For friendship is community, and we are related to our friend as we are related to ourselves.

(NE1171b32)1

I. Introduction

In recent years there has been a growing interest in a set of interrelated questions concerning agency and responsibility pertaining to collectives. This interest originates partly from the need we sometimes feel of holding groups such as corporate entities responsible for certain wrongdoings (such as cases where there is little or no blame to be placed on individual due to low or non-existent degrees of personal responsibility but where it nonetheless seems reasonable to hold them collectively responsible and blameworthy as a corporate enterprise) and partly from a more purely philosophical or metaphysical wonder regarding the nature of collective behaviour and other social phenomena as such. These two questions have usually been taken as connected in the sense that collective intentionality has been seen as a prerequisite for collective responsibility.2 This debate over collective intentionality can be seen as chiefly divided between an individualist approach that takes joint intention as the intentions of individuals related in certain ways but nevertheless being such that their content only concerns actions of the individual members (this includes pure reductionists3 and summative accounts that take collective agency to amount to nothing more than the summation of individual intentions with the same content4), accounts that understand collective action in terms of dispositions and causal agency5, accounts that takes the distinction to depend upon the content of the individual attitudes that

---


2 As an exception from this general rule some theorists have argued that it is reasonable to hold a loosely structured, or even random, collection of individuals responsible (in a non-reductive sense) for omitting to take collective action, adopting a decision procedure or in some other way constituting itself as a group. See, for example, Held, Virginia, “Can a Random Collection of Individuals be Morally Responsible?”, *Journal of Philosophy*, 14 July 1970, pp. 471-481, Tännö, Torbjörn, “the Myth of Innocence: On Collective Responsibility and Collective Punishment”, *Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 36, No. 2, 4 May 2007, May, Larry, “Collective Inaction and Shared Responsibility”, *Noûs* 24(2) 1990, pp. 269-277, Idem, *The Morality of Groups*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987). It should be noted that May, at least in his *The morality of Groups*, relies on Sartre’s relational theory which might have some commonalities with my Aristotelian account.

3 This group takes its cue from standard accounts of agency and moral responsibility (which tend to focus on individuals) and argues that talk of collective agency and responsibility is merely rhetorically summative in character (and that any literal reading of such talk is to be seen as simple conceptual errors). See Weber Max, *Economy and Society*, Vol. 1, Berkeley: University of California Press, [1914] 1978, and Lewis, Hywel David, “Collective Responsibility”, *Philosophy*, Vol. 23 No. 84, January 1948, pp. 3-18.


explain the behaviour of the group in question\(^6\), and collectivist approaches that view joint intentions as irreducible features of groups. The waters of these interrelated debates are muddled by the fact that different theorists seem interested in quite different aspects and levels of the overarching phenomenon of collective activity. It might, for instance, not be possible (or indeed preferable) to give a comprehensive or general account that is capable of accounting for all collective actions including loose, large, (possibly) hierarchical, collectives as well as two or few agents in an egalitarian setting where suppositions of common knowledge and high interdependence seems reasonable.\(^8\) Furthermore participants in the debate focusing on the content of collective intentions have had a hard time spelling out this content in a satisfactory manner.\(^9\) This might be due to the emphasis on conceptual analysis and the lack of extensive debate concerning psychological and phenomenological aspects of collective behaviour.

This paper argues that Aristotle supplies the foundations for not only one, but two, distinct but compatible accounts of collective agency and institutional virtue that between them have several appealing features. Firstly, this two part Aristotelian account paints a plausible picture of shared activity structured around the life together with friends that is psychologically and phenomenologically appealing. Secondly, it takes seriously the essentially social nature of human life and thus, to a certain extent, challenges the priority usually given to individuals without collapsing into extreme forms of holism of a Hegelian kind. Thirdly, it is capable of accounting for corporate activity and institutions in a way that also has something to say regarding the roles we are assigned within such a community.

It should be noted that my aims in what follows is not those of the interpreter. Rather, this is an attempt at establishing an outline of an account of collective agency that takes its cue from Aristotle but that goes beyond textual evidence and seeks to establish a neo-Aristotelian position.

II. The Friend as Another Self

The notion of friendship (φιλία) plays a vital part in Aristotle’s ethics and it seems like a given point of departure for any attempt at providing a distinctively Aristotelian account of collective agency. Toward the very end of Book IX of the Nicomachean Ethics Aristotle phrases his account of the life together with friends in what is strikingly collectivist terms:

> Whatever someone regards as his being, or the end for which he chooses to be alive, that is the activity he wishes to pursue in his friend’s company. […] They spend their days together on whichever pursuit in life they like most; for since they want to live with their friends, they share the actions in which they find their common life. […] [T]he friendship of decent people is decent and increases the more often they meet. And they seem to become still better from their activities and their mutual correction. For each molds the other in what they approve of, so that [you will learn] what is noble form noble people. (NE:1172a1-14)

---

\(^6\) See, Bratman, Michael E., “Shared Cooperative Activity” (1992), and “I intend that we J” (1997), in Faces of Intention (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), and Kutz Christopher, Complicity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). These accounts are threatened by a circularity if they are read as (part of) a conceptual analysis since it is unclear if an independent account of the content of the relevant attitudes can be specified without making reference to collective action. Both Bratman and Kutz explicitly address this circularity charge in the works mentioned above and the issue is given a thorough treatment (together with the aforementioned causal analysis explicitly developed to handle the circularity) in Petersson, Björn, “Collectivity and Circularity”.

\(^7\) See Gilbert, Margaret, Sociality and Responsibility (Boston: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000). It might be that Gilbert’s account – which makes explicit normative claims – perhaps should not be read as an attempt at conceptual analysis and does thus not necessarily fall prey to the circularity charge. This might give rise to a different set of problems however, since it is not in any way clear that normativity is essential to intentionality or should enter into this stage of analysis. Gilbert’s account does point to an important feature of collectivity that should not be ignored: relations to others stands as the source of many normative aspects of our lives.

\(^8\) Kutz points to the fact that extensive focus on the latter case might yield too strong requirements. See Kutz, Christopher, “Acting Together”, Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, Vol. 61, No. 1, July 2000, pp. 1-31.

\(^9\) Another important challenge in this context has been to explain how it is possible for me to form an intention that makes necessary reference to something that is, at least partly, up to you – that is, the intention ‘that we Φ’.
A central notion in this passage is ‘living together’, or ‘sharing one’s life’ (to suzên). To live together, Aristotle seems to claim, is what we most desire from our friends. Indeed, this togetherness is what seems most of all to be the mark of true friendship as opposed to mere goodwill (ennoia) etc. (NE1157b19-25; 1158b8-10). A natural and influential reading of Aristotelian friendship is to see friendship as an extension, or even redefinition, of an individual’s life in terms of the introduction of new or redefined boundaries so that this individual’s happiness (eudaimonia) comes to include the happiness of others.

In her “Love Life: Aristotle on Living Together with Friends” Irene Liu presents an account that challenges this standard reading of the nature of the shared life that is both plausible and better suited for present purposes in that it opens up the possibility of making a metaphysically bolder collectivist claim. At the heart of Liu’s account lies the so-called “argument from nature” at (NE1170b16-1170b20). The argument looks something like this: (i) Human life (to zên) is characterised by understanding and perceiving (to aisthanesthai) and pleasant in itself. (ii) We are engaged in a kind of self-perception that is the same as perceiving our being alive (bati esmen). (iii) This self-perception of our own existence is pleasant. (iv) The friend is like another self, and therefore this friend’s existence is desirable (hairesis), like one’s own. (v) To perceive this friend’s existence we must jointly perceive (to sunaisthanesthai) as friends and this requires us to live together (to suzên).

This argument thus moves from a claim pertaining to what is characteristic of human life to the importance of living together. Central here is the idea that we do not perceive our lives directly. Rather, we do this through other activities (Cf. NE1170b29-b1) in a way such that a part becomes a representation of the whole, what Liu terms synecdochic activities (so named after the poetic device).

This goes for the way we perceive the lives of friends as well for we enjoy our friend’s good activities as our own (oikein) and in a pleasurable way (NE1170a3; 1169b33). Moreover this special perception (sunaisthêsis) of the friend’s life is mutual and reciprocal, friends perceive each other (NE1155b27-1155b5); it is a form of joint perception. Our life as a whole – the central organizing concern of eudaimonist ethics is thus made available to us through the life together with friends. The joint perception of these synecdochic activities makes self-awareness of life as a whole (both our own and those of friends) possible in such a way that we see the structure of our lives and can organise them accordingly. As such, joint perception is to be regarded as an indispensable tool for organising life, but it is also an expression of solidarity with

---

12 I do not wish to take an exegetical stand here. It could be rather forcefully argued that the standard reading fits better with the corresponding passages in the EE and the MM and that the reading proposed here borders on the isegetical. However, the contexts of the relevant passages differ in such a way as to make any definitive conclusions hard to reach.
13 Cf. MM1213a10-1213b1, EE1244b20-1245a10.
14 Irene Liu writes: “by claiming that it is pleasant, Aristotle implies that this activity has a phenomenological character perhaps more akin to sense perception than to intellectual apprehension” (Liu, Irene, “Love Life: Aristotle on Living Together with Friends”, p. 585). Perhaps this could be understood, Liu further argues, as akin to the way we talk of “feeling alive” in certain especially invigorating circumstances and that this connect to the way we perceive life as a whole and that “[a]ccordingly, we might understand Aristotle’s perception bati semen or bati zêi as the self-consciousness of oneself having – or better, living – a life” (ibidem p. 585).
15 Possible alternatives here would be “that we live”, “that we are” or “that we exists”.
one’s friends and a necessary component of genuine friendship in that it makes it possible for us to truly see and enjoy the good lives of friends (NE:1156b9-10) and share in them in such a way that we go beyond the lesser forms of friendship (outlined at NE:1156b6-8) and share in each other’s lives (NE:1171b12-14) as ends in themselves (NE:1156b7-14).

What this amounts to is an austere form of holism that maintains collectivity as an essential feature of human life. Friendship in thus seen as built into the very structure of human life. Liu illustrates this by way of an example, likening friendship to a chess-game: “Chess is defined as a strategic game played by two players. While these sides must remain distinct, they are also logically inseparable. […] Thus, a one-sided chess-game is no game at all.”18 The foundational claim of the argument from nature and the Aristotelian dictum that humans are social by nature can thus be understood as saying that friendship is not only beneficial to human life (the greatest of external goods) but part of what makes life human.19

In understanding collective agency with regards to small collectives this ideal picture of the best kind of friendship between virtuous persons can be used as something akin to how prominent examples function in the prototype theory of concept learning. In categorizing collective behaviour on the level of small egalitarian groups we can rely on a hierarchical inventory (Cf. the types of friendship identified by Aristotle at NE:1156ff) based on similarity. We thus end up with a more fine-grained, continuous, way of understanding collectives.

III. The Virtues of Institutions

In her “Can there be Institutional Virtues” Miranda Fricker attests that “[w]e cannot literally apply concepts of virtue and vice to institutions considered purely procedurally, for they do not have any of the features of the normal subjects of virtue and vice: they are not agents […]. I contend, therefore, that it is only in combination with the individuals and groups whose work realizes an institution’s procedures at any given time that the institution may literally be said to exhibit virtues and vices”.20 While this might be, there is, on an Aristotelian picture, something special about institutions – they can, in the fullest sense, be said to possess a function, or characteristic activity (ergon).21 They have a purpose for which they are made and this purpose ties them closely to the particular human goods with which they are concerned. Sean Cordell has argued that this tie gives us a possibility to distinguish institutions into kinds (corresponding to a certain good or set of goods) and evaluating them qua institutions of their respective kind.22 The task for such evaluation, Cordell claims, “is to say why this institution, and not some other(s), should be linked to this or these specific good(s) and not others, in a way that helps determine whether it is doing well as an instance of its kind”.23 This idea of the institutional ergon is then used to shed light on another important debate in the context of normative ethics related to collectives, namely the issue of role-specific duties.24 This Aristotelian approach, Cordell claims, is

19 This goes nowhere to deny the fact that friendship is also contributory in making life eudaimon on the Aristotelian picture.
21 The ergon argument, beginning at NE:1097b22, is hugely complex and subject to an extensive debate which need hardly detain us here. What is important for present purposes is that institutions, in virtue of being man-made, can be said to possess such a function in the fullest sense, at least with regards to prime examples of such entities.
23 Ibid., pp. 266-267.
capable of side-stepping a dilemma pertaining to the normative force of social and professional roles. On the one hand we might think of roles in such a strict internalist way that it becomes impossible for the virtuous person not to find herself in a irresolvable tension between the right and the role-given, on the other hand we might resort to abstract ideals such as “justice” to transcend the normativity of our social and professional roles but this manoeuvre leaves us in the open with regards to how to connect them to our role-specified obligations and threatens to eradicate completely the normative force of such role-specific duties. Thinking of institutions in the Aristotelian manner suggested might help the virtuous person in her deliberative process to come to terms with a given role and its requirements as well as the limitations of its normative scope, or so Cordell claims.

The proposed model might, I would like to suggest, also help us understanding institutional virtues. By connecting the function of an institution with the particular human good it is set up to promote and which is unique to it we have identified a particular sphere pertaining to that institution with regards to which it can be said to be well or ill functioning and therefore virtuous or vicious. An institution might also exhibit additional features not directly linked to its particular sphere – well or ill functioning structures whom might encourage virtuous or vicious behaviour on behalf of its members etc. – that can be accounted for in the more reductive spirit of Fricker, that is, by saying that they possess these traits “when their structures are brought to life by the individuals and collectives whose activity puts flesh on the institutional bone”\textsuperscript{25}, but the idea behind the more ambitious reading here proposed is that institutions can be said to operate primarily within a sphere unique to it that is also connected to a particular human good. This good then constitutes the telos of the particular institution and it can be said to be virtuous to the extent that it is productive of this good, that is performs its ergon well: each function is completed well by being completed in accord with the virtue proper [to that kind of thing] (NE1098'16).

---

\textsuperscript{25} Fricker, Miranda, “Can There Be Institutional Virtues?” p. 249.