

Book Review

Group Duties: Their Existence and Their Implications for Individuals,

STEPHANIE COLLINS, 2019.

Oxford, Oxford University Press. x 218 pp, £50.00 (hb)

In *Group Duties*, Stephanie Collins offers a creative and insightful investigation into the possibilities for groups to bear duties and how this relates to the duties of individual members. The book is sophisticated while simultaneously being clear, concise, well-structured, and well-sign-posted, which makes easy work for the reader.

Collins' overarching goal is to introduce and defend a 'tripartite model' of group duties, which distinguishes between what she calls 'combinations', 'coalitions', and 'collectives'. Collins argues that only collectives can actually bear duties, qua group; although being a member of any kind of group can have important implications for an individual's duties, qua member.

The first chapter lays out the basics of the 'tripartite model', clarifying the relevant group categories (which are exhaustive and mutually exclusive) as follows:

- *Collectives* are 'constituted by agents that are united under a rationally operated group-level decision-making procedure that has the potential to attend to moral considerations'.
- *Coalitions* are 'constituted by agents who each hold [the same] goal and are disposed to work with the others to realize the goal', but lack a group-level decision-making procedure.
- *Combinations* are 'constituted by any collection of agents that do not together constitute either a collective or a coalition'. (4)

Thus distinguished, the second chapter critically assesses six arguments for the idea that combinations and coalitions can have duties. The first five share a form; namely, that positing the existence of group duties for combinations and/or coalitions is required to either (1) explain certain intuitions about individual duties, (2) explain group-level blameworthiness, (3) match our pretheoretical convictions, (4) help distribute the duties correlative to human rights, or (5) avoid overdemandingness. The sixth argument is to suggest that combinations and coalitions can be agents, and all agents can bear duties (43). Collins casts doubt on the first five arguments and argues positively that such groups aren't actually agents; however, she doesn't mean this to be decisive against such groups bearing duties. Instead, she merely wants to cause a 'stalemate'. While the responses to arguments 1–5 are worthy of attention (and perhaps minor quibbling), Collins' argument denying such groups agency may end up being more controversial. While careful to not simply stipulate a concept of agency that can't be met by noncollectives, Collins may still assume an overly demanding vision of what it takes to be an agent, which for her requires forming intentions via 'making decisions' and subsequently acting on such intentions. Given how she

conceives of making decisions later in the book, the argument may require too thick of a concept of agency and therefore not decisively undermine the possibility of these groups' *agency*.

Regardless, Collins tries to break the stalemate in Chapter Three with an argument against the possibility of combinations or coalitions *bearing duties* (she offers two, but rightly rejects the first, so I'll focus on the second). The idea is that in order for groups to bear duties, they must be able to 'make a decision', and combinations and coalitions lack the ability to do so (86). There is some room for doubt here as well. This argument relies on another idea about fulfilling duties, and the psychological explanation for action required for acquiring 'moral worth' in so doing. But the move seems to require a specific Kantian vision of moral worth that is debatable (consequentialists will likely reject it).

The fourth and fifth chapters proceed to characterise which duties (albeit not held by the group but rather individual members of the group) can actually exist in connection to combinations and coalitions. Collins calls these 'coordination duties', and they can come in two varieties: as duties to act responsively to others in order to accomplish morally important tasks ('responsiveness duties') or as duties to take responsive steps to help create a collective that can bear a duty to accomplish the morally important task ('collectivization duties') (97). This discussion is packed with interesting thoughts. One that certainly warrants further investigation in the literature is the question of choosing between the two (especially in nonideal settings). The key takeaway from the fifth chapter is that coordination duties for members of coalitions require that individuals 'we-reason', or 'coalition-reason', whereas coordination duties for members of combinations require that individuals 'I-reason'. Clarifying this difference in framing is particularly fruitful, though Collins may go too far in arguing that members of combinations do *wrong* if they coalition-reason (they might, but sometimes doing so might be good enough) and in requiring that moral coalitions take the 'most efficient and likely-to-succeed means' (141) for realising their objective (sometimes *sufficient means* is enough).

In the sixth, and penultimate chapter, we come back to collectives, proper, and get Collins' complete account of how and why such groups can have duties. She characterises the minimal conditions required for a group to 'engage in rational group-level decision-making that can attend to moral considerations' (156) as well as offers compelling reasons why we can't reduce or eliminate collectives from our ontology. The capacious understanding Collins arrives at should take some of the sting away from denying group duties to the other categories, as the bar is low to count as a collective—though it is unlikely to blunt all challenges. Moreover, while scoring some blows against rivals, the account may have some counterintuitive implications for who counts as a member of a collective (e.g., 'low-level operatives' may not always count, even if they happen to play a large causal role in the collective's action).

Finally, in Chapter Seven, Collins details what being part of a collective entails for individuals, in an account of what she calls 'membership duties', or duties to use one's role in the collective to see to an outcome's realisation (196). While the label is slightly unfortunate, given one can also be a 'member' of a combination or coalition but with very different duties, qua member, the discussion is illuminating. One issue that would be interesting to hear more about is how Collins conceives of nested cases, such as when a collective exists within a coalition.

As usual, there are many more thought-provoking elements worth commenting on than space permits, so I'll close with two more general points. First, while common to the literature and helpful in isolating distinctions across chapters via a constant through line, many of the examples are beach rescue (or otherwise highly stylised) cases. This made me wonder whether Collins missed an opportunity to push the field toward engagement with more down-to-earth, real-life cases. There's no shortage in this domain and doing so would be an important movement for the literature. Second, although Collins is explicit about her aims in the project, and their limits, some readers might find that the purported implications for individuals' duties (whether 'responsiveness', 'collectivization', or 'membership' duties) are pitched rather abstractly, limiting their action-guiding potential for most of our specific, substantive questions about responsibility. Collins explains that the 'strength' and 'demands' of individuals' duties are going to be determined by a range of contextual factors that she can't go in to (124). This isn't so much a knock on Collins as a recognition of her restricted focus and the work still required for a comprehensive picture of the deontic landscape of groups and their members.

Some lingering questions and concerns aside, *Group Duties* is a rich and rewarding read and should serve as an important touchstone for the literature going forward.

COLIN HICKEY 

Utrecht University, Janskerkhof 13, 3512 BL, Utrecht, Netherlands