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On Collective Responsibility: Thoughts Written During Air Raids

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I am not Wittgenstein; I was not on the Eastern front, and the thoughts you are about to read are certainly not the *Tractatus*. However, I did endure NATO bombing back in 1999.¹ This particular NATO intervention certainly pales in comparison to other ‘humanitarian’ interventions that followed. Nonetheless, that spring of 1999, the bombs were falling for 78 days, carried by 1000 airplanes, dropped in the course of 38,000 combat missions, and they were real.

At the time, I worked as a research fellow at the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory in Belgrade, Serbia, fresh from my undergraduate studies, unsure where and how to pursue a graduate degree. I applied to the MA program at York University in Toronto and received their acceptance letter one morning during the bombing, right after the sound of the air raid siren. That is another story, though.

To go back to ours: as soon as the first NATO airplanes took off from Aviano air base and unloaded their cargo over Serbia and Montenegro on March 24, 1999 the government proclaimed a state of emergency and introduced something called ‘obligation to work,’ which basically meant that all institutions had to continue to function regularly. As a part of that obligation, I wrote my thoughts on collective responsibility. They were delivered and discussed one Wednesday in April at the Institute. Incidentally, that was my first talk ever. It was mostly handwritten and then typed on the computer during the periods when there was electricity. It would have been certainly lost for good were it not for my now-late colleague Nebojša Popov, who asked me to give him the hard copy after I presented.

Shortly after the bombing, in August, I went to Canada to continue my studies, and I forgot about it. But Nebojša didn’t. He published my thoughts in the local magazine *Republika* without asking my permission or telling me at all.² I found out it was published by chance many years later when I googled my name and, out of sheer boredom, reached those buried pages of results. I should have been angry with him for not letting me at least fix the piece into a proper paper, but instead, I am thankful to him that something remained at all.

Without further ado, here are the thoughts on collective responsibility of a young person, written in a hurry between blasts and power outages. I leave them as they were in their original form: imperfect, disorganized, crude, with digressions and no academic caveats that only youth, especially youth caught in the war, could deliver without hesitation. I also leave my, at times, apparent misunderstandings of Virginia Held’s text as it is now interesting to see how I failed to grasp what the ‘boycotting’ of companies or countries that we disapprove of is (or should I say how I failed to grasp the importance of virtue signaling).



¹ The violent break-up of Yugoslavia began in 1991. Civil wars lasted until 1999. Under the pretext of humanitarian intervention NATO intervened two times: in Bosnia and Hercegovina in 1994-1995 and in Serbia and Montenegro in 1999.

² I learned that the piece came out as a part of the December issue of *Republika* for 1998 even though it was written and presented in April of 1999. But running late with the issues was a common nuisance at the time.

Responsibility and Guilt: Moral Reasons for Attributing Responsibility to Groups

Starting from the idea that attributing responsibility is a human practice that is not limited to attributing responsibility to individuals, but very often relates to attributing responsibility to states as well as corporations, Virginia Held attempts to find exclusively moral grounds for adopting and accepting this practice, considering that for purely moral reasons, it is better to accept than to reject the existence of collective responsibility of some groups.

Since she has preemptively disqualified all those arguments that would not represent strictly moral reasons for collective responsibility (or reasons against it), and since she emphasized that arguments based on “linguistic nominalism and metaphysical individualism” cannot be decisive in the discussion about collective responsibility, my analysis of her text will adhere to the framework she prescribed.

My primary goal will be to show that there is no sufficiently strong moral reason for accepting collective responsibility and that the danger of abuse, if collective responsibility is accepted, is far greater than the supposed benefits that Held defends. When I say the abuse of this concept, I am referring to the fact that the very concept of collective responsibility seems to be a convenient conceptual construct that is indeed intended for all kinds of abuses. Held in her text tried to cite examples of valid use of this term. The arguments she presented for the alleged usefulness of this term and on the basis of which the concept of collective responsibility should be justified and legitimately applied, seem to me extremely unconvincing.

Group Decision Making

Regarding the common practice widespread in everyday language, as well as in legal terms, of attributing responsibility to states and corporations for their specific policies, the only thing I can observe is that it's a wonderful example of linguistic economy on one hand, and the omission of naming the actual culprits on the other hand, but I will speak more extensively about this later in the text.

As Held rightly notes, groups differ in their degree of organization, namely whether they have clearly defined procedures for decision-making. States and corporations would be groups with clearly defined decision-making procedures, while a random gathering of people on the riverbank, watching someone drown, would fall into the category of groups without established decision-making procedures. Ethnic, cultural, and national groups would not fit into either category: They do not have clearly determined decision-making procedures, nor are they random gatherings of people. By making this division of groups, Held too quickly concludes that “states and corporations are among the first candidates for group responsibility”, while the responsibility of random gatherings will be “distributed among the group members” (who, in the previously mentioned example, watched the drowning).³

³ Held, Virginia. 1998. “Collective Responsibility for Ethnic Hatred.” *Belgrade Philosophical Annual* 11: 210-224, page 214.

With the second part of this conclusion, which talks about dividing responsibility among individuals, I could agree, but I would add that the formulation is, at the very least, “careless”. The responsibility of a group of people who calmly watch a drowning will not be divided among the people who were present because if the word “divide” is used in this context, it might seem that it “diminishes” the responsibility of each individual in that group. Each of those present is responsible for their inaction, and the fact that they were together with others neither increases nor decreases their individual responsibility.

Talking about any kind of division of responsibility in this case seems like a very well-known psychological mechanism that works in a surprisingly logical way, going something like this: “I wasn’t the only one there. So, I’m not the only one to blame. Thus, everyone is to blame”. And after that conclusion, the individual goes to sleep with a clear conscience. It seems to me that Held did not want to claim something about diminishing responsibility and therefore I said that her formulation is only careless, but not that the conclusion is incorrect.

With the first part of the conclusion, things stand a bit differently. From the thesis that states and corporations are groups with clearly established decision-making procedures, it does not so obviously follow that they are the first candidates for collective responsibility. It seems to me that the case is actually the opposite. Precisely because the decision-making procedure in these groups is known, it is easier to identify and name all the people who are directly responsible for some action or inaction. The fact that we usually talk about the guilt of IBM, General Motors, the USA, or Germany does not prove or justify the existence of collective responsibility. Such a way of speaking can be inspired by different motives though. Either it’s too tedious to list all the names of people who are individually responsible for something, or we still don’t know them, or we simply open ourselves a path through which we can easily move from the collective responsibility of one state to the collective guilt of its members, until we can easily justify our hatred towards the citizens of that state and our thinking will further go down a well-trodden path.

Considering the chosen topic, Held in her text paid most attention to ethnic groups and the problem of whether ethnic groups can be considered morally responsible. Held refers to Larry May who leads the discussion on collective responsibility in a paradoxical way, actually considering the problem of what the specific individual who belongs to a community should consider to be responsible for. May says “that people should see themselves as partly responsible for the evils committed by their community, or that occur within it”,⁴ and Held adds that the practice in which people see themselves as partly responsible will reduce the enormous damage caused by groups.

Although she constantly repeats that the responsibility of individuals is never the same and that, of course, in the case of some evils, some are more responsible than others, this insistence that members of a group must feel guilty for what happens in that group, or that

⁴ May, Larry. 1992. *Sharing Responsibility*. University of Chicago Press. Taken from” Held, Virginia. 1998. “Collective Responsibility for Ethnic Hatred.” *Belgrade Philosophical Annual* 11: 210-224, page 214.

for the greater good they should take responsibility upon themselves, seems to me like the old utilitarian story that it is good to sacrifice an innocent man if it will lead to good results (although there is never a comfortable mathematical certainty that such an action will indeed lead to any good). To burden someone with the responsibility for something they are definitely not responsible for, or to call them to feel guilty, seems to me like the best step in spreading ethnic hatred. Precisely because the quantifier “some” in reasoning very easily slips into “all”, from the statement “some are responsible” we easily get the statement “all are responsible”. Although both May and Held avoid the story of collective punishment, sticking only to taking responsibility and condemnation, and since probably neither of them is ready to justify “collective retribution” in any form, I think their appeal for individuals in a group to take responsibility for what they did not commit (just as those who did), acts as an ideal preparation of the ground for justifying collective retribution, which would represent one of the best examples of the abuse of the concept of collective responsibility.

However, Held does not make such a crude mistake. She often mentions throughout the text that the so-called deduction from collective to individual responsibility of a person belonging to that group is utterly unjustified and that this so-called deduction is never a matter of logic.

The discussion about whether an individual can be exempted from the condemnation addressed to the group, which Held briefly touches upon in her text, is very important, but it is wrongly posed for one single reason. In the formulation of the question of whether an individual can be exempted from the condemnation addressed to the group, it is already presupposed what should have been justified beforehand, which is the “condemnation addressed to the group”. The problem of the individual responsibility of an individual is very important, but the real question is not whether an individual can avoid condemnation addressed to the group but which individuals from a group should be condemned and which should not, or which individuals from a group are responsible and to what extent, and which are not.

In re-examining the responsibility and degree of responsibility of an individual, several theorists (such as Joel Feinberg and Howard McGary, to whom Held refers) agree under which conditions individuals do not have to consider themselves responsible for what other members of their group do, even if it’s a larger number of members of that group. The first condition is that an individual distances themselves or actively opposes the morally wrong acts, omissions, policies, or practices of their group. (As an example, Held takes white Southerners who distanced themselves from the practice of segregating blacks into separate schools, waiting rooms, etc., during the period when segregation was the rule in the southern states of the USA.)

However, just distancing oneself may not be enough since someone can participate in a practice they oppose at the same time they oppose it. Such a person should still be considered partly responsible for what is happening in their environment. Of course, such a person cannot be to the same extent responsible as one who actively supports or even participates in the bad deeds committed by some members or the majority of members of

their group. I think this discussion around the responsibility of individuals and their release from responsibility is very important, but it is not relevant to what Held is trying to prove.

The discussion about the problem of ethnic hatred, to which Held gives special importance, is also worth noting. However, I think that this discussion can provide many more counterarguments to her basic thesis that collective responsibility is a morally justified concept than to be useful to her.

The definition by which ethnic hatred would be hostility towards members of another ethnic group based on their belonging to that group is acceptable. In considering racist attitudes and their harmfulness, May writes:

Members of the group who hold racist views, both those who have directly caused harm and those who could directly do so but have not yet, share responsibility for the evils motivated by racism in their communities by sharing views that carry the risk of causing harm to others... Individual racist views, viewed together, create an atmosphere of attitudes and dispositions that increases the likelihood of racism-motivated evil. In a climate of racist views, an atmosphere arises in which community members become bearers of risk with regard to racist violence ... If people participate in creating an atmosphere of certain views, they participate in something akin to a joint risk that increases the likelihood of causing harm”.⁵

From this, Held concludes that even those who hold racist views, but do not themselves cause direct harm through violence, contribute to increasing the risk of such acts and deserve condemnation. While the discussion of ethnic hatred is conducted on this level, it falls under the previously mentioned problem of individual responsibility.

Regarding the Roots of Ethnic Hatred

I fully agree that those with ethnic hatred attitudes deserve moral condemnation, for the same reasons that Held and May have stated. However, what remained unmentioned in their presentations are the roots of such hatred and racist attitudes. As for finding the roots of such hatred, psychologists, historians, and anthropologists could be called upon for help, as they would have much to say on the topic, but my goal will not be to provide such explanations. I am primarily interested in attitudes of ethnic hatred and from which attitudes they are most often derived. Attitudes of ethnic hatred are always derived from other attitudes. They are not “irrational” in the literal sense. In deriving such attitudes, logical apparatus, or more precisely “seemingly logical apparatus,” is used.

If you ask someone who holds views of ethnic hatred why they do so, they will always rationally present another set of attitudes that justify hating members of a certain ethnic

⁵ May, Larry. 1992. *Sharing Responsibility*. University of Chicago Press. Taken from” Held, Virginia. 1998. “Collective Responsibility for Ethnic Hatred.” *Belgrade Philosophical Annual* 11: 210-224, page 216.

group (or any other). In the same way that Germans or Serbs can be hated, so can homosexuals, women (to be fair, men too), “all colored people,” etc. The most common reasons cited in propagating this hatred are: either that the “undesirable” group is naturally evil (i.e., a member of that group is predetermined for evil by their birth) or that the group has committed some great evil in the past. Both of these reasons are usually combined. From the fact that a group has committed some evil in the past, it is deduced that it must be naturally evil (this could cynically be called the cosmological proof of the evil of an ethnic or other group). This quasi-logical proving often goes in the reverse direction, deducing from the thesis that a group is naturally evil, it is understandable why it committed evil in the past and that it will, of course, do so again if not prevented.

What is important to notice is that the concept of “collective responsibility” can play, and often does play, an important role in this type of quasi-logical reasoning. I have already mentioned this unjustified deduction (reasoning from collective to individual responsibility), and although Held rejects the justification of such deduction, I think that the mere possibility of making such a deduction, at least in this case, is enough to dismiss the concept of collective responsibility as one that can bring much more harm if accepted than if rejected. I am almost ready to assert that it is precisely from such attempts to justify hatred towards a group that the concept of collective responsibility originated. This deserves special attention. However, the aim of this text is to reject the concept of collective responsibility based on the misuse of this concept, not an analysis of its genealogy.

Before moving on to analysing the main arguments in favour of collective responsibility, which Held provided in her text, I would like to return once again to another possible and very common misuse of this concept. Namely, this concept, due to its unique vagueness and generality, allows certain members of a group who are most guilty of some act committed within the group to remain unnamed so that the condemnation that should primarily be addressed to them be diluted into collective condemnation. From this, it cannot be concluded that these two types of misuses of the concept of collective responsibility necessarily go together and nor that they cannot be separated.

In the end, the question remains whether there is a valid use of this concept. Held claims that there is and that it is much more dangerous to reject this concept than the possible misuse if it is accepted. She says in her text:

There are good moral reasons to engage in the practice of attributing moral responsibility to some groups under certain conditions. In my opinion, if we do so, it will enable our understanding of the relevant moral features of human actions, situations, and customs to be much richer and more appropriate. If we refuse to do so, it will impoverish our moral language and slow moral progress.⁶

⁶ Held, Virginia. 1998. “Collective Responsibility for Ethnic Hatred.” *Belgrade Philosophical Annual* 11: 210-224, page 211.

I must admit that I am not entirely clear what impoverishment of moral language means, nor the slowing of moral progress, nor do I understand the direct link between the concept of collective responsibility and our better and more appropriate understanding of moral actions. Since Held did not provide further explanations, this cannot be taken as an argument, nor analysed as such.

As for the moral reasons for accepting the concept of collective responsibility, she attempted to provide them by citing the following examples: “Judgments about group responsibility enable us to reward responsible corporations with our investments or to avoid traveling to countries that violate international norms. They are often the first steps in investigating the specific responsibilities of individual members of these groups”.⁷

First, to avoid countries where international norms are violated, we do not need the concept of collective responsibility. It is enough to hear that the country is unsafe for foreigners, that something bad happened to some foreigners, and to think carefully before deciding to spend our summer vacation there. We won’t be very interested in who is responsible for such policies. I mean that it is not necessary to first conclude that the citizens of that country or the country as a whole are collectively responsible for the incident and then decide to spend our vacation elsewhere.

More precisely, the concept of collective responsibility is entirely unnecessary in this case, and I do not see how such a case could justify it. As for responsible corporations, Held again makes a logical error in her argument. She presupposes the corporation’s responsibility in advance, which is what she should have justified with an example. A collective is not an independent entity, and Held is not willing to accept that corporations are mature moral persons (as argued by Peter French). Those responsible for a corporation are precisely certain individuals in its management, just as those who conscientiously perform all other tasks of the company are responsible.

However, the most interesting part is her thesis that judgments about collective responsibility are very useful because they often represent the first steps in investigating the specific responsibilities of individual members of these groups. The only thing I can notice is that it is not necessary to first declare a group guilty in order to subsequently investigate and identify individual culprits. Such a procedure is entirely unjustified because declaring one group guilty will not facilitate or hinder the discovery of individual culprits. These two things are not logically related.

Responsibility, Wrongdoing, and Future Action

There is another argument that Held presents in her text, which I believe is the most important. She argues that if a group takes responsibility for some wrongdoing committed within the group, it reduces the likelihood of such wrongdoing happening again in the

⁷ Held, Virginia. 1998. “Collective Responsibility for Ethnic Hatred.” *Belgrade Philosophical Annual* 11: 210-224, page 213.

future. Now, I will set aside objections that question how a group takes responsibility when a group is not an independent undifferentiated identity. What Held is talking about is, in fact, a kind of awakening of the majority of members of that group: both those who were directly involved in committing the wrongdoing and those who supported it, even those who watched it indifferently. Such awakening indeed reduces the probability of such wrongdoing occurring again in the future. However, I do not see that this kind of awakening implies the existence of collective responsibility (even though most members of the group are willing to accept blame during the awakening) and that if we accept the practice of assigning collective responsibility to groups, such awakening will occur sooner. How this comes about needs to be further examined, and what I am sure of is that such major shifts are influenced not by our use, misuse, or non-use of a concept.

While I believe that the concept of collective responsibility cannot be defended on moral grounds, especially not utilitarian or pragmatic ones, I think it would be worthwhile to explore the roots of our practice of constantly attributing responsibility to either states, nations, or corporations. Additionally, examining the connection between the concept of collective responsibility and the sense of guilt that arises in groups where large-scale crimes have been committed could be valuable. The sense of guilt occurs even in those individuals who not only did not commit any crime but actively opposed it.

What's even more interesting is that the sense of guilt does not remain within a single generation but can extend to multiple generations, as the Germans provide the best example of this phenomenon. Such research would involve considering the relationship between the individual and the community, as well as the issue of personal identity, and it would find itself at the center of the communitarian-liberal debate. It seems to me that such an approach to the discussion of collective responsibility would be much more adequate than the one proposed by Held, which suggests limiting the discussion of collective responsibility exclusively to the ethical dimension.



Now, more than two decades since these events unfolded and since I, under the bombs, formulated my first thoughts on collective responsibility, I can assert that I have reached a clearer view on what is needed from us to break the cycle of violence—the same break that Virginia Held too sought. That view is Christian, not secular, however. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky states:

For you must know, my dear ones, that each of us is undoubtedly guilty on behalf of all and for all on earth, not only because of the common guilt of the world, but personally, each one of us, for all people and for each person on this earth. This knowledge is the crown of the monk's path, and of every man's path on earth.

I am now prepared to affirm, along with Dostoevsky, that we are all sinners guilty of the horrors of this world. Only when forgiveness overwhelms us within our hearts, and only

when we become able to say decisively, ‘the horror ends here with me and no revenge will come from me,’ will there be hope that the spiral of violence will end. But for this, our temporary determination and fleeting feelings will not suffice. We must pray to God for divine love.