Seminar

KATIE STEELE

Fellow, SCAS.
Associate Professor of Philosophy, London School of Economics and Political Science

On Collective Responsibility

Thursday, 25 September, 4:15 p.m.

In the Thunberg Lecture Hall
SCAS, Linneanum, Thunbergsvägen 2, Uppsala
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ABOUT KATIE STEELE

Katie Steele studied mathematics and philosophy at the University of Queensland before completing a Ph.D. in Philosophy in 2007 at the University of Sydney. She continued in Sydney as a Research Fellow at the Australian Centre of Excellence for Risk Analysis before accepting a position at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). She is now Associate Professor at LSE in the Department of Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method.

Steele's research in philosophy concerns the interface of science and policy decision making; she has published a number of philosophy papers in this general area. One of her principal interests is the assessment and representation of scientific uncertainty, and the question of what it means to choose rationally under uncertainty of varying character. This work continues, in collaboration with several LSE colleagues, under the project 'Managing Severe Uncertainty', funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Steele has recently directed her theoretical work towards issues that arise in climate-change science and decision making, and since 2011 is an Associate of LSE's Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment. Steele has co-published on the role of evidence of past climate in assessing confidence in climate-model predictions, and continues to work on related evidential issues. She has also explored the ethical dimension of climate change, and in particular the ethical status of 'realist' approaches to international climate policy. While at SCAS, Steele will turn the ethical spotlight on uncertainty itself. One key question is: What does it mean to make 'conservative' decisions in the face of uncertainty, and is this ethically desirable? She will also investigate the special ethical issues that arise in the context of collective-action decision problems, as is the case with climate change.

ABSTRACT

The question of *collective responsibility* is often taken to be the question of whether any groups or collectives can be regarded as autonomous agents (i.e. be ascribed beliefs and desires and intentions to act) and thereby be appropriate targets of moral accountability (see, for instance, French 1984, May 1992, Bratman 1993, Gilbert 2000, List and Pettit 2011). Paradigmatic cases are corporations that have formal decision-making procedures for settling and reviewing collective opinions on a range of interconnected issues. Whether such groups really do have 'minds of their own' is of course an interesting and important question, because we ought to recognize and respond appropriately to autonomous agents when we come across them, whether they be individual persons or groups or even machines.

The question of *collective responsibility* that I will address in this talk, however, is somewhat tangential to the one just mentioned, and arguably more relevant to the impassioned debates on this theme in public discourse (cf. Feinberg 1968): To what extent, if at all, is it appropriate for individuals to be held accountable for the broader doings and beings of the various groups in which they are formal or informal members? (The case of membership in a group with a 'mind of its own' is merely one special case.) Responses to this question in the academic and popular literature are both emphatic and varied, depending on the framing, which suggests that there is a real puzzle here, or at least conceptual confusion. Some claim (e.g. Lewis 1948) that holding individuals accountable for collective doings is barbarous, and indeed popular usage of the term 'collective punishment' implies an injustice (consider various leaders' protests against the recent Israeli military offensive in Gaza, or public criticism of proposed criminal laws of association). Others highlight (e.g. Reiff 2008) that *not* holding individuals accountable for collective doings is pernicious, even if justified, in that it allows individuals to dissociate from their group roles and the gross harms that may be committed by these groups (con-

sider the apparently conscience-free harms committed by, e.g., large financial and energy corporations, or climate change due to the marginal contributions of the world's wealthy). Yet others argue (e.g. Jaspers 1961, Held 2002) that in many cases, that it is fitting for individuals to assume responsibility for the broader impacts of groups they identify with (consider the shame/guilt/remorse of contemporary Germans on account of the Holocaust, or the view that contemporary Australians have too little of these sentiments with respect to the past effects and continuing legacy of the 'White Australia Policy').

My aim here is to unpack these varied and apparently conflicting intuitions about assigning collective responsibility to individuals. I seek an account of *individual responsibility* that can explain, with minimal distinctions, the significance of various kinds of group membership. Perhaps the most crucial distinction to this end concerns the notion of accountability itself—it may refer to the *repair* of a harmful outcome that has occurred, or otherwise to the *reform* of one's conduct or character (cf. tort law versus criminal law). The problem with much of the literature on accountability, a problem that becomes overwhelming when we attend to complicated scenarios involving groups, is that the distinction between these two forms of accountability is not adequately acknowledged (an exception being Kutz 2000).

The talk will elaborate on this core distinction. I aim to show, with reference to the earlier mentioned examples, that collectively produced harms have far-reaching relevance for both these forms of individual accountability: on the one hand, *mere faultless contribution* to collective harms may well suffice for an agent to have duties of repair, and on the other hand, collective harms serve as *evidence*, however weak, for the choice situation an individual agent faced, and ultimately their beliefs and values. All this is consistent with the claim that a strong form of collective responsibility is *never* appropriate—that of blaming or punishing an individual for values/beliefs/choices she does not herself endorse.

References

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