

Reading reflection 2

Critically analyzing and reviewing 'Groups as agents' by Deborah Perron Tollefsen

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I. INTRODUCTION

This text is supposed to be a reading reflection of the excerpt "6 The Moral Responsibility of Groups" of the book 'Groups as agents' by Deborah Perron Tollefsen. First, there will be a quick placement into the field, or topic this text is about. After that, the central thesis of the text will be presented, as well as the arguments supporting this thesis will be summarized. Finally, the strength of Tollefsen's line of argumentation will be reflected critically.

II. WHERE WE ARE

With regard to the course Philosophy of social minds, the given text can be categorized into the field of collective moral responsibility. Collective moral responsibility refers to the idea that a group or society can be held accountable for the actions of its members and the consequences that result from those actions. It suggests that individuals within a group are collectively responsible for promoting good and avoiding harm, regardless of their individual actions or intentions. The main challenge of collective moral responsibility is assigning blame and determining accountability in situations where the actions and decisions of many individuals contribute to a harmful outcome. This can make it difficult to determine who is responsible for the harm and how to allocate appropriate consequences. Additionally, there may be differing opinions on what constitutes harm and what actions should be taken to prevent it, leading to disagreements and difficulties in achieving collective responsibility.

III. CENTRAL THESIS

According to Tollefsen, groups can be morally responsible if they have normative competency, denoting the capacity to appreciate normative considerations, ascertain relevant information and engage in effective deliberation, because they are then appropriate targets of reactive attitudes. Ergo, some groups are morally responsible.

IV. SUMMARY OF ARGUMENTATION

First, Tollefsen is introducing two different phenomena, namely group responsibility and shared responsibility. Whereas shared responsibility denotes that each individual is sharing a part of the responsibility, group responsibility means that the group itself is the bearer of responsibility. In the following Tollefsen is arguing that there might be fair reasons to attribute the responsibility to a group instead of attributing it to the individual. She phrased one reason as the non-residual problem. The reason to attribute responsibility to

a group would be that in cases where it is not easy or even impossible to decide who really contributed to an action, there would be a rest of responsibility after the responsibility of the individuals was assigned. The idea is to solve this problem by targeting the group for the responsibility. The second reason she illustrates concerns actions that can only be committed by a group. In her text Tollefsen employs the example of a genocide and amplifies that the act of an individual may contribute to the whole act, however only a group as a whole can commit a genocide. Therefore, she argues that there are some cases in which such a group responsibility is required. Based on the argument that there is the need for group responsibility, Tollefsen further proceeds with elaborating how this is supposed to work.

She illustrates that group intentional agency does not mean moral responsibility, for example animals, or even robots could be intentional without being morally responsible. She proposes personhood instead as a requirement for moral responsibility. Moreover, she also argues that this notion is a serious challenge for group moral responsibility approaches since personhood is usually associated with self-reflection and self-consciousness whereas groups are according to a lot of accounts not able to offer these features. Connected to that Tollefsen names three different approaches to this challenge. French for example argues that some groups meet the conditions of personhood, as a corporation comes with intentionality, rationality, ability to reason and ability to change behavior on the basis of reasons. List and Pettit argued that groups are persons, not in a way as human-beings are, but in a different way. Further, they state that moral agency requires a performative sense of personhood which a few groups have. Personhood is here differentiated in terms of an intrinsic notion and performative sense. A third approach also introduced by French is that personhood is no requirement for moral responsibility. He argues that corporations meet the features of intentionality, rationality and reason-responsiveness which is enough to ascribe moral responsibility as he claims. Since Tollefsen emphasized the challenge of choosing personhood as a criteria for moral responsibility, she argues that concerning the current debate it is more reasonable to focus on the features that make a person morally responsible. Picking up an account by Sheehy, Tollefsen argues that even though groups cannot consider values and evaluate them based on normative standards, they are able to reflect their goals, practices and change them according to normative demands. Next to that, Tollefsen is also adding that the condition of choosing freely is also crucial for evaluating moral responsibility and supporting

this by an illustrative example showing that if I had no other choice the action cannot be called immoral. After demonstrating one approach to moral group responsibility which was evaluating criteria of moral agents and tried to put this onto groups, Tollefsen makes a shift to another approach, namely the practice of morally judging groups. The idea is to infer from this judging process what information is revealed about conditions of moral responsibility.

Tollefsen introduces the account from Strawson claiming that participant reactive attitudes like resentment, forgiveness, or gratitude, provide a proper justification for holding individuals morally responsible. For these reactive attitudes there exist internal criteria of application, namely two different cases. On the one hand, a person can be excused according to current circumstances which is inhibiting reactive attitudes. On the other hand, a person can be exempted permanently, meaning that the person is not a member of the moral community. For that, a potential for moral address is required, or in other words the person needs to be a potential participant in interpersonal interactions. Strawson also called this the objective attitude towards a person. Tollefsen argues that Strawson is applying this notion of reactive attitudes only to individuals. Tollefsen, however, illustrates that there are also reactive attitudes towards groups. She argues by employing examples of the church or sports team that reactive attitudes towards groups are possible, like anger towards the church concerning child abuse, or love and affection towards a sports team regarding a win.

Coming back to the main discussion of whether groups are morally responsible or not, Tollefsen raises the question whether such reactive attitudes towards groups would be justified. Reactive attitudes towards animals, or objects who are not morally responsible would be not justified for example she argues since one has an objective attitude towards them. Tollefsen argues that there are situations in which a group can be excused, however she states that the discussion is about whether groups should be exempted permanently. In other words, Tollefsen argues whether groups are part of the moral community or not. In order to define whether groups are capable of moral address, Tollefsen argues that first there is the need to define criteria for moral address. She defines that requirements for moral address are an understanding of moral demands, a capacity to guide one's own behavior and attitudes towards these moral demands, capacity of deliberation in terms of self-reflection. John Doris called this also normative competence. Tollefsen argues that in order to evaluate an individual as normative competence one would start a conversation and check for the given criteria. Transferred to groups, she infers that we can also communicate with certain groups, or engage in a dialogue like file complaints for example whereas the message is addressed to the corporation itself instead of to the spokespeople who are answering the messages. She further argues that we can bring the information to them that the corporation failed to meet a moral demand, whereas certain corporations can react to that and reflect on their actions. Tollefsen argues that even though individuals are doing the

deliberation and talking, this is not making their capacity invalid. She claims that social institutions are highly complex and a corporation is engaging in a dialogue through their members, but they are doing that on behalf of the company and are therefore speaking for the company so to say. On top of that, Tollefsen also illustrates that groups also go through a deliberation process. She is specifying their process as group deliberation whereas different people share their thoughts and may evaluate them. Tollefsen claims that group deliberation can therefore be described as distributed cognition and has the potential to be more efficient than individual deliberation. She concludes that thereof groups come even with a greater normative competency than individuals.

Based on the idea that normative competence can be characterized by ascertainability of relevant information, capacity to appreciate normative considerations, and engagement in effective deliberation, Tollefsen argues that groups may have even a higher ability since the division of labor allows for a collected and more pooled reflection. As a consequence, Tollefsen is arguing that certain groups have normative competence and are appropriate targets of our reactive attitudes and therefore morally responsible. Wrapping up her argumentation quickly, Tollefsen argues that reactive attitudes are a way of communicating and reasoning about morality and serves as a basis to judge whether an agent is morally responsible or not (if a reactive attitude is justified or not). However, she explains that the requirement to be morally responsible is to have normative competence, and to be part of the moral community so to say. Since she is proposing that our reactive attitudes and social practices show that certain groups are capable of engaging in such a moral community, she concludes that some groups meeting this requirement of having a normative competence are morally responsible.

V. EVALUATION

The argumentation of Tollefsen is based on the idea that reactive attitudes and the approach of looking at how we judge if others are morally responsible is a suitable way of reflecting the truth. The question is, is it true that someone has to be capable of engaging in a moral community in order to be morally responsible? If we are having proper reactive attitudes towards a person is this really a proof for the question of moral responsibility? Tollefsen referred to Strawson and has not argued further in a proper way why this is a suitable approach for the given discussion of moral responsibility. She accepted that Strawson was correct in terms of individuals and according to that she has transferred this approach to groups. But based on the assumption that this is true, her structure of argumentation is done in a proper logical structure since she argued that some groups are part of this moral communication and are therefore morally responsible. Generally speaking when Tollefsen was arguing that groups are showing moral communication, there would have been more research or other approaches necessary in order to make her point credible. She employed examples in order to illustrate her train of thought, however I would suggest that there is more proof necessary in

order to claim that there is some form of group cognition and that it is even more efficient than individual deliberation. Is this true? More thoughts and more evaluation could also lead to a longer and more complex and difficult process couldn't it? What exactly is group cognition, how does it emerge and how long is it lasting? Does every group have a group cognition? There are more explanations and definitions needed in order to make her point credible. Next to that Tollefsen has not introduced and defined the term group well. What exactly is a group? In her text she named corporations, companies, institutions for example. In order to define if groups are morally responsible, there is the need to define properly what a group actually is whereas Tollefsen is using a loose and wide definition as it seems. Moreover, Tollefsen has not elaborated well on the important critique that individuals are doing the talking and the deliberation and not the group itself. Even though she highlighted the complexity of groups, and said that groups are having something like a group cognition, she failed to directly address a very important objection. Also in the group cognition there are individuals doing the process of communication and deliberation. Although the members may do it in favor of a company or a group, it is still not the group performing this action. Framing the process of individuals working together with the same group motivation as group cognition is not making the group the actions of deliberation and communication. Tollefsen might be right, that the objection is not addressing the complexity of a group properly, however showing the complexity is also no argument against the objection. There is maybe a proper framework needed in order to analyze actions of a group better in terms of evaluating the underlying question. Additionally, Tollefsen explained well how some, or certain groups are able to engage in moral communication. She employed useful examples like the case of a clothing company reacting to messages that they acted immoral. Hereby it was illustrated well how groups could possibly be part of the moral communication and deliberation process. Generally speaking, Tollefsen has proven the idea that some groups are morally responsible. Even though some parts could have been more supported by research, or social science her line of argumentation was done in a logical sense based on the assumption that all of her premises are true. Some parts of her argumentation might have been more clearly defined, like for example what a group is, or how group cognition emerges and what exactly it is. Nevertheless, she proposed a useful approach picking up the account from Strawson and has developed, or transferred his account to groups and on top of that highlighted the complexity of groups. There might be needed other frameworks, or even views on how groups can be viewed in the debate of moral responsibility, how the actions of a group can be interpreted and how can be distinguished what group actions are and what individual actions are.

REFERENCES

- [1] Deborah Perron Tollefsen (2015) 'Groups as agents'- "6 The Moral Responsibility of Groups". Wiley.