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The Limits of Groups, An Author Responds

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In their critique Corlett and Strobel (2017) discuss my 2013 book *Social Ontology* and comment on some of my views. In this reply I will respond to their three central criticisms that I here formulate as follows:¹

- (1) Group members are said in my account to be required to ask for the group's, thus other members', permission to leave the group, and this seems to go against the personal moral autonomy of the members.
- (2) My account does not focus on morally central matters such as personal autonomy, although it should.
- (3) My moral notions are based on a utilitarian view of morality.

In this note I will show that claims (1) – (3) are not (properly) justified on closer scrutiny.

Unity Is What's Missing In Our Lives

Below I will mostly focus on we-mode groups, that is, groups based on we-thinking, we-reasoning, a shared “ethos”, and consequent action as a unified group.² Ideally, such we-mode groups are autonomous (externally uncoerced) and hence free to decide about the ethos (viz. the central goals, beliefs, norms, etc.) of their group and to select its position holders in the case of an organized group. Inside the group (one with freely entered members) each member is supposed to be “socially” committed to the others to perform her part of the joint enterprise. (Intentions in general involve commitment to carry out what is intended).

The members of a we-mode group should be able to count on each other not to be let down. The goal of the joint activity typically will not be reached without the other members' successful part performances (often involving helping). When one enters a we-mode group it is one's own choice, but if the others cannot be trusted the whole project may be impossible to carry out (think of people building a bridge in their village).

The authors claim that my moral views are based on utilitarianism and hence some kind of maximization of group welfare instead of emphasizing individual autonomy and the moral rights of individuals.³ This is a complex matter and I will here say only that there is room in my theory both for group autonomy and individual autonomy. The we-mode account states what it takes for people to act in the we-mode (see Tuomela, 2013, ch. 2). According to my account, the members have given up part of their individual autonomy to the group. From this follows that solidarity to the other members is important. The members of a paradigmatic we-mode group should not let the others down. This is seen as a moral matter.

¹ Acknowledgement. I wish to thank my wife Dr. Maj Tuomela for important help in writing this paper.

² See Tuomela (2007) and (2013) for the above notions.

³ I speak of utilities only in game-theoretic contexts. (My moral views are closer to pragmatism and functionalism than utilitarianism.)

The Moral Nature of the Act

As to the moral implications of the present approach, when a group is acting intentionally it is as a rule responsible for what it does. But what can be said about the responsibility of a member? Basically, each member is responsible as a group member and also privately morally responsible for the performance of his part. (He could have left the group or expressed his divergent opinion and reasons.) Here we are discussing the properly moral and not only the instrumental or quasi-moral implications of group action and the members.⁴

A member's exiting a free (autonomous) group is in some cases a matter for the group to deal with. "What sanctions does a group need for quitting members if it endangers the whole endeavor?" Of course the members may exit the group but then they have to be prepared to suffer the (possibly) agreed-upon sanctions for quitting. Corlett and Strobel focus on the requirement of a permission to leave the group (see pp. 43-44 of Tuomela, 2013). It is up to the group to decide about suitable sanctions. E.g. the members may be expected to follow the majority here. (See ch. 5 of Tuomela, 2013).

Furthermore, those who join the group should of course be clear about what kind of group they are joining. If they later on wish to give up their membership they can leave upon taking on the sanctions, if any, that the group has decided upon. My critics rightfully wonder about the expression "permission to leave the group". My formulations seem to have misleadingly suggested to them that the members are (possibly) trapped in the we-mode group. Note that on p. 44 of my 2013 book I speak of cases where leaving the group harms the other members and propose that sometimes rather mere informing the members might be appropriate.

How can "permission from the group" be best understood? Depending on the case at hand, it might involve asking the individual members if they allow the person in question to leave without sanctions. But this sounds rather silly especially in the case of large groups. Rather, the group may formulate procedures for leaving the group. This would involve institutionalizing the matter and the possible sanctioning system. In the case of paradigmatic autonomous we-mode groups the exit generally is free in the sense that the group itself rather than an external authority decides about procedures for exiting the group (see appendix 1 to chapter 2 of Tuomela, 2013). However, those leaving the group might have to face group-based sanctions if they by their leaving considerably harm the others.

In my account the members of a well-functioning we-mode group can be said somewhat figuratively to have given up *part* of their autonomy and self-determination to their we-mode group. Solidarity between the members is important: The members should not let the others down – or else the group's project (viz. the members' joint project) will not be successful. This is a non-utilitarian moral matter – the members are to keep together not to let each other down. Also for practical reasons it is desirable that the members stick together on penalty of not achieving their joint goal – e.g. building a bridge in their village. People do retain their personal (moral) autonomy in the above kind of cases where entering and exiting a we-mode group is free (especially free from external authorities) or where, in

⁴ See e.g. Tuomela-Mäkelä (2016) for a group's and group members' moral responsibility, Also see pp. 37 and 41 of Tuomela (2013) and chapter 10 in Tuomela (2007).

some cases, the members have to satisfy special conditions accepted by their group. I have suggested elsewhere that dissenting members should either leave the group or try to change the ethos of the group. As said above, in specific cases of ethos-related matters the members may use a voting method, e.g. majority voting, even if the minority may want to challenge the result.⁵

Questions of Freedom

According to Corlett and Strobel, freedom of expression is largely blocked and the notion of individual autonomy is dubious in my account (see p. 9 of their critical paper). As was pointed out above, the members may leave the group freely or via an agreed-upon procedure. Individual autonomy is thwarted to the extent that is needed for performing one's part, but such performance is the whole point of participation in the first place. Of course the ethos may be discussed along the way and changes may be introduced if the members or e.g. the majority of them or another "suitable" number of them agree. The members enter the group freely, by their own will and through the group's entrance procedures and may likewise leave the group through collectively agreed-on procedures (if such exist).

As we know, autonomy is a concept much used in everyday life, outside moral philosophy. In my account it is used in "autonomous groups", in the simple sense that the group can make its own decisions about ethos, division of tasks, conditions for entering and exiting the group without coercion by an external authority. Basically, only the autonomous we-mode group can, through its members' decision, make rules for how people are allowed to join or leave the group.⁶

Corlett's and Strobel's critique that the members in autonomous we-mode groups have no autonomy (in the moral sense) in my account cannot be directed towards the paradigmatic case of groups with free entrance, where the group members decide among themselves what is to be done by whom and how to arrange for the situation of a member wanting to leave

⁵ As to dissidents I have discussed the notion briefly in my 1995 book and in a paper published in 2003 with Maj Tuomela (see the references). Furthermore, Hans Bernhard Schmid discusses dissidents in we-mode groups in his article "On not doing one's part" in Psarros and Schulte-Ostermann (eds.) *Facets of Sociality*, Ontos Verlag, 2007, pp. 287-306.

⁶ Groups that are dependent on an external agent (e.g. a dictator, an owner of a company or an officer commanding an army unit) may lack the freedom to decide about what they should be doing, which positions they should have, and the members may be forced to join a group that they cannot exit from. My notion of "autonomous groups" refers to groups that are free to decide about their own matters, e.g. entrance and exit (possibly including sanctions). Personal moral autonomy in such groups is retained by the possibility to apply for entrance and exit upon taking on possible sanctions, influencing the ethos or protesting. The upshot is that a person functioning in a paradigmatic we-mode group should obey the possible restrictions that the group has set for exiting the group and be willing to suffer agreed upon sanctions. Such a we-mode group is assumed to have coercion-free entrance to the group and also free exit from it – as specified in Appendix 1 to Chapter 2 of my 2013 book. Here is meant that no external authority is coercing people to join and to remain in the group. A completely different matter is the case of a Mafia group and an army unit. The latter may be a unit that cannot be freely entered and exited. Even in these cases people may act in the we-mode. In some non-autonomous groups, like in a business company, the shareholders decide about all central matters and the workers get paid. Members may enter if they are chosen to join and exit only according to specific rules.

the group, maybe in the middle of a critical situation. Of course, a member cannot always do as he chooses in situations of group action. A joint goal is at stake and one's letting the others down when they have a good reason to count on one would be detrimental to everyone's goal achievement. Also, letting the others down is at least socially and morally condemnable.

When people have good reason to drop out, having changed their mind or finding that the joint project is morally dubious, they can exit according to the relevant rules (if such exist in the group). The feature criticized by the present authors that "others' permission is required" is due to my unlucky formulation. What is meant is that in some cases there should be some kind of procedure in the group for leaving. The group members are socially committed to each other to further the ethos, as well as committed to the ethos. The social commitment has, of course, the effect that each member looks to the others for cooperative actions and attitudes and has a good reason to do so.

My critics suggest that the members should seek support from the others – indeed this seems to be what the assumed solidarity of we-mode groups can be taken to provide. However, what they mean could be a procedure to make the ethos more attractive to them and leading to their renewed support of the ethos, instead of pressuring them to stay in a group with an ethos that no longer interests them. Of course, the ethos may be presented in new ways, but there still may be situations where members want to leave and they have a right to leave following the agreed upon procedures. Informing the group in due time, so that the group can find compensating measures, is what a member who quits can and should minimally do. The authors discuss examples where heads of states and corporations want to resign. It is typically possible to resign according e.g. to the group's exit rules, if such exist.

Follow the Leader

On page 11 the authors criticize the we-mode account for the fact that non-operative members ought to accept what the operative leaders decide. They claim that e.g. a state like the U.S., on the contrary, allows, and in some situations, even asks the citizens to protest. They are, of course, right in their claims concerning special cases. Naturally there will sometimes be situations where protest is called for. The dissidents may then win and the government (or what have you) will change its course of action. Even the ethos of the group may sometimes have to be reformulated.

Gradual development occurs also in social groups and organizations, the ethos evolves often through dissident actions. When the authorized operatives act according to what they deem to be a feasible way, they do what they are chosen to do. If non-operatives protest due to immoral actions of the operatives, they do the right thing morally, but if the operatives act according to the ethos, they are doing their job, although they should have chosen a moral way to achieve the goal. The protest of the non-operatives may have an effect. On the other hand, note that even Mafia groups may act in the we-mode and do so in immoral ways, in accordance to their own agenda.

The authors discuss yet another kind of example of exiting the group, where asking permission would seem out of place: a marriage. If a married couple is taken to be a we-

mode group, the parties would have to agree upon exit conditions (if marriage is not an institutionalized and codified concept – what it, nevertheless, usually is). As an institution it is regulated in various ways depending on the culture. The summarized critique by the authors on page 12 has been met this far. It seems that they have been fixated on the formulation that “members cannot leave the group without the permission from the other members.” To be sure, my view is that group members cannot just walk out on the others without taking any measures to ease the detrimental effects of their defection. Whether it is permission, compensation or an excuse, depends on the case. In protesting we have a different story: Dissidents often have good reasons to protest, and sometimes they just want to change the ethos instead of leaving.

It’s Your Prerogative

At the end of their critique the authors suggest that I should include in my account a moral prerogative for the members to seek the support of other group members as a courtesy to other members and the group. I have no objection to that. Once more, the expression “permission to leave the group” has been an unfortunate choice of words. It would have been better e.g. to speak of a member’s being required to inform the others that one has to quit and be ready to suffer possible sanctions for letting the others down and perhaps causing the whole project to collapse.

However, dissidents should have the right to protest. Those who volunteer to join a group with a specific ethos cannot always foresee if the ethos allows for immoral or otherwise unacceptable courses of action. Finally, my phrase “free entrance and exit” may have been misunderstood. As pointed out, the expression refers to the right of the members to enter and exit instead of being forced to join a group and remain there. To emphasize once more, it is in this way that the members of we-mode groups are autonomous. Also, there is no dictator who steers the ethos formation and choice of position holders. However, although the members may jointly arrange their group life freely, each member is not free to do whatever he chooses when he acts in the we-mode. We-mode acting involves solidary collective acting by the members according to the ethos of the group.

In this note I have responded to the main criticisms (1)-(3) by Corlett and Strobel (2017) and argued that they do not damage my theory at least in a serious way. I wish to thank my critics for their thoughtful critical points.

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R. Tuomela

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