

COMPLEX COLLECTIVE DUTIES & ACTION-GUIDANCE*

DEVERES COLETIVOS COMPLEXOS E ORIENTAÇÃO À AÇÃO

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ABSTRACT *We can often find in the literature (both popular and academic) ascriptions of complex collective duties to extensive unstructured collections of individuals. By ‘complex collective duties’, I mean collective duties that, plausibly, require that the individual members of an extensive unstructured collection should enact different contributory act-types to achieve an end jointly – for example, the alleged universal collective duty to end global poverty. In this paper, I argue that these duties are not action-guiding. The reason is that they do not pass what I call the ‘test of action-guidance’. This test assumes the intuitive belief that a moral duty is action-guiding only if it is clear to the duty-bearer the act-type that she should enact after the ascription of the duty. Complex collective duties ascribed to extensive unstructured collections fail to pass this test because, even though each duty-bearer (that is, each member of the collection) receives guidance on the end that they should achieve jointly, it is not clear to these agents the act-type that each of them should put into practice.*

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RESUMO *Em geral, podemos encontrar na literatura (tanto na popular quanto na acadêmica) atribuições de deveres coletivos complexos a coletivos não estruturados extensos de indivíduos. Por “deveres coletivos complexos”, quero dizer deveres coletivos que, de maneira plausível, exigem que os membros individuais de um coletivo não estruturado extenso empreguem tipos diferentes de ações contributivas para alcançarem um objetivo coletivo – por exemplo, o suposto dever coletivo universal de acabar com a pobreza mundial. Neste artigo, defendo que esses deveres não orientam a ação. O motivo é por que eles não passam no que chamo de “teste de orientação de ação”. Esse teste pressupõe a crença intuitiva de que um dever moral orienta a ação apenas se, para o portador do dever, estiver claro o tipo de ação que ele deve praticar após a atribuição do dever. Deveres coletivos complexos atribuídos a coletivos não estruturados extensos não passam nesse teste porque, embora cada portador do dever (ou seja, cada membro do coletivo) receba orientação sobre o fim que se deve atingir em conjunto, não está claro para esses agentes o tipo de ação que cada um deles deve por em prática.*

Palavras-chave: *Deveres coletivos. Orientação à ação. Coletivos não estruturados. Grupos-agentes. Pobreza mundial. Direitos humanos.*

I. Going Beyond the Standard Discussion

It is not difficult to find in the literature (both popular and academic) ascriptions of complex collective duties to extensive unstructured collections of individuals. By ‘unstructured collections’, I mean collections of individuals that are not ‘agent-groups’ – i.e. collections that satisfy the necessary conditions of agency such as having group-level decision-making procedures.¹ By ‘complex collective duties’ (henceforth, CCDs), I mean collective duties that, plausibly,

¹ It should be noted that I assume the standard distinction that can be found in the recent discussion on collective duties between agent-groups and unstructured collections of individual agents. On the one hand, agent-groups are collections that satisfy the necessary conditions of agency such as having decision-making procedures in common (Collins, 2013, 2017, 2019; Lawford-Smith, 2015; Pettit and Schweikard, 2006). On the other hand, unstructured collections do not satisfy the necessary conditions to be agents (Collins, 2013, 2017, 2019; Lawford-Smith, 2015). Some other authors say ‘unstructured groups’, or simply ‘non-agent groups’, to refer to what I call unstructured collections. But given that it may be argued that the concept of a group intuitively entails some type of structure, I prefer to avoid that term to refer to unstructured collections.

require that the individual members of an unstructured collection should enact different contributory act-types to achieve an end jointly. For example, consider the contemporary discussion on global poverty. It is suggested that we all fall under a collective obligation to achieve a certain state of affairs in which “all human beings have what they need” (Nussbaum, 2004, p. 13), that the affluent people in this world have a collective duty to “end extreme poverty” (Igneski, 2016, p. 16), that we all have a collective duty to “ensure that every single human being enjoys” basic rights (Wark, 2013, p. 20), that we all fall under a global duty to “make poverty history” (Zomer, 2010), and so on. These are ascriptions of collective duties to extensive unstructured collections of individual agents.² As suggested in the literature, it is plausible to think that it is necessary to enact *different* contributory act-types to achieve these morally desirable ends jointly. For example, it seems that these duties require to learn about global poverty, create awareness of this phenomenon, support certain political parties, contribute to the elimination of gender inequality, spend time performing political actions, work for better public policies, donate money to charitable organisations, encourage cross-sectoral participation, push for international efforts, and participate in social projects, among other contributory act-types (Fields, 2011; Igneski, 2018; Sachs, 2005).

The standard objection to this common practice is based on the well-known agency principle ‘only agents can act’ (and, therefore, only agents can have duties to perform actions). For example, Collins holds that attributing duties to unstructured collections “entails relaxing our concept of agency so much that it loses its distinctiveness” (2013, p. 232). Following this line, Capriati suggests that the fundamental problem with this practice is simply that collections “which are not agents cannot hold duties” (2018, p. 3). The standard reply to this objection denies the idea that there must be an agent-group to attribute CCDs. For example, Wringer argues that the agency objection is based on the intuitive idea that any obligation must be addressable to some agent, but he argues that it is possible to accept this idea without assuming the additional premise that “the addressee of an obligation need be the subject of that obligation” (2010, p. 217). Following Isaacs (2014), Igneski holds that it is possible to avoid the

2 The idea that humanity is not an agent-group is widely accepted in the literature. It is accepted even by defenders of CCDs. For example, Wringer holds: “If the ‘Agency Principle’ [only agents can act] is correct, then the idea of a global obligation seems problematic. For although there are many accounts of collective agency on offer, to any of which we might appeal in trying to show that a conception of collective obligation was compatible with the Agency Principle, most of these accounts seem to entail that the population of the world is not a collective agent” (2010, p. 220). As it is argued in the literature, the same applies to an extensive collection such as the affluent people in this world (see: Collins, 2019; Lawford-Smith, 2015; Schwenkenbecher, 2013).

agency-based objection if unstructured collections of agents are understood as “putative collective agents” (2016, p. 14).

In this paper, I do not focus my analysis on this standard discussion based on the principle of agency. Rather, I aim to extend the critical discussion to an undertheorised and, hopefully, ‘fresh’ argument. I argue that CCDs ascribed to extensive unstructured collections, such as the alleged global duty to end poverty, are not action-guiding. The reason is that they do not pass what I call the ‘test of action-guidance’ – a test constructed over our own intuitions on action-guiding duties. This test assumes the intuitive belief that a moral duty is action-guiding only if it is clear to the duty-bearer the type of action that she should enact after the ascription of the duty. I show that while duties assigned to individual agents (and agent-groups) can pass this test, CCDs ascribed to extensive unstructured collections fail to pass the test because, even though each duty-bearer (that is, each member of the collection) receives guidance on the end that they should achieve jointly, it is not clear to these agents the act-type that each of them should put into practice. After all, in the absence of a group-level decision making procedure with the capacity to distribute roles within the group, the mere idea that some (or all) individuals should achieve an end jointly does not provide any reason to each individual to enact some contributory act-type instead of another possible one.³

I proceed as follows. In section 2, I construct the test of action-guidance on the basis of our intuitions on action-guiding duties. In section 3, I show that duties assigned to individual agents (and agent-groups) can pass this test, but CCDs ascribed to extensive unstructured collections of individuals do not. In the same section, I defend my argument from possible objections. In section 4, I explain some substantive implications of my analysis. For example, I suggest that my analysis reinforces contemporary Kantian concerns over the action-guiding character of human rights talk. Finally, I conclude by saying that normative theorists should not be resistant to my analysis. The reason is

3 As I say at the beginning of this paragraph, this point is undertheorised in the literature. The reason is that some authors note this point, but they do not explore its rationale. For example, Hope suggests in one paragraph that CCDs are not action-guiding because these normative standards are simply “too vague” (2014, p. 414). However, he does not explore this point further because the aim of his article is different. Lawford-Smith suggests that ascribing CCDs to extensive unstructured collections “is particularly unhelpful [...] given the prevalence of individuals faced with the genuine question of what morality requires of them in a situation in which there is a good they can bring about together with others” (2015, p. 226). However, she does not discuss in her article what helpful practical guidance means. Wringe notes that a possible objection to CCDs is that “it seems unclear what constraints, if any, such obligations might place on the actions of particular, concretely situated individuals such as you and me” (2014, p. 172). However, he does not explore the rationale behind this possible objection. Finally, Collins claims that attributing duties to extensive unstructured collections such as humanity “appears to be a free-spinning wheel, that doesn’t do anything in itself to guide action” (2019, p. 41). But she does not explore this point further.

that it invites them to give precisely what normative theory should provide to agents: not just morally desirable ends, but practical guidance on what to do.

II. An Intuitive Test of Action-Guidance

What are the necessary and jointly sufficient conditions that moral duties must satisfy to be action-guiding? For the purposes of this paper, it is not necessary to give an exhaustive answer to this complex question.⁴ I only specify an intuitive necessary condition of action-guidance that helps us to distinguish non-action-guiding duties from duties that could be defined as action-guiding (if other necessary conditions are met):

- (1) A moral duty is action-guiding only if (necessary condition), after the ascription of the duty, it is clear to the duty-bearer the act-type that she should put into practice. Consequently, if some moral duty does not satisfy this condition, it is not action-guiding.⁵

Let me unpack this intuitive proposal in detail. I start from the assumption that it is counter-intuitive to believe that some moral duty is action-guiding even if it provides unclear practical guidance after its ascription. For example, suppose we conclude that an agent S has the duty P. Let us assume that it is unclear to S the type of action (act-type) that she should enact after the ascription of this duty – for example, because P contains an inconsistent prescription directed to action such as ‘do X but without doing X’. If so, it seems counter-intuitive to believe that this moral duty is action-guiding. By contrast, it seems intuitive to believe that there is some necessary relation between action-guidingness and clear guidance on what to do. To be more precise, it seems true that a moral duty cannot be action-guiding unless it provides clear practical guidance to the duty-bearer. For this reason, the first sentence of my intuitive proposal assumes that action-guiding duties necessarily provide clear guidance on what to do (for other authors that assume this point, see: Collins, 2019; Hope, 2014; Lawford-Smith, 2015; Schwenkenbecher, 2018; Tomalty, 2014).

From this, however, *it does not follow* that my proposal is committed to the implausible idea that clear practical guidance implies to specify every aspect of the action in advance. Even very detailed normative standards, such as ‘Susan

4 I explore an exhaustive answer to this question in another paper (RETTIG, C. “The Claimability Condition: Rights as Action-Guiding Standards”. *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 51, pp. 322-340, 2020).

5 It may be argued that principles of obligation do not provide clear practical guidance if there is a conflict of duties. It should be noted that it is an open-question if it is possible to have genuine conflict of duties (Kant, 1991 [1797]). That aside, I am focused here on so-called overall moral duties. Following Zimmerman (1996), the term ‘overall’ refers to the conclusion of practical reasoning – i.e. the normative conclusion once all morally relevant things have been considered.

should give five per cent of her income to charitable organisations on the last day of each month’, are not fully determined in this sense. For example, it is not defined how many charitable organisations must receive the donation. If the duty states that only two organisations must receive the donation, it is not specified which charitable organisation should receive the donation. If the duty defines this point, it is not specified, for example, if Susan should (or should not) use online banking to make the donation. If the duty specifies this, it is not defined if it is necessary to make the donation before (or after) the evening, and so on. From the normative perspective, some of these points may be considered irrelevant, but the claim here is not normative. Rather, the claim is that the idea of a moral duty that specifies in advance every aspect of action does not make sense. Following O’Neill, the point is that a moral duty “can offer no more than a reason for doing some action of a specified type, and not a reason for doing a particular act of that type” (O’Neill, 2007, p. 394). For this reason, my proposal invokes the concept of an ‘act-type’ – that is, a description of a type of action, which, as noted in the literature, is different from requiring the full specification of an action (see: Albrecht, 2014; Hope, 2013, 2014; O’Neill, 1996, 2007, 2014). This should not sound unfamiliar. Consider common locutions such as ‘close the door gently’, ‘keep off the grass’, ‘people should not drive drunk’, ‘pay your bills’, ‘students should do the readings before the lecture’, ‘make a charity donation to Oxfam’, ‘do not use plastic bags’, ‘take public transportation if possible’, ‘help people in need’, ‘do not be aggressive’, and so on. All these normative standards aim to provide clear practical guidance to the duty-bearers by specifying an act-type that they should put into practice.⁶

There is another key point of my intuitive proposal that deserves an explanation: the clause ‘after the ascription of the duty’. As I said above, it is intuitive to believe that a moral duty is not action-guiding if it is unclear the act-type that the duty-bearer should enact after its ascription. But to avoid question-begging assumptions, my intuitive proposal does not imply that the specification of such an act-type must be immediate in all cases. For example, if we say that ‘Susan should give food to Jack’, the content of the duty specifies

6 Following the Kantian tradition, I assume two points: to enact an act-type is to instantiate an act-type in the form of an act-token; the transition between both is the task of practical judgment (Albrecht, 2014; Herman, 2003; Kant, 1999 [1793]; O’Neill, 2007). For example, suppose Susan has the duty to provide food to Jack. For the sake of the example, suppose Susan can enact this duty in different ways without violating any other moral considerations. The decision on *how* to instantiate such an act-type is the distinctive task of practical judgment. There is a sophisticated discussion on how this type of judgment works (Albrecht, 2014; Herman, 2003; O’Neill, 2007). For the purposes of this paper, it is not necessary to analyse that point in detail, but it may be useful to have in mind that the aim of practical judgment is not to specify the content of normative standards further but to make the transition from act-types to act-tokens.

the act-type that Susan should enact (to give food to Jack) and, therefore, the specification of such an act-type is immediate. But if we assume that there are agent-groups with the capacity to distribute roles among their individual members, the specification of the act-type can be mediated in some cases. For instance, suppose there is an agent-group G that has some positive collective duty. For the sake of the example, suppose G distributes roles among the members of the group on the basis of a group-level decision-making procedure and, as a result of this distribution, each individual agent receives a task that specifies the act-type that each of them should put into practice to discharge the collective duty jointly. If so, it is clear to each duty-bearer the contributory act-type that each of them should enact. Nevertheless, the specification of these contributory act-types is not immediate, but mediate, because it depends on a task-distribution.

Finally, it is important to explain the last sentence of my proposal. This intuitive proposal specifies an existence condition that any moral duty must satisfy to be defined as action-guiding. If there are alleged duties that do not satisfy this necessary condition, my intuitive proposal provides us a way to differentiate moral duties that satisfy an existence condition of action-guidance from alleged duties that do not satisfy this intuitive necessary condition and, therefore, that cannot be defined as action-guiding normative standards. In other words, my proposal provides us with a straightforward test to distinguish duties that satisfy an existence condition of action-guidance, from duties that are simply non-action-guiding even if they satisfy other possible conditions of action-guidance (e.g. to be consistent prescriptions directed to action).

III. CCDs Are Not Action-Guiding

Duties ascribed to individual agents can pass the intuitive test of action-guidance posed in the previous section. It does not matter if they are ‘perfect’ or ‘imperfect’, ‘positive’ or ‘negative’, ‘special’ or ‘general’ duties, etc. If it is clear to the duty-bearer the *act-type* that she should put into practice after the ascription of the duty, the duty passes the test of action-guidance (recall that the test does not guarantee that the duty is action-guiding; it only specifies a necessary but not sufficient condition of action-guidance). For example, suppose we conclude that Susan has the imperfect duty to donate money to any charity organisation. This duty passes the test because it is clear to her the act-type that she should enact (i.e. to donate money to any charity organisation) after the ascription of this duty. The same applies to any individual duty that specifies an act-type – for example, the common locutions mentioned in the previous section.

The case of collective duties assigned to agent-groups is slightly different, but it should be noted that they can pass the intuitive test of action-guidance anyway. The reason was anticipated in the previous section. Contrary to unstructured collections of individuals, agent-groups, by definition, satisfy the necessary conditions of agency such as having group-level decision-making procedures (Collins, 2013, 2017, 2019; Lawford-Smith, 2015; Pettit and Schweikard, 2006). If the procedure successfully distributes roles among the members of the group, the collective duty passes the test of action-guidance because it is clear to each duty-bearer the act-type that each of them should put into practice.⁷

By contrast, I argue, CCDs ascribed to extensive unstructured collections fail to pass the intuitive test of action-guidance, even if they are reinterpreted as obligations that do not require the distribution of several contributory act-types. Let me begin my explanation by analysing an important feature of CCDs. CCDs ascribed to extensive unstructured collections such as ‘all people in this world’ have an intrinsic teleological character. I say this for two reasons. First, because these collective duties define morally desirable *ends* (for example, to end global poverty, to mitigate climate change, and so on) that specify what the individual members of the collection should achieve jointly on the basis of *different* contributory actions. The idea that CCDs define ‘ends’ (or ‘goals’) is remarked upon by several authors. For example, Schwenkenbecher holds that when individuals fall under some collective duties, they have a “joint goal” (2014, p. 61). According to Bjornsson, collective duties ascribed to unstructured collections are “collective ends” (2019, p. 23). Following Bratman (1992), Collins suggests that collective duties involve “shared ends” (2013, p. 234). Second, because the specification of such an end is precisely what mainly defines the collective duty – to be more precise, the end is what provides its *differentia specifica*. For this reason, for example, we do not distinguish the ‘collective duty to end poverty’ from the ‘collective duty to mitigate climate change’ on the basis of the different natures of these duties but simply on the basis of the distinctive *end* that each of these duties specifies.

For the purposes of this section, the relevant point is that even though these alleged duties specify the *end* that the members of the unstructured collection

7 As Collins rightly notes, group-level decision making procedures are not necessarily complex procedures. To illustrate this point, among others, she gives this example: “imagine a group of three friends who are at the beach. Numerous decisions must be made: where to lay their towels, where to go for lunch, and so on. Such a group is probably composed of agents that are united under a rationally operated group-level decision-making procedure that can attend to moral considerations. The procedure is probably conversation-based consensus. This procedure can become established simply by each member’s taking a conversational and consensual stance to the various decisions — each asking the others where, for example, they would prefer to go for lunch, and why, until all agree” (Collins, 2019, p. 15).

should achieve on the basis of different contributory actions, these normative standards do not specify *what* each individual agent should do as a matter of duty. Of course, I am *not* talking about the exhaustive specification of the action that each individual agent should perform (that is, each ‘act-token’) because *this is something that my own intuitive test of action-guidance dismisses as senseless*. Rather, the point is that CCDs ascribed to extensive unstructured collections define morally desirable ends, but they leave indeterminate the contributory act-type(s) that each individual member of the group should put into practice – for this reason, it is an open-question how the contributory act-types should be distributed among the members of the unstructured collection. To exemplify this key point, compare these two duties:

(2) Susan has the duty to give food to someone in need.

(3) All persons (including Susan) fall under the complex collective duty to end global poverty jointly. Plausibly, this duty requires to enact different contributory act-types - e.g. to learn about global poverty, create awareness of this phenomenon, contribute to the elimination of gender inequality, and so on.

Assuming that Susan has the capacity to enact the first duty in different ways without violating other moral considerations, this normative standard prescribes an act-type that Susan can put into practice by giving, for example, a piece of cake or some fruit to someone in need. By contrast, the content of the second duty leaves undetermined the specific contributory act-type (or act-types) that each individual member of the unstructured collection (including Susan) should enact. To clarify this point, consider the following questions concerning the second duty. What *type* of contributory action should Susan (an individual member of the unstructured collection) put into practice? Should Susan create awareness of global poverty, support certain political parties, contribute to the elimination of gender inequality, spend time performing political actions, work for better public policies, and/or push for international efforts? Or should Susan enact another type of action to contribute to the end of global poverty? Contrary to the first duty (2), the mere deontic idea that all persons (including Susan) fall under a complex collective duty to end global poverty does not give any informative answer to these questions.⁸

8 Someone could say that this is just a ‘matter of judgment’, but this is problematic for two reasons. To orientate practical judgment, it is necessary to specify an act-type that practical judgment can instantiate in the form of an act-token. For an analysis of this point, see: Albrecht (2014) and O’Neill (2007). The second reason is that if each individual does what her own judgment dictates, there is no ground to believe that the duty will be discharged. This is problematic if we assume that individuals who fall under a collective duty have a shared end - e.g. to end global poverty (Bjornsson, 2019; Bratman, 1992; Collins, 2013; Schwenkenbecher,

(4) CCDs ascribed to extensive unstructured collections (e.g. to humanity) do not specify the contributory act-type that each individual member of the collection should enact.

Some authors note this key feature of CCDs. For example, Igeneski suggests that CCDs are not sufficiently determined (2016, p. 14). Following this line, Lawford-Smith suggests that ascriptions of CCDs to extensive unstructured collections do not provide sufficient information on *what* particular individuals need to do (2015, p. 227). The same idea can be found in Collins (2019) and Hope (2014). From this key feature (4), however, it follows something undertheorised in the existing discussion on collective duties. *CCDs ascribed to extensive unstructured collections fail to pass the test of action-guidance constructed over our own intuitions on action-guiding duties*. To pass this test, it must be clear to the duty-bearer the *act-type* that she should put into practice after the ascription of the duty (1). However, ascriptions of CCDs to extensive unstructured collections do not satisfy this intuitive necessary condition of action-guidance. The reason is that they simply define the morally desirable *end* that an extensive unstructured collection should achieve on the basis of different contributory actions without specifying the contributory act-type(s) that each individual should put into practice. After all, in the absence of a group-level decision making procedure with the capacity to distribute roles within the group, the mere idea that some (or all) individuals should achieve an end jointly does not provide any reason to each individual to enact *some* contributory act-type instead of *another* possible one.

The objector cannot claim that this argument fails because collections have the capacity to distribute roles among their members and, therefore, even though the specification of what each agent should do is not immediate, it can be mediated on the basis of a task distribution. The reason is that my argument is directed to CCDs ascribed to extensive unstructured collections – that is, collections that, by definition, do not have any group-level decision-making procedure to distribute roles among their members. Nevertheless, the objector may try to deny my claim by saying that the collective duties that I label (and would label) as ‘CCDs’ pass the test of action-guidance if they are reinterpreted as duties that do not require the distribution of several act-types. This objection can be formulated in three main ways. First, it may be argued that CCDs pass the test of action-guidance if they are reinterpreted as normative standards that prescribe that each member of the unstructured collection must perform any

(2014). This is related to the very definition of collective duties in section III. For an analysis of this point and an example, see: Tomalty (2014).

possible contributory action. Second, CCDs pass the test if they are reinterpreted as normative standards that give rise to individual duties to take reasonable steps towards meeting some shared end. This is based on Stemplowska's influential reply to O'Neill's claimability objection, according to which it is clear who owes what to whom because each individual in need may claim assistance from anyone 'who has not taken reasonable steps to fulfil her or his duty', an idea that would be sufficient to guide action (Stemplowska, 2009, p. 482). Third, CCDs pass the test if they are reinterpreted as normative standards that give rise to universal individual duties to enact one single contributory act-type – for example, all the members of the unstructured collection have individual duties to collectivise, to work towards institutional reform, or to do something different (this is based on: Jones, 2011).

I argue that all these proposals fail to undermine my point. The first strategy is problematic for two reasons. First, even though the prescription that 'each individual member of the unstructured collection should perform any possible contributory action' may be clear in some semantic sense, it is not satisfactory from the perspective assumed in this paper – that is, from the practical perspective that matters for the deliberating agent. Assuming that there are many possible contributory actions (see: Ighneski, 2018), it leaves indeterminate the specific contributory act-type that each agent should enact in the form of an act-token. Consequently, it does not pass the intuitive test of action guidance posed in the previous section, which is central to my argument. Second, as noted at the outset of this article, as well as in the definition of complex collective duties in this section, the very idea of complex collective duties assigned to extensive unstructured collections of individuals assumes that it is necessary to enact *different* contributory act-types to achieve their ends jointly – e.g. to end global poverty (Collins, 2019; Ighneski, 2018). If the collective duty leaves unspecified the contributory action that each agent should put into practice, there is no reason to think that it is possible to achieve the shared morally desirable end jointly because of the lack of coordination among agents (Collins, 2013). Of course, an agent-group may avoid this problem, but my argument is against complex collective duties assigned to extensive unstructured collections of individuals, which lack group-level decision-making procedures with the capacity to distribute different roles within the group (see footnote n1 and p. 7).

Concerning the second strategy, based on Stemplowska (2009), the idea of 'reasonable steps' leaves unspecified which 'reasonable contributory act-type' (or maybe, act-types?) each individual should enact. For example, assuming the plausible premise that any 'reasonable step' must give due weight to the agent's own legitimate commitments, the duty to take reasonable steps provides

unclear practical guidance (in the sense assumed in this paper) because it is far from obvious how much each member of an unstructured group should sacrifice, in terms of their own legitimate commitments, to make some contribution to the shared end (Meckled-Garcia, 2013). The objector (e.g. someone who supports Stemplowska [2009]) may reply that we should specify the idea of reasonable steps in more detail. However, there are good reasons to be sceptical about the possibility of specifying (successfully) such an idea in the context of collective duties. After all, as noted in the philosophical literature, that type of specification ‘will either be so abstract as to be vacuous, or, if it aspires to be a clear rule accommodating all the factors [...] in light of all the possible changes in circumstances, it seems inconceivable’ (Meckled-Garcia, 2008, p. 256).⁹

The third strategy against my argument is inherently problematic.¹⁰ The fundamental problem with that possible strategy is that it undermines the very idea of CCDs. Following Collins (2013), the point is that if CCDs are understood as duties that give rise to individual obligations (as the third strategy assumes)¹¹, it is extremely difficult to see how these collective duties “would be more than a conjunction of individual duties” to do something (Collins, 2013, p. 28).¹² For this reason, it seems that if we assume such an interpretation, we can “eliminate the supposed group-level duty” without any substantive loss (Collins, 2013, p. 28).¹³ That said, the defender of the third strategy could claim that there is actually an important loss because collective duties necessarily explain the existence of individual duties – for example, they necessarily explain the individual duties to collectivise (this point is based on Ignieski, 2018 and Wrings, 2014). Nevertheless, it should be noted that this possible defence of the third strategy is weak. The reason is that it assumes that collective duties necessarily explain the existence of individual duties, but, as rightly noted in the literature, it is possible to explain the existence of these individual duties on the basis of something different – for example, a counterfactual about what

9 Following the same line, Tasioulas suggests that “there is no canonical way (or, at least, no one obvious way) of reflecting all these considerations” (2007, p. 98).

10 I cannot settle here if, for example, individual duties to collectivise provide clear practical orientation to individual agents because it is far from obvious what these duties entail (for example, compare: Collins, 2013; Wrings, 2014).

11 This is something that I have not taken for granted because I only assume that it is plausible to believe that CCDs require to enact different contributory act-types (see: Ignieski 2018).

12 Collins’ claim is an example of ‘analytic’ reductionism. According to Wrings, “analytic reductionists hold that claims about collective obligations have the same meaning as more complex conjunctions of claims about individual obligations” (2014, p. 14).

13 Lawford-Smith suggests the same point: “it is reasonable to interpret the claim about an obligation of an uncoordinated group as being equivalent to a claim about the obligations of each member of that uncoordinated group” (2015, p. 230).

would happen if each individual member of the group took collectivising actions (Collins, 2013, p. 224; see: Collins, 2019).

IV. Substantive Implications

It is evident that the key implication of my analysis is that ascriptions of CCDs to extensive unstructured collections of individuals are not able to guide action. But there are other (non-evident) implications that deserve special attention. It is widely accepted in principle-based moral philosophy that normative principles are, by definition, action-guiding normative standards (e.g. Albertzart, 2014; Meckled-Garcia, 2008; O'Neill, 2014; Raz, 1999; note that ethical particularism denies that normative principles are action-guiding standards, but the reason behind this is that particularism is sceptical about the very idea of principle-based moral philosophy).¹⁴ If this is true, it follows from my analysis that CCDs ascribed to extensive unstructured collections are not duties in the strict sense but something different. This is simply because CCDs do not pass the test of action-guidance. This may sound radical, but note that the denial of certain linguistic practices is common in contemporary analytical philosophy.¹⁵ The second implication is related to the first one. If moral duties are, by definition, action-guiding normative standards, it follows from my analysis that the practice of ascribing CCDs to extensive unstructured collections makes our normative theories conceptually inconsistent. The reason is straightforward: CCDs ascribed to extensive unstructured collections, such as the alleged global duty to end poverty, are not action-guiding (and, therefore, they are not duties in the strict sense if duties are action-guiding) because they do not pass the test of action-guidance constructed over our own intuitions on action-guiding duties.

The third implication is not conditional. The point is that my critical analysis reinforces contemporary Kantian concerns over human rights talk. The key current Kantian concern over human rights discourse is not simply

14 For explorations of this discussion from different angles, see: Albertzart (2014) and Dancy (2017).

15 To give an example, consider the existing philosophical discussion on human rights. Positive human rights such as the human right to subsistence goods are widely accepted in the existing human rights practice. However, there is an on-going discussion on whether these rights are rights in the strict sense (see: Collins, 2016; Hope, 2014; O'Neill, 1996; 2005; Tomalty, 2014). That said, if CCDs ascribed to extensive unstructured collections are not duties in the strict sense, what are they? I cannot provide here an exhaustive answer to this possible question. Following the contemporary Kantian criticism of human rights talk, my hunch is that if it is true that these alleged duties are not duties in the strict sense, they could be defined as specifications of morally desirable goals that do not satisfy the necessary conditions to function as action-guiding normative standards for a plurality of individual agents (the formulation of this idea relies heavily on: Hope, 2013, p. 90). This is something that needs to be explored in a further paper.

that some human rights are not ‘claimable’ because their duty-bearers are not sufficiently determined, but rather the more fundamental point that the language of positive human rights is deficient from the practical perspective because it leaves insufficiently determined *who* owes what to whom (see: Jones, 2011; Hope, 2014; O’Neill, 1996; 2005; Rettig (2020)). Even though the aim of my analysis is not to justify this specific objection to human rights talk, it does reinforce that contemporary Kantian concern. The reason is as follows. According to some authors, the language of positive human rights is intrinsically related to CCDs. For example, Nussbaum holds that positive human rights involve a complex collective duty that prescribes that we all have an obligation to achieve a state of affairs in which “all human beings have what they need” (2004, p. 13; see also Wringer, 2014). Following the same line, Ignieski holds that positive human rights involve a collective duty that prescribes that the affluent people in this world have an obligation to “end extreme poverty” (2016, p. 16). Even if it is true that these proposals may have some political impact under certain favourable circumstances, my analysis shows that these CCDs do not provide clear guidance on what to do and, therefore, that they are not really action-guiding normative standards.

V. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that that CCDs ascribed to extensive unstructured collections of individual agents are not action-guiding. The reason is that, while duties assigned to individual agents (and agent-groups) can pass the intuitive test of action-guidance, CCDs fail to pass the test even if we reinterpret them as obligations that do not require the distribution of several contributory act-types. I have shown that this analysis has some substantive implications. For example, it reinforces contemporary Kantian concerns over the action-guiding character of human rights talk. I conclude this paper by suggesting that normative theorists should not be resistant to my analysis. The reason is that if my argument is correct, it invites them to give precisely what normative theory should provide to agents: not just morally desirable ends, but clear practical guidance on what to do. After all, as an author suggests, “no adequate political philosophy can simply take the form of a theory of what is intrinsically desirable” (Dunn, 1985, p. 38).

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