

PHILOSOPHY

THE JOURNAL OF THE ROYAL INSTITUTE OF PHILOSOPHY

VOL. XXIII. No. 84

JANUARY 1948

COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

H. D. LEWIS, M.A., B.Litt.

I

If I were asked to put forward an ethical principle which I considered to be especially certain, it would be that no one can be responsible, in the properly ethical sense, for the conduct of another. Responsibility belongs essentially to the individual. The implications of this principle are much more far-reaching than is evident at first, and reflection upon them may lead many to withdraw the assent which they might otherwise be very ready to accord to this view of responsibility. But if the difficulties do appear to be insurmountable, and that, very certainly, does not seem to me to be the case, then the proper procedure will be, not to revert to the barbarous notion of collective or group responsibility, but to give up altogether the view that we are accountable in any distinctively moral sense.

On this matter more will be said below. In the meantime I should like to insist that the belief in "individual," as against any form of "collective," responsibility is quite fundamental to our ordinary ethical attitudes. For if we believe that responsibility is literally shared, it becomes very hard to maintain that there are any properly moral distinctions to be drawn between one course of action and another. All will be equally good, or equally evil, as the case may be. For we shall be directly implicated in one another's actions, and the praise or blame for them must fall upon us all without discrimination. This, in fact, is what many persons do believe, and it is very hard to uphold any form of traditionalist theology on any other basis. Of late this has been very openly affirmed by noted theologians who, if they seem to do very great violence to common sense, have, at any rate, the courage and consistency to acknowledge the implications of their view, and do not seek to disguise them by half-hearted and

PHILOSOPHY

confused formulations. We have thus witnessed recently some very uncompromising affirmations of the belief in "universal sin" or the "collective guilt of man." This does not imply that there are no ethical distinctions of any kind which we may draw. Judgments may be passed upon the outward course of our conduct without prejudice to the view that guilt itself is "universal," and this is why Reinhold Niebuhr, whose influence on religious thinking today is very pronounced, is able to combine with his assertion of the doctrine of universal sin an account of the "relative moral achievements of history."¹ One action may be much more regrettable than another, it may be uglier in some ways, or it may do much more harm to our fellows, and thus we have "the less and more" of our day to day judgments, but where proper moral estimation is concerned there is not "a big sinner and a little sinner." We are all involved in the sins of all.

But this is not at all what we normally think. The distinction between what is outwardly right and the proper estimation of the worth of persons is not, one must admit, always very clearly drawn in our ordinary ethical thinking. And this is very frequently a source of great confusion. There is less excuse for this confusion today than in the past, since ethical writers have thrown the distinction in question into much prominence and stressed its extensive bearing on matters of practice. It has been shown, for example, that the facts of moral perplexity, and the diversities in our views about the problems of practice, admit of no reasonable explanation unless we allow that a person may do what is wrong in some outward sense without being morally to blame, and *vice versa*. For moral ignorance is not itself a moral defect. But while this shows that Niebuhr is perfectly justified in arguing that the "historical" judgments we pass on the effects of actions have little direct bearing on questions of properly moral worth, it gives no solid support to his view that there is "no less and more" where the latter are concerned. On the contrary, the more plainly we draw the distinction between the rightness of the act and the worth of the agent, the more will it also be evident that the main reason for stressing this distinction and the main consideration by which men may be induced to draw it, is that in *addition* to the distinctions we draw between the ethical qualities of actions in their "material" or outward aspect there are even more important distinctions to be drawn in respect of their moral value. We want to be sure that our estimation of moral worth is not prejudiced by considerations relating only to outward action, and it is the former that is usually uppermost in our ordinary ethical judgments. It seems therefore plain that, however prone we may be to confuse the two sorts of ethical judgments which have just been

¹ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, p. 234.

COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

distinguished, we normally have little doubt that some of our actions are better than others, not merely in their effects, or in some other "material" regard, but in themselves and morally. All our usual ethical thinking presupposes this. And if it is to be argued that, in respect to properly moral worth, there is nothing to choose between the lives of various individuals, then it must be made very plain that this is diametrically opposed to all that we normally think, to the attitudes we adopt from day to day, and to the main body of philosophical reflection on ethical questions; for the latter has been mainly concerned with the problem under what conditions may distinctions between the strictly moral qualities of conduct be drawn. If there are no such distinctions, if the questions we ask about them are without substance, then the greater part of ethical controversy has been a peculiarly vain pursuit of a will o' the wisp.

II

This may be affirmed without prejudice to the further question of whether it is possible in practice to form reliable estimates of one another's moral worth. Subject to certain limitations, it seems to me not impossible to assess the moral worth of another person's conduct and there appear to be some occasions where censure is in order, not merely as directed to outward conduct, or as a means of inducing reconsideration of the rightfulness of the course pursued, but as directed to the moral choice itself. But if this is denied, and if it is also held that the difficulties attending the attempt to appraise one another's moral qualities rule out every prospect of success, it by no means follows that the distinctions themselves are suspect. We can know in a general way under what conditions moral censure is incurred without needing to determine how far those conditions apply in particular cases. There is nothing very disconcerting to ethical theory in having to admit, should that appear necessary, that we have no appreciable insight into the strictly moral struggles of other persons, even in the cases of our friends and acquaintances, or such understanding of the factors involved as would lead to reasonably certain conclusions. It may even be urged that the injunction of the Scriptures, "Judge not, that ye be not judged," holds without exception, and that it is none of our business to determine how any man fares in his inner moral life. For these are matters about which we may hold various opinions without seriously affecting the question whether there really *are* differences of value between different kinds of life. And what we need most to uphold is the reality of the moral distinctions themselves, not our ability to penetrate to the substance of them in particular cases.

PHILOSOPHY

Some comment may be added here on the reliability of the estimates we form of our own moral worth. Is fallibility in this regard also irrelevant to the question whether there really are moral qualities of conduct? This appears to me to be a most important question, but I will only venture here to make two observations. Firstly, the view which is commonly held, namely that we are usually wide of the mark in attempts to assess our own worth, seems to me very mistaken. To substantiate this in detail I should have to consider the main ways in which moral worth has been conceived. But it must suffice to note the two main alternatives. We may hold that moral distinctions depend mainly on our motives and characters, or we may relate them to some choice or free effort of will not determined by character. If we adopt the latter alternative it seems impossible that anyone should be in doubt about his own moral worth, for no one can really doubt whether he is making an effort to follow the course which his conscience requires. But if we adopt the former alternative there is room for deception of oneself in so far as we may be deluded about our own motives. But how far is such delusion possible, how far may a person persuade himself that he is contributing to a hospital from benevolent motives when he is really more concerned to ensure the esteem and gratitude of his fellows? It is often thought that we may be seriously mistaken about our motives in such cases, and that it is the business of the preacher and moral mentor to induce a deeper searching of heart and ensure a better understanding of our own characters. Literature seems to bear this out, but I am not sure that an alternative account of the facts usually adduced in this connection would not be possible if the matter were carefully investigated. But if this is denied, and if it is held that we can be widely astray in our understanding of the motives which move us to action, it seems to me that we have here a very formidable argument to advance against the first of the two main alternatives noted above, namely the view that moral worth qualifies character and motives. For, and here I come to my *second* observation, the nature of properly moral value seems to be such that it would be very strange to ascribe it to features of our conduct which we do not fully understand and bring within our control. To affirm that there can be serious delusion about our own moral attainments is thus in effect to cast very grave doubt on the validity of moral distinctions and the reality of moral responsibility.

The belief that we can be mistaken about our own moral worth owes its prevalence in no small measure to failure to distinguish effectively between questions about the "material" rightness of action and the question of the worth of the agent. In respect of the former we are indeed frequently subject to much error and perplexity, and persons of sensitive conscience have often incurred a great deal

COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

of mental pain because the very proper concern which they have felt about the "rightness of their act" became the cause of misgiving also about their own moral worth. But when the issue is clearly confronted, and it is understood that unavoidable ignorance may not be imputed to the agent, it is hard to see how we can entertain doubts about our own culpability or blamelessness in respect to conduct sufficiently recent for us to retain a clear impression of the way we responded to what seemed to be a duty. Nor is our own impression in matters of this sort easily dimmed in the course of time.

It is in respect to other persons that appraisal of moral worth is difficult. For the factors involved are not easily accessible to the outside observer. But there is no cause for misgiving here. For even if we never knew how others fared, our assurance that their actions, like our own, are subject to moral distinctions, would not be a whit affected. But if we surrender the view that there are such distinctions, and substitute for it the notion of some uniform moral quality pervading the whole of humanity, or even the whole of a particular group, we are left with nothing which we can recognize as our workaday ethical ideas; morality has suffered a complete transformation. We seem in fact to have, not morality at all, but the repudiation of it.

III

How, then, does this come about? Partly as a result of confusions which affect our ideas about value in general. We hypostatize abstractions and make them the bearers of value, forgetting that linguistic devices which make for succinctness of expression or poetic and rhetorical effect are not to be divested of their metaphorical and elliptical meanings, and taken as literal truth. We speak for example of sharing in the greatness of a nation, or we take pride in belonging to a musical or scholarly family even where we have no conspicuous claims to distinction in those regards ourselves. No objection can be taken to this provided we are clear what we are about. For the excellence generally attained by members of our nation or family warrants the presumption that we ourselves, having been subjected to the same influences, are not without a measure of the qualities for which others of our group are noted. The achievements of a relative, and especially of a son or daughter, may again reflect credit upon us, even when we have no part in what they have actually accomplished, to the extent that their success may be attributed to the devotion and discernment with which we have furthered their efforts. There is also the presumption that close association with persons of outstanding parts will have developed

PHILOSOPHY

our own propensities, especially where general qualities of character are concerned. Men take legitimate pride in this way in their association with the great, or in erstwhile membership of a famous school or college. Our interest in those with whom we have special ties of affection will also enable us to follow their success with a glow of satisfaction as if it were our own. In these, and other ways, we participate in the excellence of others. But this does not mean that we can ever take credit directly for what others have become or accomplished. The worthwhileness of music does not become mine by my being the brother or parent of a gifted musician if I have no ear for music myself. What we are or achieve is affected by our relations to others, and we are emotionally involved in their lives, but what worth our actions and experiences have depends directly on their own nature. So that although we may be proud or ashamed of others, we add not a cubit to our stature; neither do we shrink, through our association with them except in the measure that we ourselves change under their influence.

This holds of all values. But it is peculiarly evident in the case of moral value. For failure may here be brought home to the individual in a very special way in blame and remorse. And this brings us to a further way in which men are apt to lose sight of the dependence of moral value on the individual.

IV

This turns on the definition of responsibility. The etymology of this word suggests that it means "liability to answer," this being, of course, liability to answer to a charge, with the implication that if the answer is not satisfactory a penalty will be incurred. This is certainly the meaning of responsibility in the legal sense, and there can be little doubt that the original meaning of the word must be sought along similar lines, for men have not always distinguished clearly between law and morality—in primitive life both are merged in communal custom. But we do distinguish sharply between them today. It is possible to be legally guilty and morally innocent, and *vice versa*. The question arises, therefore, whether the legal meaning of responsibility provides any analogy to the meaning of the term in the ethical sense. I do not think that it does. It would, no doubt, be easy to point to sanctions which societies impose on their members outside the sphere of State enactment, some of them, for example certain kinds of ostracism, taking very subtle forms, and there are also penalties which individuals are apt to impose on themselves, as recent psychology has shown so well. But these may also be out of accord with ethical requirements. No enactment is morally fool-

COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

proof. A man may thus be morally guilty in respect of conduct to which no sort of penalty attaches. And this only helps to bring out in an indirect way what is in fact equally evident in cases where legal or quasi-legal requirements coincide with the moral law, namely that the mere fact of our liability to suffer a penalty is far too incidental a feature of conduct to constitute moral responsibility. Even if we hold, as do the advocates of the retributive theory of punishment, that wickedness calls for infliction of pain on the guilty agent, this is something *further* which we affirm about moral evil and responsibility, and not the essence of them. Such punishment presupposes the evil to which it is appropriate. We may thus reject the retributive theory of punishment, as I would certainly do, without impugning the validity of moral distinctions. What, then, does responsibility mean? It means simply to be a moral agent, and this means to be an agent capable of acting rightly or wrongly in the sense in which such conduct is immediately morally good or morally bad, as the case may be. But what do we mean by rightness, moral worth, and their correlatives? To this no answer is possible. For here we are dealing with ultimate ethical conceptions not reducible to natural fact. And the sum of this is that responsibility is an ethical conception not to be defined by reference to ideas which are not themselves distinctively ethical. It cannot therefore be conceived in naturalistic terms such as a threat of punishment and our liability to suffer it. But if we overlook this, and come to conceive of moral responsibility in ways not substantially different from our accountability before the law of our State, then it is easy to see how we come also to hold that there are some occasions, at any rate, when we share our responsibility with others and are immediately implicated in their wrongdoing.

This happens in the following way. Normally, the purpose served by the imposition of penalties require the penalties to be inflicted on persons presumed to have offended, and on no others. For if punishment were meted out without discrimination, its deterrent effect would be substantially lessened and, for the most part, reversed. For punishment would then have to be regarded as sheer injury or as "an act of God" unrelated to our own volitions, and, while thus little able to hinder crimes, it would often provoke them. But there are, however, exceptional cases where expediency requires proceedings to be taken against a group as if it were an individual entity. No account will then be taken of the guilt or innocence of individual members of the group. It is in this way that a teacher punishes a class of unruly children when he is not able to discover the real offenders, or when a meticulous apportionment of blame is not practicable. Such procedure may have effect in two ways, either (a) by directly deterring the main offenders or (b) by inducing the

PHILOSOPHY

class to deal with them in ways not feasible for the teacher himself. The less recourse is had to such measures the better, both from the point of view of effective discipline and from regard to the ill-effects of a lingering sense of injustice. But there may also be some compensating factors, such as a deepening of the sense of community, which we might profitably investigate if we were concerned with educational problems or the general question of punishment. Suffice it for the present to note that, as a device for the achievement of practical ends, we have sometimes to accept collective responsibility. This is fully acknowledged in law, where a parent may in some respects be held to account for the conduct of children, or where a society or corporation may be proceeded against as a single entity or person. Extending our canvas still wider, we have the imposition of sanctions against a whole nation in the interest of international order, although it is plain that this involves quite as much suffering for the innocent as for the guilty, the former, in a case of this sort, being probably in a very great majority. Reparations and similar measures adopted against an aggressor among nations may also be mentioned here. Such measures may be needed both in the interest of immediate discipline, and as a part of political education, and they may provide means of redress to victims of aggression. But they will involve a great deal of suffering for persons who could not, by any streak of imagination, be held accountable for the culpable acts of the nation, most obviously in the case of infants and babes unborn. Something of this nature is, in fact, unavoidable in most forms of punishment and presents us with some of its most formidable problems. Locke, in consistency with his individualism, tried to show¹ that it could be avoided. He urged that, while the participants in an unjust war could fairly be punished with death, there should be no interference with their property, for that would involve a loss to their wives and dependents. But apart from the well-nigh impossible question of apportioning guilt for participation in an unjust war, once the leaders and authors of atrocities have been reckoned with (and that in itself is a notoriously complicated matter), it is obvious that a man's family may be much more seriously affected, even at the economic level, to say nothing of the deeper personal loss, by the death of a parent or husband than by confiscation of property. Punishment is therefore very likely, in most cases, to fall, in some measure, on the innocent as well as the guilty. But this unfortunate feature of punishment, and the fact that punishment has, in some instances, such as those mentioned above, to be deliberately inflicted, without discrimination, upon a whole group, serves only to show the limitations of the expedients by which society furthers its ends. Perfect justice is not attainable

¹ *Of Civil Government*, Part II, Section 182.

COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

in practice, and even if measures which we normally consider expedient and just, in spite of their involving the innocent in the fate of the guilty, prove more easily avoidable than we are usually disposed to think, there will always be some intermingling of justice with injustice in human relations under any conditions we can anticipate. But what does this prove? Does it prove that the innocent share in the wickedness of the guilty, that the former are morally answerable for the ill deeds of the latter? Surely not. The question needs only to be stated plainly for us to see how foolish it is to allow our view of *moral* responsibility to be affected by imperfections in the ways in which members of society must deal with one another. And yet that is precisely what happens in a great many writings on ethics and jurisprudence, where the ideas of social and collective responsibility are put forward as properly ethical notions under cover of a false analogy with social enactments such as the enforcement of law.

An excellent instance of this may be found in two papers¹ by Professor Gomperz where the writer comes very frankly to the defence of the idea of collective responsibility along the lines just described. But Gomperz is only bringing out what is implicit in most accounts of responsibility in recent times. From Bradley's celebrated chapter on "The Vulgar Notion of Responsibility" in *Ethical Studies* to the symposium on the problem of responsibility at a recent "Joint Session of the Mind and Aristotelian Societies,"² by far the most predominant tendency is to define responsibility in terms of a "liability to answer" and to incur blame or punishment. This is how Bradley, like Rashdall, and other thinkers, is able to reconcile responsibility with determinism. For blame and punishment would have significance even if our conduct could not be other than it is in the last resort, provided it conformed to certain other conditions. And in the symposium to which I have referred, while the first and second contributors eschew an unambiguously naturalistic theory of ethics, they both pass easily from the view that a man is responsible because "he can be called upon to answer" (the second writer adding, "by incurring blame or moral disapproval"³—a view which, even if it avoids being naturalistic, reverses the proper relation of blame and responsibility, for the latter is prior to the former—) to cases where one person takes responsibility for the action of another, in Mr. Falk's example⁴ the case of a Prime Minister taking responsibility for the actions of his Chief of Staff by declaring

¹ "Some Simple Thoughts on Freedom and Responsibility" (*Philosophy*, January, 1937) and "Individual, Collective, and Social Responsibility" (*Ethics*, Vol. XLIX).

² *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume XIX.*

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 249.

Op. cit., p. 249.

PHILOSOPHY

his "readiness to take the blame." But this particular example serves to show very well on what a misleading course we are set when we conceive responsibility in the way described. For a Prime Minister can never be *morally* responsible for the act of a colleague, he simply cannot "take the blame" *morally*. It may be necessary for the conduct of a war, or for the normal functioning of Parliamentary government where, in our country at least, joint Cabinet responsibility seems to be established, for a minister to allow the action of another to be treated as if it were his own. But his willingness to share the blame in this sense, especially if he puts his own position and career in serious jeopardy, induces us to esteem him highly as a moral person even if it is also a reason for seeking to overthrow his administration. For his "implication" in the follies or misdeeds of his colleagues is not a moral one, but a requirement of certain governmental procedures, and his loyal acceptance of it, at personal inconvenience, redounds to his credit. It would, of course, be a different matter if he had encouraged or condoned the wrongful policy himself, or if he were sheltering a colleague for personal reasons or were retaining him against the interest of the public. He would then be morally responsible, but in respect of his own action. But to accept responsibility for others for practical purposes, to incur certain consequences for what another person has done, is one thing, to be morally accountable is another; and in this last regard we cannot answer for one another or share each other's guilt (or ~~merit~~ merit), for that would imply that we could become directly worse (or better) persons morally by what others elect to do—and that seems plainly preposterous.

V

The belief that guilt may be shared derives some plausibility also from the loose expressions which normally serve our turn when we need to refer to the contributions of several persons to a joint undertaking. Take a case of burglary. We have first the thieves who actually carried it out. One of these may be the prime mover, a confirmed criminal perhaps, another a novice pressed somewhat reluctantly to be his accomplice. The temptation may have been put in the way of these two, and the opportunity provided, by an acquaintance who bears the victim a grudge but takes no part in the actual robbery beyond supplying useful information. Yet another person may have covered the escape of the criminals or, by hindering the work of detection, have become an accessory after the fact. Finally, we may have a "receiver" who disposed of the stolen goods. Each of these persons is in some way implicated in the crime, and they may thus

COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

be said to share the responsibility for it. But it would be a great mistake to suppose that we have here a single criminal operation the blame for which rests equally on all concerned. Even the law would discriminate sharply in such a case, imposing the heaviest penalty on the habitual criminal, but, in his own case as well as that of the others, reviewing the judgment in the light of extenuating circumstances, previous convictions etc. The instigator who provided the original inducement might easily escape the toils of the law altogether. But at the properly moral level many further factors must be taken into account, several of them, as has been stressed, not easily accessible to the outside observer. And in this reckoning many roles may be reversed, the instigator, possibly, proving the worst offender. What has to be stressed is that the guilt of each is strictly proportionate to his part in the joint undertaking. It is not one crime that we have but many.

This seems very evident in the simple case described. It is just as true, however, in respect to complicated matters, such as social and economic injustices, where the lure of vague collectivist explanations is stronger. Reformers have often reminded us that we need, not merely to hinder the criminal, but also to remove the causes of crime, and, in this connection, it is frequently maintained that society shares the guilt of the criminal. Gomperz instances the case of a poor woman who steals a loaf to feed her starving children, and he contends that society is really as responsible as the woman herself, in as much as society failed to provide for her needs. He even goes so far as to speak of blaming the social "structure." But that, it seems evident, is only meaningful in a figurative sense and as a rhetorical device when concern is to be aroused at distressful social conditions. If taken in the literal sense, as Gomperz appears to intend, it is very misleading. For "a structure" cannot be the bearer of moral responsibility; neither can "society in general," for these are both abstractions which we must be careful not to hypostatize. What should be said, if we are to speak exactly, is this. The guilt of the poor woman is lessened, if not eliminated altogether, by her circumstances. But she alone is to blame, if blame there is to be, for what she herself has done. Others are also to blame, but *for something else*, namely for their part in allowing her to remain in desperate need. But they are responsible for this as individuals, and strictly in proportion to what each might have done, directly or indirectly, to ameliorate her lot.

It has also to be emphasized here that there are severe limitations on the power of the individual to modify social conditions, for normally he can only do so by concerted action, and concerted action, moreover, which requires a consensus of opinion on highly complicated social and economic questions. It is thus very foolish simply to look

PHILOSOPHY

about us, as we are prone to do, and, having noted grave and persistent social ills, such as poverty, waste, unemployment, and war, straightway to take these as a measure of human wickedness. For ills of this sort, while they do in some ways reflect the moral life of a community, and provide the basis for *some* generalisations, can not be regarded as an indication of intentional evil until we have considered carefully just what could have been expected of the average individual when confronted with them. Allowance must be made for ignorance, for the need for leadership, and for the peculiar difficulties which attend the corporate effort required for effective social reform. This does not imply that the individual must simply surrender to the drift of events, or acquiesce passively in the policies of a handful of leaders. There is much that he can do, but ultimate success will depend on a great many factors wholly outside his control, no less in a democratic than in a totalitarian country. And therefore we need to be careful not to form exaggerated conceptions of human depravity by looking, not to what could reasonably be expected of the individual, but to society as a corporate entity directly accountable for social and economic ills.

This has a close bearing on the problem of war guilt. This question, it should be stressed, is only one aspect of the general question of the treatment of aggressor nations. For many factors besides that of moral guilt enter into the latter problem. But so far as the properly moral issue is concerned, we do very serious damage to the prospect of eventual reconciliation if we allow a distorted conception of moral guilt to complicate questions which are already bewildering enough, the more especially as we shall not merely form a wrong estimate of the course we should pursue ourselves, but also encourage those pathological conditions to which vanquished peoples are prone, and which, however they may accord with our mood and the immediate requirements of a situation, are certain, if only by being an unhealthy condition unrelated to any rational assurance, to emerge at a later date in ways very little amenable to rational control—whatever the precise direction they take. What we need to ask, in the case, for example, of Germany, is not what is the record of Germany as a nation in the inter-war period or later—or our own record for the matter of that—but just what could have been expected of the average German citizen in the swirling tide of the events which engulfed him and others eventually in the deep vortex of war. This is not to suggest that he was helpless and must be exonerated altogether, and that questions of guilt concern only those who were in positions of power and authority. There were undoubtedly many things which the ordinary citizen might have done, and I can only leave it here for the historian in due course to attempt to determine what they were. But allowance must clearly

COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

be made for tradition, outlook, and environment, for the difficulty of anticipating the course of events (and it is easy for us afterwards, and from outside, to be wise about these), for the very limited influence which the individual, even if he is of a heroic mould, can normally have on the policies of a ruthless totalitarian government, and for the determined opposition to warlike and despotic measures which a certain proportion, at any rate, of the German people showed. Let us seek, by all means, to extend the influence of democratic principles which will enable the individual to give of his best to his State. But in the meantime, let us be fair to him, wherever he is found, by relating the question of guilt, not to some abstract entity in which he and all other individuals are merged, but to what we can reasonably estimate could have been expected of the individual, who is the sole bearer of guilt and merit, in the particular situation confronting him.

I should like to stress again what has already been noted, that no one is morally guilty except in relation to some conduct which he himself considered to be wrong. This seems plain enough in our ordinary encounter with one another from day to day, for circumstances force it more sharply upon us in close and immediate relationships. But it needs to be borne in mind very carefully when we are seeking to form ethical judgments about a vast concourse of people with whom individual and personal ties are slight. Otherwise we shall be inclined to arraign other peoples for follies and misunderstandings which, whatever the measures they may warrant in practice, are, I repeat, no direct indication of *moral* culpability. Again I do not imply that "to understand all is to excuse all." But I insist that we must first understand, and then we can have some indication of guilt. But to understand is very much harder, it calls for more wisdom and patience, when dealing with men in the mass than when we have to do with individuals in relative isolation, the more especially as the normal working of our imagination presents us with a simplified picture in which the nation or group is personified, and, having been given a mind and will of its own, is set to act on a stage very much simpler than the actual stage of history.

We are most prone to these false simplifications of complicated issues in times of confusion and change such as the present. For in such times there is apt to be a recrudescence of primitive ethical attitudes, as the recent history of Europe shows so well. And primitive peoples pay little heed to the individual; the unit is for them the tribe or the family. But reflection upon the affinity between the doctrine of collective responsibility and the indiscriminating "ethic of the tribe" should go a long way to discredit the former.

Failure to take due account of these matters will not only distort

PHILOSOPHY

our vision in this or that particular regard, and poison our relationships. It will also give us in general an utterly misleading picture of man and "the human situation." Of this there is ample evidence already in the prevailing fashion of gloomy denunciation of all human endeavour, an indulgence which may show itself before long to be a more serious business than we are inclined to realise. Its immediate progeny are despair and its twin, irresponsibility. But worse may follow.

VI

How far these reactionary estimates of human activity owe their persistence to mistaken philosophical views is not easy to determine. But they have obviously derived much support from "organic" theories of society, such as the celebrated Idealist Theory of the State and the cruder forms of totalitarian theories which prevail today. These latter have not yet taken very deep root in democratic countries, and although the idealist doctrines, whose authoritarian aspect was, incidentally, qualified in important ways, were in the ascendancy towards the close of the nineteenth century in Western thought, they do not accord well with the main tendencies in European culture and civilization, much less with the temper and traditions of the British people. They have been very extensively discredited today so far as philosophical thought is concerned. It is therefore well to remind ourselves that the ideas of a pervasive communal guilt and of collective responsibility are simply the obverse of the tendency to set some abstract good of the community above the wellbeing of its individual members, a tendency whose natural terminus is the ruthless oppression and totalitarianism against which our face is so resolutely set in democratic countries. Most of the arguments which have recently been used so effectively to demolish the ideas of "a common good" and a "general will," as those terms are usually understood in philosophy, hold with undiminished force, *mutatis mutandis*, against any theory of communal guilt.

The advocates of collectivist theories of society, whether they be theories of human good or of human evil, are apt to hold their opponents in contempt on the score of an alleged individualism. But this is very largely a case of hitting at random, and making play with the meaning of a highly ambiguous word. Individualism may mean several things. It may mean that the good which human beings ought to pursue is always a private one, or it may mean, again, that individuals have unlimited and inalienable rights, this latter being, I think, its main meaning in Western philosophy, or it may indicate the general failure to appreciate the dependence of

COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

the individual on his social environment. In all these meanings the term stands for mistaken theories, and theories which have also, unfortunately, wrought very serious havoc in our thought and practice in the past, and which continue at the present time to obstruct very necessary positive reforms. But individualism in these reprehensible senses, has no necessary connection with the view that the individual is the sole bearer of value. We may insist, and the need to do so is as great in many regards today as in the past, that no one can have proper interests of his own unless he has also interests in others, that we are "members of one another" even with regard to properly moral struggles in so far as the attainment or failure of one person is a matter of concern to his neighbours who are *to that extent* involved in his moral attainment or failure. No one lives in a vacuum, no one is, or should be, unaffected by the destinies of others. And where natural sympathies reach their limit, or where the welfare of one is opposed, as in many ways it may be, to the welfare of others, there yet remain our duties to further the wellbeing of others independently of any advantage to ourselves. Although no one is "responsible for" others in the sense that he is answerable for the conduct of others, we are all extensively "responsible for" our fellows in the sense that we have duties towards them—most of our duties are of this sort. But all this may be fully allowed without affecting the principle that value belongs to the individual and that it is the individual who is the sole bearer of moral responsibility. This principle is not individualistic in any way which is incompatible with a true estimate of our essential social relationships. It is not "atomic" in any objectionable sense.

"But," it may be argued, "what of the individual's dependence on his society; is not our conduct shaped by our environment?" My answer here is that anyone who holds that the individual is never free to choose his action in a way not determined by factors outside himself should surrender the idea of properly moral responsibility; the position cannot be saved by extending our responsibility to our environment, and the attempt to do so is an excellent *reductio ad absurdum* of the view that morality is compatible with determinism. To bring this out fully would require careful discussion of the uniqueness of moral value and of other matters which cannot be brought within the scope of this paper. It must suffice here to note that the doctrine of freedom as "self-determination" makes no substantial difference to the present issue. For the fact that determination is of a special kind, and involves a peculiar assimilation into the character of the agent of the forces which affect him, still leaves the determinist with the view that factors from outside ourselves have gone to the shaping of conduct. And if the notion of responsibility is to be retained at all in such a case, it is hard to see

PHILOSOPHY

how we can avoid extending it to these further factors¹, an embarrassment that does not arise in connection with non-moral values which do not carry with them the notion of guilt and a correlative merit. The determinist thus finds himself extending the blame for wrongful actions to our environment, and eventually to the whole of reality. There arises in this way the notion of a principle of evil in the universe at large; and this notion has a wide currency at the present time. It derives much support from uncritical accounts of the findings of recent psychology, and it also encourages capricious play with the mythologies of primitive religion. This also contributes to the dissemination of irrational and despondent estimates of human attainment. But it seems evident that the quietus to such reactionary tendencies cannot be finally given until moral philosophers turn with much greater resolution than at present to the much neglected problem of moral freedom. This is the crucial problem today for religion as well as for ethics and politics. But here again I am touching on matters which cannot be effectively brought within the compass of this paper. Neither has it been possible to comment on the more specifically religious aspects of the problem of collective guilt, although these are in many ways the most important.

¹ Sir David Ross, for example, argues that a person's "responsibility for acts is divided" because "other people by teaching and example, the writers of the books he has read, and so on, have all helped to mould his character into that form of which his action is the expression." *Foundations of Ethics*, p. 248.