce one's eviction from the plural subject. Whereas we earlier referenced an imagined case in which a member of a social group might express a contrary 'I'-mode attitude so long as it was sufficiently qualified,<sup>40</sup> the scope here for even personal statements of a dissenting private view is likewise severely curtailed. To convey a divergent opinion to that of the group, anywhere outside of its internal discussion,<sup>41</sup> is incompatible with continued membership of the plural agent, and given what has been said, is consequently to make one's formal position within the Cabinet untenable also. As such, a group of this kind is one that supplements the normativity of joint commitment itself with an additional rule that forbids even personal

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<sup>38</sup> 'Cook quits over Iraq crisis', *BBC News Online*, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/2857637.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/2857637.stm), 17<sup>th</sup> March 2003.

<sup>39</sup> A clear and uncontroversial example of Cabinet expulsion was the forced resignation of the Secretary of State for India, Edwin Montagu, in 1922. Montagu had authorised the publication of messages which were in contradiction to Cabinet policy on the 1920 Treaty of Sevres. See 'Biography of Edwin Montagu', Liberal Democrat History Group, [http://www.liberalhistory.org.uk/item\\_single.php?item\\_id=54&item=biography](http://www.liberalhistory.org.uk/item_single.php?item_id=54&item=biography), accessed 15<sup>th</sup> April 2013.

<sup>40</sup> See Chapter 3, page 131, note 51.

<sup>41</sup> 'Ministers cannot speak on public affairs for themselves alone. In all cases... they speak as Ministers; and the principle of collective responsibility applies': *The Ministerial Code: A Code of Conduct and Guidance on Procedures for Ministers*. 2001 Edition. London: Cabinet Office, 2001, §97. As former Prime Minister Harold Wilson similarly noted, 'the doctrine of collective governmental responsibility is totally binding on a minister whatever he is doing or in whatever capacity he may be acting. A minister is a minister, and there can be no derogation from his obligation always to act in that capacity.': H. Wilson, *The Governance of Britain*. London, Book Club Associates, 1976, p. 74. This ministerial identity is also taken to supersede any conflicting assertions a politician might wish to make in their role as a local, constituency MP: see Gay and Powell, *op. cit.*, pp. 12, 21.

disapproval of shared attitudes.<sup>42</sup> To violate the impression of collective unity, either at the shared level, or indeed even by casting doubt upon internal consensus, is to effectively revoke one's membership of the group.

The upshot of these observations is that for all intents and purposes, and despite the fact that they are not conceptually interdependent, the boundaries of an agential Cabinet grouping will (presuming its rules are enforced) always match up with the boundaries of its formal membership – the set of comprising individuals will in both instances be identical.<sup>43</sup> Whereas membership of many pre-defined groups does not in itself demand a shared attitudinal stance, which is instead regarded as an additional undertaking, in the case of the Cabinet constituents enjoy much less freedom of choice. A Cabinet Minister cannot be a merely 'ordinary' member of this grouping, but must by its very nature be willing to jointly commit, with all that this entails.

### **The Cabinet as a Rational Agent**

Aligned with its codified conventions the British Cabinet is, therefore, a very clear and indeed very robust group agent, but is it one that is capable of moral deliberation, and potentially virtue or vice? To answer this, let us see how well it can meet the various criteria we have accrued – presuming, again, that it operates as designed. Taking first the earlier-outlined standards of agential rationality, the Cabinet has the clear capacity to fulfil all three aspects.<sup>44</sup>

In terms of attitude-to-fact standards, the Cabinet's abilities to gather and process evidence have the potential to almost certainly exceed that of any individual human agent, and likely that of many other organisations, political or otherwise. Such proficiency flows both from the sources of

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<sup>42</sup> See Gilbert, 'On Feeling Guilt for What One's Group Has Done', p. 381.

<sup>43</sup> Note, in relation to our earlier criticism of the summativist interpretation of coextensive membership (see Chapter 2, page 75), that this agential identity is not tied to this collection of individuals *per se*, but rather the joint commitment that exists between them *qua* members of that particular body. The same group of people acting as constituents of a different formal group, for instance as the members of the 'Cabinet squash club', need not uphold the same set of joint attitudes. C.f. Gilbert, *On Social Facts*, p. 221.

<sup>44</sup> Indeed List and Pettit themselves acknowledge that executives and governments 'pass the test' of agential rationality: List and Pettit, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

information it has at its service, as well as the internal structure of the collective itself. Given its privileged position at the top rung of political decision-making, the members of this group are expected to be privy to a virtually unrestricted field of obtainable facts, data and testimony, including sensitive material that may not be in the public – or even general political – domain. Access to this evidence is reliably supplied to the Cabinet from the wide range of state organs and bureaucracies operating under its authority, ‘designed to collect detailed and comprehensive information, to identify options systematically and to forecast the results of alternative scenarios with supposed precision’.<sup>45</sup>

This elaborate set-up aims to furnish members of this collective with as accurate a description of circumstantial facts and possibilities as could be plausibly desired as a basis for practical deliberation, and provides a particularly solid basis for the processes of attitude formation. What is more, as a means to actively enhance the rational basis of its beliefs, the Cabinet will often commission its informational affiliates to conduct more specialised investigations, inquiries and reports on specified topics, doing so in an effort to further the collective’s knowledge in those areas where members judge their perception to be incomplete. This latter behaviour represents the kind of reflective self-regulation that we have seen to be one of the hallmarks of rational agency.

The manner in which the Cabinet is able to digest its accumulated knowledge also lends itself to high standards of truth-tracking. One of the most effective ways to maximise the accuracy of collective beliefs, argue List and Pettit, is for information processing to be devolved to a collection of expert sub-groups, each operating within its own remit of dedicated proficiency.<sup>46</sup> This arrangement, so long as it is not offset by significantly reduced information pooling, tends to lead to so-called ‘epistemic gains from specialisation’,<sup>47</sup> increasing the breadth of knowledge the group

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<sup>45</sup> O’Neill, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

<sup>46</sup> List and Pettit, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

possesses by enhancing its capacity to assimilate it from a number of simultaneous channels. Looking at the internal structure of the British Cabinet, the existence of just this kind of system is clearly evident, with a significant number of standing and ad-hoc committees – e.g. National Security, Social Justice, Economic Affairs – set up to deal with specific policy areas or pressing matters.<sup>48</sup> On this basis, and assuming such epistemic apparatus is properly utilised, membership expertise ought to be effectively channelled towards optimising the precision of those beliefs the group forms.

Attitude-to-action standards of rationality are secured with relative ease, for the Cabinet – by the evidence of its continued and successful operation – is clearly not a dysfunctional group agent.<sup>49</sup> The attitudes this collective comes to form on particular matters, and its judgements on what action should be taken, are indeed those that it subsequently endorses and (if possible) implements. The decisions of the Cabinet, as a collective, are transferred into transmitted policy via a clear and orderly procedure, overseen and coordinated by the Cabinet Office, and do so without the risk of being hijacked, distorted, or lost in administrative processes. In the course of enactment, the group sees to it that responsibility for policy implementation is devolved to the Minister of the most appropriate department,<sup>50</sup> who ensures that the group's collective decision

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In a functionally explicit group, this arrangement corresponds to a so-called 'distributed premise procedure': *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *The Cabinet Manual*, §4.11.

<sup>49</sup> It seems reasonable to assert that if the Cabinet *were* dysfunctional, and consequently unable to enact its decisions in a coherent and reliable manner, not only would we be expected to notice (given the high degree of political scrutiny that exists), but its critical role in national decision-making would be very quickly undermined, and alternative methods of governance pursued. Clearly this has not occurred, and in contrast the Cabinet is regarded as a mainstay of the Westminster parliamentary system.

<sup>50</sup> *The Cabinet Manual*, §4.43.

By means of contrast we can imagine an alternative set-up in which, after agreeing a joint position on a particular policy area, it nevertheless remains unclear as to which members of the Cabinet are subsequently responsible for bringing it to realisation. In this situation the group may end up either completely failing to bring about its intentions (as a result of no members taking the necessary action), or else encounter major obstacles in any attempt to do so (e.g. Ministers getting in one another's way by performing duplicate tasks). Under these non-actual conditions the Cabinet would clearly fall short of attitude-to-action standards.

is suitably advanced.<sup>51</sup> Accordingly, the relationship between the attitudes of this body and the action it comes to take is a secure one, and not one that is vulnerable to the kind of akratic dissonance between judgement and intention that some human beings on occasion display.

Finally, let us consider the Cabinet's maintenance of attitude-to-attitude standards of rationality, which we discussed at some length. Whilst 'it is a matter for the incumbent government to determine the specific arrangements for collective decision-making',<sup>52</sup> and though the exact details of such processes are hence shrouded by confidentiality, it is generally understood that the Cabinet is, broadly, a functionally inexplicit group. As such, it is one in which decision-making is presumed to be the result of – at least some significant degree of – open consideration and discourse, a procedure whereby 'ministers are given the opportunity to debate [each] issue, with a view to reaching an agreed position'.<sup>53</sup> It is the eventual summing up of this deliberation by the Prime Minister that goes on to finalise the group's decided policy.<sup>54</sup>

This kind of operational structure, given what was earlier attested, bodes well for group-level self-regulation, for it provides the kind of freedom and flexibility in decision-making that allows for natural second-order reflection to enter into deliberative discourse. Members of the Cabinet consider not solely what they as individuals might wish to be advanced, but what they think are the most appropriate attitudes for *the group* to hold, something that necessitates taking up a view on the agency of the collective itself. The issue being queried by Ministers is "What should

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<sup>51</sup> Whether or not all intended policy is successfully brought to action at the *state*-level will, however, depend on the legislature, which we shall discuss in the next chapter. Nevertheless, the procedure for the Cabinet presenting its proposed policy for legislative advancement (in technical terminology, proposing a motion in Parliament for a bill to be read) is, again, clearly defined: see, for instance, *Standing Orders of the House of Commons*. London: The Stationary Office, 2012, §23, §57; *The Cabinet Manual*, Chapter 5.

<sup>52</sup> *The Cabinet Manual*, §4.1.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, §4.3. Regarding the Cabinet's decision on whether the UK would enter the European single currency, then-Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott remarked: "Cabinets don't have votes. It's a collective voice... We are not doing anything different from the normal constitutional arrangements that cabinets don't have votes. The Prime Minister takes into account the views of members round the table." Comments made on the BBC's 'Today Programme', 17<sup>th</sup> May 2003.

<sup>54</sup> Directgov Online, 'The Government, Prime Minister and Cabinet', [http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Governmentcitizensandrights/UKgovernment/Centralgovernmentandthemonarchy/DG\\_073444](http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Governmentcitizensandrights/UKgovernment/Centralgovernmentandthemonarchy/DG_073444), accessed 5<sup>th</sup> March 2012.

we do?”, and through the potentially adversarial process of debate and persuasion that is required to resolve this matter, the kinds of questions that are relevant to collective consistency are apt to be raised. Given that consideration of present policy is likely to reference party political principles or ideologies, manifesto promises, budgetary distributions and the like, what has been decided previously by the group must no doubt loom large in the Cabinet’s practical contemplation. Ministers are required to think about the commitments they as a collective have already made, and what it would mean for them to now conduct themselves in a manner that went against those earlier proclamations, or appear out of step with them.

The important element of ‘feedback’, which we saw to be essential to the collectivisation of reason, is here not only provided by Cabinet members’ own supervision of group-level behaviour, but comes in no small part from sources outside the group; from other party members, from the opposition, political commentators, the media, and indeed the electorate at large. The charge of inconsistency is a politically toxic one, with an administration’s failure to avoid it likely to be met with considerable ridicule.<sup>55</sup> As such, the feedback provided from external sources not only provides its own oversight of policy consistency, but through the threats associated with failure puts important pressure on Cabinet members to remain vigilant and attentive towards the nature of their collective conclusions, sustaining their own important perspective on group rationality.

### **The Cabinet as a Moral Agent**

To continue our progression, then, we have good reasons to regard the Cabinet as a body not merely capable of unified group agency, but furthermore potentially rational group agency. As we discussed previously,<sup>56</sup> the maintenance of such rationality provides the necessary foundation for enabling coherent normative deliberation, but what evidence do we have that this collective is of a type that can actually form sophisticated moral propositions, and understand their significance?

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<sup>55</sup> List and Pettit, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

See, for example D. Walker, ‘Government’s data policy is neither consistent nor clear’, *The Guardian*, 4<sup>th</sup> August 2011.

<sup>56</sup> See Chapter 3, pages 168-82.

The clearest substantiation we can find, provided the group's decision-making is as postulated, is the fact that the explanations of Cabinet Ministers, and the policies they publicly profess, are rife with ethical terminology. From Prime Minister David Cameron's declaration that "Leadership in the world is about moral strength as much as military might",<sup>57</sup> to then-Chancellor Gordon Brown's assertion that tackling climate change is a "moral duty",<sup>58</sup> to periodic claims that a course of action champions what is 'right', 'good', 'just' or 'fair', the language of morality is recurrently invoked by the rhetoric of political justification, used as a means to validate those policies a Cabinet leadership has decided.

A particularly strong illustration, relevant to our international focus, is the 1997 strategy speech by the then-Foreign Secretary Robin Cook, presented as a mission statement for adding a so-called 'ethical dimension' to British foreign policy. Highlighting some relevant passages:

We are instant witness in our sitting rooms through the medium of television to human tragedy in distant lands, and are therefore obliged to accept moral responsibility for our response... Britain also has a national interest in the promotion of our values and confidence in our identity... The Labour Government does not accept that political values can be left behind when we check in our passports to travel on diplomatic business. Our foreign policy must have an ethical dimension and must support the demands of other peoples for the democratic rights on which we insist for ourselves. The Labour Government will put human rights at the heart of our foreign policy and will publish an annual report on our work in promoting human rights abroad... Today's Mission Statement sets out new directions... It supplies an ethical content to foreign policy and recognises that the national interest cannot be defined only by narrow realpolitik... [it is] a joint project to make Britain once again a force for good in the world.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Speech made at the Conservative Party Autumn Conference, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/conservative/8808521/Conservative-Party-conference-2011-David-Camersons-speech-in-full.html>, 5<sup>th</sup> October 2011.

See also See J. Lansdale, 'The key moments in Cameron's speech', *BBC News Online*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-15190371>, 5<sup>th</sup> October 2011.

<sup>58</sup> 'Climate change fight 'moral duty'', *BBC News Online*, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/4932988.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4932988.stm), 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2006.

<sup>59</sup> Speech made 12<sup>th</sup> May 1997, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/1997/may/12/indonesia.ethicalforeignpolicy>

In line with standard governmental practice, the announcement of policy by the Minister of a lead department is taken to be an expression on behalf of the Cabinet as a whole,<sup>60</sup> the will of the plural agent. That the individual is here speaking in that group-member capacity is clear from the many 'we'-mode references that are scattered throughout. Given the content of this pronouncement – which includes references to moral responsibility, the promotion of values, and human rights – that Cabinet members are able to form joint attitudes on ethical propositions (in this instance of a rather cosmopolitan flavour) appears starkly evident. And in describing such guiding principles as a 'contract with the British people',<sup>61</sup> the kinds of considerations that seem intended to impact upon the future deliberation of the collective, and constrain its subsequent choices.<sup>62</sup>

Even the sceptical realist, who – against the explicit claims of this speech – maintains that professed allegiance to ethical concepts is merely rhetorical subterfuge for power politics, cannot deny that, on the evidence of a ministerial pronouncement like the above, the group is at the very least able to *consider* such values. And this holds true even if in the final analysis those values are ultimately rejected in favour of more self-interested, power-centred concerns. In order to coherently articulate normative positions and ethical notions, even if disingenuously, it seems the Cabinet must at minimum have the ability to understand moral ideas, and thus – other conditions enabling – a resultant *capability* to deliberate on their basis.<sup>63</sup> As we made clear in the previous chapter,<sup>64</sup> if an agent has such a capability then it is accordingly subject to moral responsibility, regardless of whether this aptitude for moral engagement is actually realised in the decision-making process.

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<sup>60</sup> *The Ministerial Code* (2010), §2.3.

<sup>61</sup> See speech text.

<sup>62</sup> A tendency of policy-making more generally, notes Harbour: Harbour, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

<sup>63</sup> After all, being a psychological egoist does not mean that an individual is incapable of understanding moral considerations, only that they fail to be motivated by them *qua* moral considerations.

<sup>64</sup> See Chapter 3, page 167.

The British Cabinet therefore has the sophistication, as well as the potential rationality, to respond to moral reasoning on a decision-to-decision basis, but does it also have the kind of endurance that can complete its qualification as a proper focus for moral praise and blame? The speech above might *talk* of continuing endeavours, and may indeed put in place political plans and commitments that shape the intentions of this formal body later down the line. But will these future occurrences represent the deliberation, attitudes and actions of the same *agential* body? Does it make sense to view the announcement of such a policy and our evaluation of its success over time as both belonging to the same intentional entity, something that seems necessary for meaningful ethical appraisal?

So long as the membership of the Cabinet remains unchanged, in terms of the specific people composing it, agential endurance is likely to be sustained pretty unproblematically, for as we have seen this collective body is – under optimal conditions – a clear and robust plural subject, a unified focus of attitudes built around unanimous joint commitment. The tricky issue emerges with the possibility that this set of participants might in fact change. As a formally-defined body, we noted, the British Cabinet is necessarily composed of the administration’s Senior Ministers – the current Prime Minister, along with the heads of government departments: the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Defence Secretary, Home Secretary, Health Secretary and so on. Whilst this role-based membership does not generally fluctuate,<sup>65</sup> the individuals who at any one time hold these public offices may indeed vary.

Changes of this sort are unlikely to happen en masse whilst a political party remains in power, though such occurrences are not without precedence.<sup>66</sup> More frequent, however, are so-called

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<sup>65</sup> An exception may be those occasional cases in which government departments are restructured or amalgamated, for instance the 1968 merger of the Foreign Office and the Commonwealth Office into the combined Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). There is also the possibility for formal Cabinet membership to fluctuate according to the discretionary inclusion of one or more ‘ministers without portfolio’, who are not directly tied to departmental positions, as well as the similar position of Deputy Prime Minister, which particular administrations may choose to leave vacant.

<sup>66</sup> See, for instance the February 2012 resignation of the Romanian Cabinet: H. Pidd, ‘Romanian prime minister and cabinet resign en masse’, *The Guardian*, 7<sup>th</sup> February 2012.

‘cabinet reshuffles’, whereby a proportion of Senior Ministerial positions are redistributed amongst government MPs. Such occasions are likely to involve not only the internal rearrangement of *existing* group members, some of whom will take over the role of another Cabinet colleague, but moreover the addition or loss of actual members themselves. The first instance, individual changes of ‘portfolio’, poses little conceptual worry to collective agency, and is merely analogous to a football team’s switch of formation, a board of directors’ change of spokesperson, or an army platoon’s rotation of sentry – none of which violate the unity of group attitudes held. The entry or exit of specific politicians from the group itself, however – as would result from a resignation of the kind earlier discussed – does appear a more serious concern, for it represents a change in the *composition* of group membership.

Gilbert’s imagined Library Committee<sup>67</sup> might replace a proportion of its membership at the start of each academic year, and in doing so any previously upheld joint position as to which genre of books to promote may lapse. Though the committee retains its formal identity as a persisting society within the residential college, and will be comprised of at least some number of previous participants, the attitudes it has as a collective may be discontinuous – ‘refreshed’, so to speak, on the inauguration of each new annual membership, so as to reflect the current balance of interests within the group as a whole. In this sense, the collective’s joint commitments for the year ahead will need to be re-decided each time there is an adjustment in the set of people who make it up – a new ‘pool of wills’ needs to be established. Asked by a student as to why no new American literature had been purchased this year, a Library Committee member could justifiably respond “that was the preference of last year’s committee members, but this year the committee has a different view”,<sup>68</sup> thereby denying continuity of agency. In effect, a new plural subject is ‘the Library Committee’ each year.

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<sup>67</sup> See Chapter 2, page 75.

<sup>68</sup> Thereby viewing the previous committee grouping as ‘them’, not ‘us’. See the upcoming discussion of this distinction on page 212.

Is the Cabinet a group of this sort, where a change in membership results in the lapse and potential redefinition of attitudinal commitments? Whilst the formal, corporate identity of this political body clearly transcends changes in personnel – the collective is still the British Cabinet – is it the case that the group’s shared acceptances, the jointly upheld attitudes that sustain its plural subjecthood, attach only to the exact membership that fashioned them? If true, this would prove a significant blow to our hopes of sustained moral scrutiny, for it would reduce the scope of the Cabinet’s moral responsibility to the relatively short-term in which its list of members is stable. In some cases this may be no more than a matter of months. Such a timeframe would be disappointingly out of step with our intuitive conceptions of political culpability, which tend to extend over at least the period a government remains in office. It would also prove close to useless for any meaningful collective appraisal in an international context, for the replacement of a single Senior Minister would here – surely counterintuitively – change the collective agential identity of a state’s whole leadership.

To the benefit of our analysis, however, evidence would suggest that this kind of dependency is *not* in force when it comes to the attitudes of the Cabinet. In fact, it appears relatively patent that members of this body continue to abide by – and indeed to be held to – the joint commitments that were established by previous Ministerial compositions. As has been suggested,<sup>69</sup> one of the clearest indicators of an individual’s participation in a joint commitment, and hence membership of a relevant social group, is the reaction of others in cases where that fact is violated or denied; standardly, one of rebuke. Given this, a particularly suggestive example of the persistence of Cabinet agency was provided during the first session of ‘Prime Minister’s Questions’ under Gordon Brown’s British premiership. Challenged by the opposition to account for the government’s two-year delay in banning a suspected extremist group, Brown attempted to deflect blame for the issue by claiming he had “only been in the job for five days”, thereby suggesting that he and his Ministers – many of whom had served in the previous administration –

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<sup>69</sup> See Chapter 3, page 122.

somehow represented a new collective agent distinct and not responsible for the actions of the group's previous incarnation.<sup>70</sup>

That his remark was met with 'jeers' and 'howls of derision from the opposition benches', along with no small degree of embarrassment from his own,<sup>71</sup> was of course a likely entanglement of multiple evaluations, some of which were no doubt directed at Brown's personal competency and evasion. Nevertheless, part of what made the response of MPs so acutely vitriolic in this instance, even by the acrimonious norms of parliamentary debate, appeared to be a sense of incredulity towards the basis of the statement itself; the fact that the Prime Minister was not simply defending the efforts of the administration, but denying that its previous efforts were even a proper target of *current* appraisal. Though the attempted mitigation and reframing of criticism is a commonplace occurrence within the political arena, this denial of Cabinet accountability itself – an attempt to assuage responsibility in an agential sense – was widely regarded as exceptional. It is thus strongly implied from this episode that such an attestation was manifestly inaccurate, and that the agency of the Cabinet *is* something that is understood to endure across changes in personnel.

In less vivid instances, the fact that Ministers continue to account for Cabinet decisions made prior to a reshuffle, or indeed even their own personal promotion to that body, is strong evidence that they too hold themselves to be part of a persisting agent, one whose attitudes and actions continue to be the subject of collective responsibility over time. How might we understand this endurance in terms of plural subjecthood? The most plausible reading is that on joining the membership of this social group, participants consent to 'taking on' those standing joint commitments that are at that time in force – those that have already been established by the preceding set of Cabinet Ministers. On appointment to this body, then, each adds their expressed

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<sup>70</sup> 'How leaders fared at first Prime Minister's questions', *BBC News Online*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-11521789>, 13<sup>th</sup> October 2010.

<sup>71</sup> 'Brown and Cameron clash over ID', *BBC News Online*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/6267656.stm>, 4<sup>th</sup> July 2007.

willingness to commit to that of the existing group members, and thus volunteers to supplement their will to the already-formed 'pool'.<sup>72</sup>

This is not to say that a new membership cannot move to change the *content* of its joint commitments; on the contrary, shifts in policy are commonplace. What is essential, however, is that the *identity* of the joint commitments themselves – what the group intends, believes, is motivated by – is continuous with those that supported the group's unity prior to the reshuffle: that constituents continue to accept that the content of a collective attitude is, or was, what we intended, or what we believed, not what *they*, some other social group, did. If, accordingly, it is the same set of joint commitments that remain active across a change in membership, then it is also the same plural subject that persists despite variation in the individuals that sustain it.<sup>73</sup> As a result, reconstitution fails to absolve such a group of responsibility for past attitudes and intentions, and we are hence justified to regard the Cabinet as an enduring moral agent over at least the extended period of time in which a political party is in power.<sup>74</sup>

### **The Cabinet and Plural Virtue**

We have secured an – albeit idealised – conception of the British Cabinet as a unified, rational and enduring moral agent. Extrapolating from these now-established elements, and the structure that supports them, should illustrate that it is also the type of body that could plausibly support collective (non-reductive) virtue and vice. As we have argued, the Cabinet has the capacity to

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<sup>72</sup> This is in concordance with Gilbert's discussion of group identity: see Gilbert, *On Social Facts*, pp. 219-20. 'Suppose I am walking along in the woods when I run into an acquaintance and we decide to walk together for a while. After a time, we run into someone known to both. He asks 'May I join you?' We graciously agree, and the three of us continue along our path. Under these conditions it may seem correct to say that a certain group has incorporated a new member, rather than to say that one group has gone out of existence and another come into being... It seems natural enough in this case to say that the new member has, in effect, added his will to a given pool of wills.' *Ibid.*, p. 220.

<sup>73</sup> Likewise, referencing Gilbert's further discussion of a change in the character or goals of a plural subject: 'I might decide that I would like to run for a while rather than walk. I say to the others 'Shall we run for a bit?' They agree. It would be natural enough under these circumstances for me to say that, for instance, 'We walked for a while but then we decided to run, and we ran for twenty minutes.' These things indicate a presumed identity of 'us'... an already formed plural subject or pool of wills, formed to pursue a particular goal, accepts a new goal.' *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> We deal with longer-term cases in the next chapter. See Chapter 5, pages 255-58.

form and enact reasoned and sophisticated attitudes on a range of ethical propositions, and to do so with consistency over time. On account of this aptitude, its membership is clearly equipped for jointly committing to the full spectrum of attitudinal properties upon which virtue (and by extension, vice<sup>75</sup>) are constituted. Indeed, returning to our earlier example of Cabinet strategy, in which a so-called 'mission statement' for foreign policy was proposed,<sup>76</sup> we can deduce from both the function and language of this pronouncement just the kind of attitudinal progression that might lead to acting from virtue.

To restate the relationship we have in mind, conduct that exhibits virtue must result from virtuous intention, which is made so by its fulfilment of a virtuous motivation. The latter, in turn, may possess its fine nature on account of the agent's affective states, which inculcate the proper reason for the motive in question.<sup>77</sup> Considering our example, we can identify elements that might serve the function of each of these important properties. Though there is talk of obligation, the underlying reaction on which the desire to act would appear to be founded is indeed an emotive one: a realisation of suffering across the globe, and the feeling that this is a 'human tragedy'. It is on the basis of this compassionate sentiment that the doctrine's patent motivational component is brought forth: the promotion of 'good in the world' and the transnational realisation of ethical values.<sup>78</sup> Finally, the means to fulfil this motive go on to form the Cabinet's specific policy intentions: supporting demands for democratic and human rights abroad. Given that the joint commitments here outlined are designed to form a consistent, long-term policy approach, they also have the clear potential to fulfil the additional stipulation of many virtue ethical accounts, that such properties are the manifestation of settled dispositions.

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<sup>75</sup> See Chapter 3, pages 137-38.

<sup>76</sup> See page 206.

<sup>77</sup> As we noted earlier, for example, having a benevolent motive to help *because* of how a person's suffering makes one feel: see Chapter 3, page 153.

<sup>78</sup> Whether a trait like compassion in fact turns out to be a virtue in the international context is a question left to future research: see page 307.

From these observations, and in the presence of the supporting framework that has been supposed, it is plain that Cabinet members can – and indeed if such assertions are genuine, seemingly do – jointly commit to a rich assortment of unified, group-level attributes, upholding the kinds of interrelated attitudes that must necessarily underpin an ascription of collective moral virtue. But what of the remaining virtue ethical component, the possession of practical wisdom? Whilst the type and content of possible Cabinet attitudes can *under the right epistemic conditions* support a virtuous moral character, does this political body also allow for the sort of perceptual union that we have seen to be necessary for the further requirement of genuine, group-level moral insight? Can the Cabinet's choice of joint commitments, and an understanding of their contextual appropriateness, represent a distinct, synthesised quality of the collective itself? If not, incidentally virtuous conduct may be the best this political grouping can achieve.<sup>79</sup>

We noted in the previous chapter some essential prerequisites for collective practical wisdom to get off the ground.<sup>80</sup> Crucial to any amalgamation of ethical discernment was the opportunity for individual group members – within the confines of the collective – to freely air their personal views on moral matters, and for these opinions to be mutually considered by other participants as being of potential significance to the shared attitudes they might together uphold. Given such internal freedom of expression, and the potential for personal insights to interact with one another within the decision-making process, the moral judgemental capacities of the group in its own right, as a plural agent, could be seen to operate on a level not reducible to the singular perceptions of individual members.

That such conditions are capable of being fulfilled in the context at hand is in fact supported by much that has already been said about the presumed structure and operation of this particular political body. We noted in relation to the maintenance of group-level rationality,<sup>81</sup> for instance,

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<sup>79</sup> See Chapter 2, pages 92-93.

<sup>80</sup> See Chapter 3, pages 149-51.

<sup>81</sup> See page 204.

that the Cabinet – conceived as a functionally inexplicit organisation – is designed to rely upon this very type of open discourse and debate amongst members as its primary means of reflection and decision-making. Concerning the question of moral responsibility we have moreover seen that Cabinet members can consent to the acceptance of group attitudes that have rich and varied ethical content. This envisaged general mode of deliberative operation, allied to the potential moral content of the propositions being discussed, is therefore well suited to the kind of perceptual interaction outlined above, and provides very favourable conditions for an amalgamation of ethical judgement to occur, at least to some degree.

Beyond these most general characteristics, however, the finer, formalised guidelines of Cabinet discussion have the potential to further reinforce both the quality and scope of this deliberative interface. Conforming to those rules and conventions designed to sustain the secrecy of internal discussion, which we earlier discussed in the context of maintaining group-level unity, ought also to have the expedient advantage of providing the type of environment in which Ministers feel free and safe to express any opinion, liberated from the kinds of constraints that might otherwise attach to a politician's utterances.<sup>82</sup> Protecting proceedings from public disclosure is intended to encourage 'real' and candid discussion to occur amongst members, and to allow possible dissent and disagreement to be aired without being clouded or restrained by other concerns.<sup>83</sup>

The potential breadth of Cabinet discussion should be likewise facilitated by the formal authorisation bestowed upon Ministers to bring additional 'business' to the attention of the group, granting them an important opportunity to add items they see fit for collective consideration to the group's agenda (via the mediation of the Cabinet Secretariat).<sup>84</sup> Given the proper operation of this facility, freedom of expression within this political body thus ought to be

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<sup>82</sup> Being unwilling to express an unpopular opinion, for instance, on fear of alienating potential voters, or being the subject of media distortion.

<sup>83</sup> See the revealing comments made by former Cabinet Secretary Sir Gus O'Donnell: 'Cabinet debates should be private – Cabinet Secretary', *BBC News Online*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-16229867>, 17<sup>th</sup> December 2011.

<sup>84</sup> *The Cabinet Manual*, §4.27.

both 'negative' and 'positive'<sup>85</sup> – members are not only at liberty to express any opinion they like on a particular issue being discussed, but, furthermore, can influence the very topics that the group comes to reflect upon in the first place. This latter aspect further increases the degree of integration between individual moral capacities, and makes it increasingly likely that the oversight provided by the group as a whole extends beyond the deliberative scope of any individual constituent.

In the presence of the features postulated, then – an open and flexible mode of discussion, the potential moral content of its deliberation, and the frank and expansive expression of views amongst its members – the British Cabinet has, amongst groups generally, an exceptional capacity for achieving collective practical wisdom. Allied to the viable range of its joint commitments, which may encompass acting on motives and sentiments that extend over time and circumstance, we have hence found a political body that is – to the extent it lives up to these outlined properties – able to fulfil the numerous demands of rational, moral, and virtuous agency in its own right.

The qualification of the last sentence is, nevertheless, a very important one, for we have thus far only considered the Cabinet and its capacities in light of a rather idealised constitution, reflecting on the structure and operation of this political body as it is formally defined by documents like the *Cabinet Manual* and *Ministerial Code*. For our appraisal of Cabinet agency to be comprehensive and compelling, however, it is essential that analysis also takes into account the realities of actual political activity. After all, the genuine virtue-capability of the Cabinet is tied not to how it *should* operate, but to how it *does* operate. We have seen that the framework provided by the rules, guidelines and conventions of the Cabinet provide a strong foundation for complex levels of agency to potentially develop, but whether this institutional platform forms the basis of

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<sup>85</sup> In Berlin's sense: I. Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty'. In his *Liberty: Incorporating Four Essays on Liberty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

collective decision-making in practice is another matter. In other words, how well does this 'theoretical' image of Cabinet operation align with political actuality?

### III

#### Challenges to Cabinet Agency

The agential capacities we have charitably endowed on the Cabinet rest on the assumption that its rules are enforced, formal procedures followed, and conventions adhered to. But is this always the case? In this section we will consider a number of examples of real-life Cabinet behaviour that appear to depart in important ways from the 'ideal' mode of operation we have been principally considering. How serious a threat do such instances pose to the various levels of Cabinet agency? Do they have the scope to practically undermine the kinds of capacities we have hypothesised? The following issues will be examined in turn:

1. Suspensions of Collective Cabinet Responsibility
  - i. Free votes
2. Violations of Collective Cabinet Responsibility
  - i. Non-resignations
  - ii. Leaks
  - iii. Memoirs
3. Circumscribed decision-making
  - i. Misuse of committees
  - ii. Prime Ministerial domination

Let us begin by critically evaluating the central convention of Collective Cabinet Responsibility (CCR), which our preceding analysis revealed to be the very cornerstone of this body's agential aspirations. As Gay and Powell suggest, 'the enforcement of collective responsibility depends as

much, if not more, on political realities as on constitutional convention'.<sup>86</sup> The recent history of British politics would appear to provide strong corroboration for this claim, for there are indeed a number of (albeit limited) examples in which the demands of CCR appear to have been put aside in the service of political expediency.

### **Suspensions of Collective Responsibility**

Least threatening to the maintenance of Cabinet agency, we must firstly consider instances in which the convention has been formally suspended in light of particular policy choices. Cases of this type usually occur when the particular decision being confronted is regarded as an 'issue of conscience', one that potentially transcends usual party-political lines. In such circumstances Ministers (and likewise a party's MPs more widely) may be given a so-called 'free vote' in Parliament, whereby they can express their personal opinions on the matter in place of an official government stance.<sup>87</sup>

#### *Free Votes*

Though free votes are relatively atypical occurrences within UK politics, their incidence is far from extraordinary. Excluding multiple readings of the same bill within a single parliamentary session, between one and five policy issues per year were officially subject to free votes in the House of Commons between 1997 and 2008,<sup>88</sup> covering such issues as voting by prisoners, animal welfare, stem cell research, and more recently the February 2013 vote on the issue of same-sex marriage.

How threatening might free votes be to the collective capacities of the Cabinet? Do such episodes, in which Ministers can – and do<sup>89</sup> – vote out of alignment on a particular policy, risk

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<sup>86</sup> Gay and Powell, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23. Free votes may also be granted on issues relating to parliamentary procedure: *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> House of Commons Library, 'Free Votes: Parliamentary Information List'. London: The Stationary Office, 2013, pp. 2-6. 'Officially' here signifies that each of the major parties announced the vote to be free.

<sup>89</sup> See, for instance R. Winnett and T. Ross, 'High-ranking Conservatives back gay marriage amid Cabinet split', *The Telegraph*. 4<sup>th</sup> February 2013. For the subsequent split votes of Cabinet members see Division No.

derailing the group's status as a potential virtue ethical agent? Key to assuaging this worry is recognition of the differing subject of expressed attitudes. Unlike in standard parliamentary polling, in which Ministers' votes are – first and foremost<sup>90</sup> – representative expressions of a joint Cabinet attitude (e.g. 'we intend to vote aye on this bill'; 'we believe that fox hunting is unjustified'), in the context of a free vote it is instead the individual whose attitudes are at issue, a *personal* belief that is being expressed through their vote (e.g. 'I intend to vote no on this bill'; 'I believe that stem cell research is wrong'). On such occasions, the usually indelible bond<sup>91</sup> between a Minister's formal Cabinet membership and their role *qua* social group representative is permitted to lapse, and the possibility of acting in a personal capacity temporarily reinstated.

As such, occasional cases of the convention's suspension appear of minimal hazard to the abiding maintenance of Cabinet plural subjecthood. In cases of this type the collective simply declines to jointly commit to *any* shared position towards the policy in question, and hence there is no *group* attitude for Ministers' personal expressions to violate. Whilst there is therefore recognition of the lack of a unified stance on a particular issue, it is concurrently denied that a collective attitude is in such circumstances either required or appropriate.<sup>92</sup> Clearly, were free votes to form the basis of the majority of policy choices, we may indeed begin to doubt that political agency extends beyond the individual level; nevertheless, the Cabinet's group-level abstention from infrequent legislative choices does not undermine the agential attributes it continues to exhibit the rest of the time. Human beings too may sometimes fail to form an opinion on a particular matter, but we do not as a consequence doubt their status as agents capable of so doing.

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154 for the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Bill (Carry-Over): Hansard HC, 5<sup>th</sup> February 2013, volume 558, column 244.

<sup>90</sup> They may, after all, also agree in a personal capacity.

<sup>91</sup> See pages 198-201.

<sup>92</sup> Gay and Powell nevertheless suggest some more calculating motivations that might lie behind the granting of certain free votes, such as the attempt to construct a cross-party majority in the light of internal party division, avoiding the impression of a government defeat, or as a means to circumvent policy-formation on a difficult or divisive issue: see Gay and Powell, *loc. cit.* These considerations will not be pursued here.

### **Violations of Collective Responsibility**

Much more noxious to the agential credentials of the Cabinet, however, is a second class of issues relating to actual *violations* of CCR; that is, instances in which Ministers break rank with the 'unified front' of the collective whilst the convention to maintain it remains in force, and binding upon them.

#### *Non-Resignations*

Perhaps the most forceful illustration of this matter are cases in which a Minister compromises CCR – by, for instance, speaking out against an official joint position of the Cabinet – and yet despite plainly renegeing on their membership obligations fails to suffer formal expulsion from the collective as a result of their offence. The most vivid instance of recent times was surely the non-resignation of Clare Short, the Secretary of State for International Development, once again in the build-up to the 2003 War with Iraq. Despite her position as a serving member of the British Cabinet, and her resultant duty to act as a representative of the collective's views, Short publically disputed the expressed attitudes of the Cabinet in a BBC radio interview, even going so far as to call the Prime Minister "reckless":

I'm afraid that I think the whole atmosphere of the current situation is deeply reckless: reckless for the world, reckless for the undermining of the UN... reckless with our government, reckless with his [the PM's] own future, position and place in history... I feel the need now, because it's ten minutes to midnight, to say out loud what I think Britain should do with its influence, because our failure to use our influence properly is so dangerous for the world... My own view is that allowing the world to be so bitterly divided – the division in Europe, the sense of anger and injustice in the Middle East – is very, very dangerous; with undermining the UN it's a recruiting sergeant for terrorism.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Extracts from Clare Short's interview with Andrew Rawnsley on BBC Radio 4's 'Westminster Hour', 9<sup>th</sup> March 2003: 'Clare Short Interview', *BBC News Online*, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/2836925.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/2836925.stm), 10<sup>th</sup> March 2003.

Such claims are in clear breach of the earlier-outlined demands of CCR,<sup>94</sup> explicitly denying the unanimity of Ministers towards an espoused joint attitude. In addition to violating the tighter, formal restrictions of Cabinet participation, which as we saw outlaw even personally-qualified expressions of a dissenting view, it is clear from Short's pronouncements that in this instance she intended to go much further, and also deny that there was mutual acceptance of the stated *group* position. Whilst it may have been conceivable (though given the harshness of her language, and moreover the fact that she was being interviewed in her Ministerial capacity, exceedingly difficult) for Short to reconcile expression of what she terms her 'own view' with an assertion like "nevertheless, we have decided to go forward with this policy, and as a member of the Cabinet I respect and support that decision", it is patent from some of her other expressions – "we shouldn't be doing it like this"<sup>95</sup> – that the latter standpoint is not one she is willing to endorse:

I have a good relationship and frequent discussions with both [the PM and Foreign Secretary]... But what worries me is that we've got the old spin back and we have detailed discussions either personally or in the Cabinet and then the spin the next day is: "we're ready for war". So I'm worried now that people like me are being told "yes, all this is under consideration", but we're on a different path...<sup>96</sup>

In the statement above Short is evidently suggesting that senior group representatives are expressing a supposed Cabinet joint attitude that is not, in fact, jointly accepted. In other words, her claim is that the collective ascription of 'we're ready for war' to the group as a whole is inaccurate – a plural subject of that attitude is not, despite assertions to the contrary, in existence across all members (on account that she herself is not willing to enter into the associated joint commitment). Now this in itself need not be thought of as conceptually problematic, for as we have discussed in detail the extent of a social group, and thus of collective agency, is solely the extent to which relevant joint commitments *are* in force.<sup>97</sup> By refusing to consent to the suggested group position, and thus withholding her will from the 'pool' being constructed, Short

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<sup>94</sup> See pages 198-201.

<sup>95</sup> 'Clare Short Interview'. Emphasis added.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> For illustration, see again the tutorial class example on pages 197-98.

is situating herself outside of the plural subject; the 'we' in 'we're ready for war' now refers only to those remaining Ministers who have chosen to abide with that shared position.<sup>98</sup>

The problem posed by this case, however, comes in relation to the maintenance of Short's *formal* position within the Cabinet. As we earlier noted, one of the defining features of Collective Cabinet Responsibility is the requirement of ministerial resignation in cases of its violation; to be part of this grouping, we observed, *is* to be part of the social group, for it is only through this correspondence that the agential integrity of a formally-defined Cabinet can be sustained.<sup>99</sup> Yet despite professed threats to resign as International Development Secretary,<sup>100</sup> and thus revoke her executive membership, Short in fact remained in her departmental position for a further two months,<sup>101</sup> keeping her place as a Cabinet Minister in spite of her severe breach of the body's collective unanimity. During that period, therefore, she effectively functioned as just the kind of 'stowaway' or 'holdout' that we saw to be incompatible with the cohesive agency of a formal group.<sup>102</sup>

The danger posed by such an occurrence is thus directed at most basic level of unified Cabinet agency, to the very notion of this body being a proper subject of relevant attitudinal attributions. Being a member of the Cabinet implies necessary participation in its joint commitments. If, on the basis of her continuing formal membership, Short thus remained party to such commitments,

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<sup>98</sup> After all, in such circumstances failure to make their refusal known must surely constitute tacit willingness to be part of that joint commitment.

<sup>99</sup> See pages 198-201.

<sup>100</sup> "Absolutely. There's no question about that. If there is not UN authority for military action or if there is not UN authority for the reconstruction of the country, I will not uphold a breach of international law or this undermining of the UN and I will resign from the government.": 'Clare Short Interview'

<sup>101</sup> Ultimately resigning on 12<sup>th</sup> May 2003: 'Short launches broadside on Blair', *BBC News Online*, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/3019871.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/3019871.stm), 12<sup>th</sup> May 2003.

<sup>102</sup> See pages 197-8.

Though during this time Short decided to support the Cabinet's stance towards military intervention, and vote in favour of it, she still remained some way from showing unequivocal support for the group's endeavours, maintaining her criticism of its past attitudes and actions – and thus implying a steadfast rejection of being part of that 'we' – whilst presenting her decision to remain as the best option in bad circumstances. In light of this continuing defacement of the collective's 'united front', and her seeming refusal to commit wholeheartedly to the group position, it is plausible to assert that she remained in violation of CCR until the time of her eventual resignation. See 'Short decides to stay in cabinet', *BBC News Online*, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/2860553.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/2860553.stm), 18<sup>th</sup> March 2003.

then as a consequence of her deliberate contempt of appropriate representative (we-mode) behaviour, the reprimand of social – and subsequently, general – group expulsion ought to have resulted.<sup>103</sup> If, alternatively (and given her testimony perhaps more plausibly), Short was indeed unwilling to even enter into a joint commitment, then on equivalent reasoning she likewise ought to have been stripped of group affiliation.

On either reading, a hazardous tension between formal and attitudinal membership is evident. So long as a dissenting individual is retained within the Cabinet, the credible frontiers of a relevant social grouping amongst its members – in other words, the plural agent that is the accurate subject of collective attitudes – comes apart from the official boundaries which define this body as a political and constitutional entity. The latter still includes the dissident Minister, whilst the former – short of an implausible reprieve for their conduct – does not. As a result, in circumstances such as these we are no longer justified in directing attitudinal ascriptions towards the Cabinet as a unified whole, but instead only to that sub-grouping of its formal membership for which a corresponding joint commitment is in force – those Ministers who actually uphold the expressed group position. Having to fragment attitudinal analysis in such a manner conflicts quite fundamentally with the preceding notion of the Cabinet as a robust and integral group agent, and episodes of this type thus pose a very real threat to the most foundational capacities CCR is designed to maintain.

Cases like the above are therefore extremely serious, but at the same time they represent truly extraordinary deviations from the usual operation of the Cabinet.<sup>104</sup> For a Minister to overtly

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<sup>103</sup> Gilbert allows for some leeway in how serious one's violation of a joint commitment must be in order to face removal from the social group: 'What does the default in question amount to within the framework of the joint commitment as a whole, for example. Is it a peccadillo or a major crime?... default in at least some cases renders a joint commitment not void, but rather *voidable* by the other parties acting in concert.' Gilbert, 'On Feeling Guilt for What One's Group Has Done', pp. 382-3. Her emphasis. Nevertheless, whilst we can certainly imagine cases in which group unity is not seriously undermined by divergent member behaviour – a Cabinet Minister who accidentally mistakes the details of an agreed policy, for instance – the strength of the default in the case at hand must surely lie beyond the bounds of mere rebuke.

<sup>104</sup> The status of CCR in cases of coalition government is a much more complicated issue, and indeed there is some evidence of the convention's seeming relaxation during the tenure of the current Conservative-

denigrate a policy whilst it is being concurrently advanced by their colleagues, and yet remain within this core political body, is an occurrence for which Gay and Powell provide only one other major example – citing the well-known opposition of then-Home Secretary James Callaghan to PM Harold Wilson’s 1969 industrial relations proposals, conduct which resulted in no more than his temporary removal from the innermost circle of Cabinet policymakers.<sup>105</sup> There is, nonetheless, another much more routine manner in which the extant demands of Collective Cabinet Responsibility are purposely neglected, and through which the unanimity of this collective can be thrown into doubt. The phenomenon to which we refer is that of the ‘unauthorised disclosure’ or Cabinet ‘leak’.<sup>106</sup>

### *Leaks*

The leaking of information regarding Cabinet decision-making, including the supposedly-confidential details of its internal discussion, has been an ever-present feature of the British political landscape since – at the very least – the first half the twentieth century.<sup>107</sup> Whether through the dissemination of private policy documents, sharing personal correspondence, or indeed even explicit ‘briefings’ about Cabinet discourse and disagreement to members of the press, Ministers have continually violated the rules of secrecy by which their shared deliberation is supposed to operate. The content and motivations behind such leaks are variable; a Minister may, on the one hand, wish to indicate their own (and perhaps allies’) disapproval of a group policy, a means by which to put on record the kind of personal view unlikely to be documented in

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Liberal Democrat government: see, for instance H. Mulholland and A. Statton, ‘Nick Clegg threatens to veto health reforms over role of NHS regulator’, *The Guardian*, 18<sup>th</sup> May 2011. However, given that coalitions are non-standard occurrences within UK politics, and moreover present a range of unique questions that cannot be adequately examined within the confines of this project, such issues will not be explored here. Building an agential model focused upon usual political conditions must be our first concern, and provides a platform from which such further inquiries might then proceed.

<sup>105</sup> Gay and Powell, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>106</sup> For a detailed discussion see *Ibid.*, pp. 33-6.

<sup>107</sup> See O. Stone-Lee, ‘The time-old tradition of leaks’, *BBC News Online*, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/4555396.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4555396.stm), 13<sup>th</sup> April 2006.

abridged Cabinet minutes.<sup>108</sup> Conversely, they may instead be seeking to draw negative attention to the views of Cabinet adversaries, perhaps revealing dissent or insincerity as a means to undermine them. On either basis, such disclosure of discordant views can be a method by which to pressure the collective to consider a different course.

Do such occurrences pose the same danger to Cabinet integrity as the kinds of violation of CCR just discussed? Given their comparative regularity a positive answer here would no doubt be fatal to this body's prospects of developed plural agency. Advantageously, however, there is an important general feature of this common ministerial practice which strongly mitigates the potential damage leaks of this sort can cause (that is at least, agentially speaking), and this relates to the very element that differentiates a leak from the kind of public statement demonstrated in the Clare Short case – the fact that leaks are, by their very nature, *unattributable*.<sup>109</sup> A Cabinet leak, as opposed to an open proclamation of disunity, is so called because its source remains unnamed; such disclosures are made on the condition of anonymity from those who subsequently broadcast them, a method by which to protect the Minister in question from the punitive consequences of an unconcealed dereliction of CCR.

On the basis of the shrouded identity of the informer, the notion of abiding group unity – though undoubtedly weakened by scepticism about internal consensus – is nonetheless much easier to salvage, for without an overt expression of nonconformity by a Minister, even if they are implicated as having a divergent personal view, suggested disagreement appears far less tangible in relation to group conduct itself. After all, provided each Cabinet member continues to appropriately practice their representative (we-mode) behaviour, and supports the articulated positions of the collective in their public utterances, then joint commitment itself is effectively maintained. There is not a sense, unlike in the former type of case, in which any Minister here reneges or 'gets out of' their social group obligations as a result of a leak, for this would require a

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<sup>108</sup> See Gay and Powell, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

further, unconcealed denunciation of the kind that no member is here – presumably – willing to undertake.<sup>110</sup>

So long as a cohesive *group* position is outwardly conveyed, then, unauthorised disclosures about the details of decision-making can cause only limited impairment to the foundational requirements of plural subjecthood. On the basis of an anonymous leak alone nobody has actually violated the joint commitment that sustains the group as a collective agent; at worst the lack of unanimity in *reaching* an agreed joint position may have been revealed. But so long as that final position is indeed jointly upheld – for whatever personal reasons of acceptance<sup>111</sup> – a social grouping, in line with the boundaries of formal Cabinet membership, remains in operation. There is no splintering of group-agential identity so long as no Minister is willing to speak out publically.

A sense of internal unanimity no doubt bolsters our belief that a collective is functioning as a group agent, and – in what is likely a conscious rationale for CCR – would certainly provide a more secure footing for those representatives who must defend a joint position (i.e. avoiding accusations that Ministers are not fully convinced by a policy's merits); but as we have made plain at a number of points it is, in the end, only attitudes the group ultimately holds as a 'we' that are agentially relevant. An awkward incongruity between the joint attitudes a Minister expresses *qua* group member and the personal attitudes attributed to them in a leak may certainly produce a degree of political embarrassment, but it does not undermine the integrity of the Cabinet as a plural subject. Moreover, in relation to this body in particular there is a general acceptance that the notion of internal harmony is indeed no more than a necessary fiction, one that in reality would be difficult to reconcile with a desire for frank discussion and debate amongst a diverse membership:

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<sup>110</sup> An analogous case for individual agency might be that of the uncertain or indecisive person, who although torn between different options in their internal deliberation ultimately decides on a course of action and sticks to it. Awareness of their internal qualms in making that choice, or even expressions of self-doubt afterwards, would – so long as they ultimately continue to endorse the chosen stance – not lead us to deny their agency over it.

<sup>111</sup> See the related earlier discussion of Chapter 3, pages 132-34.

Traditionally there has been a belief by some that the composition of a Cabinet (and the wider Government) should reflect some or all of the main strands of thinking, and the main political leaders of the governing party (or parties, of a coalition). This form of 'balanced' Cabinet institutionalises, to some extent, at least the potential for ministerial disunity, which may test the limits of collective responsibility. On the other hand, a Cabinet with (in so far as is human and politically possible) one voice... may not guarantee trouble-free government as the excluded ideologies and personalities are unlikely to remain silent for ever.<sup>112</sup>

It is in this discursive context, however – the other primary motivation for CCR's safeguarding of Cabinet confidentiality – that leaks prove to be a much greater problem, threatening one of the more advanced plural attributes we have sought to ascribe to this political body: its capacity for practical wisdom. Whilst leaks may not prevent the policy-making group from undertaking the most fundamental process of group agency, that of jointly committing to attitudes, they do seem capable of severely debilitating the openness and sincerity with which preceding group deliberation might occur. If Ministers live in persistent fear of their private words being publically exposed, then the likelihood of them being candid and forthright in their decision-making contributions – especially if that contribution goes against the grain of either public or colleagues' opinion – is significantly reduced. This is a view echoed by former Deputy PM Michael Heseltine, who in 1986 was himself the victim of a Cabinet leak whilst serving as Secretary of State for Defence:

There is not the slightest doubt that if you have a leak environment, an atmosphere of suspicion, it tends to curtail dialogue and trust. The temptation is not to put things in writing and have the discussions on issues... If you really do want to explore an issue it's hugely beneficial to be able to sit with people who have the quality of mind

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<sup>112</sup> Gay and Powell, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

In a similar vein, Patrick Gordon Walker argues that the phenomenon of Cabinet leaks is in fact a sign that the primary rationale behind CCR is in fact well respected: 'In every Cabinet the leak will be deplored and condemned; but it is paradoxically necessary to the preservation of the doctrine, of collective responsibility. It is the mechanism by which the doctrine of collective responsibility is reconciled with political reality. The unattributable leak is itself a recognition and acceptance of the doctrine that members of a Cabinet to not disagree in public... The leak is the price paid for the maintenance of a constitutionally necessary doctrine.' P. C. Gordon Walker, *The Cabinet*. Revised Edition. London: Cape, 1972, p. 32.

to contribute to a hair down dialogue... In those circumstances you are prepared to look at options which are perhaps bizarre.<sup>113</sup>

As we noted in the theoretical analysis of group-level practical wisdom,<sup>114</sup> open dialogue is perhaps the most essential prerequisite for collective moral insight to emerge. In order for the ethical perceptions of group members to amalgamate, and thus potentially shed light upon considerations and concerns that are not apparent to other participants, individuals must be thoroughly unhindered in their ability to express views to the group as a whole. Conformity and constraint, even if self-imposed, are the enemies of this process. If a Cabinet Minister feels they can contribute to a normative debate, and yet withholds or moderates their views due to trepidation of their public exposure, then the potential scope of the collective's shared discernment will not be fully realised. Resultant policy may still be the product of group intention, but that intention will at best reflect a rather curtailed realisation of the group's judgemental capacities. To the extent that perceptual overlap is restricted, the likelihood of fine discernment is reduced.<sup>115</sup>

### *Memoirs*

The manner in which leaks can compromise Cabinet confidentiality shares much in common with another recurrent aspect of political behaviour worthy of brief note – the publication of ex-Ministerial memoirs. To similar effect as the above, such documents – sometimes promulgated in the form of diaries or biographies – can shed rather detailed light upon the narratives of past

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<sup>113</sup> Quoted in O. Stone-Lee, *op. cit.* See also Sir Gus O'Donnell's evidence to the Chilcot Inquiry regarding Cabinet leaks, summarised in: 'Blair leak fears curbed Cabinet Iraq talks – O'Donnell', *BBC News Online*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-12306377>, 28<sup>th</sup> January 2011.

<sup>114</sup> See Chapter 3, page 150-51.

<sup>115</sup> In such circumstances, so long as participants contribute even limited insight to the decision-making process, we may of course still have an instance of genuine *collective* judgment, and furthermore it may still exceed the capacities of any individual member deliberating alone. The question of whether this collective insight could qualify as practical wisdom – fine and reliable moral discernment able to adapt to multiple contexts – will thus depend both on how we understand this concept, and moreover on how significant the curtailment of views is. Whether group members must enjoy *absolute* freedom of expression in order to achieve collective practical wisdom will rest on whether we view this notion as either an ideal, a threshold, or as something that an agent can have to a greater or lesser degree (i.e. being more, or less, practically wise). As with other tangential controversies within virtue ethics, we will remain neutral on this question.

policy decisions, outlining the internal dynamics and opinions within the group during particular periods of deliberation. According to the official guidelines of Cabinet operation, CCR ought also to extend to the conduct of individuals once they have left their Ministerial positions, placing some important restrictions on the information that can be revealed in such recollections.<sup>116</sup> Amongst these, it is argued that the opinions and advice of other Ministers should only be recalled in a manner that avoids the attribution of specific attitudes to identifiable persons.<sup>117</sup>

As with the other aspects of CCR we have discussed in this section, however, adherence to outlined rules is rarely absolute, and the scope of Ministerial memoirs often go beyond the strict limits endorsed by the Cabinet's code of conduct.<sup>118</sup> Transgressional disclosure here takes advantage of the difficulty of enforcing such conventions, in the absence of legally-binding force,<sup>119</sup> when they are directed at individuals who are no longer subject to the censures of membership. If the author of a memoir has left government – and in many cases, politics in general – then there is little sense in which they might be reprimanded for the words they publish. Moreover, even if technically conforming to the outlined standards there is still the potential for a great deal to be implied by documents of this sort. An account limited to the role and attitudes of the author themselves still allows for a considerable degree of disclosure and revelation, and can likely be framed in such a way as to make the views of colleagues – even if not explicitly attributed – rather easy to discern.

As should be evident, then, it is once more the potential to undermine open and unguarded dialogue for which political memoirs are here relevant; the worry that Cabinet Ministers may again see fit to restrain their deliberative contributions, at the expense of candid group reflection,

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<sup>116</sup> *The Ministerial Code* (2010), §8.10. The guidelines endorse the findings of the 1976 Radcliffe Report.

<sup>117</sup> Great Britain, Committee of Privy Councillors on Ministerial Memoirs, *Report of the Committee of Privy Councillors on Ministerial Memoirs*, Cmnd 6386. London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1976, §56.

<sup>118</sup> See, for a famous example, the diaries of former Conservative Party Minister Alan Clark, which make explicit reference to the confidential views of senior political figures: A. Clark, *Diaries: In Power*. London: Phoenix, 2001.

<sup>119</sup> It is a requirement for memoirs to be submitted for review by the Cabinet Secretary prior to publication. Such oversight falls short of censorship, however, and it remains the responsibility of the author to conform to any subsequent advice. See Gay and Powell, *op. cit.*, pp. 38-9.

on awareness that their private comments may be brought into the open further down the line. Could this issue therefore present the same level of threat to collective practical wisdom as was judged in relation to leaks? One point worth noting about ex-Ministerial publication is that it is open to rather minimal control by *current* Cabinet members, who as we have seen have sparse means by which to curb or expurgate documents of this sort. The danger posed by memoirs is thus distinctive, for they have the potential to diminish agential capacities not from within, but from without.

All this said, our ultimate conclusion on the severity of this threat is highly qualified by the timescale of memoir publication. Unlike the other issues explored in this section, *ex-Ministerial* accounts risk a uniquely *retrospective* violation of Cabinet secrecy, and this opens up an additional, temporal factor in assessments of their import. Though in theory such disclosures can be as damaging to an atmosphere of trust as the case of an anonymous leak (indeed, perhaps even more so given their detail and openness), their practical impact upon Cabinet operation is surely tempered by the passage of time.

A full and indiscreet account of a former Minister's experience, broadcast in the immediate wake of their exit from the Cabinet, would no doubt have explosive consequences for how internal discussion was subsequently conducted. Such an occurrence, with the potential to expose current members' views towards live policy issues, would quickly sweep aside any sense of confidentiality on which frank discussion could be founded.<sup>120</sup> At the opposite end of the scale, however, a memoir published many years after the events it chronicles, at a time in which outlined decisions are moot and relevant figures no longer in power, is unlikely to be troubling to the sensibilities of incumbent politicians. A diary's posthumous revelation of divisions and infighting within Winston

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<sup>120</sup> Resignation statements, or published letters of resignation, are therefore particularly perilous when they reveal details of internal Cabinet discussions: see Gay and Powell, *op. cit.*, p. 11. Practically speaking, such mediums do, however, provide much less scope for detail in comparison to more expansive memoirs, and are thus unlikely to give a substantive account of individual contributions to the decision-making process.

Churchill's Cabinet may be of historical interest, but would be close to impotent with respect to the confidence with which current policy-makers express their views.

Hence, it is within the middle range between these two extremes that the impact of political memoirs is most open to question, and there is no sure-fire means by which to measure their precise bearing upon the ministerial mind-set.<sup>121</sup> That being said, it can be broadly conjectured that the discursive impact of political memoirs – qualified, of course, by their specific content – is inversely proportional to how long after the deliberation in question their publication occurs. This intuition concurs strongly with the rationale behind the 'thirty-year rule', a restriction imposed on the publication of official Cabinet papers, though whether it is possible to devise an exact time-frame for the 'safe' publication of Ministerial accounts remains debatable.<sup>122</sup>

### **Circumscribed Decision-Making**

A final set of interconnected issues is worthy of consideration. Though we have so far only been considering challenges to Cabinet agency related to its central convention of collective responsibility, other more general deviations from the codified structure of executive decision-making likewise have the potential to undermine this body's agential possibilities. Continuous with the preceding analysis, the threat posed by these considerations is once more directed at the capacity for collective practical wisdom.

#### *Misuse of Committees*

The first of these issues relates to the role and composition of Cabinet committees, which in earlier discussion we noted as a positive structural feature liable to promote the accuracy and

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<sup>121</sup> Politicians may be reluctant to reveal concerns about their reputation, nor willing to suggest that they did not speak up for their views on important matters. In addition, there is no guarantee that Ministers are even specifically conscious – amongst other potential influences – of the role future exposure has on their willingness to speak up, nor can it be presumed that there is uniformity across different individuals.

<sup>122</sup> See page 199. Thirty years certainly errs on the side of caution in this respect, which is perhaps a recognition of the less subjective – and thus perhaps more authoritative – nature of official records in contrast to the personal perspectives and agendas that undoubtedly colour most political memoirs.

efficiency of the group's information processing.<sup>123</sup> Yet whilst the use of specialised sub-groups, and the division of membership proficiency, can with proper employment very much strengthen the epistemic capabilities of a body such as this, there is also concomitant danger if they are misused.

One manner in which the original aims of the committee system can be misdirected is through the choice of their constituting members. The structure and membership of Cabinet committees is left entirely within the discretion of the sitting Prime Minister,<sup>124</sup> within whose remit it is to decide who exactly counts as an 'expert' within a particular policy area. The political temptation in this regard, especially in light of internal division, may be to appoint ideological allies within the Cabinet at the expense of Ministers whose dissenting views – though more troublesome – are likely to offer the most valuable range of perspectives. Though in theory sub-group specialisation ought to proceed purely on the basis of knowledge and judgement, then, the political reality is that the choice of a committee's members may be motivated as much by a desire to freeze out frictional personalities, to choose the deference of 'yes men' in place of the difficulties of compromise.<sup>125</sup> Whist politically advantageous, such a strategy corresponds to a narrowing of the group's perceptual scope.

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<sup>123</sup> See pages 202-3.

<sup>124</sup> *The Cabinet Manual*, §4.10, 4.12

<sup>125</sup> In committees where the absence of certain Ministerial *positions* would be all but unthinkable (e.g. not including the Chancellor in the Economic Affairs Committee, or the Defence Secretary in the National Security Council), specific membership may of course be controlled indirectly through the prior step of Ministerial appointments. As we have seen, a Cabinet reshuffle provides ample scope for the removal of a particular figure from a chosen area of decision-making. As a clear recent example, we can note the September 2012 reshuffle of David Cameron's Cabinet, which saw a widely-regarded opponent of the government's planned expansion of Heathrow Airport, Justine Greening, controversially moved from her position as Transport Secretary to Secretary for International Development: see D. Millward, 'Cabinet Reshuffle: Boris Johnson attacks demotion of Justine Greening over Heathrow', *The Telegraph*, 4<sup>th</sup> September 2012. For an apposite commentary on the politics behind this decision, see also N. Robinson, 'Reshuffle: The 'hand of George'', *BBC News Online*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-19489252>, 5<sup>th</sup> September 2012: '[The Chancellor] Mr Osborne wants to give business the airport expansion they want but, in his mind, transport secretary Justine Greening was a block to even having a conversation about that subject... But now, Mr Osborne will calculate that a debate can at least take place about whether expansion should be allowed in future.'

Representing a much starker abuse of the committee system, however, is the *overuse* of such sub-groupings in place of full and open Cabinet reflection. The basis of devolved decision-making, as we have discussed, is to place the consideration of particular policy matters in the hands of those Ministers most capable of responding to them, increasing the efficiency with which government business can be processed by relieving the deliberative pressures placed on its members.<sup>126</sup> The general rationale behind this mechanism appears sound: the range of policy matters that are subject to Cabinet review are legion, and many will require discernment on precise or technical details that – though essential for the issues confronted by specific members – it would neither be feasible nor efficient for *all* Ministers to be closely conversant with.

The best way forward in a complicated legal dispute, or in devising the minutiae of a new financial venture, are often best handled by more focused, specialised Ministerial groupings than by the collective in totality.<sup>127</sup> This withstanding, technical decisions of this sort will often represent the more specific means by which to implement broader decision that *are* presumed to be taken by the group as a whole – in these examples above, perhaps a wider stance on EU judicial powers, or an underlying economic policy direction. Cabinet Ministers in general then consent to mutually supporting the conclusions reached by a committee to be the joint attitude of the group at large. But whilst this deference to sub-groups may be conceivable on subsidiary issues like those above, policies that have a major impact upon the ideological direction of an administration, or address what are quite evidently issues of pressing moral relevance, sit much less comfortably within this abridged decision-making process. In contrast, they represent policy questions for which the widest possible oversight ought to be invoked.

A misappropriation of concentrated policy consideration, at the expense of reflection by Cabinet as a whole, would thus be a serious impediment to the potential breadth of group-level moral

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<sup>126</sup> *The Cabinet Manual*, §4.9.

<sup>127</sup> Such committees may moreover be augmented by external specialists or advisors, for instance professional economists, scientists or military leaders. Such figures do not have the power to make decisions or draw policy conclusions, however, and exist solely to advise relevant Ministers.

insight, segregating deliberation on the most important ethical matters away from this body's full perceptual capacity. Is there evidence of such behaviour actually occurring in contemporary British politics? Returning to our recurrent example of the 2003 Iraq Conflict, the inquiry set up to examine the role of intelligence in the lead up to the decision for war, the 2004 Butler Review, made the following observations concerning executive decision-making during the period in question, chronicling the notable decline of the full Cabinet as the primary basis for policy deliberation:

In the year before the war, the Cabinet discussed policy towards Iraq as a specific agenda item 24 times. It also arose in the course of discussions on other business. Cabinet members were offered and many received briefings on the intelligence picture on Iraq. There was therefore no lack of discussion on Iraq; and we have been informed that it was substantive. The Ministerial Committee on Defence and Overseas Policy did not meet. By contrast, over the period from April 2002 to the start of military action, some 25 meetings attended by the small number of key Ministers, officials and military officers most closely involved provided the framework of discussion and decision-making within Government.

One inescapable consequence of this was to limit wider collective discussion and consideration by the Cabinet to the frequent but unscripted occasions when the Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary and Defence Secretary briefed the Cabinet orally. Excellent quality papers were written by officials, but these were not discussed in Cabinet... Without papers circulated in advance, it remains possible but is obviously much more difficult for members of the Cabinet outside the small circle directly involved to bring their political judgement and experience to bear on the major decisions for which the Cabinet as a whole must carry responsibility... [and] plainly reduced their ability to prepare properly for such discussions<sup>128</sup>

The account above paints a picture of a seriously disfigured mode of collective decision-making, one in which not only discussion itself, but also the very means for proper discussion (i.e. relevant policy papers) have been perennially withheld from the majority of members. Such circumstances represent not only a reluctance to encourage the full amalgamation of Ministerial insight, but also a wider failure of the infrastructure supposed to support the processing of evidence, something

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<sup>128</sup> Lord Butler of Brockwell, *Review of Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction: Report of a Committee of Privy Councillors*. London: The Stationary Office, 2004, §609-610.

that is clearly necessary for informed judgement to occur.<sup>129</sup> Operating under these conditions, then, in which free and open debate on policy is – for most members – all but ruled out, it is highly unlikely that the Cabinet’s capacity for collective practical wisdom could be maintained. Even if this pattern of decision-making ultimately reached the ‘right’ moral conclusions, an inability for the group as a whole to contribute to the deliberative process would preclude the assertion that the Cabinet *itself* had knowledge of the appropriate course of action, and thus any ascription of plural virtue to this body would likewise be misplaced.

### *Prime Ministerial Domination*

It is often argued that occurrences of this nature – of restricted circles of decision-making, and the subsequently truncated discussion of policy matters – are demonstrative symptoms of a more general shift towards so-called ‘Prime Ministerial government’: the increasing concentration of executive power within the hands of the administration’s leader. As our latter discussion of the Cabinet has revealed, there is often a significant and important disparity between the constitutional design of governmental entities and the political reality by which they really function. The same is true of the British Premier, who despite inhabiting a role historically defined as merely *primus inter pares* (‘first among equals’), the chairperson of the collective, has in modern times come to wield exclusive powers and influence that far outweigh those of other Cabinet members. Prime Ministerial government therefore corresponds to the domination of the Cabinet by its preeminent member. There are two respects in which this might occur, each of which – by curtailing proper group reflection – present a now-familiar obstruction to the emergence of collective moral wisdom.

Following on from our preceding discussion, the first method by which a Prime Minister might exert undue influence over group decision-making is by taking command of the committee

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<sup>129</sup> Indeed, we earlier noted this capacity to be a strong foundation of the *idealised* Cabinet’s attitude-to-fact rationality: see pages 202-3.

apparatus just outlined.<sup>130</sup> In the context of significant policy deliberation passing through such sub-groups, the ability of the PM to chair a significant number of them – thus setting the agenda, directing the discussion, and holding important sway over the conclusions of such meetings – can result in effective control of a sizeable portion of policy-making output. Such a strategy was arguably undertaken by Tony Blair in May 2005, who reduced the overall number of Cabinet committees whilst respectively increasing the number, and thus proportion, that he himself chaired – a move that was seen by commentators to be a means by which to push through his personal agenda of domestic reforms.<sup>131</sup>

Even more forcefully, however, it may be the case that a Prime Minister attempts to circumvent the Cabinet and committee system altogether, and seek to devise government policy more informally through a series of ad hoc, often-bilateral discussions with Ministers and advisors. Forming decisions on this basis moves substantive policy deliberation outside of the collective infrastructure provided by Cabinet machinery, and represents a more severe centralisation of decision-making power around the Prime Minister themselves. In such circumstances we have what may be more aptly described as ‘presidential’ behaviour – the expansion and consolidation of political control to a point where genuine group discussion is effectively redundant. One possible manifestation of this style of leadership is a Prime Minister’s announcement of policy – creating subsequent pressure for Cabinet support – in the absence of prior knowledge or authorisation by members at large, including, on occasion, even the Minister responsible for the policy area in question.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Part of which may of course be the appointment of allies within their membership, as we have already discussed.

<sup>131</sup> See N. Morris and B. Russell, ‘Blair consolidates power with control of key cabinet committees’, *The Independent*, 25<sup>th</sup> May 2005.

<sup>132</sup> Something that additionally violates two further, related obligations implied by CCR: ‘that ministers do not trespass without authorisation on the departmental responsibilities of their colleagues and that colleagues, including the Prime Minister, should respect the advice (even if not accepted) of ministers within their departmental policy areas.’: Gay and Powell, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

Evidence suggests that during periods of recent political history this kind of presidential framework has indeed formed the backbone of a sizeable swath of important policy-making, with the Blair administration's oft-termed 'sofa government' recurrently cited as a markedly strong example.<sup>133</sup> Clare Short's resignation statement to the House of Commons was expressly scathing in laying such allegations at the Prime Minister's door, arguing that Cabinet consultation was particularly eschewed in the period prior to the conflict in Iraq, only encountering major policy once it had been pre-determined higher up the chain of authority:

...the errors we are making over Iraq and other recent initiatives flow not from Labour's values, but from the style and organisation of our government, which is undermining trust and straining party loyalty in a way that is completely unnecessary... the problem is the centralisation of power into the hands of the Prime Minister and an increasingly small number of advisers who make decisions in private without proper discussion. It is increasingly clear, I'm afraid, that the Cabinet has become, in Bagehot's phrase, a dignified part of the constitution... There is no real collective responsibility because there is no collective; just diktats in favour of increasingly badly thought through policy initiatives that come from on high. The consequences of this are serious. Expertise in our system lies in departments. Those who dictate from the centre do not have full access to this expertise and they do not consult. This leads to bad policy.<sup>134</sup>

The range of issues that have been explored in latter sections represent different means by which Cabinet deliberation can be structurally constrained; nonetheless, they each share the same conclusion for the prospects of collective practical wisdom. Whether through the distortion, overuse, domination, or indeed plain bypassing of established Cabinet apparatus, any move that demotes the importance of *en masse* reflection for major policy decisions – which 'acts to concentrate detailed knowledge and effective decision-making in fewer minds at the top'<sup>135</sup> – strongly undermines the shared perceptual capacities of this political body. In earlier discussion we noted that the functionally-inexplicit nature of Cabinet appraisal boded well for the possible

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<sup>133</sup> See, for instance, J. Kirkup, 'Ed Miliband attacks Blair and Brown for 'sofa government'', *The Telegraph*, 25<sup>th</sup> June 2011; see also the testimony of Gus O'Donnell in 'Blair leak fears curbed Iraq talks – O'Donnell'.

<sup>134</sup> Speech to the House of Commons: Hansard HC, 12<sup>th</sup> May 2003, volume 405, column 38.

<sup>135</sup> Butler, *Review of Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction*, §608.

amalgamation of Ministerial insight;<sup>136</sup> what we have seen here is that when guidelines are loosened to too great an extent such permissiveness can in fact work against perceptual overlap. Deliberative flexibility is only enabling under general conditions of freedom and inclusiveness; as the conclusion of the Butler Report suggests, in the absence of these features the effect can be quite the contrary:

We do not suggest that there is or should be an ideal or unchangeable system of collective Government, still less that procedures are in aggregate any less effective now than in earlier times. However, we are concerned that the informality and circumscribed character of the Government's procedures which we saw in the context of policy-making towards Iraq risks reducing the scope for informed collective practical judgement. Such risks are particularly significant in a field like the subject of our Review, where hard facts are inherently difficult to come by and the quality of judgement is accordingly all the more important.<sup>137</sup>

### **The Prospects of Cabinet Virtue**

On the basis of the preceding sections, then, how confident – if at all – can we be about the British Cabinet's capacity for collective virtue ethical agency? On constitutional grounds, we have noted that there is indeed much to support the kinds of capabilities necessary for virtue-based attributes to emerge. Nevertheless, this optimism has been somewhat offset by recognition of a range of political realities which – to differing degrees – have the potential to undermine those very foundations. Where, therefore, should our conclusion lie? Are the threats posed by violation, abuse and evasion of Cabinet procedures enough to undermine our original evaluation that it is within this group's ability to develop plural virtue? Should we resultantly disqualify the Cabinet from normative appraisals of character, virtue and vice?

Amongst the perceived challenges to Cabinet agency considered in the preceding discussion, it is critical to note that in most cases the danger posed by such issues is best understood in degrees, as operating along a spectrum rather than in absolute terms. The threat presented to open

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<sup>136</sup> See pages 214-16.

<sup>137</sup> Butler, *Review of Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction*, §611.

deliberation by leaks and memoirs cannot be judged outright, but only in reference to their prevalence, content, and – in the latter case – the time and context of their publication. Vague and infrequent disclosures of Cabinet discussions are clearly less serious than explicit and widespread ones. Similar insight can be drawn with our subsequent analyses of inhibited policy deliberation, for which factors like the proficiency of sub-groupings, or the extent of Prime Ministerial influence, are difficult to measure in an ‘all or nothing’ manner. A modest display of authority and control on behalf of the PM is a likely prerequisite for effective governance, and need not signal the end of significant consultation and dialogue. There is surely also some scope for public violations of CCR to be more or less damaging to agency: a minor, accidental error in Ministerial assertion is not a grave contradiction of policy.<sup>138</sup>

Given this range of possibilities, the true condition of Cabinet agency will depend upon which end of these various spectra its practical operation is most closely positioned. The key question is not whether such curtailments and abuses of procedure occur – on the evidence presented, clearly they do – but, rather, the question of whether such occurrences are *significant enough* to undermine the fairly robust impression of this body’s plural agency. Throughout our analysis and appraisal of these issues we have frequently sought to consider their import at the most extreme limit, drawing attention to the damage they *could* cause under the most severe conditions of manifestation; but it remains open to question as to how likely these most destructive outcomes are. Accordingly, let us attempt to draw some broad conclusions about the potency of these threats in light of the Cabinet’s overall operation.

Reviewing the issues outlined, then, the limited deployment of free votes was firstly found to be well below a threshold that could pose a danger to unified agency. Such occurrences represented the mere suspension of group attitude formation, and would need to form the basis of at least a significant portion of policy-making in order to be maleficent. The possibility that leaks and

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<sup>138</sup> See the related discussion on page 223, note 103.

memoirs might undermine internal freedom of expression was seen to be more viable, and some impact upon deliberative openness can be reasonably assumed. But is it likely that such curtailment is of a level mortiferous to valuable debate? The plainest evidence to the contrary – so much so that it is prone to be overlooked – is the raw fact that leaks exposing open discord amongst Cabinet members continue to be prevalent.<sup>139</sup> If Ministers were genuinely shackled into acquiescence by the threat of exposure, and argument mute, there would be little for leaks of this sort to reveal.

The few cases we have discussed in which important capacities *do* appear to be conclusively ruled out were in relation to, firstly, the non-removal of overt Ministerial dissidents (the Clare Short case), and secondly, the endemic suppression of genuine group decision-making (acute Prime Ministerial government). Such occurrences *are* of sufficient severity to undermine relevant agential functions; they demonstrate Cabinet operation that breaches the threshold at which such group attributes might plausibly be maintained. Yet despite the undoubted force of these particular examples, it remains essential to situate them within a broader political context; instances of this extreme nature remain stark exceptions from the – even imperfect – norm.

In the former case of non-resignation, we have already indicated the egregious aberrancy of such an occurrence. Instances of open and fundamental nonconformity, not resulting in group expulsion, are not merely rare; they are practically unheard of within single-party government.<sup>140</sup>

The fact that the case in question was so widely regarded as deviant and abnormal, and a subsequent focus of so much comment and analysis, is representative of an important and abiding reality – that for a vast majority of the time, Ministers *do* broadly conform to at least the

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<sup>139</sup> For further recent examples, see D. Boffey and T. Helm, 'Eric Pickles warns David Cameron of rise in homeless families risk', *The Guardian*, 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2011; N. Watt 'Liam Fox believes cabinet colleague leaked letter on aid', *The Guardian*, 18<sup>th</sup> May 2011. See also Chief Secretary to the Treasury Danny Alexander's remarks about Cabinet arguments in 'To do: Fix economy, save Union, look after £700bn, buy shoes', *Press and Journal*, 11<sup>th</sup> February 2013.

<sup>140</sup> As we noted earlier, the airing of contrary views is perhaps less curtailed within a coalition environment. See page 223 note 104. Even within this setting, however, the kind of attack evident in the Short case, directed at one's own party leadership, remains an extreme outlier. Were such occurrences to become more commonplace, however, this might well present grounds for a reappraisal of the issue.

most critical elements of group-mode behaviour necessitated by CCR. Framed in this manner, the agential consequences of a case like this can be significantly curbed, for whatever the short-term bearing of such a break with procedure, the overall impact of an isolated violation is surely less caustic. That the questionable management of a single Minister, at one point in an administration's political incumbency, could lead us to invalidate the remaining bulk of unified Cabinet behaviour appears a gross overstep.<sup>141</sup> So long as there is enduring consent to preserve group unity, Cabinet agency remains on a firm footing.

Prime Ministerial encroachment on group decision-making, and even those more presidential trends of personally-driven leadership, are – evidence would have us believe – significantly less exceptional within contemporary British politics; but for the currents of centralisation to reach the degree suggested by some of the most severe commentary of this section remains particularly remarkable. If inquiry findings and the testimony of former Ministers are accurate, then the state of major policy deliberation in the lead up to the Iraq War clearly put paid to the Cabinet's capacity for group-level wisdom. With collective discussion bypassed in favour of consolidated authority – 'diktats... from on high'<sup>142</sup> – this period of the Blair administration marked a truly fundamental divergence between the theory and practice of Cabinet operation.

The important thing to note, however, is the powerful and revealing reaction provoked by this state of affairs. Any notion that such levels of Prime Ministerial dominance are either normalised or inveterate is surely at odds with what transpired as a result of this episode, with the condition of political decision-making during this period considered severe enough to lead to (a) multiple Ministerial resignations, (b) two full-scale public inquiries,<sup>143</sup> and furthermore (c) significant

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<sup>141</sup> Indeed, we might compare such an occurrence to the case of an individual whose normal agential functioning is disrupted by a short-term psychotic episode. So long as this functioning is subsequently regained, and the condition does not result from a more perennial disorder, our confidence in that person's enduring agency remains secure.

<sup>142</sup> See quoted section on page 237.

<sup>143</sup> The already-discussed Butler Report of 2004, as well as the broader Chilcot Inquiry, which is due to announce its findings in 2013: see [www.iraqinquiry.org.uk](http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk). Neither of these inquiries had an *exclusive* focus on Cabinet decision-making, but as has already been evidenced the topic nonetheless formed a significant

pressure (and indeed, resultant pledges<sup>144</sup>) to restore the machinery of Cabinet government to a position of prominence and authority. There is some evidence that – to a qualified extent – the latter has indeed occurred, with a move towards longer, more regular, and more formalised Cabinet meetings designed to provide the primary framework onto which smaller, more informal meetings continue to provide additional supplementation.<sup>145</sup> Accordingly, not only should the period in question be regarded as perhaps the lowest point for modern Cabinet influence,<sup>146</sup> it was at the same time followed by concerted efforts to redress this perceived imbalance – to actively prevent it becoming the status quo.

The preceding observations are vital to how we ultimately judge the state of Cabinet agency. It is clear that the kinds of plural attribute we have sought to ascribe to this political body *can* be diminished or subverted; but not only are conditions necessary for the latter exceedingly rare, they also prove to be transitory. The most serious deviations from proper Cabinet functioning remain just that – *deviations*. There may indeed have been periods of centralised, presidential policy-making, such as in the build-up to the Iraq War, in which the Cabinet's capacity for practical wisdom was undermined; there may likewise have been cases like the non-resignation of Clare Short where this body's unified agency *did* momentarily come apart. But such occurrences embody rare instances in which the ubiquitous distance between ideal operation and practical reality has been allowed to overextend, inducing moves to return Cabinet operation to a sustainable, if imperfect, equilibrium.

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aspect of their investigative remit. The 2003 Hutton Report also overlapped with some issues of government operation and decision-making, but was less directly focused on these issues.

<sup>144</sup> See A. Seldon, 'No 10 under Cameron: The three acts of the PM's leadership', *The Independent*, 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2011.

<sup>145</sup> For a useful overview see 'Is cabinet government back?', *Politics & Government Online*, <http://www.politicscymru.com/en/cat2/article31/>, accessed 26<sup>th</sup> February 2013. There is some suggestion here that the particular demands of coalition government have provided a further spur for the retrieval of Cabinet authority.

<sup>146</sup> Former Cabinet Secretary Sir Gus O'Donnell noted that Cabinet meetings were more numerous both before and after the Blair administration: see 'Blair leak fears curbed Cabinet Iraq talks – O'Donnell'.

Maintaining the possibility of collective political virtue thus requires not the total absence of curtailing factors, but only that they are kept – or recaptured – within intuitive limits. Management of this sort is achievable, for there is nothing we have discerned in any of the above shortcomings that is inherent or unchangeable, nothing in the *nature* of this political body that necessitates such impediments to be in force. Though elements of Cabinet operation have at times drifted beyond the red lines at which specific plural attributes can be maintained, it is recognised that such periods represent a state of sickness for the collective, one from which a return to better health is subsequently sought. These ailments need not be chronic, for they do not flow necessarily from any permanent defect in the group's structure<sup>147</sup> – and so long as this remains the case, the Cabinet's ability to develop plural virtue is likewise preserved.

What the preceding observations *do* demonstrate, however, is that sustaining the conditions for collective virtue is far from an automatic process. For the Cabinet to achieve the status of a unified, rational, and virtue-capable actor rests not on mere endowment, but requires both hard work and continuing vigilance to maintain. The capacities that underlie collective virtue can lapse without careful management,<sup>148</sup> and failure to correct these disorders could very much undermine the agency we here seek to attribute. There is clearly room for improvement in how the Cabinet operates, ways in which its propensity for virtue can be maximised;<sup>149</sup> nevertheless, the structure of this body provides a strong enough foundation to rule out any dismissal of its

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<sup>147</sup> In the case of leaks and memoirs in particular we can make a further observation. Not only is there a lack of structural necessity to their *incidence*, but furthermore their practical *impact* upon open deliberation is likewise contingent. There is nothing about Cabinet operation that *demand*s Ministers to restrain themselves in a leak environment; it is only because of their personal preferences and anxieties that a risk of public revelation may lead to the curtailment of expression. Were the Cabinet composed of individuals who cared little for their own reputation, and valued the honest statement of their views ahead of all else, then there is no reason why disclosure of internal discussion should result in any reduction in the scope of group deliberation. In this context, then, there is clearly nothing about the structure of the Cabinet itself that acts to undermine this capacity. The same is not true, of course, with the centralisation of policy-making.

<sup>148</sup> Indeed, it has been suggested that – despite the initial reinvigoration of Cabinet deliberation – moves towards greater Prime Ministerial authority (though falling far short of the earlier-discussed levels) have in fact begun to re-emerge: see 'Is cabinet government back?'. Keeping this particular issue in check would thus appear to be a perennial challenge.

<sup>149</sup> As suggested by our analysis, most notably by enshrining principles of deliberative democracy at the heart of its decision-making.

virtue ethical potential. A system capable of achieving advanced joint agency is in place within the Cabinet; where there are shortfalls in this aptitude they result not from that system itself, but from the failure of those in power to utilise it properly. As such, so long as any deviant procedures remain open to modification, we can justifiably say that the British Cabinet – as a group entity – can possess virtue.

These conclusions, of course, are not to say that the British Cabinet *does* possess virtue, or indeed that it ever has – only that it has the *capacity* to do so. This capacity alone does not guarantee that the various elements of virtue will actually be adhered to, even in such a case as was outlined earlier in this chapter, where a policy is founded on ostensibly fine foundations.<sup>150</sup> In particular, whether or not a collective acts from a stable character trait will only become clear across multiple situations.<sup>151</sup> What is important here is that, much like the capable human being who may or may not actually possess a virtuous character, the Cabinet is a plural agent that can nonetheless be held to virtue's normative standards, regardless of whether it actually meets these standards in specified instances. If this body is *able* to meet the requirements of virtue, then it is morally liable for when it does not. As such, our collective ascriptions of both virtue and vice have in this context been vindicated.

### **Chapter Conclusion**

The aim of this chapter, allied to that which follows, is to investigate the plausibility of collective character evaluation within the political hierarchy of a modern state – to query how successfully the theoretical model of group virtue and vice, developed in preceding chapters, can be applied to actual political conditions. Utilising a central case study for political decision-making, the UK's

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<sup>150</sup> See page 206.

<sup>151</sup> Indeed, that the Minister who announced this foreign policy 'mission statement' was the same individual who later resigned in order to speak out against the collective is perhaps suggestive that subsequent decision-making, whether through mistaken intention or transformed motive, strayed from the path of those ostensibly admirable attitudes professed at the outset.

Westminster system of parliamentary democracy, the present chapter began that larger endeavour by analysing the agential capacities of the British Cabinet.

Proceeding through the accumulated conditions needed to qualify a group for virtue ethical ascription – the consistency, sophistication and range of its joint attitudes; an enduring moral identity; the capacity for rational deliberation – we have seen that a proper agential appreciation of this institution rests not only upon settled features of its formal structure, but also on how well those features are utilised by those who animate it. In appraising the divergent practical realities of ministerial behaviour, we have noted that successful maintenance of the Cabinet's group-agential capacities requires careful management and oversight; at the same time, it has been argued that this important political body is nevertheless very much capable of collective virtue and vice, and thus suitable for associated scrutiny. In the chapter that follows, the investigation of virtue ethical agency will be expanded beyond this foundation to encompass wider political groupings.

# 5

## **CHAPTER FIVE: A Case Study for Political Virtue (Part II)**

The previous chapter began our political case study by defending the virtue ethical agency of the British Cabinet, the centremost policy-making body within the UK's Westminster system of democracy. Suitably managed, this core political grouping was shown to be capable of the kind of sophisticated shared agency that would enable it to possess virtuous or vicious character in its own, non-reducible right. Nevertheless, though the Cabinet is undoubtedly the centre of gravity around which national decision-making proceeds, securing *its* group agency still leaves us some way short of understanding the full structure of collective political action; nor – as we shall see – does it provide us with a settled target for virtue ethical scrutiny in the international realm. As such, the present chapter will continue the progression of our agential investigation to probe the possibility of more expansive virtue ethical attributions, proceeding through the levels of Government and Parliament to produce a final account of state-level character. The culmination of this case study will provide an agential template upon which a full account of international virtue ethics might then be constructed.

# I

## From Cabinet to Government

Having secured the virtue ethical agency of the Cabinet, it is now appropriate to expand our analysis to wider political groupings. We began our evaluation of interstate conduct by attempting to discern the accurate catchment of governmental ascriptions.<sup>1</sup> We are now in a position to return to that question in the context of Westminster democracy. As we noted at the outset of this case study,<sup>2</sup> whilst the Cabinet is composed only of the most senior figures of a ruling party's parliamentary membership, a Government itself is broader in scope, encompassing not only the Prime Minister and Secretaries of State (and sometimes others) who serve in this supreme body, but also that additional set of party MPs who, under their authority, hold lower-ranking or 'junior' departmental positions. Individuals falling within these subordinate Ministerial tiers – termed, in decreasing seniority, 'Ministers of State' and 'Parliamentary Under-Secretaries of State' – are therefore part of the Government but not part of the Cabinet, whilst members of the latter are *also* part of the former.

Is it possible to extend our model of collective virtue and vice to this larger collection of politicians, or is it only within the relatively confined boundaries of the Cabinet that this kind of plural agency might be thought to operate? Furthering what has been argued thus far, can it be accurate to say that the British Government, *taken as a whole*, is virtuous or vicious? Given our intuitions regarding the extent of political culpability, and the fact that our pre-theoretical assertions *do* most commonly reference Governments over Cabinets, securing this kind of expansion is clearly desirable. It is to our significant advantage, therefore, that not only does this endeavour indeed prove fruitful, but that on the platform provided by preceding analysis the

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<sup>1</sup> See Chapter 4, pages 194-95.

<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 4, pages 195-96.

additional justification for such a move – despite its importance – requires only a small amount of further argumentation.

So as not to muddy the waters of agential progression, we have so far been careful to speak only with reference to the Cabinet during our analysis of political conventions. Nevertheless, in relation to many of the issues we have considered this represents a somewhat artificial restriction, for much that has been discerned about the operation of this particular body is rather easily extendable to the operation of Government at large. What underpins this augmentation is, again, the central principle of Collective Cabinet Responsibility – for despite its slightly misleading name, this principle is in fact binding upon government Ministers *in totality*, not simply those within the Cabinet itself:

All government ministers are bound by the collective decisions of Cabinet, save where it is set aside, and carry joint responsibility for all the Government's policies and decisions.<sup>3</sup>

Decisions reached by the Cabinet or Ministerial Committees are binding on all members of the Government.<sup>4</sup>

As such, the same restrictions and obligations incumbent upon Cabinet Ministers are likewise duties that all other members of Government must observe – that is, by every Member of Parliament who holds a salaried Ministerial position.<sup>5</sup> Prime Ministers, Senior Ministers and Junior

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<sup>3</sup> *The Cabinet Manual*, §4.2.

<sup>4</sup> *The Ministerial Code* (2010), §2.3.

<sup>5</sup> 'Parliamentary Private Secretaries' provide a minor complication to this picture. These are MPs who, despite *not* being official members of the Government (and thus holding no additional salary) are nonetheless required to uphold the tenets of CCR, supporting the work of Ministers and furthering the Government's endeavours, usually as a means to gaining Ministerial promotion in the future. See *The Ministerial Code* (2010), §3.6-3.12. The decision of whether or not to include such members within Government agency, or else group them with the remaining 'external' body of MPs, provides no additional problems for the view being advanced, but would simply require different sets of boundaries for what 'really' counts as the Government. This need not result in the same problematic discrepancy between formal and agential membership that we noted in cases on non-resignation, so long as we understand 'formal' membership merely as a contrast to the latter notion, as picking out the boundaries of a group independently of attitudinal factors. Membership in this pre-defined sense thus does not have to be 'formal' in the strongest sense of that word; Parliamentary Private Secretaries may be *informal* members of this formal body (the Government), members in all but name (indeed, some studies treat them as such: see 'Is this the biggest UK government ever?', *The Guardian*, 12<sup>th</sup> October 2012). So long as *these* membership

Ministers alike are thus required to uphold and support the collective conclusions of the Cabinet, asserting and defending these policies in their public dealings, while of course voting for them in Parliament.<sup>6</sup> The attitudes of the Cabinet therefore *are* the attitudes of the wider Government, and it is not possible to be a member of either body without willingness to maintain those group-level views. Any member of the Government who wishes to express a dissenting view to that of the collective is required to resign their Ministerial position, and revert to being a merely ‘backbench’ member of the legislature, one who is not a member of the executive.<sup>7</sup> When a Cabinet Minister resigns, therefore, they are at the same time resigning from both the Cabinet *and* the Government.

How then might we understand the relationship between Cabinet and Government in philosophical terms – in terms of group agency? Given that the primary purpose of CCR is to preserve the integrity of group attitudes, its extension to a larger collection of people must surely imply the corresponding extension of joint commitment, a widening of the political plural subject. The membership obligations inherited by Government members play the same role in maintaining collective unity as we earlier discussed in a Cabinet context, only now we see that the subject of shared attributions – the ‘we’ for which joint attitudes are in force – more properly refers to the Government at large.<sup>8</sup> As such, whilst group-level attitudes have their inception in Cabinet decision-making, where their content is formulated and approved, the scope of resulting commitments – of the subsequent ‘pool of wills’ – expands beyond the boundaries of formation. Lower-ranking sections of Government thus in a sense ‘piggyback’ the agency of that smaller political body, allowing *its* decisions to define the joint commitments to which they are subject.

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boundaries conform to those of plural agency, the two group identities remain in alignment. For simplicity, then, we will largely ignore the role of these political appointments.

<sup>6</sup> This aspect of political action, legislation, will be explored in the second major section of the chapter.

<sup>7</sup> Such members can of course retain their party political-affiliations. Robin Cook and Clare Short (initially at least) both remained Labour Party MPs despite their resignation from the Labour Government.

<sup>8</sup> This is the case for Cabinet and non-Cabinet members alike, given that it is the *same* joint commitment that is in force. Senior Ministers are thus stating *the Government* position in their group-mode behaviour, not a separate Cabinet position.

It would appear then that securing Government agency, from the robust and already-established foundation of Cabinet agency, is relatively straightforward. Whatever the joint attitudes of the Cabinet – be they intentional, belief-based, motivational or emotive – they are furthermore the joint attitudes of the executive more widely. All members of the Government, who signal their willingness to enter into joint commitment by their continuing formal affiliation, are obligated to engage in group-mode behaviour that best maintains these attitudes to be those of the collective as a whole. Cabinet agency therefore becomes Government agency.<sup>9</sup> But this alone, as we have been at pains to stress, represents only a *general* form of shared agency, the unity of relevant joint attitudes. Whilst plural subjecthood can be expanded to this wider political grouping, then, is the same true of those more developed strands of agency against which we evaluated the Cabinet?

For a majority of the features in question corroboration is ready-made, in that the established capacities of the Cabinet itself quite patently carry across to the Government level. We have already suggested that Government joint commitments can consist of that same variety of attitudinal states – intentions, beliefs, motivations, emotions – open to the Cabinet; this much ought to be self-evident, given that the latter body generates this content. The same is true as regards the sophistication of such attitudes; if the Cabinet upholds joint positions with a moral dimension, the same must be true of Government Ministers more widely. And this pattern can equally be seen in relation to group-level rationality standards; given that the relationship between joint commitments ought to be a relevant factor in their choice,<sup>10</sup> it is again *the Cabinet* that is responsible for assuring their fit with facts, action and each other. Government agency does not simply ‘piggyback’ joint commitments themselves then, but by extension the attitudinal

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<sup>9</sup> It is perhaps best to think of these as different ‘levels of agency’ rather than thinking of the Cabinet and Government as being two separate group agents. In some circumstances it may make sense to talk about the agency of the Cabinet, and in others the agency of the Government, but in a sense they are different brackets of the *same* shared agency, given that the joint commitments they hold (those relevant to policy, at least) are identical.

<sup>10</sup> See Chapter 4, pages 204-5.

consistency of Cabinet decision-making.<sup>11</sup> It is not possible for the Cabinet's attitudes to be rational but the Government's not to be.

The only area in which this parallel association might be questioned is in terms of deliberative capacity. The Cabinet decides the make-up of Government joint attitudes, and can moreover ensure their rational basis; but so long as these judgements are grounded solely in the reflection of this smaller political body is it still possible for the wider executive to possess the remaining pre-requisite of plural virtue – practical wisdom? If non-Cabinet members merely follow the path laid out for them by more senior Ministers, then although they may ultimately share in an appropriate set of collective attitudes, it cannot be maintained that the ethical discernment underpinning choice belonged to the Government in its own right, but merely a sub-group. If this were indeed the case, we would be correct to rule out the possibility of this larger agent having group-level moral wisdom, for the agential context would be no different to the previous chapter's example of travelling together: mere willingness to do so does not imbue members with the driver's knowledge of the route.<sup>12</sup>

But although it is Cabinet Ministers that must ultimately mandate a collective attitude, the idea that policy positions are developed *entirely* within this grouping is an exaggeration. The buck may indeed stop with Cabinet debate, but for the vast majority of political decisions the lead-up to policy announcement provides ample (and indeed, necessary) opportunity for Ministers more widely to contribute to the deliberative exercise. Helping to formulate policy is of course one of the central duties of *any* Government Minister; less authoritative members simply do so via more modest, and often less direct, routes. Despite lacking positions within the full Cabinet, Junior Ministers may firstly be invited to attend meetings of Cabinet committees,<sup>13</sup> providing a clear and

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<sup>11</sup> For equivalent reasons, any *dispositional* consistency in Cabinet attitudes would again be mirrored at the Government level, paving the way for a corresponding ascription of virtuous or vicious character traits.

<sup>12</sup> See Chapter 3, page 146.

<sup>13</sup> See 'Cabinet Committee Membership Lists', The Cabinet Office Online, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/60638/Cabinet-Committee-Membership-Lists-17-02-12.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/60638/Cabinet-Committee-Membership-Lists-17-02-12.pdf), 17<sup>th</sup> February 2012.

personal opportunity to feed their policy perspectives into wider discussion. Beyond this, and at a greater degree of removal, such members can likewise participate in Cabinet discourse departmentally, by working to shape the views and proposals their superiors ultimately bring to the political high table.

Accordingly, Government MPs who are not members of the Cabinet are not for that reason excluded from deliberative interface. Such individuals have a number of means by which to communicate their ideas and insights up the chain of command, even if they must do so from the periphery, or through the proxy of a more senior figure. Does this endow Junior Ministers with the same scope for decision-making input as is available to more senior Secretaries of State? Clearly not. Non-Cabinet members are unlikely to have as much influence over the broader strokes of Government policy, and the general ideology of the administration, as those at the top. Nevertheless, their involvement in the decision-making process is far from insignificant, for so long as they can present views that have the potential to influence and modify collective attitudes, that can challenge the assumptions on which Cabinet debate might otherwise take place, they can surely qualify as contributing to group-level deliberation.

In theory, the manner in which lower-level insight is transmitted up the political ranks ought to produce a particularly efficient consolidation of membership knowledge. Given the large number of Government MPs in the House of Commons (totalling 95 in 2012<sup>14</sup>), a non-hierarchical system of fine-grained decision-making would be at best laborious, and likely unworkable. Funnelling wider policy reflection through either committee or departmental sub-groups is therefore an expedient means by which to refine the information that reaches the top of the Government pyramid, ensuring that Cabinet Ministers arrive at final debate with the richest perspective possible – one that has already been filtered through previous stages of perceptual amalgamation.

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<sup>14</sup> Figures taken from K. Parry and R. Kelley, 'Limitations on the number of Ministers and the size of the Payroll vote'. House of Commons Library Research Paper SN/PC/03378. London: The Stationary Office, 2012, p. 6.

In practice, however, such a system also opens up a similar range of impairments to those that confronted intra-Cabinet deliberation. Foremost amongst these concerns is a potential for the multiple stages of this consultation process – the junctures at which the results of subsidiary deliberation ought to be fed into further discussion – might instead function as discursive *barriers*, as road blocks to the further passage of those ideas. Without the assurance of being able to express views directly within Cabinet, the risk is that senior Ministers may simply ignore or water down the sub-group contributions of less authoritative colleagues, promoting their own unmitigated views in Cabinet rather than a stance more representative of wider opinions. Doing so would clearly prevent these insights from reaching the higher echelons of policy-making.

This greater threat of perceptual regulation is an important challenge to Government-level wisdom, but mirroring the previous issues we have examined there are two points that ought again to be raised. The first is that total absence of a particular curtailment is not the standard by which a plural capacity should be judged.<sup>15</sup> The question is not whether wider Government views can enter Cabinet discussion without *any* dilution, but whether inhibition is significant enough to undermine their deliberative contribution. The latter is unlikely to be the case. Though Governmental hierarchy is strict, the very reason lower Ministerial tiers exist is to assist higher-ranking officials in their work. If the advice and insight of such individuals were thus completely and consistently spurned, and failed to play any valued role in subsequent policy formation, then there would be little rationale for maintaining these appointments.

Secondly, we can again recognise that any limitation of this nature is an affliction that is very much avoidable. An infrastructure enabling the communication and optimal concentration of Ministerial knowledge, outlined some paragraphs earlier, is evidently in place within Westminster government. Used properly this deliberative process should allow important contributions to rise to the summit of political decision-making, and the potential for shared practical wisdom is

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<sup>15</sup> See the earlier discussion in Chapter 4, pages 238-39.

secure. Any destabilisation of this capacity is therefore indicative of a failure to fully utilise the system that is in place, a shortcoming in operation rather than structure. As we have argued previously,<sup>16</sup> this does not rule out the corresponding group *ability*, and for that reason we can continue to appraise this collective agent by standards that make reference to collective judgement.

The issue above is particular to those members outside of core decision-making, but how, finally, might Government agency be affected by those other practical threats we have already evaluated in the Cabinet context? Are suspensions and violations of collective responsibility, or the centralisation of decision-making authority, equally hazardous (or unhazardous) at the wider Government level? For nearly all of these cases the danger posed is surely equivalent. Given the matching foundations of Cabinet and Government agency, and the convergent means by which they are maintained, the challenges posed by free votes, dissent with non-resignation and constrained deliberation are plainly no different here than in their earlier setting, and as such do not need repetitive analysis.<sup>17</sup> One specific issue perhaps less pertinent outside of Cabinet, however, is that of leaks and memoirs, owing to the simple fact that the scope of revelation is significantly reduced for members external to that body. Lower-ranking Ministers are not only less privy to the details of high-level discussions; at the same time their subservient role makes *them* less noteworthy targets for such disclosures.<sup>18</sup>

With the same set of practical qualifications, then, it seems that the agential capacities endowed to the Cabinet can indeed be extended to a Government in its own right. Like that smaller body, this wider political grouping can – on the basis of shared judgement – jointly commit to a varied

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<sup>16</sup> See Chapter 3, pages 167, 244 and Chapter 4, page 207.

<sup>17</sup> See Chapter 3, pages 217–44.

<sup>18</sup> This said, it is obviously still the case that any impact from *intra*-Cabinet leaks extends to Government wisdom at large. Firstly, as the Cabinet is a component *part* of Government; and secondly, given that Cabinet hosts the final interface of wider-sourced views, as was just outlined, a suppression of *this* body's deliberative openness corresponds to a reduction in judgmental amalgamation across the collective as a whole. If senior Ministers are inclined to conformity in Cabinet debate, then non-conforming views derived from broader Government discussion have no better chance of entering policy reflection.

and robust collection of morally-imbued attitudinal states, constrained by important, multi-faceted standards of rationality. We have thus secured the collective virtue ethical agency of the British Executive, the branch of national organisation most responsible for deciding a state's policies. This is a critical milestone for the overriding investigation of this thesis, and a waypoint from which more substantive questions of international virtue ethics can be advanced. We have, for the first time, a plural actor whose character can be justifiably scrutinised in light of global political decision-making – a focus around which to catalogue the virtues and vices of international interaction (see conclusion). Our agential analysis ought not to rest on its laurels, however, for there remain a number of important issues still worthy of attention. Their scrutiny forms the basis of the remaining sections.

### **The Limits of Responsibility**

Throughout the preceding investigation of Government there is one important facet of collective agency for which extended analysis has been intentionally neglected: that of an enduring subject of responsibility. As we noted in the closing stages of the Chapter 3,<sup>19</sup> though it may be possible for a short-lived social group to embody the requirements of merely occurrent moral agency – displaying a suitable and consistent composite of attitudes during some singular instance of joint action – for normative discourse to be full-blooded the agential target of evaluation needs to also be the subject of a persisting ethical identity. This common reference point for temporally-extended joint behaviour – a means by which to bind together the past, present and potential future conduct of a group – was seen to be a co-extensive condition for the ascription of moral dispositions: virtuous or vicious character traits.

A sustained identity of this very sort was earlier defended in reference to the Cabinet,<sup>20</sup> where on the basis of enduring joint commitments its temporal integrity as a plural subject was seen to

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<sup>19</sup> See Chapter 3, pages 182-84.

<sup>20</sup> See Chapter 4, pages 208-12.

survive changes in group membership or attitude. Neither Cabinet reshuffles, nor modification to the *content* of its shared commitments, affected the underlying ‘pool of wills’ sustaining it as a collective agent over time; previous configurations of the political body – within an administration’s tenure – continued to count as ‘us’ and not ‘them’. Under corresponding circumstances it seems that we have likewise procured this persisting identity in the case of a Government. Just like the Cabinet grouping on which its operation builds, a Government’s agential ipseity resists dissolution on either of the above grounds. The entry or exit of specific MPs from Ministerial positions, or the inauguration of a new policy direction, do not signal the end of a continuing subject of joint attitudes, but simply the addition or loss of specific wills from the established pool, or latterly, the redirection of that pool.

Virtue ethical scrutiny of Government policy can thus naturally extend across the full timescale of a political incumbency, a period over which group dispositional analysis becomes a realistic possibility. In the context of domestic politics, this outcome is likely to suffice, for in an internal setting it is indeed individual administrations that are almost invariably the focus for normative assessment. But as we noted at the outset of Chapter 4,<sup>21</sup> in the realm of international relations the same does not always hold true. National responsibility, in a significant number of cases, is taken to endure beyond the span of time during which a particular Government is in power; countries sometimes blame (and occasionally praise<sup>22</sup>) one another – *in a moral sense*<sup>23</sup> – for conduct that was propagated many years prior to current political organisation. Does political

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<sup>21</sup> See Chapter 4, page 192-93.

<sup>22</sup> One example we might think of here are countries who express historical gratitude to the states that liberated them from past wartime occupation, sometimes praising their courage for doing so.

<sup>23</sup> This contrasts with the weaker ascription of so-called ‘outcome responsibility’, which though not attributing *moral* praise or blame for the consequences of action, nevertheless makes agents responsible for those outcomes in a way that can make them liable to compensate for any harm caused: see D. Miller, ‘Holding Nations Responsible’, pp. 244-45.

agency really extend over these longer periods of time? Can we conceive of 'government' plural subjecthood constituting a lasting, perhaps trans-generational political entity?<sup>24</sup>

These questions are intermingled with an issue for which we have thus far put off engagement, but which is nonetheless the very cornerstone of any democratic system: national elections. So long as a political party remains in power, it appears manifest that the foundational joint commitments of that Government continue to abide, and this remains the case even across an electoral divide. A Government that wins *re-election*, even with changes to specific Ministerial personnel, represents the same plural subject – the same group agent – that was in existence prior to the re-constitution of its parliamentary membership. It would be inconceivable that an administration in their second elected term could deny continuity of agency for what was done in their first; the Labour Party Government consecutively re-elected in the 2001 and 2005 UK general elections was surely *the same* Government that initially came to power in the 1997 ballot – the policies of earlier terms still represent what that same 'we' did.

Elections where the incumbent administration *loses*, however, are an entirely different proposition, for in these circumstances it seems that the foundational joint commitments of Government do indeed expire. Unlike the mere rearrangement of Ministerial positions, a *wholesale* change to the grouping holding political power appears to mark a critical rupture in agential endurance. Whilst the Labour Government of 1997-2010 can rightly be held responsible for policy-making throughout *its* period in office, we certainly do *not* hold it responsible for the conduct of the administration(s) preceding it, most proximately the 1979-1997 Conservative Government. From the perspective of the former, and despite embodying the same formal institution of 'the British Government', the policies promoted by *these* prior Ministerial

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<sup>24</sup> It is not being suggested, it is worth stressing, that this issue effects only Government and not Cabinet; the discussion of this section impacts upon both in equal measure. Previous discussion of Cabinet endurance was simply limited to a context in which the Government in power did not change, which is the assumption now being confronted.

compositions really do represent something that ‘they’, not ‘we’ did.<sup>25</sup> The philosophical implication is that the pool of wills which grounded the unity of the earlier collective is here disbanded, and a new one – *with a distinct identity* – is founded in its place. A new Government corresponds to a new plural subject of attitudes, a new group agent.

If state agency reduces to government agency, then this presents a sizeable problem, for nothing said so far allows collective political character – and hence normative accountability for virtue and vice – to extend beyond the bounds of a single Government’s term(s) in office. The intuitions that ground global political discourse, and define the nature of the international moral community, appear to be out of step with the limits of our current analysis. Can we reconcile these elements? Is there a different sense in which state-level responsibility can somehow traverse a Governmental divide? To better appreciate the full extent of this quandary, we need to firstly shift focus to a slightly different issue, and more closely examine the nature and limitations of political decision-making within the Westminster system.

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<sup>25</sup> There are two possible complications here that ought to be addressed. The first is whether the same Government agency persists across changes in a party’s leadership. Despite not coinciding with an electoral defeat, the change of Prime Minister from Margaret Thatcher to John Major in 1990, or from Tony Blair to Gordon Brown in 2007, are often thought of as changes in ‘administration’. Nevertheless, though we have at times referred to the ‘administrations’ of particular leaders (e.g. decision-making under the Blair administration), it is best to consider such usage as simply an alternative, more limited understanding of the term. There appears to be nothing, agentially speaking, that would demarcate such periods from the broader plural subjecthood maintained throughout a party’s tenure in government (indeed, we earlier noted the agential continuity between Brown’s premiership and that of his predecessor: see Chapter 4, pages 210-11), and as such a change in leader is merely the higher-profile incarnation of a Ministerial reshuffle. The second issue is the implied responsibility that is sometimes leveled at current Ministers for the policies of previous Governments formed *by the same political party* – for instance, the blame often directed at Conservatives, as ‘the Tories’, for the divisive domestic agenda adopted by the Thatcher Government in the 1980s. One plausible way to read such association is not as an ascription of genuine agency and responsibility, but rather the accusation that current members are committed to the same *values* as those earlier Governments, values that are grounded in their shared party ideology. Political parties themselves are of course much more than a parliamentary membership, and operate in a wider and more general sense than is our main focus. For these reasons *their* potential agency will not be explored here.

## II Parliament

Our case study investigation into British politics has so far been limited to the executive branch of national organisation, the assemblage of political institutions most responsible for overseeing the strategy and day-to-day administration of the state. We have thus far argued that Governments, over the period of their electoral tenure, have the capacity to exhibit plural virtue or vice in both how and what they choose as policy. The fact that we have been focused on *policy*, however, is significantly revealing, for policy alone does not necessarily mean action. To speak generally, policies represent principles and guidelines designed to *direct* action: they lay out a specified course of behaviour, pursuit of which is taken to be favourable. Nevertheless, for such behaviour to actually come about policy needs to be implemented – and this is not something that is always guaranteed.

This relationship is no different at the national level. Governments, within the Westminster system, are chiefly responsible for the development of national policy: they decide, as a collective, which courses of action they think it is most appropriate for the various organs of the state (its armed forces, for instance) to pursue. But mere expression of preferred policy – even when sincerely upheld – does not assure that a stage whereby it is *enacted* will subsequently be reached, for Governments alone (broadly<sup>26</sup>) lack the authority to authorise state-level action.<sup>27</sup> For a proposed policy to enter into force it firstly needs to attain legal standing, and

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<sup>26</sup> This claim, and the discussion that immediately follows, is qualified by two important issues: firstly, that of ‘devolved legislation’, and secondly in relation to powers bestowed upon the executive under ‘Royal Prerogative’. Both of these elements are explored below: see pages 278-83.

<sup>27</sup> This lack of ‘guarantee’ for policy enactment is of course meant in only a legal, procedural sense. The political authorities of a state could, after all, legitimately declare war only to have their military desert, and refuse to carry out those orders. This would be a much stronger sense in which political action cannot be guaranteed, but it lies outside the relevant focus of our present investigation.

understanding how *this* mechanism works requires us to explore the interaction between executive decision-making and that of another branch of political authority: the legislature.<sup>28</sup>

The British legislature is Parliament, which for our purposes can be taken to refer to its dominant lower chamber, the House of Commons:<sup>29</sup> a body composed of (presently) 650 elected members chosen as constituency representatives in the preceding general election.<sup>30</sup> Within the Westminster political system, unlike in some others,<sup>31</sup> the legislature is not an institution entirely separate from the executive, but – mirroring the earlier relationship between Cabinet and Government – is a body *from which* the executive is formed. Government members are a subsection of the MPs who make up Parliament as a whole; there is, as it is sometimes called, a ‘fusion’ rather than full separation of political powers. Parliament functions as the final arbiter of political authorisation, providing or withholding formal assent for state-level policy enactment. It does this, principally,<sup>32</sup> by scrutinising the policy proposals presented to it by the executive branch, ultimately deciding whether to endorse, modify, or reject the Government’s position on the basis of a majority vote open to all members.

It is only when so authorised by Parliament, then, that executive policy can standardly be brought to fruition. Brief reflection on the relative populations of these political bodies, however, ought to demonstrate the lack of certainty in such an outcome. Given that CCR necessitates all holders of Ministerial office (along with affiliated Parliamentary Private Secretaries<sup>33</sup>) to vote in favour of administration policies, the executive can indeed be assured of a sizeable block of guaranteed

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<sup>28</sup> Shifting focus away from our particular case study, the inability of executives alone to push through their policy agenda is a feature observed across political systems more widely (indeed, limiting their authority is the very rationale behind a separation of powers). As a clear illustration, we need only consider the recent budgetary deadlock within the US legislature concerning the so-called ‘fiscal cliff’ and subsequent sequester: see ‘Obama signs sweeping US budget cuts into effect’, *BBC News Online*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-21638727>, 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2013.

<sup>29</sup> See Chapter 4, page 195, note 22.

<sup>30</sup> Or in a small number of cases through ad hoc by-elections, votes undertaken outside of the standard election schedule owing to a Parliamentary seat being vacated.

<sup>31</sup> The presidential system of the United States, for instance.

<sup>32</sup> See the upcoming discussion of ‘Private Members’ Bills’ on pages 272-73.

<sup>33</sup> See page 248, note 5.

support in a House of Commons ballot – what has come to be known as the ‘payroll vote’. Nevertheless, this total (140 members in 2010<sup>34</sup>) still falls some way short of a Parliamentary majority, and as such it remains a real possibility that Government policy might be derailed if a large enough number of non-Government MPs – from both opposition parties and the ruling party’s own ‘backbench’ ranks – vote contrarily.<sup>35</sup> Accordingly, the means to secure Parliamentary authorisation lie outside of executive control.<sup>36</sup>

When evaluating the behaviour of a Government *alone*, therefore, we must generally view the scope of such appraisal to be more limited, directed at the executive’s decision to *advance* certain policies rather than their (merely potential) enactment. As we discussed in relation to the Settling Condition in Chapter 2,<sup>37</sup> it is open to doubt as to whether an agent can accurately intend an outcome that they themselves lack full power to produce. As such, it would appear that when needing the support of a wider Parliamentary membership, Governments cannot properly intend state positions in their own right, but merely a role in trying to bring them about. It would surely be deficient, however, to pursue a virtue ethical analysis of international relations solely up to the stage of policy proposition. In evaluating the character of states we are principally concerned with what they *decide* to do, not with what their governments merely aspire for them to. It is the final choice to *go to war* which is most apposite for a state’s virtue or vice, not mere encouragement to do so.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Parry and Kelley, *loc. cit.*

<sup>35</sup> The most recent Government defeat in the House of Commons was in relation to the 2014-2020 European Union budget, with MPs voting in favour of real-terms *cut* in EU spending rather than endorsing the Government’s own policy of supporting a mere freeze in it. See ‘EU budget vote: Rebel MPs defeat government over spending cut call’, *BBC News Online*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-20157063>, 31<sup>st</sup> October 2012.

<sup>36</sup> That is not to say that Governments cannot try to influence how backbench members of their party vote, of course. Party discipline is indeed often maintained through the process of ‘whipping’. So long as wider support is not *guaranteed*, however – something that ‘backbench rebellions’ so clearly illustrate – it remains inaccurate to suggest the Government can genuinely control the results of a Parliamentary vote.

<sup>37</sup> See Chapter 2, page 108.

<sup>38</sup> Further clarification is needed here. We are here taking state-level action to be achieved when the means to desired outcomes have been properly authorised – when the subsidiary conduct required by the various organs of the state has been given the ‘green light’, so to speak. The *larger* sense in which something like

### **Reconstructing Political Agency**

Consequently, we are given strong reasons to pursue the chain of political agency further, and explore the process through which state-level attitudes, proposed by Government policy, are actualised. Broadly speaking, there are two streams along which Parliament can give its backing to executive decision-making. As this body's wider categorisation suggests, the primary means is that of *legislating*: the process of creating national laws, which are expressed in official statute (for instance, the ratification of an international treaty). In other instances, particularly when the urgency of circumstances makes formal law-making infeasible (for instance, national defence), Parliament may instead adopt an associated resolution as the means of authorising state action. The precise details of these different procedures, the intricacies of which are manifold, will not be explored here in a comprehensive fashion; nevertheless, it is worth recognising the important correspondence between their general processes.

In the former case of legislation, the move from executive policy to national statute is mediated by the passage of a 'bill', a draft document presented to the legislature which outlines the Government's joint position on a particular matter, and for which wider Parliamentary consent is sought. The bill proceeds through a number of so-called 'readings': periods of consideration during which its content is examined and appraised by MPs, and – if successfully traversing these subsidiary stages – is finally subjected to a 'division' of the House, a full ballot of (attendant) members in which they express their favour ('aye') or opposition ('no') to the bill entering into

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an invasion 'happens', i.e. the aggregate of actual fighting undertaken by soldiers, sailors and airmen, is being treated here as external to political agency itself, as something done by another grouping on behalf of the state. This move may not be an entirely satisfactory one, for in equating what the state 'does' with what it politically authorises, it leaves open important questions about what exactly politicians and (in this example) military personnel are jointly, or indeed independently, responsible for. Does the political decision to engage in war bring equal moral culpability for the deaths of enemy combatants as attaches to the soldier who pulls a trigger or the pilot who drops a bomb? Are these things for which the state itself is *directly* culpable, or merely outcomes that it is responsible for enabling? Nevertheless, until we have a better handle on what exactly 'the state' is, it is difficult to provide full answers to questions such as these. Whilst it may ultimately be possible to include the full depth of participatory action within 'state' conduct, given the limitations of this project attempting to tie the latter concept to political authorisation appears to be a reasonable first endeavour, and one that is still compatible with most ascriptions of praise and blame.

law. If there is a majority in favour, the bill is legally enacted and becomes an official Act of Parliament. In the latter case of a resolution, a circumscribed version of this same mechanism ensues, with a call for action presented to the chamber through the proposal of a 'motion': the suggestion that the House 'moves to' endorse whatever policy position is being advocated.<sup>39</sup> After being subjected to a – albeit more limited – period of analysis and dialogue amongst members, a division on whether or not to enact the motion, and thus approve the position of the Government, is likewise undertaken.

For the purposes of illustration, let us again return to our central example of the Britain's decision to invade Iraq, which was authorised on the basis of a Parliamentary resolution. Immediately prior to military engagement, the Government proposed the following motion to the House of Commons:

That this House notes its decisions of 25th November 2002 and 26th February 2003 to endorse UN Security Council Resolution 1441; recognises that Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and long range missiles, and its continuing non-compliance with Security Council Resolutions, pose a threat to international peace and security; notes that in the 130 days since Resolution 1441 was adopted Iraq has not co-operated actively, unconditionally and immediately with the weapons inspectors, and has rejected the final opportunity to comply and is in further material breach of its obligations under successive mandatory UN Security Council Resolutions; regrets that despite sustained diplomatic effort by Her Majesty's Government it has not proved possible to secure a second Resolution in the UN because one Permanent Member of the Security Council made plain in public its intention to use its veto whatever the circumstances; notes the opinion of the Attorney General that, Iraq having failed to comply and Iraq being at the time of Resolution 1441 and continuing to be in material breach, the authority to use force under Resolution 678 has revived and so continues today; believes that the United Kingdom must uphold the authority of the United Nations as set out in Resolution 1441 and many Resolutions preceding it, and therefore supports the decision of Her Majesty's Government that the United Kingdom should use all means necessary to ensure the disarmament of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction; offers wholehearted support to the men and women of Her Majesty's Armed Forces now on duty in the Middle East; in the event of military operations requires that, on an urgent basis, the United Kingdom should seek a new Security Council Resolution that would affirm Iraq's territorial integrity, ensure

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<sup>39</sup> Motions are also the preliminary means by which the consideration of a particular bill commences, i.e. to propose 'that the House moves to consider...'.

rapid delivery of humanitarian relief, allow for the earliest possible lifting of UN sanctions, an international reconstruction programme, and the use of all oil revenues for the benefit of the Iraqi people and endorse an appropriate post-conflict administration for Iraq, leading to a representative government which upholds human rights and the rule of law for all Iraqis; and also welcomes the imminent publication of the Quartet's roadmap as a significant step to bringing a just and lasting peace settlement between Israelis and Palestinians and for the wider Middle East region, and endorses the role of Her Majesty's Government in actively working for peace between Israel and Palestine.<sup>40</sup>

After consideration by MPs, the motion was put to a vote (as Division 118), and was ultimately passed with a majority of 263 (412 ayes to 149 noes).<sup>41</sup> As such, Parliament was taken to endorse the Government's stance, and the commencement of military action against Iraq was authorised. How might this process be understood in agential terms, however? Beyond the legal-constitutional import of Parliamentary approval, what is signalled philosophically through the occurrence and result of such a ballot? One rather simplistic reading would be to treat the authorisation of a wider House of Commons membership as nothing more than an *external constraint* on executive agency, in much the same way as we have been treating the oversight of the judiciary, for instance. Perhaps it is the case that the only group agency at issue here *is* that of the Government, but that the need for further approval simply places limits on the scope of its intentions. Just as an individual's aim to open a bank account may be qualified by the results of a credit check, then, maybe we can treat Government objectives as similarly hypothetical – they *would* intend to launch an invasion *if* the enabling conditions are forthcoming, and when the latter holds the executive *can* then so intend.

Nevertheless, there would appear to be significant advantages to bringing a wider Parliamentary grouping *within* the bounds of plural agency itself. The most evident motivation for doing so is that it chimes much more closely with our pre-theoretical intuitions about political culpability. We tend to think that voting in support of a particular policy renders those Members of Parliament,

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<sup>40</sup> See A. Mellows-Facer, 'Commons divisions on Iraq: 26 February and 18 March 2003'. House of Commons Library Paper SN/SG/2109. London: The Stationary Office, 2003, pp. 3-4.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

even if outside of Government, somehow jointly responsible for its enactment – as sharing in the collective praise or blame that attaches to the action being endorsed. And this seems to hold true not only irrespective of *Government* membership, but furthermore irrespective even of one's political party. Conservative MPs voting 'aye' in Division 118, and thus backing *Labour's* proposal to invade Iraq, are not taken to be absolved of joint responsibility solely by that ideological affiliation. Making a finer-grained distinction, it also appears that it is the decision to go to war *itself* – the primary strand of intentionality – for which we generally hold this extended collection of MPs liable, not simply for their subsidiary decision to *support* the Government policy; something that a merely external role might suggest.

How then might we understand the kind of Parliamentary vote noted above in relation to the group-agential components thus far established? Given the language of the outlined motion, and its nature as a *proposal* for group-level positions, our most plausible analysis must surely read it as a call for joint commitment, indeed one strikingly parallel to the narrative of an earlier illustration of shared attitude formation, Gilbert's poetry discussion group.<sup>42</sup> Like in that expository example, in which a suggested group interpretation was presented to members as a means to petition their joint acceptance, it seems that in the substantive case at hand the executive is engaging in just the same process. The Government motion outlines a set of collective attitudes (recognition of the threat posed by Iraq's WMD, a belief that the UK must uphold UN resolutions, support for British armed forces, and so on) which define the foundations of a potential plural subject; a set of attitudes towards which Government Ministers signal *their* willingness to jointly commit. Putting the motion to Parliament thus corresponds to a plea for its wider membership to do likewise: for other MPs to 'opt in' to the proposed joint commitment, to add their wills to the plural subject being formed.

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<sup>42</sup> See Chapter 3, page 128.

By voting yes, therefore, non-executive members of the legislature openly express their willingness to be part of the plural subject the Government has proposed, to jointly commit to upholding the content of the motion (or in other circumstances, bill) *as a unified body*, as a 'we'.<sup>43</sup> But what exactly is the composition of this 'we'? If a majority of MPs give their support to a Government policy, and it is subsequently enacted as a resolution or Act of Parliament, is that body as a whole – the House of Commons – therefore the proper agential subject of associated joint attitudes? Despite the fact that the motion above indeed asserts '*this House...*' to be its envisioned focus, we in fact have good reasons to doubt the agential accuracy of such a preface.<sup>44</sup> As we have elaborated, plural subjecthood required *unanimous* willingness across participants; to be a member of the *social* group one has to enter into joint commitment, to be bound by the requirements of representative, 'we'-mode behaviour. But is this really the case for the totality of Parliamentary members? Are all MPs sitting the House of Commons, even those who voted against the motion, party to such obligations?

The answer would appear to be no. As we have discussed at length, the species of behaviour incumbent upon jointly committed members must sustain the notion that the social group *as a whole* holds associated joint attitudes. In our current example, this would correspond to such utterances as 'We believe that Iraq's WMD pose a threat to international peace and security', and 'We believe that all means necessary should be used to secure their disarmament'. If the House of Commons itself is the 'we' here referenced, and as in the Government case members of this body express willingness to jointly commit merely on the basis of their continuing formal

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<sup>43</sup> Given that mutual common knowledge is the condition for a joint commitment to enter into force, we might technically qualify that it is only when the results of a Parliamentary division are announced that a plural subject of these attitudes is actually formed. If, however, the results reveal that a proposed policy does *not* have majority support, and thus lacks legal authorisation, then although those voting 'aye' may still jointly commit (with one another) to *certain* collective attitudes – that 'we, the minority, *believe...*' for instance – they can no longer form a plural subject towards any of the *intentional* content of a policy proposal, for having lost the vote they no longer have the ability to sanction state-level action.

<sup>44</sup> It may of course remain accurate to say policy is *formally* or *legally* authorised by Parliament or the House of Commons, for these claims concern procedure, not agency. It remains accurate to say that 'the electorate' formally brought a Government to power, regardless of whether or not we count such a collection as a genuine group agent (indeed, it was argued in Chapter 2, page 111, note 128 that it is likely not).

membership, then regardless of any personal opinions MPs may have expressed prior to entering into joint commitment (with their individual decisions to vote ‘aye’ or ‘no’ here merely part of the group’s internal decision-making), once the collective position supporting the motion has been established all members take on the same representative obligations. If every Member of Parliament really were a group agential participant, then, they would share equal liability for rebuke were they to speak out against the collective stance, were they to violate the maintenance of collective unity.

But this state of affairs is evidently not one that we see realised. Whilst it is the case that those voting *for* the successful enactment of a motion or bill become mutual representatives for that body of opinion, and do indeed suffer censure if they express attitudes contrary to those implied by their vote,<sup>45</sup> MPs voting *against* an authorised policy proposal appear to retain their right to speak in opposition to the majority conclusion. Many of the 149 members who chose to oppose the Government motion to intervene in Iraq, including backbench rebels still affiliated to the ruling party,<sup>46</sup> continued to openly criticise the policy even after the results of the ballot – and hence Parliamentary approval – had been determined. In doing so, they clearly denied the impression that those attitudes contained in the motion were upheld by MPs as a unified whole,<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Though slightly distorted by the additional complications of their former *Cabinet* membership, a relevant illustration of this point may nonetheless be found in the well-publicised exchange between MPs David Miliband and Harriet Harman during the 2010 Labour Party leadership election. Responding to the latter’s applause when it was claimed that Labour was wrong to go to war in Iraq (a policy which they had both supported), Miliband was seen to turn to his colleague and angrily remark “You voted for it, why are you clapping?”: see ‘David Miliband rebukes Harman over Iraq applause’, *BBC News Online*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-11426413>, 28<sup>th</sup> September 2010.

<sup>46</sup> In total, 84 Labour MPs sided against the Government motion in the final vote, with a further 69 abstentions: see Mellows-Facer, *loc. cit.*

<sup>47</sup> Might one argue that such dissent is merely of a personally-qualified nature, and thus not in violation of group-mode responsibilities (see Chapter 3, page 131 note 51)? Though it may indeed be the case that non-supportive MPs often express their opposition in the ‘I’-mode (“I think this war is unjust”), this does not seem sufficient for them to otherwise sustain the postulated obligations of wider Parliamentary joint commitment. For not only are they clearly operating in a representative capacity when speaking publically – something that would make the expression of personal opinions damaging and inappropriate – but moreover such critical utterances would at any case need to be reconciled with acknowledgement that the group itself upholds the contrary, and that *as a member of that group* the individual in question supports the policy’s enactment when operating *qua* member (“We, this House, think the war is just”). We see little evidence, however, that opposing MPs would identify with the latter position, accepting an abiding obligation to further the disapproved group goal through their participatory conduct. Indeed, it is unclear

and yet this is something towards which other members, and indeed the public more generally, appeared highly indisposed to admonish.<sup>48</sup>

Given that such behaviour is clearly not compatible with group-mode obligations,<sup>49</sup> and yet despite this fact dissenting MPs do not appear to be appropriate targets for rebuke, it is strongly suggested that they are *not* participants in a relevant joint commitment.<sup>50</sup> It would seem instead, therefore, that the boundaries of any plural subject created through policy endorsement align only with that grouping who personally voted in support – only with those members who balloted ‘aye’ in the Parliamentary division. MPs, then, may certainly choose to ‘opt in’ to a proposed set of joint attitudes, but it would appear that they do so only singularly, through *individual* expressions of willingness, and not on the catch-all basis of Parliament’s majority position. These MPs remain equally free to ‘opt out’ of that joint commitment,<sup>51</sup> to express their *lack* of willingness to uphold the attitudes proposed in a Government motion or bill, and they are able to do so despite this being a minority stance amongst Parliamentary membership.

These conclusions cohere well with our intuitions and practice. When Parliament moves to endorse a particular national position, it is surely not the case that every politician is accordingly

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how such obligations *could* be fulfilled short of supportive affirmation and voting. (Such members may of course still say that “This House *voted to support* the war”, for this again is best understood as a procedural rather than group-agential claim: it represents nothing more than the formal, aggregated result of *individual agents’* vote-casting.)

<sup>48</sup> Indeed, the fact that Liberal Democrat MPs were able to use their opposition to the war as a subsequent election platform is surely clear evidence that the public did not consider them jointly responsible for its Parliamentary authorisation.

<sup>49</sup> Referencing a more developed group attribute, dissenting MPs sometimes also dispute what they see the true *motives* of a majority decision to be – indeed, perhaps the principal line of criticism towards the invasion of Iraq. It is hard to see how speaking out in *this* manner – denying that the professed group motive is even genuine – could be in any way reconcilable with that individual entering into a joint commitment to uphold it.

<sup>50</sup> It is useful to consider this point of controversy from the converse angle. If one wishes to argue, against the claims here presented, that ‘no’-vote MPs *do indeed* enter into joint commitment on the sole basis of their Parliamentary membership, then two questions need to be answered. Firstly, *what* new group-mode obligations have such individuals taken on that we would rebuke them for renegeing upon? What restrictions or demands upon behaviour would somebody like Robin Cook *now* be subject to that they were not subject to before voting? And secondly, why do we envisage there to be *additional* obligations on those MPs who vote ‘yes’? Why might we expect them to defend the final group position in a manner we would not expect of the minority? If both ‘yes’ and ‘no’-voting MPs are participants in a single, Parliamentary-wide joint commitment, then their representative obligations ought to be *the same*.

<sup>51</sup> Not once it has been established, of course, but only on the basis of a prior negative vote.

painted with the same brush. In contrast, we seem readily willing to draw clear distinctions of responsibility, to discriminate *between* the members of this body on the basis of their participatory roles. It would, for instance, be highly counterintuitive to claim that Robin Cook, resigning from Government so as to explicitly distance himself from its policy towards Iraq,<sup>52</sup> was despite his principled and forthright opposition still complicit – owing to his continuing *Parliamentary* membership – in the final decision to invade. If resigning completely as an MP was the only standard by which to escape such collective responsibility, then this legislative body would quickly become one where only conforming voices remained.<sup>53</sup> Instead, expressing genuine opposition to the preponderant view of the group in no way requires renunciation of one's formal position within the House of Commons.

The above reading of Parliamentary agency fits with our natural understanding, then, but it should likewise be evident that this analysis all but rules out ascribing (policy-based<sup>54</sup>) attitudes to the legislature taken as a whole. For this to be a possibility we would of course require the formal and agential boundaries of Parliamentary membership to perfectly harmonise, as was the case at the levels of Cabinet and Government. But short of a *unanimous* division of MPs, which for substantial policy matters is exceedingly rare,<sup>55</sup> such alignment fails to materialise. Lacking the

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<sup>52</sup> See Chapter 4, page 200.

<sup>53</sup> To force home this point, imagine the case in which a neo-Nazi party wins a majority vote in Parliament, using this to authorise and enact a highly immoral policy. Would we claim that all those who argued and voted against the unjust motion, and who moreover choose to remain MPs so as to work to overturn that decision, nevertheless jointly commit to upholding it at the group level?

<sup>54</sup> This is not to deny that there may be *other* strands of joint commitment that really are in operation across the House as a whole. As in our earlier discussion of the imagined tutorial class (see Chapter 4, page 197, note 26), there may be a corresponding set of foundational joint commitments between members, such as that 'We accept a majority vote as legally binding', and 'We believe our duty is to represent the views of constituents'. It seems that every member may indeed be liable for rebuke where they to violate *these* collective understandings. There is nothing to rule out the House of Commons qualifying as a plural subject in these *other* respects, then; it is simply not a dimension of agency relevant to *state-level* decision-making.

<sup>55</sup> For true unanimity we would not only require the absence of any votes in opposition, but more strongly 'aye' votes from *every* formal member of the House. Whilst the former is not unprecedented, the latter is much more demanding, for it is rarely the case that the turnout for Parliamentary divisions approaches 100%. Beyond this, there is also the tricky further issue of whether to treat deliberate abstentions from a vote as signalling tacit acceptance of joint commitment. Whilst this would affect the precise boundaries of subsequent plural subjecthood, a conclusion either way is easily compatible with the overall argument presented, and so will not be explored further here.

same procedural guarantees of group-level unity, we cannot accurately say that the 'House of Commons' intends a course of action, but only that a prevailing, jointly committed sub-set of its membership does. Let us call this latter, social grouping the 'Parliamentary Plural Subject'.<sup>56</sup>

### **Virtue Ethical Attributes**

We will return to the import of this qualification in a moment, but preceding that analysis let us follow the pattern of previous sections and briefly assess the wider agential capacities of this plural subject. The first thing to query is the potential depth of legislature-level joint commitment. Though Members of Parliament may collectively uphold the policy *conclusions* presented by the executive, can the fuller range of rich and varied attitudes necessary for plural virtue similarly carry over from this lower level? Can a Parliamentary Plural Subject jointly commit to do things *for certain reasons*, and *in certain ways*? Re-examining our policy case study, the sheer length of the outlined Iraq motion ought to highlight that the possible scope of such commitment is indeed considerable, even when we are dealing with a mere resolution rather than fully-formed legislation. In the text of the proposal above we find references to motive-implicating beliefs ('*recognises* that Iraq's weapons of mass destruction...'; '*believes* that the United Kingdom must uphold...'), emotive states ('*regrets* that despite sustained diplomatic effort...'), as well as ultimate

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<sup>56</sup> Is this plural subject *the same* plural subject that is referred to when Cabinet and Government Ministers say 'we', or else a different subject of collective attitudes? Does the Parliamentary-level group agent simply represent an extension of the joint commitments that unify the executive, or an entirely new joint commitment to which members of that latter group *additionally* enter into? It would seem that the second option is more plausible, for three reasons: (1) as we have already noted, it seems it is not possible for the executive alone to properly intend state-level action, but it *is* possible for a larger Parliamentary body to hold a joint commitment of this content (once voting results are common knowledge); (2) as evidenced by the outlined Iraq motion, the terms of Parliamentary joint commitment may already make reference to Government joint attitudes ('*supports* the decision of Her Majesty's Government...'), suggesting their distinctness; and (3) in a related vein, it is possible for the majority of Parliament to jointly commit to an anti-Government position – to defeat an executive policy proposal – whilst that smaller body remains jointly committed to that different set of collective attitudes. As such, and in light of CCR, it seems that Government Ministers in fact jointly commit (at the executive level) *to be willing to jointly commit* (at the legislature level).

political intentions ('supports the decision of Her Majesty's Government...'; 'requires that, on an urgent basis...'; 'endorses the role of...').<sup>57</sup>

The progression of attitudes comprising a potential state of virtue are thus well within the remit of intra-Parliamentary joint commitment, but what of the other requisites of virtue ethical agency – namely, the capacities for attitudinal rationality and sophisticated collective deliberation? Despite final Parliamentary decision-making operating under a functionally *explicit* procedure,<sup>58</sup> majority voting, the processes leading up to policy endorsement provide ample grounding for each of these dimensions of group reflection to emerge. In our earlier discussion of the Cabinet we noted that its members were potentially endowed with both 'negative' and 'positive' freedom of expression: not only a lack of discursive constraint, but furthermore the ability to influence the very topics being considered.<sup>59</sup> An analogue of this dual capability exists also at the Parliamentary level.

As we have noted, votes on proposed national policy are standardly preceded by extended periods of consultation and discussion amongst the wider legislature,<sup>60</sup> the centremost pillar of which has unerringly remained open debate between MPs in the main chamber of the House of Commons. That members enjoy negative freedom to express their views in this arena is perhaps more difficult to deny than to attest, for the frank, often vociferous, and indeed frequently irreverent argumentation of the House of Commons is widely renowned. Those regulations that are in force, such as the power of an impartial, elected chair to direct and bring order to proceedings, serve not as encumbrances to expression but rather as its guarantor, ensuring both that a representative spread of opinions are given voice, and moreover that members' views are properly heard amongst the adversarial clamour. Parliament thus offers an intense and dynamic

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<sup>57</sup> Mellows-Facer, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4, emphasis added. A rival, amended motion also made reference to emotive states of hope and admiration: *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>58</sup> See Chapter 3, page 174.

<sup>59</sup> See Chapter 4, pages 215-16.

<sup>60</sup> See pages 262-63.

form of collective discussion, one in which an ability to openly challenge the views of other participants is strongly enshrined.

But wider Parliamentary debate is not simply limited to procuring yes or no votes for a settled policy proposal; it can also have real deliberative input concerning the *content* of the latter. Non-executive legislators are firstly able to propose amendments to Government motions and bills: to suggest changes to the details of presented policy. If there is enough support for a modified position, then it too can be subjected to a Parliamentary vote, producing a rival policy stance that the legislature has alternative power to enact. Just such an amendment was raised against the Government's own Iraq motion, proposing to change its declaration to one stating that 'the case for war against Iraq has not yet been established'.<sup>61</sup> Put to a vote (as Division 117) it was nevertheless defeated, and the original policy motion continued form the focus of Parliamentary decision-making.<sup>62</sup>

Beyond mere amendment, however, Members of Parliament also have the much wider authority to actually propose legislation of their own. Though for simplicity we have so far been presuming that it is only the executive itself from which draft policy originates, Parliamentary enactment can also be sought for so-called 'Private Members' Bills', which are introduced to the legislature by individual, non-Governmental MPs. It is this facility that imbues legislators with the positive dimension of deliberative freedom; the ability to actually dictate the issues that are brought up for debate. Though in practice the reduced time put aside for consideration of such bills makes their eventual authorisation less likely than their Government equivalents (still, a very significant number – 743 – have made it onto the statute books since the Second World War<sup>63</sup>), they can

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<sup>61</sup> Mellows-Facer, *loc. cit.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* The amendment was ultimately defeated by 178 votes, but witnessed the largest ever revolt by party members against a Labour Government, with 139 Labour MPs declaring support for the modified position: see 'Blair wins war backing amidst revolt', *BBC News Online*, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/2862325.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/2862325.stm), 19<sup>th</sup> March 2003.

<sup>63</sup> See 'The Success of Private Members' Bills'. House of Commons Information Office Factsheet L3. London: The Stationary Office, 2010, pp. 3-4. The UK's 1965 abolition of the death penalty is perhaps the most celebrated example of a successful Private Member's Bill.

nonetheless have important *indirect* influence upon state legislation, placing pressure on the executive to address the area in question if considerable support and publicity is generated.

Parliamentary procedure therefore provides a solid foundation for the concerted yet flexible group deliberation of policy. In the case of a legislative bill, the consultation period prior to a vote is substantial and protracted, with a number of general readings in the House of Commons augmented by the technical analysis of a dedicated committee of MPs (in addition to a corresponding passage through the upper chamber of Parliament, the House of Lords). Yet even hastily-convened motions, for which prolonged and methodical periods of reflection would prove detrimental, can be subject to quite rigorous group appraisal by Parliamentary membership. The debate that preceded the House of Commons division on Iraq lasted ten hours, and saw 354 speeches made by MPs.<sup>64</sup> The capacity for both rational and ethical oversight of group decision-making – founded upon free discourse – is thus clearly in place, but is there practical evidence that such issues are in fact topics of consideration during the authorisation of policy?

In the former case, the fact that the Iraq motion begins by drawing attention to those commitments already upheld by previous Parliamentary votes – that ‘this House notes its decisions of 25th November 2002 and 26th February 2003 to endorse UN Security Council Resolution 1441’<sup>65</sup> – suggests that the maintenance of attitudinal consistency is just as much a focus for contemplation here as we saw it to be at lower levels of policy-making. Given that this active view on the rationality of group reasoning is here contained within the very proposal presented to MPs, it seems that collective reflection on whether to jointly commit to outlined group attitudes cannot but acknowledge such considerations.<sup>66</sup> Finding evidence of latter, *ethical* deliberation amongst legislators is greatly aided by the fact that Parliamentary debate, in contrast

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<sup>64</sup> See Hansard HC, 18<sup>th</sup> March 2003, volume 401, columns 760-911.

<sup>65</sup> Mellows-Facer, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>66</sup> Indeed, the argumentation of the Iraq motion represents a rational progression of attitudes akin to that proposed in the decision-making example of Chapter 3, where we outlined three interrelated propositions querying (1) Iraq’s violation of Resolution 1441, (2) the authorisation granted by any such violation, and (3) the subsequent conclusion of whether to invade. The motion gives consistent positive answers to each of the premises and the conclusion.

to the confidential nature of Government decision-making, is both public and recorded. As such, the presence of sophisticated normative discourse amongst members, and indeed even explicit reference to moral philosophical theory, can be quite definitively discerned, as the following exchange from a recent second reading of the 'Human Rights Act 1998 (Repeal and Substitution) Bill' clearly demonstrates:

Rory Stewart MP: Human rights are based on notions of dignity and of inviolability, and they are in their nature universal. To say that somebody has a human right is a statement about their moral status. It is not a statement about their nationality. It is not a statement about their citizenship. It is to say that anyone, anywhere, treated in this fashion is wronged, and that although there may be a threshold above which that right could be suspended, below that threshold their possession of the right is not relative to the cost or benefits of upholding it in any particular case.

Jacob Rees-Mogg MP: But surely once there is a threshold, the right is not absolute?

Rory Stewart MP: My honourable friend makes a very important point... The concept of human rights is based on a notion of human dignity and on a notion that humans should be treated as ends in themselves, rather than as a means to an end. In other words, it is a sort of Kantian world view... but at a very extreme level there may be a threshold at which we in the Chamber would intuitively feel that that right could be suspended. For example, if a child was in possession of information about a ticking bomb that was going to destroy a million people in a city, we might feel that in that situation it was justifiable to twist the child's thumb to find out where that bomb was...

Jacob Rees-Mogg MP: May I come back to my honourable friend on his previous example? He said that a particular act would be justifiable to save a million people. What about 500,000? What about 50,000? What about 10,000? What about one?<sup>67</sup>

### **Unstable Character**

Attaining these important elements of plural virtue is thus plainly within the scope of viability for an intra-Parliamentary social group, and for this reason it makes sense to say that jointly committing MPs can manifest virtuous or vicious joint attitudes, along with demonstrating their possession or lack of collective practical wisdom, in the policy decisions they together endorse.

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<sup>67</sup> See Hansard HC, 1<sup>st</sup> March 2013, volume 559, columns 589-90. The exchange has here been slightly abridged.

But returning to the previous strand of argument from which the above discussion digressed, can we now go further and say that the level of group agency in question is synonymous with that of the state? Have we found a suitable target for the ascription of international virtue and vice? Lamentably, our broader analysis of political decision-making has in fact only added further complication to that endeavour.

Moving beyond the insufficient authority of the executive level, we firstly noted an inability to make agential claims about the legislature as a whole.<sup>68</sup> Parliamentary joint commitment is not a catch-all phenomenon, but entered into only by that proportion of its membership who are so willing. In itself this acknowledgement has only modest consequences. Though making it less straightforward to demarcate the precise boundaries of group agency, and necessitating the less natural ascription that merely ‘these supporting MPs’ are jointly responsible for the state-level conduct in question, there is nothing overly problematic – at least philosophically speaking – in reducing the accurate target of political culpability to an agential sub-group not equivalently picked out as a constitutional entity.

The much more damaging problem, however, is that this sub-grouping – which we referred to as the ‘Parliamentary Plural Subject’<sup>69</sup> – lacks a stable identity across distinct policy choices. If, as we have argued, members of the legislature exercise discretion in whether or not to ‘opt in’ to political joint commitments, then across *different* motions and bills there is a strong probability that the make-up of this Parliamentary group agent will change. The specific collection of MPs willing to jointly uphold one set of policy attitudes – say, those outlined in the motion to invade Iraq – will likely fail to correspond with the collection of MPs willing to uphold the attendant attitudes of some other policy proposal – say, a bill promoting further EU integration. Indeed, if the winning majority in the latter case consists of anything other than the exact 412 MPs who

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<sup>68</sup> Again, short of circumstances in which there is unanimous agreement across 100% of the Parliamentary population. See page 269, note 55.

<sup>69</sup> See page 270.

voted 'aye' in that first division, then the plural subject of each attitude set will be incongruent: the collection of legislators whose joint commitment sustains group agency – what we might call its membership 'footprint' – will differ.

We have, of course, considered variation in plural subject membership previously, arguing that at the levels of Cabinet and Government group agency can – within certain limits – survive beyond changes in participants.<sup>70</sup> But the issue at hand is not akin to the case of a Ministerial reshuffle, in which specific individuals merely enter or exit an established pool of wills; it is one in which the very *identity* of the enactive plural subject changes.<sup>71</sup> Whereas executive groupings were seen to be sustained by enduring joint commitments – that policies formed under differing membership configurations continued to represent what 'we', the Labour Government, decided – there is no such equivalent in the context of Parliamentary voting. There is nothing else which binds together what is an otherwise contingent collection of specific legislators other than the joint attitudes for which, in that instance, they have expressed mutual willingness to collectively uphold.

As such, when some proportion of Parliamentary membership votes to enact a different set of collective attitudes, their expressed willingness is to enter into a *distinct* joint commitment, not to add further layers of attitude to one that already exists. This does not mean that the former plural subject disappears; those who entered into its associated joint commitment continue to form a 'we' for which those collective attitudes are (or were) in force, a body for which they act as representatives. Nevertheless, there is no continuity between this 'we' and that which is established when some new policy proposal is authorised. No member adding their will to a plural subject supporting EU integration would for that reason alone take on the standing commitment of supporting the invasion of Iraq. In contrast, he or she could speak in favour of the former and in criticism of the latter without violation of membership obligations; the pool of wills directed towards the first set of group attitudes is a different pool to that directed at the second.

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<sup>70</sup> See, respectively, Chapter 4, pages 208-12 and this chapter, pages 255-58.

<sup>71</sup> Akin, instead, to the case in which a new Government is elected.

Under these conditions, a change in the membership of joint commitment really is a change in group agent.

The import of this observation is significant, for it deals an even stronger blow to our hopes of securing a settled target for global political evaluation. As we can now see, the problem of agential endurance in the international realm is not grounded solely on the longer-term issue of electoral change,<sup>72</sup> but also the much more immediate issue of a shifting ‘footprint’ of policy enactment. On a decision-to-decision basis, and indeed even within the framework of a stable executive, the collective agent responsible for national decision-making – constituted by a proportion of members in the legislature – varies. For each instance of state-level action, the proper focus of relevant joint attitudes is highly likely to fluctuate; there is no such thing as *the* Parliamentary Plural Subject, but only *a* Parliamentary Plural Subject relative to each case, created by a progression of intra-legislature joint commitments each with an independent identity. There is no single group agent.

Not only is this damaging to the practice of attributing persisting national responsibility, it is also inimical to ascriptions of state-level character traits – for it seems as though the plural agent which demonstrates benevolent motives in one political decision may be a different entity to that which manifests courageous sentiment in a second, or exhibits anger in a third. As such, though we may argue that a particular political decision demonstrated the occurrent elements of specific virtues or vices, we can neither discern these attributes to form part of settled plural dispositions, nor can we talk more broadly about an enactive group agent possessing a range of traits beyond those brought to light in a single context. But even if we ignore the dispositional requirement, and understand virtue more along the ostensive lines of Slote’s account,<sup>73</sup> the initial problem remains: we are still unable to say that *the same agent* was responsible for that virtuous or vicious conduct over time.

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<sup>72</sup> See page 257-58.

<sup>73</sup> See Chapter 3, pages 161-62. Though note the qualification there made.

### *Delegated Legislation*

There are avenues by which we might attempt to mitigate this problem.<sup>74</sup> Our analysis thus far has claimed that the executive alone lacks the power to bring about state-level political action. Whilst true in a broad sense, there are nonetheless two qualifications to this (necessarily) simplified picture which wrestle aspects of political agency back from the troublesome level of the legislature. The first is that of ‘delegated’ (or ‘secondary’) legislation. Whereas the authorisation of major policy stances takes place only through the mechanism of direct Parliamentary approval, through the so-called ‘primary’ legislation of an Act of Parliament, the authority to bring about the subordinate provisions of an Act is in many cases ‘given over’ to the executive level.<sup>75</sup> Delegated legislation is thus similar in rationale to earlier-outlined committee usage,<sup>76</sup> with the full deliberation of the legislature reserved for broad issues of principle and ideology rather than decision-making about the trivial or technical details of policy enactment.

Hence even though it is here still *constitutionally* accurate to say that Governments themselves lack the power to enact policy (given that it is only through Parliamentary statute that delegated authority is conferred<sup>77</sup>), practically speaking it appears that once enabled by the legislature the executive alone is indeed able to bring about – and as such to properly intend – at least subsidiary elements of national conduct. In such cases, it *is* accurate to say that a more stable collective

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<sup>74</sup> Perhaps a further, pre-theoretical intuition we might have in response to this predicament is to ask why we cannot simply regard the legislature as a *divided* agent, with a split in votes akin to an individual person who is ‘caught in two minds’ about a certain action, or who feels ambivalent towards its execution (a comparison we earlier considered in the context of Cabinet leaks: see Chapter 4, page 226, note 110). This thought may be an appealing one on first analysis, but it draws the analogy between individual and group too closely, ignoring the central role joint commitment plays in plural agency. Whilst the human being who acts despite internal conflict is no less an agent than one who acts with resolute purpose, in the collective context the situation is rather different, for when a division amongst membership results in the refusal of some to jointly commit (which was *not* the case in the earlier Cabinet-leak case), those members are not simply dissenters, they are *no longer part* of the plural subject at all. Human agents possess that status on the basis of their ingrained capacities; collective agency only comes about when participants are willing to act in ways that construct it. Refusal to jointly commit does not therefore produce a divided group agent, it instead undermines the very bond that would make those people part of a group agent in the first place.

<sup>75</sup> See ‘Statutory Instruments’, *Parliament Website*, <http://www.parliament.uk/business/bills-and-legislation/secondary-legislation/statutory-instruments/>, accessed 20<sup>th</sup> March 2013.

<sup>76</sup> See Chapter 4, pages 202-3, 231-34.

<sup>77</sup> Parliament furthermore retains the power to annul laws made at the delegated level: see ‘Statutory Instruments’.

agent, the Government, is responsible for state-level action, for it can be sanctioned without the need for a further Parliamentary vote. It is worth emphasising, however, that (as in the (proper) employment of committees) decisions ratified at the delegated level, whilst vastly outnumbering the enactment of primary legislation, are merely the means by which the broader aims of those parent Acts are realised. On issues of significant moral concern, then, it may be that the virtue ethical nature of delegated action is best understood *in light of* the overarching Parliamentary stance it supports.<sup>78</sup>

### *Prerogative Powers*

The second qualification we ought to address is the special body of authority vested in Government under so-called 'royal prerogative': a set of exclusive powers, originally held by the sovereign, which over the development of the British constitution have now come to be wielded by the executive branch.<sup>79</sup> Under the remit of these powers, Ministers exercise privileged control over a number of important policy areas without *any* need for separate Parliamentary authorisation; indeed, there is no requirement that the legislature even be consulted in such cases. Some powers endowed under royal prerogative are largely procedural, such as the issuing of passports, appointments to political, civil service and military positions, along with the dissolution of Parliament and calling of elections. Importantly for our overriding focus, however, such authority has also historically been held over significant aspects of foreign affairs: principally

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<sup>78</sup> This will depend on how specific we want to be with our ethical evaluations. Do we want to normatively appraise a state's broad implementation of trade barriers, or its enactment of a specific import tariff on a particular good? Might we want to praise an increase in the overseas aid budget or commend a specific investment in a particular charity project? In general we might think that the virtue or vice of these subsidiary actions are more discernible in reference to the broader endeavours of which they are a part; that we fully appreciate the character of specific moves only when we see them in the context of wider motivations. But this is not to deny that details can be important, and perhaps even at odds with the ethical qualities of overarching positions. We might think that the recent move by the EU and IMF (the question of their group agency aside) to impose a 10% bank levy on the savings of Cypriot citizens was unjust, without having to conclude that the wider stance of imposing conditions on financial bailouts is likewise wrong: see 'Shock in Cyprus as savers face bailout levy', *BBC News Online*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-21814325>, 16<sup>th</sup> March 2013. The flexibility offered by our multi-layered analysis of political agency is thus beneficial.

<sup>79</sup> See L. Maer and O. Gay, 'The Royal Prerogative', House of Commons Library Paper SN/PC/03861. London: The Stationary Office, 2004, pp. 3-5.

the recognition of states, the making of international treaties, and perhaps most crucially the declaration of war and deployment of armed forces.

In cases where prerogative powers are exercised, then, it would appear that executive agency actually supplants that of the legislature altogether, and the issue of a shifting Parliamentary Plural Subject is redundant. Within these important policy domains, therefore, it may be the Government group agent alone – in a direct and unmitigated sense – that decides, intends and sanctions the full scope of state-level action. If the use of this constitutional anachronism was as widespread and unchallenged as just suggested, and the executive enjoyed free rein over international conduct, we might very well wonder whether reducing state agency to that of its Government, is, after all, a conceivable possibility. As we have been careful to consider throughout, however, it is important to balance formal possibilities against the often mitigating force of practical reality, for indeed in the contemporary setting the plausible scope of royal prerogative is somewhat more diminished than its constitutional backing may suggest.

The executive's prerogative to enter into treaties is, for instance, highly qualified. To begin with, any treaty requiring changes to UK legislation, such as the incorporation of new rights and obligations into national law (common features of many EU treaties), evidently require the statutory powers of the legislature to be engaged before they can come into effect.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, from as far back the early twentieth century Governments have conformed to what was formerly the constitutional convention,<sup>81</sup> but now statutory requirement,<sup>82</sup> of laying a treaty before Parliament twenty-one days prior to ratification. This period gives MPs the opportunity to debate and possibly deny the proposed approval, the choice to override the power of the executive if they see fit. Similar provisos hold against executive war powers. Whilst more limited matters of military sanction, and strategic decisions taken *in* wartime, remain largely within the control of

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<sup>80</sup> See Great Britain, Ministry of Justice, 'The Governance of Britain: War powers and treaties: Limiting Executive powers'. Parliamentary Consultation Paper CP26/07. London: The Stationary Office, 2007, §119.

<sup>81</sup> The so-called 'Ponsonby Rule': see *Ibid.*, pp. §120-125.

<sup>82</sup> Following the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010.

Ministers,<sup>83</sup> the grander decision to engage in a major armed conflict is one that no modern Government – despite constitutional right – could hope to enact without Parliamentary consultation and support:

In theory the prerogative powers could allow the government to send armed forces into armed conflict abroad without any Parliamentary discussion or debate, or without Parliamentary consent. In practice it is inconceivable that any government could make such an important decision without the support of the House of Commons as the executive is dependent on the support of Parliament for its survival... ultimately the Commons has the power of censure – the vote of no confidence. Moreover, in principle, the House of Commons' power to vote or withhold supply provides a sanction which could make it impossible for the Government to proceed for long in the face of determined Parliamentary opposition.<sup>84</sup>

Given recognition of this actuality, the executive's abiding *formal* authority to unilaterally initiate armed conflict is one which in reality tends to be yielded to the legislature itself; something that we have already seen demonstrated in our main example of Iraq. Not since the Second World War has a British Government committed forces to a major conflict without – at the very least – an opportunity for Parliamentary debate,<sup>85</sup> whilst in more recent times the precedent set by the Commons vote on Iraq looks to have established a stronger settlement from which no subsequent administration can retreat. As the subsequent 2011 intervention in Libya has

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<sup>83</sup> A clear instance of the former would be the June 2012 decision to sanction a hostage-rescue operation by British special forces in Afghanistan, action for which Parliament was not consulted: see 'Four kidnapped aid workers freed in Afghanistan', *BBC News Online*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-18306148>, 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2012. Given the evident need for secrecy in authorising specific military operations, the prerogative powers over these two areas continue to have clear rationale. An open vote in the legislature as to the choice of targets in a bombing campaign, or the specific details of invasion, would all but undermine the necessary element of surprise.

<sup>84</sup> Great Britain, Ministry of Justice, 'The Governance of Britain: War powers and treaties', §35.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, §31. Does debate alone bring legislators within political agency, and result in the same kind of Parliamentary Plural Subject as we have seen in cases where a motion is actually voted on? It could certainly be argued that the process of a debate provides a less explicit opportunity for entering into joint commitment, with individual MPs able through their contributions to express or deny their willingness to side with the Government stance, and thus offer or withhold their will from joint attitudes. If this is denied, however, and it is argued instead that only a clear vote on a bill or motion can support wider joint commitment, it simply reduces the scope of relevant agency in such cases to the executive level, a point which is commented on below: see page 294.

reinforced,<sup>86</sup> a formal Parliamentary division on the decision to commit armed forces now looks to be a settled norm within British politics, effectively bringing the remit of this official prerogative back within the same bracket of agency relevant to other areas of policy. As one editorial noted in the aftermath of the Iraq vote:

Though the formal prerogative power to declare war remains with the Crown, the de facto authority passed yesterday to MPs. By allowing yesterday's debate and vote, the government delivered on a promise. But it also did more than that. It gave parliament the power to stop the war before it begins. Parliament did not take its chance, alas. But it is clear that, had the vote gone against war, British soldiers would not have gone into battle and Mr Blair would have resigned. He said as much at the end of his speech. In its way, this is as significant a shift in constitutional power as anything since the Glorious Revolution. Having made it, there can hardly be any going back. When and if Britain again stands on the brink of war, it will be parliament that decides.<sup>87</sup>

Whatever we might conclude about the scope and frequency of non-Parliamentary authorisation, however, an appeal to either of these alternative mechanisms of policy enactment does little to aid our search for settled agency. A recognition that state-level action is sometimes brought about through delegated or prerogative means shows, if anything, only that the problem at hand is even starker than previously acknowledged. Even if it *were* the case that the most important elements of international conduct flowed from executive rather than Parliamentary-level agency, something that we have at any rate suggested to be inaccurate,<sup>88</sup> all this would demonstrate is

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<sup>86</sup> The Government proposed the following motion, which was passed by 557 ayes to 13 noes: 'That this House welcomes United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1973; deplores the ongoing use of violence by the Libyan regime; acknowledges the demonstrable need, regional support and clear legal basis for urgent action to protect the people of Libya; accordingly supports Her Majesty's Government, working with others, in the taking of all necessary measures to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack in Libya and to enforce the No Fly Zone, including the use of UK armed forces and military assets in accordance with UNSC Resolution 1973; and offers its wholehearted support to the men and women of Her Majesty's armed forces.': Hansard HC, 21<sup>st</sup> March 2011, volume 525, column 700. See also 'MPs back United Nations action against Col Gaddafi', *BBC News Online* [<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-12799937>], 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2011.

<sup>87</sup> 'History's verdict: MPs lose on the war but win a battle', *The Guardian*, 19<sup>th</sup> March 2003.

<sup>88</sup> It of course *may* have been accurate in earlier periods, when prerogative powers were more widely employed. Considering the converse perspective, then, even if nowadays very *little* is directly brought about through royal prerogative, the fact that it may have been in previous eras means that the agential focus of the state decision-making has differed across time. This causes equivalent problems for enduring responsibility.

that the focus of agential ascription is even more unstable than first thought. For so long as we maintain that at least *some* global political action is brought about through intra-legislature joint commitment, the possibility of derived or prerogative authorisation leaves us with an even more radical variation between the proper subject of state-level attitudes: vacillating not only between different Parliamentary footprints, but likewise with that of the executive taken alone. Accordingly,<sup>89</sup> we are still without a steadfast focus of responsibility for interstate conduct.

### III

#### The Enduring State

Our extensive examination of political agency within the Westminster system appears to have led our virtue ethical endeavour to somewhat of a stalemate. On the basis of the preceding argument we have, on the one hand, virtue-capable Government group agents, stable in the medium term, which whilst capable of formulating state policy lack the full power to bring it about.<sup>90</sup> On the other hand, we have merely occurrent policy-enacting group agents, able to properly intend state action but unsuitable for fuller character evaluation owing to their transient scope. The former, though relatively lasting, cannot hold *state-level* attitudes; the latter, though accurately subject to such attitudes, exist only in reference to single instances of decision-making. As such, we are left without the kind of unified actor thought necessary for international normative practice, a collective agent that could be the *enduring* subject of virtuous or vicious character attributes across varied instances of 'state' action.

This conclusion is unfavourable, for it leaves us without the means to accurately say that 'the United Kingdom' acted virtuously or viciously in its past or present endeavours, or more strongly, to say that it acted *from* virtue or vice, or *is* virtuous or vicious. Our agential analysis is thus in

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<sup>89</sup> And, in addition, given that some legislation may result from those non-executive Private Members' Bills we earlier discussed: see pages 272-73.

<sup>90</sup> The above qualifications of delegated legislation and royal prerogative powers aside.

plain tension with the more general group nature of the state. As we noted at the outset of the chapter,<sup>91</sup> states are understood to be conglomerate collectivities: entities which maintain a robust collective identity despite changes in their constitution over time. We intuitively think that the present British state is a development of the one that existed last week, last year, and indeed a hundred years ago, not that each of these bodies is merely a distinct aggregate tied to a particular time and membership – the equivalent of ‘these people currently standing at the bus stop’. And it is to this persisting corporate identity, the state itself, that moral responsibility for international conduct is generally directed, not to the shifting, precisely-bounded sets of politicians suggested by our philosophical exploration.

### **Population Joint Commitment**

Is it possible to reconcile these two notions – the enduring group identity of the state, and a lack of persistence in the *social* groups that perform action in its name? A solution to this apparent impasse is indeed achievable, and comes from broadening our focus to that very wider membership which is encompassed by its corporate identity – the population at large. Given the theoretical foundations of our developed model of collective virtue, it is appropriate that Gilbert’s own account of political association provides the starting point for this enterprise. In accounting for our seeming acquiescence towards state-level attitude ascription, and in later work as part of a more specific attempt to ground the authority of political institutions,<sup>92</sup> Gilbert settles upon the central idea that a citizenry itself can plausibly qualify as a large-scale plural subject. The joint commitment sustaining the shared agency of this national grouping, she argues, is one which authorises a state’s leadership to act and form attitudes on their behalf:

I find it plausible to argue that we allow ourselves to [ascribe national attitudes] because we presume that a certain complex set-up exists. We presume that the citizens at large have endorsed the idea that what their government as such thinks

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<sup>91</sup> See Chapter 4, page 192.

<sup>92</sup> See Gilbert, ‘Reconsidering the “Actual Contract” Theory of Political Obligation’; M. Gilbert, *A Theory of Political Obligation*.

may be regarded as what they as a nation think. This presumption can be further articulated in terms of the notion of the joint acceptance of a view. We presume that the citizens have endorsed the idea that they may be regarded as jointly accepting whatever propositions the government itself accepts.<sup>93</sup>

In further elaboration of this agential arrangement, Gilbert draws a distinction between two planes of joint commitment which are here in operation: 'ground-level' and 'derived' commitments.<sup>94</sup> The former, as its name suggests, sees the establishment of a general base attitude amongst a body of participants, and it is then from this foundation that the content of the latter is consequently determined. Across the membership of the society in question, the ground-level joint commitment is that which consents to upholding *government* attitudes as a wider national body – an underlying shared acceptance between population members that the decisions taken by their political representatives are to be regarded as what that national group *taken as a whole* decides. Whatever the government collectively believes or intends, therefore (and, given our expanded analysis, presumably whatever it feels, judges or is motivated by), is on this basis what we, 'the people', are committed to collectively believe or intend. In general terms, this kind of case is one in which a larger group membership 'correlates' its joint attitudes to those of a special sub-grouping.<sup>95</sup>

This ground-level convention in place, the subsequent notion of a 'derived' joint commitment then equates to a society's collective maintenance of whatever *specific* group attitudes their government in fact holds. If, for instance, the British Government has the collective intention to invade Iraq, then in the presence of an underlying population commitment that 'government attitudes are national attitudes', citizens enter into a *derived* joint commitment that 'we, the

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<sup>93</sup> M. Gilbert, 'Modeling Collective Belief', p. 200.

<sup>94</sup> M. Gilbert, 'The Idea of Collective Guilt', p. 147.

<sup>95</sup> She refers specifically to 'correlative beliefs': Gilbert, *On Social Facts*, pp. 239-40. See also *Ibid.*, p. 311; Gilbert 'On Feeling Guilt for What One's Group Has Done', p. 379.

In this sense, the structural role of a ground-level joint commitment closely corresponds to our earlier discussion of the 'piggyback' relationship between Cabinet and Government agency, where the content of the larger body's joint commitments mapped on to those defined by its sub-grouping of senior Ministers: see page 249.

people of the United Kingdom, intend to invade Iraq'. As we have outlined previously, being part of such a commitment does not mean that individual citizens are obligated to *personally* uphold the attitude in question,<sup>96</sup> but rather to sustain the notion that they *as a collective* possess it. Unlike an initial grounding commitment, Gilbert notes, such derived commitments are not produced directly; case-to-case there is no distinct expression of willingness amongst citizens to form a plural subject of the particular Government attitude in question.<sup>97</sup> Rather, the population at large is automatically committed to such attitudes on the basis of their prior, underlying agreement that this be the case.<sup>98</sup>

### *Etiology of Commitment*

Is this understanding, which seeks to equate state agency with the shared attitudes of its population, a plausible one? Do we, as a unified body of citizens, jointly commit to regarding our governments' conduct as what the nation at large collectively upholds? The first thing to query is how the kind of ground-level commitment Gilbert envisions – in effect across a population at large – might practically come about. As she herself acknowledges,<sup>99</sup> for a group of this size, which moreover will be geographically dispersed, the standard mechanism of plural subject formation – which we have so far discussed only in reference to relatively small, centrally-situated bodies – is unlikely to be conceivable. Not only is there a lack of acquaintance between all members',<sup>100</sup> it is furthermore unlikely that there ever could be, for it is clear that the

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<sup>96</sup> Again, in a specifically *intentional* case such as this, it remains unclear as to whether they ever could. Surely no singular, private citizen can personally (and accurately) intend to launch a large-scale invasion.

<sup>97</sup> Gilbert, 'The Idea of Collective Guilt', p. 147. In this sense, their joint commitment again mirrors the relationship between cabinet and government, and contrasts with that between government and parliament.

<sup>98</sup> Indeed, in such cases it may not even be necessary for those party to the ground-level commitment to even be aware of the specific content of the derived commitments they have taken on: M. Gilbert, 'Collective Remorse', p. 132; see also Gilbert, 'The Idea of Collective Guilt', p. 148.

<sup>99</sup> See, for instance, Gilbert, *A Theory of Political Obligation*, p. 272.

<sup>100</sup> Gilbert, *On Social Facts*, p. 212.

constituents of very large groups 'may not be able to get together and discuss things in an open forum, letting everyone have his or her say'.<sup>101</sup>

Nevertheless, Gilbert strongly denies the conclusion that such appreciations rule out the possibility of a population-wide joint commitment; 'A difference in process', she notes, 'need not affect the identity of the product'.<sup>102</sup> For a larger group membership, even one characterised by 'impersonality and anonymity', the basic requirements of forming a plural subject remain the same: participants must firstly express their mutual willingness to uphold joint attitudes with others, and secondly this fact must be common knowledge between them.<sup>103</sup> Whilst these conditions cannot be met directly at the national level, she thinks, they can nonetheless be fulfilled in more dissociated senses. Whilst we may not know the exact constitution of 'the British population' – that is, the specific identity of each individual citizen of the United Kingdom, we nevertheless have a pretty accurate *conception* of this body and its boundaries, of those who share the identity of being 'British'. This general notion of our fellow nationals, '*whoever precisely these may be*', is all that is needed for us to each formulate willingness to enter into joint commitment with that relevant 'we', perceiving other members we do encounter 'not so much as particular individuals but rather as members of the population in question'.<sup>104</sup>

But even if we are able to conceptualise the limits of this proposed social group, and within our *personal* interactions identify those who share in its common identity and those who do not, how might the members of a national body express their willingness to jointly commit in a manner that would make this fact common knowledge, 'out in the open'? How can the citizenry as a whole come to be aware that such a state of mutual willingness obtains? The key here, Gilbert proposes, is language usage – 'the widespread observed use of phrases such as "our government"

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<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 294. Perhaps the only way we might conceive of such interface ever being possible would be through technology, though the problem of large numbers would still remain.

<sup>102</sup> Gilbert, *A Theory of Political Obligation*, p. 272.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175. See also *On Social Facts*, p. 294.

<sup>104</sup> Gilbert, 'Reconsidering the "Actual Contract" Theory of Political Obligation', p. 103. Her emphasis.

and “our country”<sup>105</sup>. The crucial reference to ‘our’ in such utterances, she argues, is most naturally read as implying membership of a plural subject, one that is jointly committed to upholding the political institutions of the state in question,<sup>106</sup> the extension of which is to endorse their status as acting in the population’s name. This is of course the very grounding commitment we are seeking to substantiate, but if Gilbert is correct about the implication of such phrases, don’t they suggest that joint commitment is already in force rather than expressing mere willingness to construct it? As she importantly notes, however:

joint commitments and their attendant obligations can become established as a result of a process that is considerably extended in time, and in such a way that it may be hard for the participants or for anyone else to “date” their establishment. That is not to say that there is in fact no single point in time at which the joint commitment in question was finally established. But the subtle kinds of communication that may be involved are quite likely not to be consciously noted by the participants. They will probably just think of their practice as just having “grown up somehow.”<sup>107</sup>

In the case of a population’s joint commitment, this more gradual narrative for the establishment of plural subjecthood appears fitting. After all, short of the formation of an entirely new political jurisdiction, or perhaps the complete overthrow of a previous governmental structure, in most cases the political institutions of states are already in operation; any pool of wills which acts to endorse their representative status is established and ongoing. Expressing willingness to jointly commit and actually being part of that joint commitment are thus in this context best thought of as contemporaneous. Using a phrase like “our government” is to express *continued* willingness to jointly accept that body’s attitudes as those of the nation at large; they reinforce the notion that the relevant grounding commitment persists. As individuals, the process of entering into this

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<sup>105</sup> M. Gilbert, ‘Group Membership and Political Obligation’, in her *Living Together: Rationality, Sociality, and Obligation*. London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1996, p. 371. See also Gilbert, ‘Reconsidering the “Actual Contract” Theory of Political Obligation’, p. 109.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> Gilbert, ‘Group Membership and Political Obligation’, p. 367.

abiding joint commitment is likely to be equally gradated, and presumably comes about rather naturally as part of our upbringing in a particular society. As Gilbert reinforces,

It is very easy to slip into the “plural subject” mode of endorsement of governments and other institutions in the countries in which we are long-term residents. It is very easy to go along with others who think in this mode, given a natural tendency to constitute some kind of group, and, of course, given the pressure from others to do so... bonds or ties inevitably ensue.<sup>108</sup>

Even if there is no definitive starting point for such a joint commitment, however, the question still remains as to how this state of affairs can be common knowledge amongst a population. Willingness may be expressed through linguistic convention, but across a large and dispersed citizenry it clearly cannot be the case that every member knows *in specific terms* that each of their fellow nationals has spoken in such a manner. As we have already noted, however, members’ conception of the population social group, of those others with whom they are prepared to enter into joint commitment, is itself unspecific in nature. For this reason, Gilbert argues, *population* common knowledge functions on different terms to that which may obtain between personally-acquainted group members. In larger, impersonal collectives, where both the identity and potentially even existence of specific group members may be unknown to another participant,<sup>109</sup> common knowledge is not that between particular individuals considered as such, but between people ‘considered... as members of a population individuated by means of a certain general description’.<sup>110</sup>

For this reason, thinks Gilbert, appreciation of mutual willingness amongst the members of a large society must be largely inferred rather than distinctly perceived: ‘Members of the large group must often extrapolate from a small sample, make use of reports rather than direct observations, and so on’.<sup>111</sup> Within the setting of a modern, interconnected state, particularly

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<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 371.

<sup>109</sup> Gilbert, *A Theory of Political Obligation*, p. 174.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176. For instance, as being ‘British’.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 272.

with the proliferation of mass media and communication, we can surely conceive of what it would mean for such knowledge – the prevalence of a particular mode of speech – to be considered ‘out in the open’. Though we ourselves *personally* experience the usage of phrases like “our government” only in what we take to be a representative sub-set of the population, we can be fairly confident – absent of our awareness of any special attenuating factors<sup>112</sup> – that such evidence is in fact characteristic of the larger majority of fellow citizens.<sup>113</sup>

A reliance on inferential reasoning, however, need not suggest that awareness of mutual willingness within a population is flimsy; indeed, Gilbert argues, it is no more unreliable than our knowledge that the people in a certain region speak a particular language.<sup>114</sup> We are, after all, comfortable in asserting that ‘the population of France speaks French’, even without directly observing that this is true of every French citizen. Of course, it may indeed *not* be true that *every* French citizen really does speak French;<sup>115</sup> it may likewise be the case that a relatively small and undiscerned section of a population does not conform to using phrases like “our government”, and genuinely do not recognise the representative status of political bodies in the territory they inhabit. Such individuals would indeed lie outside of the boundaries conceived of when ‘we’, the vast majority of population members, express willingness to jointly commit. But this, thinks Gilbert, is of small concern for the prevailing practice of ascribing national attitudes. We may be unable to specify the *precise* boundaries of a population plural subject (described as, for instance,

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<sup>112</sup> Perhaps we know that national media is heavily controlled by state authorities and thus does not give an accurate picture of how fellow nationals speak or act; or perhaps we realise that those citizens we have directly observed are members of a special sub-group of the population who do not share the same views as the majority. In such cases we ought not to regard our direct evidence as ‘representative’.

<sup>113</sup> Gilbert, *On Social Facts*, p. 212. Such reasoning is therefore inductive in nature.

<sup>114</sup> Gilbert, *A Theory of Political Obligation*, p. 176.

<sup>115</sup> See the related discussion of the truth-conditions of ‘generic statements’ within the philosophy of language, particularly the work of Sarah Jane Leslie. Generic statements express general claims about kinds – e.g. ‘ducks lay eggs’ – but do not involve the use of explicit quantifiers such as ‘all’ or ‘most’. As a useful overview, see S. J. Leslie, ‘Generics’, in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Ed. E. Craig. London, Routledge, 2011.

‘British’), but such a subject clearly exists, and for practical purposes we can sensibly equate it to the citizenry as a whole.<sup>116</sup>

*Practical Accuracy*

What, then, are we to make of Gilbert’s account? Can we tie a state’s agency to its population in the manner she suggests, and can this provide the suitable foundation for international virtue ethical evaluation? The general structure of her model, with the central notion that a citizenry can enter into ground-level joint commitments, certainly appears a broadly plausible reading of what might underlie a national society. Intuitively speaking, there does indeed seem to be some form of shared convention amongst citizens as to the relationship that exists between government, state and people; the actions of political institutions, even when they do not impact directly upon a domestic population, are nonetheless thought to have special import for them. Similarly, common feelings of pride and guilt for the conduct undertaken by political authorities are apt to be seen as an index of citizen identification.<sup>117</sup>

In fact, one of the most useful – if perhaps unexpected – ways to query the accuracy of Gilbert’s assumptions regarding population joint commitment is to consider a type of case in which citizens appear to actively *reject* it. The context in mind is that of political protest; appropriately, one that can be quite vividly illustrated in reference to the chapter’s main example case. In the months and weeks preceding UK participation in the 2003 Iraq War, and indeed also in the period following, large-scale public demonstrations against that involvement became a common sight in a number of British cities. The largest such rally took place in London on February 15<sup>th</sup> of the same year, an event for which close to a million people participated.<sup>118</sup> A widely-used slogan amongst protesters, often being prominently displayed on placards, was that of “Not in my

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<sup>116</sup> Gilbert, *A Theory of Political Obligation*, pp. 178-9.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

<sup>118</sup> Indeed it represented the largest demonstration in the city’s history: ‘Anti-war rally makes its mark’, *BBC News Online*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/2767761.stm>, 19<sup>th</sup> February 2003.

name”<sup>119</sup> – an evocative statement that is indeed widely used in great many political demonstrations.

What is it that we judge to be signified when a sentiment of this nature is expressed by a protester? Surely our most natural thought, given what has been discussed, is that it openly demonstrates the individual’s *lack* of willingness to be part of a joint commitment, their refusal to be included within the plural subject of relevant collective attitudes. In the case at hand the attitude in question is of course the intention to invade Iraq. The question of whether such a proclamation *does* in fact succeed in removing this association is a matter of dispute; Gilbert herself takes a rather strong stance to the contrary, arguing that protest short of active interference continues to qualify only as an expression of *personal* disapproval, rather than a fuller denial of the status of political institutions as representative of the state.<sup>120</sup> One way in which we might interpret this argument is that an individual cannot remove their will from the pool directed at a *derived* joint attitude without first removing it from the ground-level commitment from which the former is necessarily generated.

Nonetheless, regardless of whether protest alone *can* in fact remove one from a population joint commitment, a debate which we will not be drawn into here, the fact that such demonstrators even feel the *need* to deny their complicity, when they themselves presumably play no part in relevant political decision-making, surely suggests that in usual circumstances such commitment is *indeed* presumed. Moreover, it is presumed by the very individuals in question. By openly asserting that a state-level action or attitude ought not to be performed “in my name”, the clear implication is that without such protest (and again, possibly still with), it *is* to be expected that

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<sup>119</sup> Indeed, it was an official slogan of the largest protest organisation, the Stop the War Coalition.

<sup>120</sup> ‘One who says in a protest against a government action ‘Not in my name...’ marks the fact that, personally speaking, he strongly prefers that the government not act as they are doing. Meanwhile the government *is* acting in his name insofar as he is a member of the political society whose government they are, and they are acting in the name of that society.’: Gilbert, *A Theory of Political Obligation*, pp. 281-2. Her emphasis. See also Gilbert, ‘The Idea of Collective Guilt’, p. 149; Gilbert, ‘On Feeling Guilt for What One’s Group Has Done’, p. 380. Such a distinction is reminiscent of Rousseau’s contrast between the ‘general will’ of the people as a whole, and the particular wills of those people as individuals: see J. J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract*. Trans. C. Betts. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

this association be rightly made, that state-level political actions are performed on behalf of the population at large.<sup>121</sup> That the citizens of a state really do consider themselves party to the kind of ground-level joint commitment Gilbert envisions, then, appears to be much more than mere theoretical speculation. The behaviour of population members, often on a large scale, provides further strong evidence from which we can infer.<sup>122</sup>

#### *A Necessary Modification*

Nevertheless, whilst the *framework* provided by Gilbert's account moves us some way towards a desired resolution of agential disunity, the *content* of her ground-level joint commitment – that the attitudes and actions of a government may be regarded as the attitudes and actions of the people as a whole – is arguably misconceived. In what remains, we will propose an important modification to this picture, and in so doing provide a final resolution to the problems with which this section commenced. The necessary alteration ought to be evident from the bulk of this chapter's argument. As has been explicated at length, *Governments* – at least within the type of parliamentary political system here explored<sup>123</sup> – are not the suitable agential foci for most significant state-level attitudes. The political body collectively responsible for the authorisation of state action, as we have seen, tends instead to change quite fundamentally across different

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<sup>121</sup> That population members might enter into joint commitment to accept government actions as representing the state at large is a separate issue to them believing that a particular government holds *legitimate* authority, or that citizens are obligated to obey it (though Gilbert indeed argues for these further claims). A great many people in Gaddafi's Libya may have thought him a tyrant, with no justification to rule. Nevertheless, it is at least conceivable that they might still have jointly accepted that the actions of his regime – somewhat lamentably – represented the actions of the state of Libya during its period in power. (Though we will not examine such non-democratic contexts in depth here, they are an important focus for future work: see page 306.)

<sup>122</sup> From the evidence of our more general experience, and in light of the requirements of joint commitment, could we ever conceive of rebuking a fellow citizen were they to deny, for instance, that 'we, the United Kingdom, invaded Iraq'? It seems that, short of some qualification adequately demonstrating their explicit non-acceptance of political representation, we may at minimum experience a degree of bemusement as to such an utterance, and expect the individual in question to explain what they mean. If it became clear that, though considering themselves a member of the political community, the person nonetheless did not regard the actions of its authorities as what that community was responsible for, then some form of rebuke – perhaps impressing on them that they are mistaken – might indeed seem plausible.

<sup>123</sup> As such, even if in other systems what is regarded as 'government' *can* in fact form intentions for state action, Gilbert's understanding is not suitable as a general account of state agency. See also note 127 below.

decisions and occasions. If the citizenry jointly commits to upholding a Government's action as their own, therefore, our national ascriptions would fail to encompass most of the decisions we intuitively want to attach to states.

Accordingly, it seems that the proper 'target' of a population's ground-level joint commitment ought instead to have a similarly shifting focus, settling upon that particular group agent which, decision-to-decision, actually has the power to intend and enact policy at the relevant political level. Appropriating the terminology employed by Tuomela, who relative to his own (largely reconcilable) theoretical framework presents a broadly corresponding account of larger-group operation,<sup>124</sup> let us call the target of this shifting focus the 'operative' group agent. This plural subject equates to whatever political collective is responsible for generating state-level action in the circumstances under consideration.

Reflecting upon our UK case study, in many instances the boundaries of this operative grouping will no doubt correspond with those of the earlier-discussed Parliamentary Plural Subject, the winning majority in a legislature vote.<sup>125</sup> The 'footprint' of this body, as we have elaborated, is highly variable: it could, amongst other possibilities, be composed of an alliance between the executive's Ministers and other MPs in support of a Government motion; it could be composed of a mixture of opposition MPs and governing-party rebels in support of a rival amendment; or it could be composed of a more haphazard assortment of legislators in support of a Private Member's Bill, or perhaps exercising a free vote on an issue of conscience. In cases of delegated legislation, or with the employment of prerogative powers,<sup>126</sup> the boundaries of the operative political agent may instead come to align with the agency of the Government alone. Finally, it

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<sup>124</sup> 'According to my "positional account", there is in a structured group a division of the members into operative and nonoperative members for attitude formation, where the operatives are assumed to be (internally) authorized for the type of task in question. The nonoperatives only tacitly accept or at least (*pro tanto*) ought to accept what (e.g. what intentions or views) the operative members have jointly accepted for the group. This "ought" may be only a weak group-social obligation related to authorization of operatives and the group's functioning as a unit when it has the attitude in question.': R. Tuomela, *The Philosophy of Sociality*, pp. 129-30.

<sup>125</sup> See page 270.

<sup>126</sup> See the respective discussions on pages 278-83.

may even be conceivable that when political decisions are made on the basis of a binding, nationwide referendum, the winning proportion of voting citizens may themselves directly constitute the operative agent.<sup>127</sup>

As should be evident from this and previous discussion then, the ‘shape’ of the operative grouping is highly flexible,<sup>128</sup> and cannot be reduced to the joint attitudes of a single political body in the manner that Gilbert – in citing government – suggests. For a ground-level joint commitment between population members to properly correlate to the kinds of action and attitude we find at the culmination of political agency, therefore, it is to the properties of this generative progression of plural subjects that joint commitment must refer. This is not to say that individual citizens must actually appreciate the content of their foundational joint commitment in these technical terms, nor even that they *conceive* of the commitment in relation to the concepts here expounded. Clearly, it is highly unlikely that population members think about state-level action via a notion like ‘operative agency’.<sup>129</sup> What seems crucial, however, is whether political decisions arrived at through this more complex agential route would still be intuitively *counted* by population members as the action towards which their commitment is directed. If this is the case,

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<sup>127</sup> Though throughout this case study we have concentrated on the dominant decision-making of groups, it is conceivable that in some instances operative agency may even reduce to that of a single individual, when they are invested with special authority. Though less relevant within the Westminster political system, where the Prime Minister and Head of State have minimal powers that they might *genuinely* bring to bear alone (the Queen’s constitutional power to dissolve Parliament, though constitutionally valid, is nevertheless in reality a rubber stamp to the advice of the executive), in other political structures this is more of a possibility. In the US presidential system, for instance, this would correspond to the enactment of a so-called ‘executive order’, whilst in a dictatorship operative agency may more routinely centre upon a single autocrat, perhaps even to the redundancy of analysing wider political agency.

<sup>128</sup> Tuomela argues that the make-up of an operative grouping may be task-relative: Tuomela, *The Philosophy of Sociality*, p. 129. Here this may be true in the general sense that the Government group agent is tasked with enacting delegated and prerogative decisions whilst it is a Parliamentary Plural Subject that is tasked with making other types of decision. Nonetheless, it also seems that given the variable boundaries of the latter Parliamentary grouping itself, the make-up of the operative group is moreover *circumstance*-relative. The grouping of MPs who enact a piece of primary legislation in a given policy area may nevertheless be different to the grouping that enacts the same type of legislation on a different policy area, or indeed even the *same* area later down the line.

<sup>129</sup> Indeed, given the amount of argument it has taken us to get to this point, it is surely far from obvious that it is not always the Government that acts at this level.

and it seems likely that it is, then a lack of precise perspicacity need not count against its broader plausibility.

### **A Multilevel Theory of State Character**

This modification in hand, then, we are now in a position to tie together the elements of this section in the service of our overarching inquiry. Our analysis of political agency within the Westminster system left us with a troublesome tension between two notions: (a) the enduring group identity of the state, taken to be the proper target for international moral assessment, balanced against (b) a *lack* of endurance in the collective agents actually productive of state-level attitude and action. Utilising the apparatus now assembled, we can see how these elements can be reconciled. The citizens of a state, taken as a body, can be understood as engaged in an underlying, 'ground-level' joint commitment, a commitment that the various attitudes and actions of 'operative', state-level political agents ought to be regarded as those of the population *as a collective whole*. If Parliament votes to go to war, then the intention of its winning majority is to be taken as the intention of 'we', the nation at large, even if individual citizens continue to oppose it personally.

Given this relationship, the possibility of ascribing virtue ethical attributes at a more comprehensive national level now becomes a possibility. If an operative political agent manifests virtuous or vicious motives in its state-level conduct, then on the basis of the population grounding commitment such motivations, and their ethical qualities, can now be taken as those of that larger collective. If a political body enacts a certain policy on compassionate grounds, then given that these attitudes and actions represent *our* attitudes and actions, it is right to say that *we* did something compassionate. In itself, this simply broadens the scope of political plural subjecthood, it brings the population of a state within the catchment and associated responsibility of that relevant 'we'; but it is yet to provide us with the lasting stability we seek. We may still ask the question of whether the actions done in the name of the population at time A

are in any way linked to the actions done in the name of the population at time B. After all, between these two points in time the population of the state in question will have likely changed.

But it is here that the nature of a ground-level, population joint commitment plays its telling hand, for as we have seen,<sup>130</sup> such a commitment represents a long-term, ongoing convention between citizens, one that is without a discernible point of establishment and which continues to persist despite the entry or exit of particular members. An underlying joint commitment that, for instance, the actions of the British political hierarchy represent the actions of the British nation, is understood to be the *same* convention which exists now as did fifty or a hundred years prior. Not merely the same in terms of content, but indeed *identity*.<sup>131</sup> Accordingly, it would appear that the collective entity that is subject to this persisting joint understanding must itself be enduring in nature; it cannot be limited to the specific make-up of the population at any one point in time. Rather, the grouping for which this lasting ground-level commitment is in force must be that which exhibits equivalent persistence across changes in constitution – that entity is *the state itself*, the very conglomerate whose agency we have been attempting to ground.

On this basis, the search for an enduring subject of international virtue and vice can be successfully concluded. When, on the foundation of an authorising joint commitment, the qualities and attitudes of an operative political agent go on to represent those of the nation as a whole, this latter grouping corresponds not simply to the specific collection of individuals who at that moment form the citizenry, but more strongly to the enduring corporate identity of ‘the state’ in its own right. What successive operative agents do, think, feel, judge and are motivated by go on to represent what the state does, thinks, feels, judges and is motivated by.<sup>132</sup> It is through ground-level joint commitment that these otherwise disparate agential occurrences,

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<sup>130</sup> See page 288-89.

<sup>131</sup> In parallel to philosophical debate concerning ongoing *personal* identity, it might be argued here that what more accurately matters is the *survival* of a population joint commitment (via a series of relevant, overlapping connections), rather than its identity per se. For a seminal discussion see D. Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984, Chapter 12.

<sup>132</sup> We might therefore think of such bodies as being the ‘custodians’ of a state’s character during the scope of their operation, and thus able to improve, sustain or damage that character in light of their conduct.

even across differing Governments, are bound to a unified state identity. Not only are we able to say that a plural subject composed of British legislators intended to invade Iraq, then, or indeed even that the British population in March 2003, as a whole, intended to do so; we can now say more decisively that Great Britain *itself*, 'the United Kingdom', so intended, and for this reason it makes sense to hold that state responsible for resultant action.

From these conclusions, how then might we ultimately judge the character of a state? With agential endurance secured, providing a robust and unified focus for attitudinal ascription, the enterprise of discerning virtuous or vicious dispositions over time and circumstance can be conducted much as we would in the individual case. Though decision-to-decision the body that generates national conduct may fluctuate, so long as joint commitment correlates their attitudes with those of the state itself we can appropriately appraise the latter by the content and frequency of such attitudes alone. If we observe that over multiple and diverse situations a state's conduct has consistently displayed the attributes of compassion and justice, then – with the same degrees of confidence as we see fit in the case of human beings – we ought to entertain that the state in question has these virtues. If, on the other hand, the behaviour of a state has consistently demonstrated callous and unjust attitudes in similar circumstances, we would likewise appear justified in the ascription of these associated vices. In principle, there is no reason why more nuanced appraisals of character conditions, such as continence or *akrasia*, might not also be carried across from the individual level.<sup>133</sup>

What might underpin such dispositions, and what guarantees that they are sufficiently robust to qualify as virtue or vice? In one sense, the reality is that nothing, in terms of a *collective* attribute, *can* provide this assurance. If operative agency shifts from decision to decision there is in theory nothing that prevents a state's character from changing rather radically from one moment to the

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<sup>133</sup> These would of course demonstrate a collective that is failing to live up to the rationality standards it is capable of: see List and Pettit, *op. cit.*, p. 24. Again, if it is *incapable* of meeting them, it is not suited for ethical appraisal in the first place: see Chapter 3, pages 167-70.

next. Which of two policies is ultimately enacted at the state level, a Government motion upholding a range of *virtuous* attitudes, or instead an opposition bill upholding their *vicious* counterparts, may come down to the personal voting decisions of a handful of politicians. In itself this may simply mark a divergence in what group and individual agents are like. But in practice the likelihood of drastic change is, in the short-term at least, largely determined by the strength of a number of political factors.

Unlike a Government, those Parliamentary group agents responsible for a significant degree of state-level action are, given their decision-to-decision change, not capable of holding dispositions as part of any group-level policy commitment. The patterns of choice exhibited by these successive plural subjects are instead largely contingent, depending on (1) the intermix of members' personal views, (2) the stances put forward by the executive, and on (3) the relative strength of the Government's legislature majority. But to suggest on this basis that the kinds of decision likely to emanate from this body are somehow 'up in the air' is a gross exaggeration. Addressing the first factor, legislators who are willing to commit to a particular virtuous or vicious attitude in one set of circumstances are more likely than not to be similarly inclined in other instances. This is not summativism,<sup>134</sup> for resultant group commitments remain irreducible, but aggregate individual qualities can nonetheless have an important impact upon what is likely to be endorsed at the shared level. That a group of virtuous politicians are *more likely* to reliably vote in favour of jointly-virtuous policies is not the same thing as saying the latter reduces to the former.

The relationship between the other two factors noted above can similarly determine the scope for state character variation. Though as we have seen Governments (within the Westminster system) cannot be assured of bringing their plans to fruition, they nevertheless remain the primary driving force behind the direction of national policy, and in the enabling setting of a large and relatively loyal Parliamentary majority (MPs of the same political party), administrations are

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<sup>134</sup> See Chapter 2, pages 73-76.

in practice likely to have considerable success in pushing the bulk of their political agendas through the stages of Parliamentary approval. Indeed, under these conditions executive defeats in the House of Commons are rare, with no more than seven being suffered in the tenure of a majority Government since 1945.<sup>135</sup> In this sense, the traits of a robust executive have a good chance of carrying across to most levels of operative agency, providing a reasonable degree of contingent dispositional stability at the state level.

In periods of weak Government this is less likely to be the case, and there is indeed a greater chance that the ethical grounding of state actions will fluctuate. It is, however, still *the same* character which here undergoes change, a phenomenon that we of course equally observe in the case of human beings. Mirroring the individual case, then, the model we have developed allows us to track the development and variation in a state's collective character over different stages of its existence, identifying not only potential periods of virtue and vice, but moreover periods in which its character traits are more or less robust. Not only does this provide for a rich and longer-term appraisal of states, much akin to the full depth with which virtue ethics can appreciate the lives of individuals, it can also imbue policymakers with the positive realisation that the character of their nation is not set in stone, but – on the evidence of its historical narrative – can be changed for the better.

The idea that states can have characters, and that we might subsequently evaluate them by means of virtue and vice, has thus been validated. It has likewise been demonstrated that their agency within the global realm can endure across extended periods of time and despite internal change, providing the underlying philosophical rationale for those ascriptions of lasting moral responsibility which lie at the heart of our common practices of international normative discourse. In some senses the virtuous and vicious character of states is symbolic; it rests upon

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<sup>135</sup> Grouping together multiple amendment defeats relating to the same bill: see D. Boothroyd, 'Government Defeats on the Floor of the House of Commons', *United Kingdom Election Results*, <http://www.election.demon.co.uk/defeats.html>, accessed 15<sup>th</sup> July 2013.

qualities and attitudes which are principally possessed as part of the joint agency of smaller representative bodies, but which populations consent to being regarded as those of the larger national group. There is likewise no enduring operative agent, but an infrastructure animated by a series of transitory ones, bound together by the continuity of that latter convention. As David Runciman attests, 'the *independent* moral identity of the state is a kind of necessary fiction, something that we have to assume if the state is not to be reduced to a series of endless and fragmentary personal power relations, but which we can never establish.'<sup>136</sup>

Nevertheless, within this representative framework the virtues and vices of states are in other important senses very much real. The joint actions which are attributed to national bodies really do flow from virtuous or vicious qualities and attitudes, even if they do so in an indirect or disjointed manner. Through its relationship to the agency of smaller political bodies, virtuous or vicious conduct undertaken in the name of the state still has a real link to the irreducibly-collective motives, emotions and intentions held by operative groupings. Moreover, in order to qualify as virtuous, such action must of course also flow from those bodies' possession of collective practical wisdom. In this sense, virtuous state conduct remains an appropriate ethical response to the world grounded in fine, context-dependent group judgement. Finally, the virtue and vice of states has a real and indelible link to national populations, for it is only on the basis of citizens' mutual willingness that the unity of state character can be maintained.

### **Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter marks the culmination of our core investigation into international virtue ethical agency, applying the theoretical model of plural virtue and vice, developed in preceding inquiry, to the practical setting of state politics. As such, we have completed a progression which began by querying the one-off joint intentionality of a small and informal collection of individuals, to

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<sup>136</sup> D. Runciman, 'Moral Responsibility and the Problem of Representing the State', in *Can Institutions Have Responsibilities? Collective Moral Agency and International Relations*. Ed. T. Erskine. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, p. 46. Emphasis added.

arrive at a rich and complex account of persisting group agency able to operate at the level of large national populations. Assessing the plausibility of collective character in the international realm has proceeded through the specific and rigorous examination of one particular system of political organisation, the Westminster parliamentary democracy of the United Kingdom. In the course of this investigation, our analysis has progressed through the full hierarchy of political decision-making, demonstrating the capacity for a range of virtue ethical attributes at the levels of the executive, legislature, and ultimately the state itself.

That virtue ethical evaluation can be directed at these multiple levels of political organisation is an advantageous feature of the developed account, and allows for a thorough, multi-layered appraisal of responsibility and its nuances. Our recurrent policy example of the invasion of Iraq has also provided a common thread by which to practically illustrate the theoretical connections between these levels of agency, illustrating how the essential prerequisites of virtue – along with the difficulties in achieving them – can fit together in light of a real-world instance of international political action. The aim of this chapter, and that which preceded, was not to provide a comprehensive account of political virtue across the varied set of actors which operate internationally, but to demonstrate in detail the structure, concepts and general plausibility of such an account in reference to a representative case study of the modern state. It is hoped that these conclusions can now serve as a guide from which comparative analyses of alternative systems and institutions might proceed.

## Conclusion

The guiding ambition of this project was to prepare the ground for a new normative perspective on global political conduct, one that could successfully employ the underutilised concepts of ‘virtue ethics’ in the appraisal of contemporary international interaction. The interdisciplinary inquiries necessary to provide this conceptual foundation have been multiple and diverse, but at the conflux of their investigative strands has been the issue of collective political agency.

Unlike those moral approaches that situate value in states of affairs, or in adherence to rules, virtue ethical evaluation cannot be easily abstracted from the nature of performing agents. For this kind of ‘aretaic’ approach, we noted, the *character* of a virtuous person is indeed the very criterion of moral worth. But in assessing the international realm, this central feature proved highly problematic, for the currents of global politics are principally those of *group* rather than individual action: relationships of war, peace, trade and cooperation persist between states and institutions, not between single politicians. The most essential prior underpinning for a character-based approach to international relations, then, was settling the level of decision-making at which character attributes could, and should, be accurately ascribed. In a manner that would be consonant with our common modes of expression, could states *themselves* properly possess virtue and vice in a distinct – and fully collective – sense?

The core argument of this thesis has answered that question in the affirmative. In doing so, it has not simply been contended that states might be courageous, honest, intemperate or unjust in a mere metaphorical sense – as no more than useful shorthand for describing patterns of aggregate individual agency. On the contrary, it has been shown that political entities of this sort, through the relationship of their national and representative groupings, can be taken to possess the agential components of such qualities – to intend, believe, feel, judge and be motivated – in a manner that cannot be conceptually reduced to the personal properties of their individual members. Moreover, such ascriptions can be philosophically justified at the most fundamental

## *Conclusion*

level, on the basis of the inter-subjective commitments that underlie our most basic forms of sociality and group membership. For these reasons, it can be both accurate and appropriate to appraise the character of a state in its own right.

This conclusion can ground a radically original take on how we understand the ethical dimensions of interstate conduct; it provides us with an evaluative viewpoint that has not been available within the existing frameworks of international normativity. In place of viewing the moral demands of the global realm in terms of conformity to external standards and obligations, whether grounded in power, order or individual entitlement, the virtue ethical perspective encourages us to adopt a broader and longer-term view on the behaviour of political communities. Akin to an individual person, what is the condition of a state's 'life as a whole'; what enduring qualities and characteristics are manifested in its ongoing action? In its responses across changing context and circumstance, how reliably does such an entity stay true to important ethical values? This departure from settled ways of thinking is a valuable one, able to offer a fresh catalyst to ongoing debates about international relations, and a concurrent means by which to challenge and potentially reconsider the important insights of other moral perspectives.

Nevertheless, the import of this project need not be limited to the study of international affairs. The means of arriving at the kind of viewpoint just described are themselves a significant contribution to knowledge. The model of collective virtue developed in this thesis provides new and innovative angles by which to understand and evaluate group conduct more widely; it also offers concrete guidance as to how we might modify the structure and operation of organisations so as to increase their chances of ethical proficiency. In the service of constructing its main argument, this work has already demonstrated the further relevance of these findings for domestic political action, but they would evidently have equal import if applied, most readily, to the world of corporate business. This more general applicability speaks to the plausibility of the foundations here established.

## Conclusion

The constrained aims of this thesis have therefore been achieved. We have proved the general viability of a collective, virtue ethical mode of evaluation, and demonstrated its applicability at the level of an international political actor. It has been shown, beyond the territory of existing scholarship, that it is possible to apply character analysis to echelons of decision-making situated above the individual statesperson. Nonetheless, even with these accomplishments in hand there still remains more work to be undertaken in order to complete the much larger endeavour this present project seeks to launch. The conclusions of this thesis provide us with firm grounding for a virtue ethical reading of global affairs, but they still leave us some way from actually possessing such an account. We have, in development terminology, 'proof of concept'; what then is needed to advance this prototype to a fully-formed product? What are the further ingredients that would complete a virtue ethical account of global politics?

Two broad lines of additional inquiry appear necessary; the first relates once more to questions of agency. The preceding chapters presented a detailed analysis of national decision-making within the United Kingdom's political hierarchy. Whilst demonstrating the key components and philosophical plausibility of state character, however, this case study alone is insufficient to provide an evaluative infrastructure capable of fully assessing international *relations*, for which a spectrum of political actors, systems and conditions require consideration. Short of evidence suggesting significant divergence, we might reasonably extend the template provided by this thesis to other political structures based upon the Westminster model, and perhaps with minor modification parliamentary configurations more generally. But although this assemblage of states would be significant in catchment, encompassing some noteworthy participants in global affairs,<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Over 30 states, spanning a full range of socio-economic categorisations, utilise political systems based on the Westminster model, ranging from first-world Western powers like Australia and Canada to developing countries in the 'Global South' like Iraq, Thailand, Malaysia, India and Pakistan.

it still leaves an equally significant group of international actors outside of justified virtue ethical ascription.<sup>2</sup>

Accordingly, the next endeavour on the road to building a virtue ethical account of the global realm must be to analyse the character-based agency of a larger variety of international political groupings. A complete, case-by-case treatment of the unique peculiarities of every political entity, comparable in depth to the present investigation, would be a cripplingly laborious but ultimately unnecessary enterprise. At the same time it may be ignorant of important commonalities. In order to construct a working framework for international virtue what is needed, rather, is a general, structural template for each of the main categories of state organisation, one that can then be modified to particular variants if evaluative circumstances demand it. This thesis has provided such a scaffold for (a) parliamentary systems of governance. Perhaps the most prominent alternative arrangements worthy of investigation would be (b) presidential systems, and (c) systems of non-democratic, authoritarian rule.

Given the important groundwork already established, key to these supplementary inquiries (perhaps again undertaken via representative case studies) will be to track the agential route of authorisation within political decision-making, examining the relationships of deliberation, sanction and constraint between separate branches of political authority, or – in category (c) – given the potential absence of such divisions. As the virtue ethical account is further refined, agential inquiry might then be extended to consider a range of more challenging entities within global affairs, such as (d) failed or divided states and (e) intergovernmental organisations. There is no guarantee that the profile of virtue ethical agency evinced in the paradigm example of the present work need carry over to other political circumstances, and indeed in these latter cases accurate character-ascriptions could potentially shift away from the national level. As such, these

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<sup>2</sup> Indeed, we are not yet in a position to justify all of the agential sentences outlined at the start of Chapter 2 (see page 69).

broader investigations prove critical to the wider applicability, and indeed adaptability, of a virtue ethical account.

The second necessary component of future research must then be to ally this justificatory map of group agency with an appropriate set of international political virtues. Understanding the structure of group-level attributes in global affairs provides a vital platform for accurate ethical evaluation, but without providing 'thick'-evaluative *content* to these possibilities, such findings remain normatively impotent. If, as argued, a state can indeed have moral character, then *which* character should it seek to possess, and what associated standards should we hold it to? Accordingly, we must add definite form to these structural silhouettes and thus provide the materials by which to make substantial virtue ethical claims about actual issues in international affairs. What are the fine dispositions a state-level actor should develop in its action, and what are the destructive vices that it should avoid? The key questions to be confronted here are whether these qualities will match up to the familiar ideas of virtue found in individual life, or whether – in line with some of the approaches discussed in Chapter 1 – there might be unique traits of character needed to respond to the global realm's distinctive demands.

The culmination of these important investigations will furnish international political scholarship with a new and distinctive ethical outlook. It is hoped that this unique and pioneering perspective will prove an advantageous one for the study of the global realm.

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