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The distinct moral importance of acting together

This review essay engages with Garrett Cullity's argument that there is a fundamental moral norm of cooperation, as articulated in *Concern, Respect, & Cooperation* (2018). That is to say that there is moral reason to participate in collective endeavours that cannot be reduced to other moral reasons like promoting welfare. If this is plausible, all the better for solving collective action dilemmas like climate change. But how should we understand a reason of participation? I supplement Cullity's own account by appealing to the notion of 'team reasoning' in game theory. Even if not an adequate notion of rationality, adopting the team stance—deriving individual reason to act from what a group may together achieve—may well have distinct moral importance.

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1. A plurality of moral foundations

In *Concern, Respect, & Cooperation*, Garrett Cullity defends a pluralist account of morality, whereby moral reasons for behaviour and attitudes rest on more than one foundation, none of which is reducible to others. Two of the pillars on which he builds his account are commonly taken to be in tension: concern for others' welfare, and respect for their agency. Controversially, Cullity sees a role for both. But more intriguing again is the third pillar, which he presents most simply (i.e., minus the caveats) as follows:

“Our worthwhile collective action calls for my action of joining in.”

In Cullity's words (p. 52): “I want to take seriously the idea that when people manifest this form of decency, they are following norms that are just as fundamental to morality as the norms for concern and respect. The question ‘Why join in worthwhile collective actions?’ is like ‘Why help people who need it?’ or ‘Why allow others to live their own lives?’”

But these questions are not obviously on a par. The response “because they are persons” seems adequate for the latter two questions. But it is not an evidently adequate response to the first. What is so important, after all, about acting together? It is not obvious that a fundamental way of recognising others as persons is to team up with them to pursue joint ends.

As with many aspects of this rich book, whether or not one agrees with Cullity's inclusion of cooperation as a moral foundation, the idea is original and fruitful. It is worth considering what a fundamental norm of cooperation would plausibly look like. In this comment I initially lay out Cullity's own characterisation, and ultimately build from this a much fuller picture of the norm, albeit pushing it in a direction that Cullity may not endorse. I claim, however, that there is no alternative. The more salient ways of understanding the norm are neither convincing nor helpful for filling in crucial details. My own proposal draws on the rich findings of game theory regarding the tragedies of individualist reasoning, or what is known as *collective action problems*.

2. When there is reason to join in

The fundamental moral norms, on Cullity's view, furnish reasons for action that are by definition non-derivative, and yet not necessarily trumping. They are merely *pro tanto* reasons: *some* consideration in favour of doing *X* rather than *Y* that may nonetheless be defeated by other moral or nonmoral considerations. Reasons of this

sort can be rather blunt. For instance, there is plausibly a reason to help any and all strangers in severe need; where it gets complicated is how this reason is weighed against other competing reasons to act otherwise. That said, when it comes to cooperation, even *pro tanto* reasons surely require qualification. Unlike helping strangers, the idea that there is even *some* consideration of decency to join in any and all collective efforts is simply not compelling.

Cullity's norm of cooperation is indeed a qualified one; the nuance lies in his specification of *worthwhile* collective actions. To begin with, whether a collective action is worthwhile depends on other moral and non-moral reasons. This clearly rules out collective acts of aimless harm and wanton destruction. There is no reason for any agent, whether an individual or a group, to pursue such ends. But Cullity goes further in suggesting that whether a collective action is worthwhile may be sensitive to *who* is concerned and what other reasons bear on their actions (p. 55). For instance, it may be worthwhile for *me* to join a choir, because the practice hall is merely five minutes from my house, but not worthwhile for *you* to join the choir, despite your similar love of singing, because the practice hall is too long a commute for you and the outing would thus consume too many resources.

The single term "worthwhile" thus plays an important and complex role in determining who, if anyone, has reason to act together to pursue some end. In short, those who are enjoined to participate in a collective action are those who *similarly have reason* to pursue the joint endeavour; they are of common "kind *K*" with respect to the endeavour, to use Cullity's words (p. 55). Cullity gives the following examples:

"... where the action is one of collective self-interest in producing a public good, the group may be constituted by people for whom the benefit being produced by the collective action outweighs the cost of contribution. Where the action is one of group beneficence, the group may be constituted by people with the capacity to contribute without serious personal cost..."

These examples further suggest that an individual's own reasons for participating in a collective action are closely bound up with those of others. For instance, whether or not the benefits of producing a public good outweigh the costs for any given individual may depend on how many people are similarly placed, since this affects how much of the public good would stand to be produced and thus the size of the benefit that is weighed against the personal cost.

These details go a long way towards identifying those collective actions that call for joining in and are suggestive of a fundamental norm of cooperation. But there remain some critical ambiguities. In particular, it is not clear what, exactly, are the criteria for individuals being similarly placed to achieve something together. For

instance, does being similarly placed mean that individuals have identical options for how to act as well as identical sets of reasons for pursuing those options? It seems not, since, in the spirit of *pro tanto* reasons, Cullity allows that you and I may be similarly placed even if you have reason to join just one collective action, *C*, whereas I have reason to join *C* in addition to some further collective actions (see, e.g., p. 54). In that case our sets of reasons are not identical. To what extent then, must our options and reasons coincide for us to count as similarly placed or of common kind *K*? We are owed a response to this question, since the notion plays a pivotal role in defining worthwhile collective action. This is not just a matter of stipulation; what is needed is a bigger-picture story for when and why a norm of cooperation is integral to our moral lives.

3. In search of a bigger picture

One might worry that no bigger-picture story can nor need be given for a fundamental moral norm. After all, such norms, by definition, cannot be derived from other norms. To motivate a fundamental norm, it seems wiser to seek paradigm cases of the norm's manifestation, that is, cases where the norm in question, and no other, clearly furnishes a reason for action of moral significance. For instance, the norm of concern can be motivated by cases where an agent has the opportunity to greatly relieve suffering. Simply in contemplating such cases, we appreciate that relieving suffering provides reason to act, and this is a matter of living decently.

The problem is that there are not such obvious paradigm cases for a norm of cooperation. Such cases rather require careful construction; hence the need for a bigger-picture story. To be sure, there are vivid cases of worthwhile collective action as defined above. The difficulty is in identifying worthwhile collective actions for which, *but for* a norm of cooperation, one cannot explain what seems a compelling reason to join in.

Consider, for instance, the following case.

Two Hikers: Two friends are hiking in the mountains when they come across a person trapped under a boulder. The closest friend immediately tries to lift the boulder, but its weight proves too much for one person alone. The other friend sees that her participation will allow the boulder to be lifted. She thus has ample reason to join in.

While clearly a case of worthwhile collective action, *Two Hikers* does not offer clear support for there being a fundamental norm of cooperation. The second friend finds herself in the position of being able to either save someone's life by joining in the

effort to lift the boulder, or else continue unfatigued in exploring the mountains. The former action enhances wellbeing much more than the latter. So, concern for wellbeing clearly favours joining in the lifting. There is no need to appeal to a reason of cooperation to explain why the friend has strong reason to join in.

To motivate the norm of cooperation, Cullity himself appeals primarily to cases like the following, where the agent in question would make next to no difference in joining in:

Many Hikers. Numerous friends are hiking in the mountains when they come across a person trapped under a boulder. The closest two friends immediately start lifting the boulder and will clearly prevail. Moreover, the subsequent contributions of the other friends would be negligible in terms of relieving the burden of the first-movers. Nonetheless, all have reason to join in.

In this case there is very limited reason of concern to join in, since the trapped person would be saved regardless, and the burden of the first-movers would be reduced only marginally. There is no obvious reason of respect to join in either. Indeed, at the limit where joining in makes no difference whatsoever, there cannot be any reason of either concern or respect to do so.

The *Many Hikers* case is therefore of the right sort to support a fundamental norm of cooperation and reveal its nature. The problem, however, is that it is not clear that there is *any* reason for the latecomers to join in the boulder lifting. Is it really worthwhile to pile on here? Not obviously so, at least. To be sure that this is a paradigm case for the norm of cooperation, we need a bigger-picture story that illuminates why *Many Hikers* has the right features to make joining in both desirable and not attributable to other sorts of reasons.

Is there such a story in support of *Many Hikers*? In the remainder of this section, we will pursue a couple of salient possibilities that are ultimately unsuccessful. The first candidate is one that appeals to the unique fellowship that comes from acting together. This fellowship, in and of itself, regardless of any difference the agent makes to the group outcome or the burdens of other group members, is valuable and is thus reason to join in. Or so the story might go. Now one might object that even if *Many Hikers* isolates a reason to do with fellowship for joining in, it is only a very weak reason; the fellowship story is not convincing insofar as there is *strong* reason for the friends to join in lifting the boulder. These friends are out taking a hike together, after all, so presumably they already have fellowship aplenty. But let us grant that fellowship is here a strong moral reason to join in. The bigger objection is that the fellowship associated with a joint endeavour should already be counted amongst its wellbeing outcomes, even if typically overlooked because its contri-

bution to wellbeing goes unnoticed. It is thus covered by the norm of concern. That is, we need not appeal to some further norm of cooperation to accommodate strong reasons of fellowship. On this count, *Many Hikers* is, if anything, a paradigm case for a less familiar aspect of the norm of concern.

The second candidate story appeals rather to the expression of equality that comes with joining in. Cullity proposes something along these lines. He emphasises that agents who are similarly placed to achieve some collective outcome have reason to act together, simply *because they are similarly placed*. In *Many Hikers*, for instance, even though the boulder can be lifted by just two persons and any further contribution by others would make negligible difference, since all the friends are similarly placed with respect to this outcome, they all have reason to express their non-exceptionalism, as it were, by joining in. While there is something to this story, as it stands it does not help in articulating the details of the norm of cooperation. That is, we cannot hope to refine what it means for individuals to be “similarly placed” by appeal to a story that emphasises what equality demands of those who are similarly placed. Moreover, one might wonder why such a norm of equality is needed in the first place. Agents who take reasons of concern and respect adequately into account already seem to treat all moral subjects as equals. The norm of concern asserts that the wellbeing of *all* is similarly worthy of promotion. And the norm of respect asserts that *all* similarly deserve not to have their self-expression interfered with. Do we need to postulate a further demand of equality? Perhaps, but more must be said for this to be convincing.

4. Circumventing the tragedies of individual reasoning

It helps to focus on how a norm of cooperation differs from those of concern and respect. The three norms may each be fundamental, but they need not all have the same target or operate in the same way. The norms of concern and respect are similar in that they are about what are better and worse ways the world might be. The world is better when a person has more wellbeing or when her self-expression is not interfered with, all else being equal. These norms thus bear directly on the outcomes of action. In *Two Hikers*, for instance, both friends have reason to join in lifting the boulder because, on the understanding that the other will also do her part, they will each make a difference to the outcome. The trapped person will thereby be released—a big boost in her wellbeing. But the norm of cooperation is different. It is not about the goodness, even broadly construed, of action outcomes. It does not furnish first-order reasons for action in this way. It is best conceived, rather, as

furnishing second-order reasons for action. When agents perceive that they have similar reasons for joining in a collective action, on the norm of cooperation these reasons themselves generate a further reason to join in.

The most plausible way to develop this story is by appeal to familiar lessons from game theory regarding the tragedies of individualist reasoning. The tragic cases, known as *collective action problems*, are ones where individuals together choose a Pareto-inferior act (one that is worse for someone and not better for anyone than some alternative) due to the limitations of each reasoning unilaterally about what to do. These problems come in different forms. There is the well-known *Prisoners' Dilemma*, a particularly troubling scenario whereby it is rational for each individual, reasoning unilaterally, to defect from some group action, regardless of what others do, even though it would be better for each if all joined in the group action. Other sorts of collective action problems arise not from the incentive to knowingly “free ride” in this way but rather from uncertainty about what others will do. The latter are referred to as *Coordination Dilemmas*. In *Many Hikers*, for instance, it is merely fortuitous that there are two first-movers who lift the boulder. While any of the friends would presumably be willing to help lift the boulder if they knew that they would be a difference-maker, none has this knowledge. It may turn out that all think it so unlikely that they will be the difference-maker that, tragically, none has sufficient reason to join in.

It would seem then that it is this feature of cases—their being collective action problems—that makes them candidates for motivating a fundamental norm of cooperation.² Joining in seems genuinely worthwhile, since, from a shared group perspective, all have sufficient first-order reason to pursue some joint endeavour when others do too. From each isolated individuals' perspective, however, the first-order reasons do not suffice for joining in. *But for* a reason of cooperation, there is thus insufficient reason for an individual to join in. This further second-order reason, as it were, is needed for individuals to do what is optimal from their shared group perspective.

Note that this story is not quite so compelling when it comes to coordination dilemmas as compared to free-rider prisoners' dilemmas. That is because coordination dilemmas admit of more sophisticated resolutions. After all, if all join in some collective endeavour that only requires a small number to get the job done, then time and labour are wasted. Still, better this excess than the job not being done

² Indeed, Cullity's own illustrative cases for the norm of cooperation have the form of collective action problems even if he does not present them as such. His trapped-under-rubble case (p. 222) is analogous to *Many Hikers* and can thus be conceived as a *coordination dilemma*. His consumer boycott case (p. 231) and the case of action against climate change (p. 233) are presented, roughly speaking, as *prisoners' dilemmas*.

at all. But if the individuals were able to communicate in a timely fashion, they might be able to draw straws, say, to determine who should join in. In *Many Hikers*, while there is no communication, two friends happen to choose to start lifting the boulder; here it seems perverse that the remaining friends still have a reason of cooperation to join in when it is clear they will make no difference. But one could argue that this reasoning serves as insurance in that it ensures the boulder is lifted, were an insufficient number to take it upon themselves to join in, as could well have happened.³ In prisoners' dilemma cases, by contrast, those who join in due to a reason of cooperation always make a difference. For instance, reducing one's personal carbon emissions *does* make a difference, even if not enough of a difference, but for a reason of cooperation, to outweigh the costs of this personal sacrifice. So, prisoners' dilemmas make for clearer-cut paradigm cases for the norm of cooperation.

5. A norm of morality or rationality?

The appeal to game theory may help in refining a fundamental moral norm of cooperation, but it raises the question: Is this a *moral* norm or merely one of rationality? The norm we have described is reminiscent of a revisionist notion of rational choice in collective settings—known as *team reasoning*—that was first defended by Robert Sugden (1993). The idea is that rational individuals, even non-altruistic ones, would not consider what is best for themselves in isolation but would rather consider what part they should play in a group effort to produce outcomes that are best for all. In this way, players would overcome the prisoners' dilemma. A related proposal defended by Lawrence Davis (1977), also intended to overcome the prisoners' dilemma, is that rational individuals choose that which is best for all rational individuals who face the same options to choose.

The vast majority of game theorists, however, are not convinced by either of these augmented notions of rational choice. Binmore (1994) articulates the widespread view that these proposals depart from the minimal notion of rational choice by introducing substantial assumptions about what agents should value or else believe about other players' choices. But that is precisely why these proposals may be better seen as animating *moral* norms that provide individuals with further substantive reasons for choice. The latter proposal which invokes what we might dub *symmetric reasoning* seems particularly promising in this regard. Agents have reason to act as if others similarly placed will act similarly, not because the evidence already suggests that this is indeed how others will act but rather by way of *creating*

³ Note that this marks a point of divergence with Cullity, who does not think it problematic or worthy of explanation that individuals have a reason to join in a collective action, similarly placed to others as they may be, when it is clear that they will make no difference whatsoever.

evidence that this is how others will act. After all, for a nuanced moral theory like Cullity's, even in the best circumstances consisting of perfectly moral agents with full information, there would otherwise be many tragic collective circumstances.

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