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Rewiring Ethics: Collective Action, Recognition, and Fractal Responsibility

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Many moral theories hold individuals responsible for their marginal impact on massive patterns (for instance overall value or equality of opportunity) or for following whichever rules would realise that pattern on the whole. But each of these injunctions is problematic. Intuitively, the first gives individuals responsibility for too much, the second for too little. This article offers a new approach to ethics in collective action contexts. It defends a new collaborative principle that assigns recognisably worthwhile responsibilities to agents wherever possible. This principle supports a *fractal* model of moral responsibility, that favours restructuring divisions of labour to enhance the prospects of recognition at every level of social organisation. This article is programmatic: starting from a conjecture about the moral significance of recognition, it sketches a new way of approaching a range of collective action problems that combines the importance of the perspectives of both moral and political philosophy.

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. Collective Action Problems

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

Moral theorists standardly want their moral theory to yield the result that individuals should behave in ways that mitigate these negative social impacts. It is common for theorists to oscillate between two scales: either giving responsibility to individuals for their marginal contribution to some massive pattern, or giving responsibility to massive agencies to instruct individuals blindly.[1] But ideally, we want individuals to be doing something significant themselves while also participating in some larger collaboration of significance.

This article starts with a conjecture. Lots of people find work more fulfilling when it is *recognisably* worthwhile: when they are more transparently and palpably connected

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[1] The former assumption is standard in moral theory (cf. Nefsky 2019). The latter is especially common in productive ethics, where the presumption is that markets regulate production 'invisibly'. For excellent recent discussion, see Hussain 2023. For this assumption in political theory, see the Rawls quote in Section I.B.

with the value they produce.[2] Relatedly, lots of people are more motivated to work when they are more transparently and palpably related to the value they produce. Call this *the Localising Preference.*

I assume this is intuitive enough. For instance, many people prefer to work for the needs of a local community rather than following centralised instructions as part of a massive corporation; many people also prefer to consume products that were made with their particular needs in mind rather than mass-produced commodities. We can find support for this conjecture in empirical psychology,[3] management science,[4] economic theory,[5] and contemporary ethical theory.[6] This also connects up with an important theme in political theory and moral theory. Recognition is a key aspect of the ideal of unalienation in Hegel and Marx.[7] This is also an important theme among contemporary critical theorists, in particular Nancy Fraser[8] and Axel Honneth.[9] A related notion of uptake or completion is important in care ethics.[10] Recognition is also a key aspect of the ideal of contractualism developed by T.M. Scanlon, which also inspired Waheed Hussain's criticisms of market opacity.[11]

The central theme of this article is that taking *morally* seriously the importance of this kind of recognition provides the basis for a new standard for dividing up responsibilities in collective action contexts. This approach enjoins dividing labour in ways that preserve recognisably worthwhile responsibilities where possible. This injunction would apply within a given group of individuals with some large responsibility, but also to the allocation of responsibilities to those groups of individuals themselves. This supports a *fractal* model of moral responsibility, where each agency is assigned recognisably worthwhile responsibilities as participants in collaborations that are themselves assigned recognisably worthwhile responsibilities as parts of larger collaborations, and so on. In this way, individuals can take responsibility themselves for suitably-sized needs while also taking responsibility for playing their parts in

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[2] I will be neutral about what it is to be worthwhile (see Section I.C).

[3] E.g. Sinisalo, 2004; Yang, Jiang & Pu, 2021; Yang, Jiang & Paudel 2021.

[4] Cf. Carton 2018 – though see Section II.A below.

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

[6] E.g. Wolf 2010, p. 26; Kittay 2019.

[7] For an overview of recognition in Hegel, see Honneth 2020. For Marx, start with 1975a.

[8] Fraser & Honneth 2003.

[9] Honneth 2020, also Fraser & Honneth 2003.

[10] Especially in Tronto & Fisher 1990; Kittay, 2019.

[11] Scanlon 1998; Hussain 2023.

increasingly larger collaborative endeavours. Since there will be natural limits on the extent to which responsibilities can be feasibly allocated in recognisably worthwhile ways, this approach also yields a taxonomy of strategies, favouring local management of needs where possible, but also favouring large-scale management of large-scale values in suitable contexts.[12]

B. Quick Contrast with Rule Consequentialism

The literature on marginalist approaches to collective action is vast.[13] I want to focus on, and make a proposal within the context of, more collaborative approaches.

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

> In designing and reforming social arrangements, one must, of course, examine the schemes and tactics it allows and the forms of behaviour which it tends to encourage. Ideally the rules should be set up so that men are led by their predominant interests to act in ways which further socially desirable ends. The conduct of individuals guided by their rational plans should be coordinated as far as possible to achieve results which although not intended or perhaps even foreseen by them are nevertheless the best ones from the standpoint of social justice. Bentham thinks of this coordination as the artificial identification of interests, Adam Smith as the work of the invisible hand.[14]

Rawls thought it was a job for social science to figure out what sorts of rules would produce the best overall outcomes.[15] Notice that the 'predominant interests' we are to

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[12] At issue is not physical locality, but something like social locality. The term 'local' doesn't do any fundamental explanatory work in this essay.

[13] A 'marginalist' approach is one that maintains that individuals are morally responsible for all and only the degree to which their voluntary acts promote a given evaluatively significant outcome. Parfit 1988 is canon; the best overview is Nefsky 2019.

[14] Rawls 1971, p. 57.

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

be led by are given *antecedently* – in advance of collaboration.[16] Moreover, the overall results need not be intended or even foreseen by the individuals.

There are two problems here. One is extensional. Consider cases in which a localising rule (to anticipate: one assigning more recognisably worthwhile responsibilities) would bring about less overall value. In such cases, the localising option would promote more disvalue than the option that promotes the most marginal value – though perhaps not all that much. Rule Consequentialism would not advocate a localising rule in such cases. But I think that even if the overall result would not be value maximising, it may well be most morally desirable to follow a rule enjoining one to act in a localising way.

The other problem is methodological. I want to resist the idea that we design rules based on exogenous descriptive expectations about how individuals are likely to behave. That gives individuals too little moral responsibility. It treats moral motivation as analogous to non-agential influences on outcomes; this is a classic mark of moral alienation.[17] And it threatens to make the relationship between substantive individual responsibilities and social value too opaque.[18]

In my view, it is a mistake for *Act* Consequentialists (or other less extreme marginalist approaches) to think that individuals have some individual responsibility for everything of value that they can affect. This seems to give individuals too much responsibility – and for each one not to give others enough responsibility. Act Consequentialists are not moral team players. But it is also a mistake for *Rule Consequen*tialists to think that individuals are merely responsible for following whichever massive rule happens to be most impactful in the aggregate. This seems to give too little consideration to the specific moral responsibilities of individuals. It seems problematic to me that individuals have no guarantee that they will be able to 'foresee' the ways in which their actions contribute to the 'best overall outcomes.' It is

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

[17] Cf. Williams 1973; Maguire 2022.

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

mere luck in this case when the best rule enjoins individuals to take a more localising responsibility for particular individuals. Intuitively, the Rule Consequentialist approach gets the right result (when it does) for the wrong reasons.

C. The Recognisable Responsibility Principle

I offer instead:

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

I'm going to spend most time on the most distinctive aspect of this proposal, the relevant moral significance of *recognisably* worthwhile responsibilities.[19] Let me first say something briefly about the other elements in this principle.

Firstly, by 'responsibility' I have in mind something like Zheng's notion of responsibility as accountability:

> We are ... responsible for an action in this accountability sense when it is appropriate for others to hold us to certain expectations and demands regarding our duties and tasks— and to sanction us when we fail to carry them out.[20]

As mentioned, this approach is neutral about the conditions under which a responsibility is worthwhile. There is a range of views one could take here, from something being worthwhile when it meets the needs of others,[21] or when it realises value,[22] and perhaps even when the action is not reasonably rejectable on the basis of

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[19] To keep the discussion manageable, I'll mostly focus on cases in which agents face similar options and prospects (either all recognisably worthwhile or not to the same degree). A fuller treatment would need to address cases in which only some agents can be assigned recognisably worthwhile responsibilities. For congruent discussion of these issues in the ethics of production, see Kandiyali 2020; Gomberg 2007.

[20] Zheng 2016, p. 66; cf. Watson, 1996 and the distinction between 'task-based' rather than 'blame-based' responsibility in Goodin 1987. This is a normative conception of one's responsibilities, insofar as it involves claims about normative expectations as well as descriptive expectations, and associated standards of accountability. However, since there are suboptimal roles (as discussed later), it doesn't follow that these standards are *authoritatively* normative. (For this distinction, see Woods & Maguire 2020.)

[21] Cf. Kandiyali 2020; Brudney 1997.

[22] Cf. Wolf 2010; Hurka 2001.

personal reasons.[23] A fuller development of this approach would need to take a stand on this question. I'll default to talking about meeting needs.

It is important to keep in mind that the RECOGNISABLE RESPONSIBILITY principle is a *collaborative* principle.[24] The principle distinguishes merely acting on recognisably worthwhile responsibilities – as one might without knowledge or concern for one's potential collaborators – from acting in a suitable collaboration, in which one takes oneself to be playing one's collaborative part. One's first-order reasoning and one's behaviour in the specific interaction may be superficially similar in the two cases. But one's overall motivational orientation would be importantly different; this also has counterfactual implications for one's motives and actions, and for the prospect of recognising oneself as participating in a larger collaboration responsible for larger values. The RECOGNISABLE RESPONSIBILITY principle does not advocate a focus on one's own specific responsibilities while neglecting the circumstances of others. Rather, it is based on collaboration, and hence, in the case where all agents are similarly situated, a form of generalised normative expectations. According to the RECOGNISABLE RESPONSIBILITY principle, one upholds one's responsibilities as a way of playing one's part in a collaboration with others, where those others also have recognisably worthwhile responsibilities.

To anticipate: this is also relevant to the proper basis of the relevant kind of recognition, which is not merely that the activity is worthwhile, but that the activity is collaboratively worthwhile. This collaborative relationship is one we can stand in to the patient and other would-be agents. The recognition of this fact, that we are collaborating in worthwhile ways, can form the basis for a desirable form of moral community.

II. LOCALISING, RECOGNITION, AND ALIENATION

A. Explaining Recognisability

Let me build up to that last claim by starting with the simple question: What are the conditions under which a responsibility is *recognisably* worthwhile?

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[23] Cf. Scanlon 1998.

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

Here's a first thought: a responsibility is recognizably worthwhile if the agent (or some other pertinently situated agent) is in a position to know that upholding the responsibility would be worthwhile.[25]

But this won't quite do. For in many collective action thought experiments (such as Glover's 'baked beans' or Parfit's 'harmless torturer' cases[26]), we do know what the overall effect of our action and everyone else's actions will be, and yet individual actions are not plausibly *recognizably* worthwhile, in an intuitive sense that I'm trying to capture. Here it is relevant that Karl Marx – making reference to Smith's famous example of the division of labour in a pin factory – actually made fun of the idea that recognition in production might come merely from the fact that one knows that one is a trusty cog in a good system, whatever the specific content of one's responsibilities:

> Man remains a maker of pin-heads, but he has the consolation of knowing that the pin-head is part of the pin and that he is able to make the whole pin. The fatigue and disgust caused by the eternally repeated making of pin-heads is transformed, by this knowledge, into the 'satisfaction of man'.[27]

There you are every day, banging away at some fraction of some pin. You have read your *Wealth of Nations,* so you know that everyone's taking a tiny part of the overall productive process is massively more efficient than each person taking responsibility for making the whole pin. But still, there you are, banging away at these fractions all day, miserable – and perhaps now also feeling guilty because you think you should be pleased that you are helping people efficiently.

This is closely connected with the idea that moral theories that give no importance to the Localising Preference are alienating. Interestingly, the idea that workers will be alienated if they lack some more *palpable* knowledge of the worth of their efforts is well-known among business leaders and military strategists.[28] Andrew Carton advocates that we 'conceptualize leaders as architects who optimally motivate employees when they create a cognitive blueprint composed of a small and streamlined constellation of

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[25] I'm going to be arguing that recognition is more than an epistemic condition so I am starting with a strong epistemic condition (knowledge) rather than, e.g. justified belief. Being 'in a position' to know is weaker than 'knowing' but the RECOGNISABLE RESPONSIBILITY principle concerns the counterfactual state of one's worthwhile action being recognis*able* – I presume this only requires the counterfactual state of being in a position to know the relevant condition obtains.

[26] Glover 1975; Parfit 1984; 1988.

[27] Marx 1975b, p. 225.

[28] Brennan and Tullock 1982.

connections that link everyday work and the organization's ultimate aspirations and then allow employees to mentally assemble more elaborate connections around that core structure.'[29] Carton offers this as purely instrumental advice for managers trying to motivate employees – because alienated employees are less productive.

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

For the *nature* of our activity is also relevant, not merely a changed perception or greater knowledge of activity that, along with the coordinated activity of some large number of others, has sufficiently desirable consequences.

A more palpable sense that one's efforts are meeting needs is what is missing in the pin factory. Even if you know, theoretically as it were, that your action has some impact in the void, this is no part of your productive experience. It is all the same to you whether the eventual causal impact is positive or negative or neutral. It is likewise all the same to the patient whether and why you did whatever you did. This is why one cannot simply *redescribe* cretinising or massively diffuse contributions into something recognisably worthwhile. It is also why the stratagems of the military and business leaders ring hollow: they are (some of them) mere rebranding.

My suggestion is not that we rebrand, but *rewire*: that, where possible, we restructure collective activity in ways that assign individuals recognisably worthwhile responsibilities, on some not-far-fetched understanding of what this amounts to.

One more distinction will help to clarify what I have in mind by a more *palpable* knowledge of the nature of one's worthwhile activity.

Start with the notion of 'completion' described in the care ethics literature.[30] Here is Kittay:

> Care is not something we do *to* something or someone. It is something we do *for* another's benefit. There has to be an uptake on the other's part ...To underscore the active element in the reception of care, I will speak of the completion of care as the 'taking-up of care'.[31]

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[29] Carton 2018, p. 352

[30] E.g. Noddings 1984, pp. 4, 6: Tronto & Fischer 1990, p. 40; Kittay 2019.

[31] Kittay 2019, p. 186.

At issue here is the taking-up of care by the cared-for – the recipient of the caring act of service. The central idea is that care involves respect: an open attentiveness to and engagement with the subjectivity of the cared-for.[32] Care is not merely about imposing benefits, but about working with the patient to meet their needs as they see them – at least when we can.[33] As a thesis about the nature of ideal care, this seems plausible. I also think that uptake is morally important; this can be a helpful corrective to a widespread consequentialistic assumption in ethics that assumes that the 'promotion' of benefits is pro tanto morally good,[34] in favour of a more relational approach.

It is plausible to describe the 'taking-up of care' as the recognition of care by the patient. In this sense, recognition involves both a representation of something as a certain way and the manifestation of approval for that thing's being that way.[35] This involves the manifestation of esteem, for instance in the expression of gratitude for a service.

But this is still not quite the kind of recognition under consideration. The central issue for the RECOGNISABLE RESPONSIBILITY principle concerns the prospect of recognition *by the agent* that their own service is worthwhile.[36] I suggest that we get this by adding another layer to Kittay's notion of uptake.

We can find this more complex ideal in the slightly different notion of 'completion' from the writings of the early Marx.[37] In Marxianly completed service, an agent does what they can to meet a patient's specific need; their doing so is recognized as such by the patient; *and* the patient's recognition is recognized, in turn, by the agent. *This* is what we are after. I understand *palpable* knowledge that one's service is worthwhile, in the specific case in which one is serving another human being, then, as one in which: the agent is knows and approves of the fact that their service is worthwhile partly in

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[32] Kittay argues for this at length, explicitly pushing back against Darwall's (2002) influential separation of care and respect. See also Dillon's (1992) notion of 'care respect'.

[33] Kittay persuasively applies this ideal to a wide range of non-ideal cases (2019, pp. 202–208).

[34] For a particularly explicit example of this egregious presumption in moral theory, see Maguire 2016.

[35] This is distinguished as 'British recognition' in Honneth 2020; see also Brudney 1997.

[36] N.B. the recognisable responsibility principle enjoins the *empowerment* to recognise worthwhile service. The important thing is that agents are in an effective position to recognise the worthiness of their service – it is a separate question whether they take up this opportunity.

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

virtue of the fact that the patient knows and approves of their service being worthwhile. This is the notion of agent recognition at stake in the RECOGNISABLE RESPONSIBILITY principle. That principle does not require that there *be* such recognition. Rather, it enjoins us to *empower* agents by putting them in a position to recognize their activity as collaboratively worthwhile in this sense. In short, the kind of recognition at stake in the RECOGNISABLE RESPONSIBILITY principle is being in a position to have agent recognition of patient recognition of the service as worthwhile.

This is obviously a rather stringent condition. However, as we will see, in cases where the various features of such a robust ideal cannot be satisfied fully, the RECOGNISABLE RESPONSIBILITY principle can be satisfied by degrees and/or by making these limitations as such transparent.[38]

B. The Value of Recognition

It would be a mistake to think that *mere* recognition is valuable in itself, as it were, without being recognition of something worthwhile, such as the actual meeting of someone's needs. That mistake involves the fetishism of esteem. The RECOGNISABLE RESPONSIBILITY principle is designed to avoid both overly materialist and overly idealist approaches, or more positively, to combine the strengths of both.

Consider this remark from the third part of the *Theory of Justice*:

> What binds a society's efforts into one social union is the mutual recognition and acceptance of the principles of justice; it is this general affirmation which extends the ties of identification over the whole community.[39]

We'll shortly take up Iris Marion Young's extrapolation of this thought to a wider class of social relations. For now, I want to accept the thought that the primary source of the value of recognition of worthwhile service is, in the first instance, in the importance of being able to identify oneself as a participant in a suitably moral community. I am taking up the suggestion from Marx, Rawls, and many others in the socialist, feminist, and communitarian traditions, that such identification is an important human good, and one that will properly serve as a part of an ideal of moral community.[40]

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[38] Cf. Hussain (2023, pp. 108 ff.) on authoritarian mechanisms.

[39] Rawls 1971, p. 571.

[40] There is a connection here with the moral importance of work being *meaningful* (see, e.g. Yeoman 2014). For instance, Susan Wolf's (2010) influential account of meaning emphasizes an intentional connection between one's work and its product being worthwhile (albeit she

These relationships are of tremendous importance in moral life. There is a tendency to abstract too far from such quotidian details in analytic moral philosophy. There is often a presumption that only necessary conditions and universals can be starting points in moral theory. But an alternative, equally venerable, more Humean, tradition, starts with what David Wiggins has called the 'truly irrevocable cares and concerns of human existence.'[41] We can think that morality is about people, about community, and start with what people are really like and what community is really like – not just empirically, but phenomenologically. On this approach, it becomes easier to see how the phenomenology of doing something recognizably worthwhile can be important to someone, and that kind of importance could be a condition on the structure of moral responsibility.[42]

C. Moralities of Recognition

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

This recognition-based approach has roots in Karl Marx and John Rawls, and has been given particularly clear expression in T.M. Scanlon's defence of moral contractualism.[43] In order both to show the methodological overlap, and the

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doesn't apply her ideas to the realm of production). Though notice that this is not a *reciprocal* intentional relation. This account involves agential recognition of the value of their activity, but not recognition of the patient's recognition of their activity (unless we assume that service is worthwhile only if recognised as such by the patient (cf. Kittay 2019, p. 186).

[41] Wiggins 2009, p. 6.

[42] For instance, Carton assumes this matters to the NASA workers in his management piece: "I'm working on a small piece, *but an irreplaceable and essential piece* of that puzzle. And I can see how it fits in within this broader organizational system. Because of that, I can see how my work connects to the organization's aims" (Carton 2017, my emphasis). It is important that the emphasis on irreplaceability here, and my own insistence on the importance of recognisable responsibilities, is compatible with the organisational imperative to have a system of back-up workers, and indeed, to incorporate associated research, training, and leadership responsibilities into ideal roles. In fact, more strongly, the importance of back-ups is a virtue of treating the collaborative management of needs (or other worthwhile ends) sufficiently seriously. For one example of such an account, see Forsyth et al. (2023); on the philosophical point, see Goodin 2023.

[43] For discussion of relevant similarities between Marx and Rawls, see Brudney 2013. On Scanlon, see especially Scanlon 1998; see also Wallace 2019, and the relational egalitarians

substantive differences, it will be helpful to contrast the two a little more. To be morally wrong, for Scanlon, is to be unjustifiable to others. The standard of justifiability is given by the contractualist principle: roughly, an action is unjustifiable if its performance under the circumstances would be disallowed by any set of principles for the general regulation of behaviour that no one could reasonably reject.[44] This forms the basis of the relationship between agents and relevant parties, which is, loosely speaking, one of respect as justifiability. Scanlon's argument for this approach is phenomenological.[45] As Scanlon says:

> The contractualist ideal of acting in accord with principles that others (similarly motivated) could not reasonably reject is meant to characterise the relation with others the value and appeal of which underlies our reasons to do what moralities requires. This relation, much less personal than friendship, might be called a relation of mutual recognition.[46]

I am taking on board the idea that the value and appeal of mutual recognition might underlie the authority of a set of guiding principles in collective action contexts – which is most contexts, really.

However, there is an important contrast between the transcendental standard of recognition in Scanlon, where agents are merely enjoined to act in accordance with certain principles discernible largely a priori, and the normative-psychological notion of agent recognition under consideration here.[47]

The distinctive suggestion that I am drawing out in this article is that recognition of others is not a formal property, or a merely epistemic condition, but a palpable fact about the human experience of living together under certain conditions. I am suggesting that recognition of serving one another is an important desideratum in the moral assignment of responsibilities. This seems to be an important part of the phenomenology of everyday moral life.[48]

(e.g. Scheffler 2014). The importance of recognition is more familiar in other parts of practical philosophy that are more heavily influenced by Marx and Hegel, e.g. Honneth 2020.

[44] Scanlon 1998, p. 15.

[45] Ibid., p. 187.

[46] Ibid., p. 162.

[47] Thanks to a referee for encouragement to emphasize this contrast. Many thanks to Oded Na'aman here; we develop this contrast at length in joint work in progress.

[48] It is worth pointing out that my proposal is stronger than, but consistent with, Hussain's (2023, ch. 6) requirement that relations between agents and outputs be *transparent.*

D. Two Objections (One Postponed)

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

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

The other concern, naturally raised from a more consequentialistic perspective, is that insisting on the importance of recognition can sound problematically self-interested. It is as though one is focused on the value to oneself of serving others rather than the value to the others. But that is a misunderstanding of the functional role of recognition in the approach I am advocating. The first point to make in response is that one's reason for action in service is not recognition but the meeting of the relevant need. The value of recognition is a by-product.[49] The importance of recognition plays a different explanatory role, as a general standard on desirable divisions of responsibilities.

This connects with another point about collaboration: one is not merely rearranging one's *own* responsibilities to make them more personally agreeable. Rather, the conjecture is that recognizable service is important to all of us. This explains the significance of structuring responsibilities for everyone to empower recognizable service. This also fits with the shift in moral perspective from the circumstances of patients to the circumstances of agents. A significant part of the quality of our lives together is determined by our own activities, not just the resources we have or the ways we materially impact on others. And yet the *quality* of service has been oddly erased from much moral theory.[50] I suggest that a morality that *starts* with the quality of service – everyone's service – has much to recommend it. This is true both for agents assigned recognizably worthwhile responsibilities where possible, but also for 'patients' who are in a position both to recognize that their needs are being met and to recognize the work of those meeting them.

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[49] Cf. Brudney 1997. See also Scanlon's (1998, chs. 4, 5) response to J.J. Thomson's objection.

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

III. APPLICATIONS OF THE RECOGNISABLE RESPONSIBILITY PRINCIPLE

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

A. Localisable Collective Action

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

The principle also advocates a certain amount of reasonable partiality in one's projects – to care more about one's own children and students than those of others. How does it do this? Easily: children and students are ready bases of important kinds of recognition.[51] It would be natural to universalize responsibilities in ways that preserve these recognition-enhancing responsibilities even at some cost to overall efficiency or value promotion. (Plus, as we saw earlier from moments of extensional convergence between Act Consequentialism, Rule Consequentialism, and the RECOGNISABLE RESPONSIBILITY principle, promoting overall value will not always conflict with distributing recognizable responsibilities.[52])

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

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[51] For a terrific account of the relational values in prospect in parenting, see Swift and Brighouse 2014.

[52] Jackson 1991 is illustrative here.

increasingly small units – small enough to make desertion humanly recognizable.[53] We can reproduce this structure in industrial action, for instance. Take the recent industrial action in UK academia. Forgoing wages and withholding teaching is individually costly to academics; the implications of one individual teacher's doing so are fairly negligible in national negotiations. But rather than focusing on the national movement, one can identify with one's own university, or school, or department. The strategies one employs might well be different in these different cases, if the strategy that increases the chance of success at your university conflicts with national strategy.[54]

Importantly, the idea is not that in such cases one is choosing whether to collaborate with the university as the larger group or with the national group. Rather, the suggestion is that one is choosing whether to add an additional agential layer in the total collaboration. The additional layer – the university-sized group – itself aims to honour the RECOGNISABLE RESPONSIBILITY principle. In fact, the national struggle for fair terms in academia itself can be seen as a collaborative layer within a larger struggle for fair terms across the economy as a whole – and that in some country, and so on. At each level of organization, the RECOGNISABLE RESPONSIBILITY principle advocates assigning to all participants in some group some recognizably worthwhile end, to the extent possible; that group is itself assigned this responsibility as part of a larger group assigning recognizably worthwhile responsibilities; and so on.

This is the *fractal* ideal for social organization: at every level of social organization, agencies are upholding recognizably worthwhile responsibilities as a way to participate in a suitable collaboration with relevant others. Every agency has responsibilities in two directions as it were: their first-order responsibilities (designed to be recognizably worthwhile) and their responsibilities to the collaboration (to take on such first-order responsibilities as fits with a distribution of recognizably worthwhile responsibilities to the other participants in a way that meets the group's responsibilities).[55]

It is worth pointing out that the metaphor of 'localism' can be misleading. The presumption of localism comes from human limits on service and recognition. That being said, a proper division of responsibilities will probably require some people to be in charge of coordinating subgroups, and the larger groups of which they are a part.

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[53] Cf. Brennan and Tullock 1982.

[54] For a range of examples, see Kelliher 2019.

[55] Of course, this raises a host of interesting questions in distributive ethics, especially if recognisably worthwhile responsibilities cannot be divided equally. As mentioned earlier (fn. 19), I'm going to set such questions aside for further study.

Some individuals have abilities (including based on training) that are well suited to taking responsibilities for municipal and national coordination of strategies; others have abilities better suited to meeting more personal needs.

In cases involving larger agencies, the notions of recognition, ability, and need will all be scaled up appropriately. The needs at stake will often be massive – such as the concerns of public health in a mining community, or the importance of democratic rules in a massive state. The relevant abilities will also be massive; clearly, groups can do lots of things that no individuals can do by themselves. We will also need some collective notion of recognition, such that there could be recognition by and of a massive agency, such as Preston or Cleveland, for instance. This provides an alternative source of justification for subsidiarity and municipal economic management, as in certain models of Community Wealth Building.[56]

Municipalities might themselves aim to honour a version of the RECOGNISABLE RESPONSIBILITY principle, thereby to realise a kind of community-level analogue of mutual recognition. They might aim to invest in local labour and capital in ways that are designed to foster relations of solidarity, and doing so in a way that is nevertheless responsive to some overall distribution of abilities and needs across a far larger population. This is precisely the moral ambition of some participants in the Community Wealth Building movement, which seeks to structure capital and labour management within a community in ways that provide short- and long-term benefits to that very community. By simultaneously seeing themselves as participants in a larger collaborative enterprise, these municipalities are also in a position to avoid concerns about self-interested protectionism.[57]

B. Non-Localisable Collective Action

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

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[56] Cf. Guinan & O'Neill 2020; on subsidiarity see, e.g. Melé 2005.

[57] On Community Wealth Building and protectionism, see Dennis & Stanley 2023.

Climate change is a good example of a technological limitation on localisation. Climate change is already negatively impacting the lives of billions of people, and it has resulted from the actions of billions of particular people. But it is not possible to distinguish recognisable relationships connecting particular agents and patients, either retrospectively or prospectively, due to the global and systemic nature of the causal chains in play. This is importantly different from the kind of recognition that is possible in lots of production and consumption contexts. It is also importantly different from the recognition that is possible in military and industrial action cases, where the collaboration itself can be made more recognisably worthwhile. In cases where the nature of the phenomenon or the limits of technology render recognisably worthwhile responsibilities unavailable, we should opt for effective collaboration. Our contributions to this effective collaboration can still then be recognisably worthwhile in the following different sense: so long as the rationale for our responsibilities (stated in this paragraph) is as transparent to us as possible, we will know that we are contributing in the best way that we can.[58]

The moral difference between the localising and non-localising responses in these cases is explained by a fact about the nature of alienation, which is that alienation is *agentially-imposed.* (I'm assuming that the relevant notion of alienation is the negative counterpart to the positive notion of recognition.) You are not alienated from someone separated from you by a river, just inconvenienced. But you would be alienated from someone who you could not spend time with due to homophobic social norms or your own racist attitudes or because they were afraid to say the wrong thing in case you fired them. In localisable collective action situations, where we do not distribute responsibilities in ways that empower recognisably worthwhile responsibilities, we *are* plausibly alienated from one another.[59] However, in non-localisable collective action situations, where we *cannot* distribute responsibilities in ways that empower recognisably worthwhile responsibilities, transparently distributing responsibilities in some other satisfactory way is the best we can do.[60] We are *not* alienated by the non-availability of greater recognition in these cases.

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[58] I think this is also a good way to divide drudgery; compare Gomberg 2007 and Kandiyali 2022.

[59] For an argument that efficient markets are so alienating, see Maguire 2022.

[60] My suggestion is that ensuring transparency is, effectively, a way to provide recognition *to a lesser degree.* In this sense, I don't think we need a separate principle or clause for the RECOGNISABLE RESPONSIBILITY principle to enjoin transparency about organisational obstacles to full recognition.

Somewhat ironically, I think we would be alienated by a moral approach that claims that one's contribution *is* individually worthwhile in such cases – even if we are certain that our contribution makes some tiny difference to the massive outcome.[61] For that would constrain us to misinterpret the point of the proceedings and the real significance of our contribution. And in fact, I'm inclined to agree with Walter Sinnott-Armstrong that we should freely draw on *extrinsic incentives* to ensure compliance with the collectively optimal strategy in some non-localisable cases.[62] This should be within the remit of our collaborative design of responsibilities in non-localisable cases.

This also yields a response to a natural question from consequentialistically-inclined philosophers. What about rich people in an unequal world? Should they still prioritise the recognisability of local service over the far more significant good they can do opaquely, e.g. by simply relinquishing their fortunes to a well-run charity?[63] And if not, do we collapse into consequentialism?

In reply, this sort of case involves a combination of localisable and non-localisable considerations. Consider international economic injustice, for instance (analogous considerations will apply domestically). Global injustice calls for reparations and radical changes to international trade and international politics. These are not changes that most individual rich people can bring about by themselves. Take reparations, say. These reparations are recognisably worthwhile at some macro-level, which is where they are properly situated. A given rich person should do their part in financially supporting such reparations, for instance, through aggressive taxation. The rich can also actively campaign for aggressive taxation policies, including using their money to finance these campaigns. They might also focus their energies on campaigning within their own locality.[64]

None of this involves a collapse into consequentialism, because there is no presumption that one must donate all one's time and resources to the point of diminished marginal returns, and because individuals must still see themselves as making a suitable contribution to a collaborative effort.[65]

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[61] Cf. Nefsky 2017.

[62] Sinnott- Armstrong 2005.

[63] Though see Wenar 2010 for excellent commentary on the debate between optimists and sceptics about the consequential value, all things considered, of individual contributions to international aid.

[64] Thanks to a referee for additional suggestions here.

[65] The discussion of Young and Zheng on responses to structural injustice in the following section develops these thoughts further.

The moral approach under development in this article lends itself to an integration between moral and political considerations. This project blends into normative politics. This is a feature, not a bug.[66]

C. Collective Values?

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

Not all of these collective arrangements will be massive. It would be a mistake to think that democracy is something instantiated only at massive scales, and even more of a mistake to think that democracy is constituted only by massive plebiscites. Much of democratic life is local; this will mean the delegation of large swathes of political authority to regional and local authorities.[67]

Still, some democratic processes in some places are constituted by massive plebiscites. The importance of participating in them is explained by appealing to the prospect of recognition suitable to this kind of value. Ideally, participating individuals have a transparent account of why the policies managed at that level are best managed at that level and with precisely that amount of individual accountability (which is to say, not terribly much). Participating in massive plebiscites has value precisely in playing an almost performatively recognitive function: we all engage in the theatre of voting in part to manifest our commitment to democracy itself. This explains why expressivist theories of voting can feel quite compelling.[68] Earlier I said that there is a distinctive kind of value instantiated in societies structured to empower individuals to recognizably serve one another. One way we enact structures that have this value is by participating in democratic processes.

Does this strategy collapse into the wishful thinking that Marx made fun of? No, precisely because there is a transparent explanation for why this particular collective action has to be undertaken at this scale and in this way. Such an explanation is

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[66] This is discussed further in Section IV. See also Maguire (2024) for a similar approach to the one developed here that starts from a number of familiar problems in political philosophy.

[67] Compare Dewey (1939) on democracy as a way of life.

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

lacking in the pin factory, on the assumption that profit-maximisation is the preeminent organizing value there. In the case of massive plebiscites, the best moral explanation acknowledges the importance of recognition, in the sense that we have been considering. Given the nature of the values at stake in massive plebiscites, we should not expect individual actions to be efficacious. In fact, more strongly, in light of this transparent explanation for the inherent massiveness of this collective activity, we should expect ideal individual actions in such contexts *not* to be individually efficacious.[69] The 'rationality of voting' is mostly puzzling for philosophers and economists; ordinary people do not naturally deploy a standard of consequentialist rationality in this context.[70]

IV. STRUCTURAL INJUSTICE

It will be helpful to end by contrasting the fractal approach that prioritises recognisable responsibilities with an approach to structural injustice led by Iris Marion Young[71] and, in particular, an influential specification of this general approach developed by Robin Zheng that emphasizes the explanatory importance of social roles.[72]

Young famously argued that:

Rawls thinks about structure in the wrong way. He...is looking for a *part* of society, a small subset of its institutions, that is more fundamental than other parts. ...[T]his is a mistake. ...[T]he structural processes that tend to produce injustice for many people do not necessarily refer to a small set of institutions, and they do not exclude every-day habits and chosen actions. Social structures are not a part of the society; instead, they involve, or become visible in, a certain *way of looking* at the whole society.[73]

Young goes on to positively suggest that:

...as individuals we should evaluate our actions from two different irreducible points of view: the interactional and the institutional. We should judge our own actions and those of others according to how we treat the persons we deal with directly: for example, are we honest, do we refrain from exercising dominative power when we

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

[70] Compare Gutman 1996, p. 529.

[71] Especially in Young 2011.

[72] Especially in her Zheng 2018.

[73] Young 2011, p. 70.

have the means available, are we considerate? We should also ask whether and how we contribute by our actions to structural processes that produce [injustice of various kinds].[74]

I think this distinction between two points of view is extremely helpful for theorising about fractal morality. (I presume that cases of structural injustice are among the cases that concern us here.) For on the fractal approach, all agents have particular responsibilities in two directions, as it were: they have particular 'interactional' responsibilities delegated to them by some collaboration and they have more general 'institutional' responsibilities to participate in and counterfactually respond to the needs of larger collaborations of which they are a part. Individuals will have multiple such responsibilities, which will be participations in a range of different collaborations (you are a member of a family, a university, a neighbourhood, a public interest project, etc.). And the collaborations which serve as the focus of an individual's interactional responsibilities will themselves be 'institutional' participants in other and larger collaborations. To take up the example of community wealth building again: individual productive organisations (a local farm or hospital, for instance) can have institutional responsibilities towards municipalities; these municipalities, in turn, have institutional responsibilities towards states, and interactional responsibilities towards those organisations; likewise, states have institutional responsibilities in the international system and interactional responsibilities towards their own constituents.[75]

However, as Young appreciated, her own approach to individual responsibilities leaves opens various questions about how exactly one is to think about one's interactional and institutional responsibilities as a conscientious individual. Young directs our attention to four 'parameters of reasoning'[76]: individuals should act differently depending on how much power, privilege, interest, or collective ability they have relevant to addressing injustice, arguing that we should use what powers we have to 'pressure powerful agents' into making things more just.

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[74] Ibid., p. 73.

[75] Is there a problematic asymmetry between individuals and supraindividuals here, where the interactional responsibilities of the former are significantly other-regarding, whereas those of the latter concern their own members? I don't think so. Not all supra-individual groups will have interactional responsibilities primarily towards the needs of their own members, as for instance, local productive organisations and NGOs typically do not.

[76] Young 2011, pp. 142–151.

Robin Zheng has argued that social roles can provide the missing explanation, since they are agential structures that relate upwards to complex divisions of labour and downwards to provide role-based reasons for individual actions.[77] This is an extremely constructive proposal. However, I think it has some limitations, that can be mitigated by allowing the RECOGNISABLE RESPONSIBILITY principle to play a prior role in authorising specific roles.

Zheng's account starts with the notion of a social role, defined (roughly) as a related bundle of responsibilities, i.e. generic descriptive and normative expectations pertaining to the role occupant in virtue of their relationships to others maintained through sanctions.[78] Examples include being a parent, friend, citizen, clinician, burger-flipper, or slave. Roles yield (what I would call) *teleological autonomy*: individuals are empowered to employ their values, attentiveness, and judgement in pursuit of specific needs. Roles can also be collaboratively-assigned, fitting individuals together in productive patterns that are counterfactually robust. Hence, roles constitute an additional explanatory layer of agential structure in between individual actions and larger social structures. Roles also come with *the built-in prospect of recognition*, since they are sustained by expectations and (both positive and negative) sanctions. This is another attractive explanatory advantage of appealing to roles. In Zheng's framework this doesn't quite reach as far as recognition for 'boundary-pushing' behaviour, since that is behaviour that goes beyond the structural expectations of a given role in pursuit of an individual role-ideal. But it is natural enough to imagine that one is also accountable for one's role-ideal, so that one's boundary-pushing behaviour is also apt for recognition as such.

Zheng's distinctive proposal is that we are accountable for promoting structural justice in and through all of our roles. Zheng recommends we 'push the boundaries' of all of our roles, using the distinctive social empowerments they involve to push back against massive injustice.[79] For instance, as a teacher, one has a responsibility to decolonise one's syllabus, and to support positive structural reforms within the university; as a burger-flipper, one can support one's colleagues and push for unionisation. The additional explanatory level is an advantage of a certain kind of role-based approach over a more austere approach that enjoins the collective promotion of justice. In the latter case, there is no constraint on the nature of the assignments of particular tasks to individuals in such collaborations. They might all lack recognisable merit individually.

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[77] Zheng 2018.

[78] Ibid., following Dahrendorf 1968.

[79] Zheng (2018) offers this just as an account of responsibility and is consequently neutral about what constitutes injustice.

Let me turn to some points of disagreement. I agree that roles are an important site of structural responsibility, and that they are invaluable for theorising about our responsibilities 'where agency meets structure.' But Zheng maintains that *all* of our roles, whatever they happen to be, have authority for us, in the sense that we have genuine moral responsibilities to work within (each of) them to promote justice. By contrast, I think it is a mistake to assume that roles have their authority essentially. In many cases, I don't think role expectations have any intrinsic authority, but are instead merely instrumentally significant. Take, for instance, Sumaya, a 'burger-flipper' with two other jobs and children at home to look after. Like Young's famous example of 'Sandy,' who ends up homeless due to structural circumstances beyond her control, Sumaya is really trying her best just to get by in objectively difficult circumstances. She knows she would face penalties at work for union-friendly behaviour. I don't think Sumaya necessarily has responsibilities of justice to do more than meet her job description at work, and that mostly for instrumental reasons.[80]

Zheng says that a person's roles are 'burdens that she is already committed to shouldering.'[81] But this fails to distinguish between doing the minimum instrumentally, which I think is sometimes permissible, and striving towards a fully just role-ideal, which I think is often infeasible and inadvisable. In response to this sort of objection, Zheng maintains that that we are 'in principle responsible for boundary-pushing in all our roles, even though we cannot in actuality do this, just as we are responsible for performing all our roles well even though, in practice, we always have to prioritise some over others. We're expected to do the best we can.'[82]

Consider now the converse point. There are some people so structurally empowered that they have extremely weighty responsibilities to 'bend their roles towards justice.' Just to stick with a low-level example, take the position of being Head of Education in a local community council. In that job, one will make decisions that might impact severely on the lives of working families and young children, many of whom are disadvantaged in different ways. With a role like that comes profound responsibilities to 'raise one's consciousness' about issues of intersecting structural injustices and how they might be impacted by, for instance, the provision of wrap-around nursery care or after school clubs. Likewise, anyone who manages other staff has weighty

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[80] For a similar argument, see McKeown 2024 and McKeown & Zheng 2018. Some people, for sure, manifest remarkable virtue in difficult circumstances. But this shows that boundary pushing is possible in some extreme cases, not that it is one's moral responsibility in all such cases. See also Hirji 2021.

[81] Zheng 2018, p. 13.

[82] McKeown & Zheng 2018.

responsibilities to attend to relevant considerations of care and justice. Likewise, parents have weighty responsibilities, given the influence they can have on the quality of life and prospects of their children.

Combining these points, Maeve McKeown has argued that it may well be more effective for those in dominated roles to exert their efforts pressuring those in powerful roles to make justice-improving decisions, rather than trying to enact more just structures through their own limited roles.[83] The plausible upshot is that one's accountability for 'bending one's role towards justice' is a function of one's degree of social empowerment in a role, and not just mere role occupancy.

I wish to abstract from this dialectic to make a more general theoretical point about the basis of the authority of roles-based responsibilities. Part of the project of this paper is to try to draw explanatory connections between individual contexts and larger social contexts. The object is not exactly to explain how every single individual has responsibilities relating to structural injustice. Sometimes, instead, the questions concern larger distributions of power *to* individuals, and to specific roles – and those are the things that really need to be changed. Otherwise, the theory will be too explanatorily reductive.

The RECOGNISABLE RESPONSIBILITY principle primarily concerns desirable *divisions* of responsibilities. I'm really making a point about how to *restructure* responsibilities to empower participants in a desirable collaboration. In cases where there is no more recognisable distribution of responsibilities available, my approach still recommends an alternative way of perceiving these responsibilities, viz. as unavoidably non-transparent.

One way to put my concern with Zheng is that responsibility is all *within* a particular role, whereas I think we have authority together to restructure the division of labour in ways that create entirely new roles. One way to see this is concerns the distinction between one's job and vocation.[84] Take an adjunct lecturer, struggling to pay bills on a meagre hourly salary. Their contract might assume that they can prepare to teach, say, a whole novel for a given week's seminar, in two or three hours. If they were to see their role as 'adjunct hourly lecturer' they would not be motivated to prepare beyond that time. But it would be more natural for them to see their role as a teacher, not an adjunct lecturer, and to prepare properly. Suppose Sumaya is also this adjunct lecturer. This is one of her other jobs. It seems reasonable for her to uphold her vocational responsibilities as a teacher while acting merely instrumentally for a wage in her

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[83] Ibid.

[84] See Blum 1990 for helpful discussion of vocations.

burger-flipping job. It would also seem reasonable for her to take her role as activist citizen seriously when she can, and to, for instance, take her children to Pride marches, push her local councillor to deploy funds more equitably if the occasion arises, etc.[85]

It is to some extent up to Sumaya to decide – in suitable collaboration with others – what her authoritative roles are. She might choose to see some economic roles merely instrumentally, and to see her pedagogical role vocationally rather than economically, as it were. At this stage of moral theorising, the RECOGNISABLE RESPONSIBILITY principle has some purchase. Then *within* the specific roles so authorised, Zheng's injunction to bend those roles towards justice does seem ideal.

In the case in which roles are roughly equally empowering, and maximally transparent, then the universal injunction to bend our roles towards justice – with the implication that we may all be fittingly sanctioned otherwise – would be satisfactory. But roles are not equally empowering, and it doesn't seem particularly desirable that they would be. It makes sense that we will divide labour in such a way that larger agencies have responsibilities for needs at larger scales. It also makes sense that such collectives will have suitable management hierarchies. Thus, some people, even in ideal circumstances, will have responsibilities with greater scope, and greater risk and potential, than others. The occupants in such roles are to be held far more stringently to account for the justice of their decision making. As such, those roles guarantee robust recognition. (I'm assuming that we hold individuals accountable for – and hence recognise – their role-ideal behaviour that goes beyond minimal role-based expectations.)

Here is another way to put the point. Particular roles do not have authority as such. Roles are too morally cheap for that. But roles are still plausibly the primary locus of *interactional* responsibilities – so long as they are sufficiently well-designed and fit into a suitably desirable larger division of responsibilities, and thereby also satisfy our *institutional* responsibilities. Roles are indeed an important 'site where structure meets agency' and as such they are good mediators of social responsibility. But there are plausibly standards bearing on divisions of responsibilities into roles that explain the authority that particular roles do or do not have. The RECOGNISABLE RESPONSIBILITY principle is part of such prior standards.[86]

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[85] Compare the argument that pharmacists should be perceived to have the role of clinicians in Rushworth et al. 2024, and the more general discussion of 'role ambiguity' in Austin et al. 2010.

[86] It doesn't help that Zheng distinguishes her theory of responsibility from a theory of justice (as noted in fn. 79). For I am claiming that one is responsible, in part, for the role one takes as authoritative, not just for bending given roles towards justice (whatever that is).

Let me end by considering one more question. How much weight should be given to the importance of recognition in assigning responsibilities? This might be presented as an objection in the form of a dilemma. Either recognition is taken as having lexical priority over other worthwhile considerations; but this would seem implausible in cases where the worthwhile considerations are tremendous and the recognitional considerations slight. Or else we have to somehow balance the value of recognition to agents with the value of their worthwhile service; but this would involve a collapse into direct consequentialism.

The response is implicit in the foregoing. Balancing the importance of specific needs against the prospects for recognisable service is not determined *a priori*. It is a task for transparent collaborative organisation. The RECOGNISABLE RESPONSIBILITY principle is a standard for collaborative reasoning. Sometimes decisions aspiring to honour that principle will trade off worthwhile outcomes for more recognisably worthwhile responsibilities. Sometimes, instead, collaborations will decide to allocate responsibilities for certain vital or large-scale needs to larger agents, and occupants of roles in more hierarchical organisations. In such cases, however, ideally the nature of the obstacles to more localised management of needs will be made transparent, and the occupants of the more powerful roles will be held more accountable.

V. CONCLUSION

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

It is worth drawing out another attractive implication of this approach, which is that there is value in making improvements by degrees. Even if full collaborative management of the means of production is infeasible, for instance, we can certainly still opt for more recognition in particular workplaces, and also across particular professions. To take one example, the Collaborative Care model for pharmacists in Scotland aims to restructure the ethos and expectations of professional pharmacists in ways that assign each worker recognisably worthwhile responsibilities.[87] Or as noted,

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[87] Cf. Forsyth et al. 2023.

we can empower particular municipalities, for instance by pursuing community wealth building projects, and generally with more subsidiarity.

This way of approaching collective action can come as a bit of a relief. It is natural for philosophers to feel despair in the face of collective action problems, especially as one oscillates between individual insignificance and the opacity of massive institutional demands. There is often nothing much one can recognisably do to make society significantly more equal, or more free, or more valuable overall. But one can do something significant to make society better, by honouring one's role in a collaboration that assigns recognisable responsibilities, where possible, and is otherwise transparent about why not. One can do something worthwhile in one's professional life, in one's life as a citizen, as a neighbour, a friend, a parent. This might not be much in the grand scheme of things. But why should anyone think it is their responsibility to make some big impact in the grand scheme of things?

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The author declares that he has no competing interests.

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