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## MORAL RESPONSIBILITY AND PUBLIC DUTIES IN A PLURALIST SOCIETY

BARBARA GOODWIN



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Dr. Barbara Goodwin

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## MORAL RESPONSIBILITY AND PUBLIC DUTIES IN A PLURALIST SOCIETY

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What follows is an outline of arguments and analysis which I hope to explore at greater length elsewhere. The work-in-progress aspect of this paper means that it raises more questions than it answers and passes rather rapidly over issues which require considerable debate. I hope that the book of the paper will remedy this!

The 'moral crisis' of Western societies in the contemporary world stems, I believe, from the complexity of their organisation. Most such societies are industrialised, pluralistic and operate on a liberal-democratic model of politics and society. The 'crisis' results from the fact that we no longer know whom to hold responsible for actions and events outside the narrow sphere of personal/private life, even where the actions are performed by governments in the name of their people. Nor, as individuals, do we know precisely the nature and extent of our own moral responsibilities and duties, due to our multiple roles within the social and political structures. My aim is to delineate the moral problems thus created and their causes, and to move towards formulating an account of moral responsibility and duties which would be valid for a 'complex society', such as we live in today in Britain.

The term 'complex society' will be used throughout this paper to denote Western, industrialised, capitalist societies. However, many of the arguments advanced might be equally applicable to the industrially advanced Communist societies of Europe and to some other societies which are neither liberal-democratic, nor pluralist. For the purpose of comparison I shall first look briefly at earlier moral perspectives which seemed to produce clear-cut notions of responsibility and duty for the individual and clear accounts of the demarcation of the public and private spheres.

### The Background to the Problem

In the Republic, Plato drew an analogy between the just man and the just society, on the supposition that the individual is a microcosm of the social unit, or city-state. 'The problem of the good state and of the good man (for Plato) are two sides of the same question...Morality ought to be at once private and public'. (1) Aristotle argued, by contrast, that the goodness of the citizen was goodness in relation to the constitution. In other words, it was a functional virtue, whereas 'the good man is good in virtue of one single, perfect goodness'. (2) Thus it was possible to be a good citizen - to discharge one's public duties - without possessing the goodness of the good man. Despite Aristotle's qualifications and subtle realism on this issue, the Athens of his time is generally held up as a model of a culture in which little distinction was made between public and private life. For both the Greeks and the Romans, the greatest virtues were those related to the res publica and the individual was viewed primarily as a citizen and subject of the state and only secondarily as a private individual.

Christ himself provided a solution to the public/private split which was appropriate to an unorthodox minority sect in a powerful empire: 'render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things which are God's'. (3) But later the Christianity of mediaeval Europe fused the duty to God with that to Caesar by conjoining the secular with the theological in the structure of the polity. Following one's duty to the King was tantamount to doing right by God, since the King was one of His deputies on earth. Although the subversive individualism of early Christian doctrine was implicit in the whole text of the New Testament, the pre-Reformation Christian world had little difficulty in resolving the public/private distinction by making most personal moral duties a matter of public concern and often by enforcing them legally.

There are two possible approaches to formulating moral duties: one is to propound general, abstract, formalistic principles which individuals must interpret in context: the other is to allocate quite specific duties to specific individuals. The latter approach is most appropriate to an explicitly differentiated society. The form which duties take is a separate issue from the demarcation of public and private life, but general duties

which pervade all spheres of life are more likely to abolish the presumed distinction between the public and the private.

The contractualist emphasis of the 17th century produced a distinctive notion of duties by emphasising the importance of the law as the foundation of valid duties. The nature of the archetypal contract (for example, a business contract) is that two individuals emerge from the obscurity and privacy of personal life, and voluntarily contract with each other to do something: this process imposes a duty on each of them which is enforceable in the public domain by courts of law. Thus, life in a contractualist society - abstractly viewed - would consist of a series of forays into the public domain to achieve ends which one considered beneficial, such as making a business deal, getting married, buying a house. This approach contributed to the liberal outlook. The early liberal model of society (again viewed abstractly) was that of an atomistic society in which everyone was formally equal before the law, and 'everyone counted as one'. There was no room in such a model for public institutions (other than those conceived of as voluntary aggregates of individuals), nor any acknowledgement that such institutions could, of themselves, impose public obligations on individuals, other than those into which they contracted. Ideally, the role of law in such a society would be minimal; there would be virtually no public duties (except that of obeying the law) unless people voluntarily undertook them by quitting the private sphere and entering the public for limited purposes. The nature of moral duties in such a model is, in principle, self-imposed (in accordance with liberal precepts) and, generally, specific: that is, one contracts into specific duties. However, out of early liberalism there grew a moral theory, utilitarianism, which proposed a simple, general and formalistic duty for the individual - the maximisation of utility. Here was a principle which could rule both the public and the private sphere without distinction.

Although, as we know, utilitarianism could run in both directions, either justifying an extensive private sphere occupied by utility-maximising individuals, or an interventionist form of government which extended the public sphere and public duties by insisting on the greatest happiness of the greatest number, alias social utility, it has usually been most associated with the maximisation of private pleasure and the minimisation of public duties. Utilitarians from the mid-nineteenth century to the present have recognised the over-simplificatory nature of Bentham's original theory, and have tried to reconcile it with a more complex view both of society and of individual psychology - they have, for example, tried to include altruism and other non-selfish impulses in the theory. The role of the public domain was played up, and the individualistic side of the theory played down. Indeed, the negative utilitarianism of some recent writers such as Singer and Harris has dragged us all into a public domain far wider than we suspected existed, and has proposed for everyone public duties of such mammoth proportions that we have an 'infinite obligation' to prevent harm anywhere in the world. (4)

The recent history of moral and political philosophy in liberal societies in the last twenty-five years is one of a debate between the propounders of 'grand theory' which is proposed as valid for both the public and private spheres of life (for example, the theories of Rawls and Nozick and the 'negative utilitarianism' of Singer) and those who argue that a complex society which generates different roles cannot be governed by a single, formalistic principle or a unified moral theory. The latter thinkers would argue that the differentiation of spheres within which we operate requires different moral principles: they would also say that the 'grand theorists', past and present, inappropriately conflate our various spheres of existence and behaviour. They might, loosely speaking, be called relativists. This paper is based on an acceptance of the pluralistic perspective, but a rejection of its 'relativistic' conclusions. A new theory - or, not to beg the question, new theories - of moral obligation is now needed, not solely because society has become more complex and pluralistic, and world politics more convoluted since the archetypal theories of Kant and Bentham were propounded, but also because our perceptions of the nature of society now, by and large, acknowledge its complexity, which was implicitly denied in the earlier liberal, individualistic model. (Even old-style liberals now, although not perhaps libertarians, accept the pluralistic nature of 'complex society'.) The rationalist thinkers of the Enlightenment sought to reduce society to a homogeneous phenomenon and to explain it in terms of a single, unifying principle, the law of attraction, with corresponding consequences for

their moral outlook. We can no longer achieve this simplification, even at an intellectual level, and our moral theories and our conceptualisation of the public and private domains must accordingly be reformulated to take the pluralism and complexity of modern society into account.

### Features of Complex Society

Various features of complex society cause particular problems for the moral theorist, by undermining any straightforward account of personal moral responsibility. These will be enumerated briefly.

#### 1. The extensive division of labour

The division of labour allocates different roles, with different relationships to the end-product. These are not accompanied, in capitalism at least, by any feeling of collective responsibility for the end-product. Indeed, no-one feels particularly responsible for the end-product of, say, an armaments production process. The division of labour applies to co-operative but non-productive activities too - no-one in an army may feel responsible for the deaths inflicted in battle. The problem of 'acting under orders' is noted below; certainly it too stems from the division of labour. Division of labour is not merely a division of responsibility. In many cases it is an abolition of responsibility. No-one knows where the buck stops - or it has vanished entirely.

#### 2. Division of powers

The division of powers between the organs of government and between those in government and other power- or resource-holders (such as businesses and unions) is a special case of the division of labour. Originating in a Lockean desire to prevent dangerous monopolies of power, by a separation and balance of powers, it has extended to become the political hallmark of liberal pluralist society. The anti-monopoly endeavour has been to some extent successful, but the effect on the location of moral responsibility among the powerful is disastrous. If all political decisions are the result of collaboration, compromise or wheeling-dealing, no individual operator need feel responsible for the outcome: indeed, none is causally responsible for the outcome in most cases. It follows that no-one feels particularly responsible for his/her input either; fighting one's corner in an entirely selfish fashion is acceptable since one can assume that other forces will modify one's input and determine the outcome.

#### 3. Democracy

The essence of liberal democracy is the selection of representatives of the people who are made accountable to them via the regular election process. However, this model diffuses responsibility. Although representatives are causally responsible for policies and actions, and may be held culpable for those which turn out badly, they can also claim that they are following their constituents' wishes, and are not morally responsible for these policies. An M.P. who voted for the return of capital punishment could claim (perhaps rightly) that s/he represented the wishes of the majority of her/his constituents. While I was writing this, the news was announced that President Reagan had formally admitted responsibility for 'Irangate'. The general response in America seemed to be 'Now that he has admitted it ritually, let him get on with being President'. Responsibility here was, by implication, divided between the President, his entourage and the electorate whose wishes they claimed to enact. The Irangate episode demonstrates a curious kind of moral responsibility, where admission brings absolution and the idea of anyone suffering for his/her actions seems to have disappeared. The two-way nature of responsibility for political actions in democracies (neatly illustrated by Hobbes' dictum in Leviathan that the authors are 'responsible for their agents' actions while unable to control them (5)) obfuscates the moral issues and seems to leave everyone with clean hands.

#### 4. Bureaucracy

The characteristics of bureaucratic organisations have been studied and criticised by social theorists from Weber onwards. The generation of norms internal to the organisation which members are expected to uphold, is one means whereby individual members are divorced from the wider society and from its basic norms of moral behaviour. The delegation of power and specialisation of function within a bureaucracy operates (as with the more general division of labour) to relieve many bureaucrats of responsibility. Although blame for mistakes formally rests at the top (but penalties are transmitted downwards internally) the number of people involved in the carrying out of a policy makes

responsibility for its operation diffuse: the delegation of functions may mean that a policy conceived at the highest level turns out very differently in its execution. (We see this with, for example, some DHSS policies and the very different behaviour of counter-clerks or 'snoopers'.) The removal of bureaucratic organisations from direct accountability to the public at large also makes the issue of responsibility less pressing for their workers.

#### 5. Corporations and multinational companies

The diffusion of responsibility within corporations mirrors that within public-sector bureaucracy and needs no separate elaboration here. The multinational nature of many corporations exacerbates the problem of diffusion and abdication of individual responsibility. Firms whose operations are directed from one country but carried out in a distant country may benefit from not having to adhere to the stricter legal and moral rules of their own society. The advantage taken by multinationals of the absence of regulations for the protection of labour in third-world countries is too familiar to require detailed mention. The 'out-of-sight-out-of-mind' principle can absolve managers at the Head Office from responsibility for the conditions under which their employees abroad work, while local managers are absolved from responsibility, similarly, by being subject to orders from Head Office to maximise profits and minimise industrial disputes.

#### 6. Urbanisation and the destruction of 'Community'

The growth of towns, cities and conurbations decreases the sense of neighbourliness and personal responsibility for events in the community and for one's fellow members. Many people relish the personal freedom which the highly individualised nature of urban living offers: the obverse of this is that in illness, trouble and old age they may lack support because no-one feels responsible for them. (In countries with a welfare state, the government takes some responsibility, and there is, of course, a debate about whether welfarism is inversely proportionate to the decline of 'community', and in which direction the cause-effect link works.) It would indeed be hard to formulate a set of moral rules for the interpersonal behaviour of city-dwellers and for their duties to the community. In the absence of such rules, personal responsibility and public duties tend not to be acknowledged by the majority of people.

#### 7. Legalism

I use this term to denote the increased reliance on legal regulation of interpersonal conduct and individuals' 'public duties'. This tends to diminish any requirement for individuals to conduct themselves well for moral reasons. In the interstices of the law, anything goes, morally speaking. The more that a culture relies on legal regulations, the less will its members be inclined to consider their moral responsibilities. The United States is known as a highly litigious society and events there demonstrate that, in such a society, if individuals who have committed some moral wrong cannot be successfully prosecuted, they are often entirely exonerated. (The Irangate hearings bear out this impression.) The proposition, then, is that the scope of law and the sense of individual moral responsibility are also inversely related.

#### 8. The 'global village'

McLuhan's phrase signifies <sup>(among other things)</sup> the twentieth-century phenomenon of strong interdependence between most countries in the world due to the development of a world economy and of various global political alignments. This phenomenon extends the causal chain, triggered by some national event, far beyond national boundaries, and often beyond the foresight and control of those who initiated the events. The unforeseen reverberations of our actions may make it impossible to act morally (except in the immediate context of our actions); the distance at which some consequences occur may allow us not to hold ourselves responsible.

#### 9. Money

The institution of money has been significant in depersonalising transactions and obscuring causal chains and hence chains of responsibility. Simmel wrote of the power of money to enhance individual independence and freedom. (6) He argued that it extends the 'teleological series', so that we see connections between events where we saw none before. But it is equally true that it can facilitate myopia with regard to such series: if I simply put my money into a Unit Trust, which invests in the shares of different companies, I need not inquire too closely how those companies earn their money.

The more complex the world of finance capitalism becomes, the less are we able to feel much personal moral responsibility for events, or for what we do with our money, or for how we earn it. In the everyday context, money also allows us to buy our way out of what might in a different society have been considered as moral responsibilities: by giving money to a beggar, we absolve ourselves from any obligation to inquire into his needs or the causes of his plight.

### The Moral Consequences

Not all of these phenomena are unique to current Western, Capitalist society - some existed in the past, and some appear in Communist and third-world societies too - but they all appear in an advanced form in such society, and in combination they militate against the definition of a moral role for the individual and the location of responsibility and blame. Some of these factors minimise the individual's sensitivity to responsibility and duties (e.g. legalism, urbanisation), while others serve to diffuse responsibility, or even to lead to moral abdication (e.g. bureaucracy, the division of labour).

The consequences of these developments with respect to moral responsibility can be summarised as follows:-

- (1) There is no simple, direct relationship between actions and outcomes, when actions are performed within or mediated by institutions. (Of course, it may be argued that there is never a simple, unmediated relationship between action and outcome. However, in face-to-face or interpersonal conduct there is a greater chance of the individual foreseeing the outcome of his/her actions, or at least seeing it after the event.)
- (2) There is no simple, direct relationship between agents and 'patients' in many contexts. The initiating agents of some policy or chain of events (those who give the orders or send the money) may not have any personal contacts with those affected. By contrast, most moral theories presuppose that such direct, perceptible relationships exist and are governed by morality: and that they can act as models or paradigms for action in more complex situations.
- (3) The complexity of organisation of pluralist societies and world society leads to the problem of increasingly imperfect knowledge. We are all enmeshed in many networks, each of which may be so wide, complex and diffuse that we are unable to know or predict the more distant results of our actions. This presents a particular challenge to consequentialist moralities such as utilitarianism.
- (4) Similarly, the diversity and extent of networks multiplies the unintended, as well as the unforeseen, consequences of our actions and so makes moral judgement more difficult. A recent example is the 1986 American bombing of Libya: the agreements made in the 1950s to retain American military bases in Britain implicated the British in this action, although the use of the bases for such a purpose was undoubtedly not envisaged in the 1950s. No doubt there are few actions in life which lack unforeseen consequences, or which are undertaken from a position of perfect knowledge, but complex society increases the degree of uncertainty in any moral calculation.
- (5) A further problem, resulting from these factors, is the difficulty in determining the length of any chain of causal and/or moral responsibility. Since the second world war and the decolonisation process, much has been said about the new White Man's Burden guilt. To what extent can the current citizens of an ex-colonial power be said to owe reparations for the evils inflicted on colonised peoples by their imperialist forefathers? Causally, no chain of responsibility can be retrogressive: I doubt, too, if moral responsibility can be allocated in this way. But this argument is frequently made in Western societies and usually arises in the context of collective guilt - for example, the German reparations to Israel and the American programme of affirmative action for blacks. Whether the individual can feel any such retroactive moral responsibility is dubious - which is not to say that s/he may not feel pity for those wronged, or shame for the actions of those who wronged them. (The issue of collective guilt is itself an interesting one, since it seems to presuppose the existence of social institutions and a complex society. Were we truly liberal individualists, we would not acknowledge collective guilt or responsibility.)



Enough has been said to show that various features of complex society tend to negate many of the practical assumptions concerning responsibility made by earlier moral theories, and to suggest that contemporary ethics requires a new account of responsibility and duty which can embrace these complex social phenomena.

### The Public and the Private

My concern in this paper is chiefly the responsibilities and duties of individuals which fall within the 'public' sphere, rather than those which affect private conduct. However, many private, interpersonal situations are in some way modified by the social context. 'Love thy neighbour' in a city means something very different from what it means in a village community - or, perhaps, nothing at all. The major issue to be determined is whether the distinction between the public and private spheres can validly be maintained in the context of moral behaviour and, further, whether it can meaningfully be upheld in today's complex society. The proposition that the virtues of the good citizen were not co-extensive with those of the good man was advanced by Aristotle. Machiavelli made a notorious (and rather successful) case for the differentiation of behaviour in public life from that of private life, although whether his argument counts as immoral, amoral or moral is still a matter of debate. The early liberal inclination to demarcate public life and to enhance the scope and importance of 'private' life served to foster contempt for public duties and responsibilities, as did the axiom that as long as one observed the law one had fulfilled one's public duties. In the era of laissez-faire, this axiom did not make heavy demands on people! The development of conscientious (or conscience-stricken) liberalism such as is represented by J.S. Mill in some writings, and Hobhouse, signalled a more flexible account of the individual in society and a less rigid public/private distinction, with more tolerance for the extension of the public sphere and related duties, via interventionist government. The permeation of liberal thought by sociological theories, such as Durkheim's 'holistic' theory of institutions, and Weber's account of bureaucracy, also contributed to a new, less individualistic understanding of society and a greater interest in the construction and momentum of institutions and groups. The arrival of universal suffrage in liberal-democratic societies also gave rise to a new, participatory conception of the relationship between individuals and government, even if the practice never lived up to the theory. What resulted from these socio-cultural and theoretical developments can be expressed in the following propositions:-

- (1) The 'private' actions of individuals may have consequences which are legitimately of public interest (e.g. the way in which a factory owner treats his/her workers is not purely a matter between him/her and them.) Of course, all societies have acknowledged this when it suited them: motherhood became a matter of state interest in Nazi Germany, as sexual behaviour is in South Africa today. J.S. Mill's On Liberty was written to discourage the extension of this proposition into those areas of life which he considered irrevocably private.
- (2) In a democratic society, we must shoulder responsibility for the actions of politicians because we are able - in theory - to control and change them. Events in the political sphere are thus not divorced from the activities of 'private citizens', and the latter should feel some moral responsibility for their actions and omissions where these bear on the political sphere.
- (3) There are intermediate institutions in complex society which are neither wholly private nor wholly public. How these behave is a matter of legitimate public interest too, and the individuals within them have dual obligations, of a private and a quasi-public sort. Where the institution is a part of the public sector, their institution-related obligations are public, as in the civil service. Those who accept a Durkheimian analysis of institutions would argue that such institutions have an existence over and above that of the individuals who compose them - this, and the Weberian notion of institutions, norms enhances our conception of the quasi-public nature of intermediate institutions, and suggests that pluralist liberal societies cannot maintain a strict public/private distinction. There have, of course, been such intermediate institutions (sometimes called secondary institutions, to distinguish them from that primary institution, the state) throughout history; the army, the navy, the church and the stage are examples. The point is that the growth of pluralistic liberal analysis allows us to see them as quasi-public organisations, rather than as private 'clubs', membership of which is voluntary and contractual.

The acknowledgement of propositions (1) and (2) suggests the need for a far wider interpretation of the meaning of 'public' than has hitherto been made in liberal society. However, the acceptance of (3), which is, in effect, an acknowledgement of the pluralist nature of society, has tended to blur the public/private distinction and has opened the way to 'particularist' ethical theories, which hold that particular spheres of action generate sui generis moral principles and, hence, that all-encompassing or 'grand' theories which merge public and private conduct or treat them the same are inappropriate to complex society. There is thus a tension, even an implicit conflict, between proposition (1) and (2) and proposition (3) in terms of their moral consequences, although all three conjointly seem necessary to the characterisation of complex society.

The particularist stance is stated forcefully in Held's Rights and Goods. She criticises moral theorists of the past who have sought to extend their principles to every domain, and compares the endeavour to that of eighteenth-century thinkers who looked for the 'one, true, unified scientific theory', a quest soon overtaken by the division of science into many different fields of inquiry. Held argues 'We need, I think, a division of moral labour. Different persons in different roles in different domains of society ought to develop and to experiment with different moral approaches... We should accept the suitability of partial views for partial contexts.' She proposes that the moral philosopher should 'create' roles which are accompanied by particular normative recommendations; her book pursues this aim.(7)

There is, undeniably, something seductive in the idea of creating roles with particular duties attached to them. It accords with our understanding of pluralist society and with some recent psychological theories, and psycho-sociological theories about the social construction of reality. It also fits with post-Hegelian philosophical conceptions of the subject as interacting with a world of objects, and so transforming itself. Nevertheless, there seems to be something conceptually wrong with dividing human life into a series of watertight (or only slightly inter-permeable) compartments, within which different moral rules apply. Psychologists have warned us of the sort of inner conflicts which this approach can create for the individual. Pluralist society expects us to be competent at filling a number of roles; it also claims that our interests as the fillers of different roles are all represented by different organisations. But without some basic compatibility of roles and their demands, the integrity of the individual is under severe threat. A unified moral theory would foster that integrity: partial, role-based theories do not.

Returning to the public/private distinction, I would argue that there should be general moral duties which apply across the board, no matter which sphere of action is under scrutiny. These duties must be universalisable and hence applicable to both the public and private spheres (in so far as these can be demarcated), although it does not, of course, follow that such duties need be regarded as absolute or objective. This is not merely an argument from consequences - although the consequences of particularist moral theories are, I think, unacceptable - for it also rests on the conviction that if there are rights, duties and goods, these must be so in all circumstances, once allowance has been made for the differences of application in different contexts. It also rests on the belief that the individual cannot properly be called a moral agent under any other circumstances - that is, unless s/he accepts some general moral principles. What these principles should be is a separate question.

We can, then, approach the question of the public/private distinction in several ways. Practically, there seems little justification for making such a distinction, given the interpenetration of many areas of life, both at an institutional and an individual level. (What I mean by this is that the small business does not operate in isolation from political events and policies, nor is it unaffected by the behaviour of its staff, for example. Again an individual's behaviour at home is strongly affected by his/her economic situation, his/her group activities and by the other roles which he/she fills.) It is also dubious to demarcate the two theoretically because there are no logical boundaries, and because practice militates against such a distinction. The most elegant theories often separate various spheres of life into public/private or other divisions, but they are rendered vulnerable by this artificial act of separation, as we can see from the many attacks made on Marx's supposed economic determinism (i.e. his separation and prioritisation of the economic sphere). At the individual level, the public and the private may be experienced differently

and either the former or the latter may be the focus of individual goals and desires; role conflict may also disturb the individual. Nevertheless, it is the 'same' individual who experiences public, quasi-public and private life, and from his/her perspective no hard and fast line can be drawn between them.

### The Notion of Responsibility

Another area which must come under scrutiny before any theory of duties in a complex society can be propounded is that of moral responsibility. As has been suggested, the distinctive phenomena of pluralism raise many obstacles to the lodging of moral responsibility at the door of individuals. A full discussion of the problems would necessitate answering the following questions:

(1) To what extent can I be 'indirectly responsible' for an event, in both the causal and the moral sense? (That is, where the causal and the moral differ: sometimes they coincide, but not always.) Moral theory copes most adequately with direct responsibility: I wrong a friend, tell a lie, give money to charity. In real life, and especially in public or quasi-public life, the chain of events is not so short. I initiate a policy and someone else, or many other people, executes it. 'Between the motion and the act, Falls the Shadow.' The puzzle is how direct responsibility can be imputed when the causal chains in complex society are so extended, the context is so multi-dimensional and unforeseen consequences abound. If it cannot, can we formulate a notion of indirect responsibility which stands up to scrutiny? The very idea draws us into practical questions and probability calculations: how far down the causal chain could I, and should I, be able to see? Was the outcome so probable that I should reasonably have foreseen it?

(2) Can individuals be held responsible for actions mediated by institutions? This, the cog-in-the-machine question, leads directly to the question of how far individuals can be held responsible for actions performed under orders. 'Obedience to orders' suggests, in most cases, actions validated by institutional norms: the soldier who kills under instructions is normally doing an action made moral by the military institution and the wartime context. (Abnormally, he may be carrying out orders which even the norm does not validate - as happened at My Lai.) The 'under orders' argument was widely aired at the Nuremberg Trials, where it was rejected by the Allies as a defence, partly on the grounds that the Nazi leaders on trial were in the business of giving, rather than receiving, orders. It has been argued that soldiers go through a training which brainwashes and brutalises them to the point where they have no will or private judgement. (8) The necessity is to establish widely held beliefs and conventions about this so that anyone acting under orders retains the capacity to judge morally and holds himself/herself responsible for his/her actions.

(3) In a case where responsibility for an action, event or policy is diffused, to what extent can individuals be held morally responsible? Is 'diffused responsibility' so ubiquitous in modern society as to be meaningless (c.f. 'those who are not with us are against us') or can the idea be circumscribed and made to form part of moral thinking? These questions are particularly pertinent in the case of order-givers and policy-makers, where decisions and policies are made collectively, but they are also relevant where a policy is executed by a number of people (for example, a law which is passed by the legislature, interpreted by civil servants and administered by the police and the judiciary). The ritual assignment of formal responsibility to the top - which happens, for example, when a British Cabinet minister resigns because of misconduct by a civil servant - avoids the issue of real moral responsibility. It seems that the only way to overcome the problem of diffused responsibility, other than by abandoning the concept of responsibility in large areas of human life, is to hold each contributor to an action or policy as responsible as if s/he alone had initiated or performed it.

We may ask, however, whether the notion of collective responsibility can stand up to analysis and, if so, where and how it applies to the groupings and institutions of complex society. This notion of collective responsibility is most often applied to a group, many of whose members had no direct part in an action or an event: the notion that the German people was collectively responsible for the Holocaust is one notable application of the principle. From the viewpoint of individual agents trying to behave morally, this notion of collective responsibility offers little useful guidance, since it is usually applied retrospectively; furthermore, it does not specify to what lengths someone should go to absolve himself/herself from collective ill-doing.

(4) Can institutions be 'moral' or is it only the individual agents who compose them who can be morally responsible? The present argument operates at the level of individual agent and presupposes that moral agents are necessarily individuals. However, it is possible to judge institutions to be good or bad according to one's moral lights. This question seems tangential to the present analysis, although anyone taking a holistic, rather than a methodologically individualistic approach needs to ask it. It seems probable that the branding of institutions as immoral (or moral) is an example of transferred epithet, although one which may serve a useful rhetorical purpose.

Another question which needs to be considered is to what extent the attribution of responsibility is ultimately ideological. The political use of language disguises or misplaces responsibility in many cases. Ideology too can operate as an obstacle to the location of responsibility, while ideological conflict creates considerable uncertainty about responsibility and duties, both public and private. A full consideration of this issue would need to examine the chief ideological competitors of pluralist society in their role of alternative, rival methods of allocating responsibility to different groups of individuals.

The formulation of answers to these questions is a precondition for any ethical theory which might apply to a complex society. (The questions themselves are not entirely neutral, since they presuppose the ethical validity of attributing responsibility to individuals and of treating individuals as moral agents.) In the answering of such questions, the public/private distinction would, I suspect, be dissolved.

#### The Multi-faceted Individual

In a complex society, each plays many parts, and each part seems to generate another set of duties, some of which may conflict. It could indeed be argued that all duties are generated by roles. One's behaviour to others is behaviour qua friend, relation, neighbour, employee, not merely behaviour as one person to another: even in the sort of case where roles do not seem to be involved, as when one sends money to a charity appeal, one is, it could be said, acting as a member of humankind. The pluralist conception of individuals as clusters of roles tends to undermine the public/private distinction from the bottom up. Even roles such as husband, parent, friend and neighbour are in a sense public.

It seems that, given the various particularist moralities which are haphazardly adopted by individuals (albeit unwittingly) according to their current roles, the pressures of duty on the multi-faceted individual are considerable. Duties are not merely generated by roles: the increased awareness of some personal attributes such as race, gender and sexuality, in addition to more traditional attributes such as nationality, can add further duties. Some individuals seem to choose their affiliations, or 'facets', in such a way as to produce compatible and convergent duties. The often-caricatured political radical who works in a community centre, is vegetarian and votes Ecology is someone to be envied for the convergence of his/her duties. For most people, a variety of roles, some forced on us by the necessity to make a living, leads to divergent duties which sometimes cannot be reconciled, and to a sense of multiple responsibilities which cannot simultaneously be satisfied. This may lead to personal and psychological problems - and to moral impotence.

A particularist approach to ethics may absolve individuals from wider moral duties, or may license them to follow a cluster of moral or quasi-moral principles which conflict with wider moral principles. It cannot, per se, provide any means of resolving conflicts between two or more role-generated duties, nor adjudicate between them and establish priorities. If we reject the particularist ethical approach because of these and other shortcomings, it is not necessary simultaneously to reject the notion that particular roles generate particular duties: we must, rather, require these duties to conform to the wider and more universal moral principle(s), so that they are viewed as elaborations of that principle in the context of a particular role.

In fact, many of the best scandals and the most contentious political issues arise from the conflict of roles generated in a pluralist society which has neither retained nor developed a method of prioritising duties and which has, effectively, abandoned the search for universal moral principles. The disgrace of British politicians such as Profumo, Lambton and Parkinson occurred, one might say, because of the public's confusion about

their duties as politicians and their duties as sexual beings: it has often been said that in many European countries (where politics and private life are viewed as separate activities), these scandals are regarded as absurd. It may be that the British public still has inklings of a wider moral duty which it prioritises - or, more likely, that we merely prioritise the various roles differently from our European counterparts and consider wrong behaviour in the sexual sphere more heinous than that in the political sphere. The cases of Ponting, Tisdall and Wright are, on the other hand, indicative of a strong prioritisation of role-based duties (by the prosecuting government) against a more general duty which all three claimed to be following - to act pro bono publico, as defined by their consciences. (Wright may not fall precisely into this category, but some of his defenders would argue on these grounds.) The acknowledgement of overriding moral duties would resolve some of these issues, although it will always be in the interests of organisations (including governments) to argue that certain role-based duties are paramount. In the absence of overriding duties, we become easy prey to the organisations which seek to define our duties in their own interests.

### The Clarification of Responsibilities

This, and the following section, delineate some of the problem areas in complex society which need analysis. Especially problematic are those areas where it is difficult to establish causal responsibility, with the result that moral responsibility can more easily be repudiated.

(a) Politicians and the People: the chain of responsibility and the distribution of duties created by democracy needs scrutiny. Currently, doctrines like that of the electoral mandate make the people morally responsible for many decisions which they are largely unable to affect causally. In those liberal-democratic societies most prone to electoral apathy, it would also be desirable to devise and propagate some doctrine about the duties of the electorate which progressed beyond the classical liberal view that personal freedom must include the freedom to withdraw from political activity and to take not part in civic activities.

(b) Large Organisations: the reciprocal duties of employers and employees need clarification. The degree of responsibility of the individual members of an organisation for its activities also needs determining. This is an urgent problem because of the delegation and diffusion problem mentioned earlier. A third problem, the most important in terms of the role of organisations in society, is the determination of when and how they can be held responsible for the results of their activities. The Anti-Slavery Society recently issued a report alleging that Lonrho has a large number of young boys working naked, up to their waists in liquid cyanide, at a Ghanaian chemical plant. If it is argued that responsibility can be attributed to individuals for this sort of activity, despite the diffusion/delegation problem, all well and good. If, on the other hand, it is argued that firms are collectively responsible, then some delineation of the firms' duties is urgently needed. Since the execution of a firm's activities is, ultimately, in the hands of its individual employees, there needs to be a process whereby employees are allocated responsibilities in alignment with those duties which the firm owes to society at large. (Few organisations would be exempt from this attribution of corporate responsibility, because few, if any, exist in isolation from the rest of society.)

(c) Our Duties to Other Members of Society: the question needs to be answered whether, supposing that individuals do have duties to other members of society (to relieve their suffering where possible; for example) institutions such as a redistributive tax system or a welfare state satisfactorily discharge, or replace, such duties, wholly, or to some extent so that individuals have no residual personal duties to their fellows at large. In The Needs of Strangers, Ignatieff argues for the retention of a sense of responsibility towards others and their needs, in the face of interventionist government and welfarism. (9) The reconceptualisation of this issue is, again, necessary to the determination of what might be called the wider or public duties of individuals.

Weighty and practical issues of this nature could be decided by devising an ethical theory which resolved the problem of the diffusion of responsibility and determined whether, in such areas, people's duties should be role-specific or general and universal.

### Responsibility and Duties in the Global Village

If we have public duties, or general duties which comprehend our 'public' lives, there is no reason to think that these stop at national boundaries. A large number of issues of world concern present themselves to us for resolution. These are not so much problems of the complex society, but of a complex world. Two of the more pressing questions, as far as individual responsibility goes, are the following:

(a) To what extent can we be held/hold ourselves responsible for events elsewhere? Do we have duties to 'strangers' in other societies? Should the individual donate money to third-world charities and insist on buying coffee and other products at non-exploitative prices? Do we indeed have the kind of infinite obligation outlined by Singer (on a negative utilitarian basis) to relieve suffering at the cost of self-impoverishment? Have Western governments a duty not to export Western practices and expectations to the third world? It would be hard to answer such questions except from the basis of a universal, non-particular moral principle, since individuals rarely have specific roles which generate duties towards people in other countries.

(b) What duties, if any, do we have to future generations and the human race? The global village is a community in which we cannot easily separate responsibility (if we have any) to future generations of our own society and own offspring from duties to future generations of other societies because, as has been illustrated by the cases of acid rain and Chernobyl, phenomena such as pollution do not observe national boundaries: nor does the depletion of world resources, in the long-term. The question of the militarisation of the world and the proliferation of nuclear weapons also falls into the category of questions about our duties to future people and to the race as a whole. The difficulty of allocating duties to individuals here is outstanding. No individual could be held responsible for something like acid rain: how then can s/he have a duty in this, or a similar, connection? If duty, obligation and responsibility cannot be attributed where the capacity to act does not exist, what possibility is there of convincing people of moral duties in such contexts?

The problem here is that if we conceive of people's duties to the rest of the world and the future using a broad canvas, we shall be arguing for the establishment and acknowledgement of duties which individuals are incapable of fulfilling and this will in turn bring into disrepute the notion of such obligations: this argument has also been made by critics of the 'infinite obligation' theory, for slightly different reasons. In the latter case, the objection is that infinite moral responsibility requires almost unlimited sacrifice by the individual; in the present case, the difficulty is that the individual could not begin to conceive of how to fulfil his/her responsibilities. If, on the other hand, we try to resolve world problems by talking of the collective responsibility of governments, nations and agencies, we fall foul of the fact that this concept is philosophically dubious and hard to operationalise, and also suffers from the diffusion problem in abundance. The resolution to the 'world and future' problem is surely that individuals should be encouraged to acknowledge duties in these areas - duties based on some universal moral principle or set of principles - even if their opportunities of acting in fulfilment of these duties will be few. They may, however, import this sense of duties into their membership of collectives and groups which have some influence over world events, and thus bring about the infusion of general moral principles to curb particularistic ethics and group interests.

### Responsibility and Duties in a Complex Society

Having outlined some of the practical problems with which any moral theory must deal in a complex society, it is possible to draw some general conclusions. A distinction must be made between specific and formal duties. Specific duties, such as 'honour thy parents', seem most appropriate to 'simple' societies, and most adequate to governing 'private' conduct. In complex society, however, with the decline of the status of the specific personal duties formerly allocated by religious and other systems, and with the rejection by many people of the formal duties of the great religions and of Kantianism and utilitarianism, we find that the gaps have been filled by specific duties which are allocated with and by organisations and institutions - duties such as loyalty to the Party, or pursuit of the Company's interests. These tend to override formal and universal moral duties (where

these are still acknowledged) because of the latter's more general and intangible nature: this can lead to horrifying immorality, such as the Nazis' treatment of the Jews.

Specific obligations result in general from formal contractual arrangements - for example, the acceptance of a job - or informal ones, such as becoming a parent. In one sense these are voluntary and some people would argue that they are therefore more compelling than any general duty which humanity may impose on its members. It is hard to counteract this other than by the assertion of the contrary position. Such specific duties are certainly nearer to our hearts, and reflect our personal interests more closely, but it is hard to see how they can supersede our more general duties as members of a society, and of the human race.

To counteract the dangers of specific duties' supplanting general moral principles and creating or reinforcing a fragmented pluralist society of diverse organisations and interest groups with particular interests and specific 'moralities' to uphold them, we need to devise or acknowledge a moral theory which allocates formal and universal responsibilities and duties. Such a theory would be appropriate to complex society, in that its precepts would be sufficiently general to apply to conduct in many, varying contexts. This is not to say that some formal, universal moral principle could govern one's behaviour in every role, tout court. The applications of any principle will always vary according to context: calculating utility as a DHSS counter-clerk will be a different sort of operation from calculating it as a father, a businessman or an academic. But it is not impossible for such role-holders to make these calculations, if they are sufficiently aware of and committed to the general theory to be proof against the role-specific duties which others will attempt to lay on them. In short, specific duties should be worked out in the context of the general principle or principles, and conflicts of duty should be resolved in favour of that principle. Walzer takes this position in Obligations, where he argues the right of workers in a large, authoritarian company to impose on that country some of the democratic norms which constitute the wider society within which it operates. (10)

This paper conflates a number of issues: the distinction between public and private life and duties, the issue of establishing individual moral responsibility in a complex society, the possibility of prioritising some moral or quasi-moral principles over others, and the question of what form a morality should take in a complex society. This conflation occurs because these issues are inseparable: and such issues are intrinsic to the problems of contemporary liberal and pluralistic society. The location of responsibility requires a resolution of the public/private distinction, in one direction or the other - that is, by reinforcing and systematising it, or by abolishing it. The adoption of a particularist ethical position will, *prima facie*, reinforce the distinction although it also creates, by acknowledging, a range of intermediate institutions which generate duties that are public (in the sense of being the concern of a group, not of the private conscience), but not 'public' in the sense of reflecting the interests of all the members of a society, or of humanity as a whole. My argument is that there are public duties, in the following sense: a universal moral principle would impose duties which are presently thought of as being in the public sphere, as part of an individual's integrated set of moral duties.

The question of how to prioritise some duties above others again requires an assessment of the relative moral importance of public, intermediate (institutional) and personal life. The adoption or acknowledgement of a universal moral principle (whatever it may be) would resolve these problems. Its general nature would destroy the public/private distinction: it would also take priority over all role-specific or sphere-specific moral and quasi-moral principles and would govern the form which they could properly take.

Liberalism has never satisfactorily resolved the private/public <sup>dichotomy,</sup> as can be seen from the ambiguities of J.S. Mill's 'non-interference' principle. As an ideology, it has a universalising bias, certainly, but it stops short of applying this to resolve its own internal (and practical) problems. Pluralism (qua theory of complex liberal society),

viewed against the backdrop of liberal ideology, has further confused the issue by asserting the validity and autonomy of intermediate or secondary institutions whose status cannot be directly mapped on to the already questionable public/private matrix of classical liberal thought; the particularist ethical position which is its corollary serves to diminish moral responsibility and to undermine further the notion that the individual should live in 'one world', in which s/he can maintain moral integrity, no matter what role s/he occupies.

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