

**What we ought to do – An Extension of Collective and Individual Duty Principles in the
Context of Bystander Inaction**

Cassandra Beyer

London School of Economics and Political Science

Morals Politics and Philosophy

This essay explores the question of moral duties in the context of collective action problems. Rather than attempting to offer a complete account of what we ought to do across various contexts, I will focus specifically on scenarios involving bystander phenomena. One such scenario, is the following hypothetical case:

A attacks B in a train carriage. There are 10 bystanders in the carriage. No single bystander is powerful enough to safely overcome the attacker, but, as all 10 bystanders realise, were they to act together, they could easily and safely do so, saving B from harm. Nobody acts.

Based on frameworks such as Dietz's collective reasons (2016), the normative questions on "what we ought to do" arising are twofold in scope:

1. What do the passengers collectively ought to do
2. What do each individual passenger ought to do

The latter will be the primary subject of my inquiry. More precisely, I inquire into the relation between collective reasons for a group's actions and individual actions. While it is uncontroversial to claim that passengers have good moral reasons to intervene, the more interesting question is whether the existence of a collective reason alters what individuals ought to do. I argue that Dietz's (2016) framework fails to adequately ground individual duties in bystander cases for two reasons: it evaluates moral situations in episodic isolation and assumes independence of individual choices and determinacy of cooperation. These underlying assumptions limit its applicability to realistic bystander scenarios.

Terminological Clarifications

I will apply the term "group" in line with Dietz's (2016) characterisation to merely indicate "a set of persons." Existing distinctions, such as Held's (1970) contrast between *collectives* and random collections or Collins's (2019) Tripartite Model, are typically based on the presence of decision-making procedures. Since collective agency is often taken to ground responsibility and blame, these distinctions matter primarily for theories of moral

responsibility. The following, however, does not aim to answer questions of moral responsibility.

Following Wringer (2014), I treat "what we ought to do" and "what we are responsible for" as separate inquiries. Moral duties are forward-looking (what should and ought to be done), while responsibility can be both forward- and backward-looking (what was done to attribute blame or praise). From this view, duties do not automatically mean an agent is blameworthy if they fail to act, nor do they demand a particular theory of agency. This aligns with Dietz's (2016) non-moralised definition of *ought* as "whatever we have the strongest reasons to do" (p. 956). On this view, collective reasons concern what we together ought to do, without presupposing collective agency.

Reasons to act

The first central claim in Dietz's (2016) account is that groups of individuals can have collective reasons for actions (there is something we together ought to do). Such reasons include (i) making outcomes better, (ii) avoiding harm, and (iii) benefiting ourselves (p. 956). Similar accounts of joint oughts are defended by Parfit (1988) and Jackson (1987). The existence of shared duties and collective reasons will be assumed and not further defended here. From both Dietz's and consequentialist perspectives, the obvious answer is that the group ought to intervene and save the passenger.

The second part of Dietz's argument concerns whether such collective reasons affect what individuals ought to do. One answer is offered by Woodard (2008), whose principle states that "even when others will not do their parts in what we together ought to do, I may still have some group-based reason to do my part" (as cited in Dietz, 2016, p. 969). Woodard's principle implies that individual duties to pursue a collective reason (e.g., saving the passenger) apply even when others do not participate. Dietz (2016), however, doubts this implication and argues that it can generate disastrous outcomes.

To illustrate this, he draws on Gibbard's (1965) coordination case, in which two agents choose between actions A and B. Joint choice (B, B) yields the best outcome, while (A, A) is only slightly worse; however, mismatched choices lead to catastrophic results. Dietz also invokes Bernard Williams's (1973) Jim and the Indians case, in which Jim must choose between killing one captive to save nineteen or refusing to act and allowing all twenty to be killed. According to Woodard's principle, Jim ought to pursue the best joint action - namely, that neither he nor Pedro shoots. However, given the background conditions, this leads to the worst outcome. Dietz concludes that this result is implausible.

Applied to the train carriage scenario, Gibbard's case can be reconstructed as follows. Suppose action (B) is interference and (A) non-interference. If only some passengers interfere while others abstain, the outcome may be worse than collective non-interference. A lone intervener may be injured, resulting in two harmed passengers rather than one. From a purely consequentialist perspective, this is a worse outcome. Summarised, the possible outcomes are:

(A) All interfere (passenger is saved; minimal harm) – *Best*

(B) Partial interference (1-9 passengers interfere, B may be saved, but other passengers potentially harmed) – *Second worst*

(C) No one interferes (one passenger is harmed) – *Second best*

Assessing these outcomes precisely would require more information about the attack, such as its severity or whether fewer than ten passengers could intervene successfully. After all, the scenario only specifies that ten passengers can stop the attack safely and easily; it does not rule out success by fewer participants.

Nonetheless, Gibbard's case reveals a crucial tension that arises in uncooperative scenarios where individuals cannot easily communicate to choose a shared course of action.

Claiming that we “ought to do B” simply because it has the best outcome does not work. From the perspective of the individual passenger who observes the inaction of fellow passengers, doing A (not interfering) is best given the possibility that others choose A as well.

Dietz (2016) formulates two main objections to Woodard’s principle. First, the disaster objection, which argues that Woodard’s principle is implausible because it can justify actions with potentially worse outcomes (e.g., outcome B, where multiple passengers get hurt). The second is the double-counting objection. If a feature of an outcome (e.g., saving a life) already grounds a collective reason to act, it cannot also ground an individual ought without counting the same moral reason twice.

As a solution to these objections, Dietz proposes the following principle:

"P4: If some fact about our acting in some way gives us a reason (not) to act in this way, and we will act in this way if I do my part, then I have a reason (not) to do my part." (Dietz, 2016, p. 971).

P4 is designed to avoid both the disaster objection and the double-counting problem. In the train carriage scenario, this means our acting in some way (all ten passengers intervene) gives us a reason (saving the victim) to act. The additional condition C ("we will act in this way if I do my part") requires that the other nine passengers will intervene if I confidently step in first. Only if C holds do I (the first passenger) have a reason to do my part (intervene). Hereby, Dietz’s principle is able to avoid disastrous outcomes: If others will not cooperate, then condition C fails, and individuals have no reason to act.

Dietz double counting proviso further specifies that while the feature of an outcome F can ground a collective reason to act (e.g., F = "a person is saved from harm"), it does not ground an individual's reason to act: "However, if this feature does not depend on what I do, then it will also be a feature of the outcome of what we will be doing if I act in any other way." (2016, p.979).

Since the passenger might be saved even if I do not intervene, Dietz concludes that the individual has equal reason to intervene or not (2016, p. 978). While Dietz's objections expose counterintuitive implications in cases like Jim and the Indians, I argue that they apply less straightforwardly to bystander scenarios and rely on problematic assumptions.

Determinacy of Cooperation

Dietz's principle that I have a reason to do my part "only as long as others will do theirs" (2016, p. 978) presumes a clear fact about the group's willingness to act. In Jim and the Indians, the stance of the second agent (Pedro) is fixed and doesn't depend on Jim's choice. We know Pedro will kill the captives regardless, so the cooperation clause is stable. By contrast, ordinary bystander situations are different. Whether other passengers will intervene depends on the signal sent by the first to act. Studies on the bystander effect show that perceived willingness of others is the strongest predictor of intervention (Brosnan, 1992): 93% of New York subway riders said they would act only after seeing a fellow passenger take the first step. Thus, cooperation often depends on the very actions being evaluated. Held (1970) noted that random collections can become organised through simple procedures (such as verbally encouraging help), shifting a non-cooperative group into a cooperative one. Dietz's principle overlooks this dynamic which undermines his principles' relevance to real-world bystander dilemmas.

Episodic isolation and Separability of Outcomes

Although never stated explicitly, Dietz's argument presupposes that each possible outcome can be judged in isolation. From that standpoint, outcome B (partial interference) looks worse than outcome C (total non-interference), because the comparison is treated as a purely first-order judgment about how many lives are saved in the moment.

This ignores any systemic consequences. In a real bystander situation, such as the train-carriage attack, failure to act does more than harm the immediate victim: It helps forge a

social norm of non-intervention (Darley & Latané , 1968; Levine & Stroebe , 1987). The meta-harm includes: (a) signalling to future attackers that bystanders will not resist, (b) signalling to future victims that assistance cannot be relied upon, (c) eroding trust in shared spaces like public transport, and (d) creating a self-reinforcing cycle of passivity. Dietz's examples consider only the immediate case and thus miss these long-term effects.

In a pre-digital world, such norm-forming consequences were limited because information about a single incident remained locally bounded. Today, emergencies are filmed and amplified on social media (Pittaro 2019). This new medium affects bystander action in two ways: Firstly, bystanders' knowledge of being filmed and potentially being watched by millions might actually encourage people to help, out of fear or being criticised, or in an effort to appear heroic. On the other hand, social media may perpetuate awareness of bystander failures and thereby fuel a public narrative of social apathy (Pittaro, 2019).

The public's perception of bystander willingness becomes a global variable that influences future behaviour both of potential perpetrators and of ordinary commuters. Consequently, outcome (c) "no one interferes" can be morally worse than (b) "some intervene and cause collateral injury," because the former establishes a durable norm of passivity that endangers future passengers.

Conclusion

In summary, Dietz argument can only demonstrate that outcome F („passenger is safe“) does not depend on individual action in this specific scenario. It hinges on the assumption that the feature of the outcome F, is episodically isolated (e.g., "the attacked passenger survives"). But when F is replaced with the systemic feature of outcomes F' (e.g., „passengers are generally safe on public transportation systems“) the outcome is no longer separable and does depend on my action (through norm-setting and expectation effects).

The tendency to treat moral outcomes as isolated episodes, is not unique to Dietz. The same structural oversight appears across a number of contemporary accounts of collective responsibility including Woodards (2008) account on group-based reasons or Tollefson's (2003) account on collective responsibility. By ignoring the systemic, norm-forming dimension of collective action, such accounts miss an essential source of individual duty in bystander situations. A potential extension of Dietz framework may be achieved by additionally evaluating outcomes in terms of long-term systemic goods (e.g., continued safety on public transportation) hereby ensuring a more nuanced view on individual and collective ought.

References

- Brosnan, D. (1992). Perceptions of bystander willingness to intervene on behalf of victims of criminal assaults: Implications for the development of coproductive strategies. *Criminal Justice Policy Review*, 6(1), 40–54. <https://doi.org/10.1177/088740349200600103>
- Collins, S. (2019). *Group duties: Their existence and their implications for individuals*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198840275.001.0001>
- Darley, J. M., & Latané, B. (1968). Bystander intervention in emergencies: Diffusion of responsibility. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 8(4), 377–383. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0026570>
- Dietz, A. (2016). What we together ought to do. *Ethics*, 126(4), 955–982. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26540891>
- Gibbard, A. F. (1965). Rule-utilitarianism: Merely an illusory alternative? *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 43(2), 211–220. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00048406512341181>
- Held, V. (1970). Can a random collection of individuals be morally responsible? *The Journal of Philosophy*, 67(14), 471–481. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2024108>
- Isaacs, T. (2014). Collective responsibility and collective obligation. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 38, 40–57.
- Jackson, F. (1987). Group morality. In J. J. C. Smart, P. Pettit, R. Sylvan, & J. Norman (Eds.), *Metaphysics and morality: Essays in honour of J. J. C. Smart*. Blackwell.
- Levine, J. M., & Stroebe, W. (1987). Bystander behavior in emergencies. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 6(2), 59–63. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8721.00171>
- McNaughton, D., & Rawling, P. (1998). Act-consequentialism. In *Consequentialism*. Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Taylor & Francis.

<https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/consequentialism/v-1/sections/act-consequentialism>

Parfit, D. (1988). *What we together do* [Unpublished manuscript]. PhilArchive. <https://philarchive.org/archive/PARWWT-3.pdf>

Pittaro, M. (2019, September 19). *Social media and the bystander effect*. Psychology Today. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-crime-and-justice-doctor/201909/social-media-and-the-bystander-effect>

Tollefsen, D. P. (2003). Participant reactive attitudes and collective responsibility. *Philosophical Explorations*, 6(3), 218 -234. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10002003098538751>

Williams, B. (1973). A critique of utilitarianism. In J. J. C. Smart & B. Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and against* (pp. 77–150). Cambridge University Press.

Woodard, C. (2008). *Reasons, patterns, and cooperation* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203935132>

Wringe, B. (2014). Collective obligations: Their existence, their explanatory power, and their supervenience on the obligations of individuals. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 22(2), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12076>

Zukowski, D. (2022, September 14). *With attacks on public transit up, cities struggle to make riders feel safer*. *Smart Cities Dive*. <https://www.smartcitiesdive.com/news/us-leads-violent-transit-crimes-nyc-los-angeles-san-francisco-philadelphia/631738/>