

1. Introduction.¹

We routinely treat groups, including governments and corporations, as agents with beliefs and aims who are morally responsible for their actions. For instance, we might blame the government for the Covid crisis. Many philosophers take such ascriptions to be literally true. If groups are morally responsible agents, then it seems that groups may potentially have excuses for wrongdoing in the way that individuals do. One kind of excuse in the case of individuals is an excuse from ignorance. Indeed, groups blamed for wrongdoing sometimes attempt to excuse that wrongdoing by appeal to ignorance; for instance, the government might claim that it didn't know just how infectious the new Covid variant was. Surprisingly, there has so far been relatively little work on what it is for a group to have an excuse from blameless ignorance². In this paper, I assume that groups are morally responsible agents to develop an account of what it is for a group to have an excuse from blameless ignorance.

In the next section, I distinguish two ways for a realist about group agency to provide an account of group blameless ignorance by exploiting already existing materials. A realist might attempt to reduce group blameless ignorance to some already theorised group epistemic state (e.g. lack of knowledge or justified false belief); or treat group blameless ignorance as a function of member blameless ignorance. In sections 3 and 4, I argue that neither of these strategies works, so that we need to provide a new account of what it is for a group to be blamelessly ignorant. In section 5, I provide my own account of group blameless ignorance which appeals to the idea that a group's ignorance is blameless if the group could not have reasonably been expected to take measures to avoid that ignorance. I explain what this condition amounts to by appealing to the notion of a group duty to avoid wrongdoing. We see how the proposed view can allow that a group can be blamelessly ignorant even if its members are not, and vice versa. That is so whether or not one accepts that group belief is a function of member belief. In section 6, I sketch how the proposed account could be combined with my preferred inflationist account of what it is for a group to act on blameless ignorance. The proposed account appeals to a group's institutional processes and systems, rather than the motivations and attitudes of group members. With an account of what it is for a group to have an excuse from blameless ignorance, we are better able to assess when groups are blameworthy for wrongdoing.

2. Realism about groups and group blameless ignorance.

We routinely treat groups as agents with beliefs and aims who are morally responsible for their actions. Realists about group agency treat such ascriptions as literally true, arguing that

¹ Thanks to the Leverhulme Trust for a Major Research Fellowship to work on group responsibility. I have presented various versions of this paper in a variety of settings (the Group Responsibility and Law Workshop at Glasgow 2019, the Urbino Summer School 2019, St Andrews 2019 and Zürich 2020). Thanks to those audiences for useful feedback. Thanks especially to Collins, Goldberg, and McGrath for comments on the paper.

² De Haan (2021) argues that a non-agential collective can be blameworthy for being ignorant that p even though its members are not. However, he doesn't provide a positive account of what it is for a group to be blamelessly ignorant. Some identify the epistemic condition for a group to be responsible with group knowledge (e.g. Gilbert 1986) or awareness (Metz 2021), which might suggest that lack of knowledge or lack of true belief would be sufficient for the kind of ignorance which excuses wrongdoing. But, as we see in S3, that's implausible.

claims about group agents cannot be readily translated into claims about group members (e.g. Gilbert 1989, Pettit 2007, List and Pettit 2011, Tollefsen 2015 and Collins 2019). By contrast, deflationists hold that claims about group agents are readily translatable into claims about group members (see Sverdlik 1987, Goldman 1970, Narveson 2002, and McKenna 2006). In this paper, I assume a realist approach on which at least some groups are morally responsible agents to examine what it is for a group to have an excuse for wrongdoing from blameless ignorance. I will focus on the kinds of groups which are taken to be the best candidates for being morally responsible agents, namely organised groups with well-ordered decision procedures such as companies or governments (as opposed to, say, a group composed of all left-handed Scottish people).³ The claim that such groups are morally responsible goes beyond the less contentious claim that groups are causally or legally responsible. For, one can be causally or legally responsible without being morally responsible. For instance, a young child might be causally responsible for a broken window, without being either morally or legally responsible.

On the standard view about individuals, an individual has an excuse from blameless ignorance for wrongdoing if her ignorance is blameless and she acts from that ignorance. The condition that the individual must act from the ignorance is designed to deal with cases in which, although the subject is blamelessly ignorant that she is doing wrong, this doesn't seem to excuse her since she her action wasn't due to, or motivated by, her ignorance (see, *inter alia*, Nottlemann 2007, Peels 2014, Alvarez and Littlejohn 2017, Weatherson 2019). For instance, suppose that I feed poisonous mushrooms to my enemy in blameless ignorance that they are poisonous. Even though I am blamelessly ignorant that the mushrooms are poisonous I might not have an excuse if, say, I would gleefully feed them to my enemy if I were to know that they are poisonous.⁴ Building on the standard approach to the individual case, we might say that a group has an excuse from blameless ignorance for wrongdoing if the group is blamelessly ignorant and acts from that ignorance.

Despite the interest of the notion of when a group has an excuse from blameless ignorance, there hasn't been much discussion of this. *Prima facie*, that's surprising given its importance. Perhaps, it's been assumed that one can readily appropriate existing work on groups to provide an account of when a group has an excuse from blameless ignorance. First, consider the condition that the agent must act from ignorance. If groups are morally responsible agents, we plausibly need an account of what it is for a group to be motivated by one consideration rather than another. For it's standardly held that whether an agent is praiseworthy for doing right depends on why she did it (e.g. self-interest or because it's right). While it's controversial what it is for a group to act from one motivation rather than another (e.g. Brown 2021), presumably the correct general account of what it is for a group to act on one consideration rather than another can be employed in the account of when a group acts from blameless ignorance.

Turning to the condition that the group is blamelessly ignorant, it might be suggested that existing work on group epistemic states can provide an account of group blameless ignorance. For one often phrases an excuse from ignorance in terms of lack of knowledge (e.g. but I didn't know that those were your favourite flowers not weeds). Indeed Gilbert

³ E.g. Pettit and Schweikard 2006:33; Lawford-Smith 2015:232; Collins 2019:949.

⁴ Counterfactuals are standardly taken to be good, but not infallible, evidence for whether one acted from ignorance or not. For, plausibly, I might have an excuse from blameless ignorance for giving my peanut-allergic friend a peanut-containing curry even if I fail a counterfactual test: for instance, perhaps a nefarious neuroscientist is in the wings who wants the death of my friend. In the nearest world in which I know that she has a potentially fatal peanut allergy, the neuroscientist would intervene to ensure that I still feed her the peanut-containing curry.

(2006), suggests that group blameless ignorance can be understood as the lack of group knowledge. Alternatively, it might be suggested that we can analyse a group's being blamelessly ignorant that *p* as a function of its members being blamelessly ignorant that *p*. In the next two sections, I argue that neither of these strategies work. In the remainder of the paper, I develop my own positive account of group blameless ignorance.

3. Is group blameless ignorance lack of group knowledge or group (justified) false belief? It may be initially tempting to identify group blameless ignorance with lack of group knowledge or perhaps group justified false belief. However, these proposals are problematic for reasons familiar from existing work on individual excuse from ignorance. Although we frequently express the idea that somebody is ignorant by saying, "she didn't know", lacking knowledge is not sufficient for ignorance (e.g. Rosen 2008, Peels 2011, Harman 2011). For one could lack knowledge that *p*, even while justifiably and truly believing that *p*, in which case one is not ignorant that *p*. For instance, consider a subject who is in a Gettier case with respect to the proposition that these mushrooms are poisonous. If she proceeds to feed the poisonous mushrooms to her guests for dinner while justifiably and truly believing that they are poisonous, she doesn't count as being ignorant that the mushrooms are poisonous. In addition, blamelessly lacking true belief that *p* is not sufficient for the kind of blameless ignorance that excuses wrongdoing since one might blamelessly lack the true belief that *p* by blamelessly suspending on the question that *p* (Peels 2011). For instance, suppose that one's evidence leaves it 50:50 that the mushrooms are poisonous so that the one blamelessly suspends on the issue. If one proceeds to feed the mushrooms to one's friends for dinner, one doesn't count as having an excuse from blameless ignorance for feeding them poisonous mushrooms, even though one is blameless in not believing them to be poisonous.

Last, it's implausible to identify blameless ignorance that *p* with justified false belief that not-*p*. First, it isn't necessary for being blamelessly ignorant that *p* that one justifiably falsely believes that not-*p*. For instance, one might be "deeply ignorant" that *p* by blamelessly having no doxastic attitude about the matter (whether belief, disbelief or suspension), perhaps because one doesn't even have the concept to think the proposition that *p* (e.g. Peels 2011). Alternatively, one might blamelessly falsely believe that *p* even though one's belief is not justified e.g. if one believes that *p* via a tempting fallacious inference which one was in no position to understand to be fallacious. Second, many argue that justifiably falsely believing that *p* is not sufficient for the kind of blameless ignorance that excuses wrongdoing. For instance, Rosen (2008) argues that even if one is justified in believing that *p* on the evidence one has, one might nonetheless be blameworthy in believing that *p* if one ought to have gathered further evidence and, if one had, it would have supported not-*p*.

Further reason to reject the sufficiency of justified true belief for blameless ignorance arises if one rejects so-called encroachment on justification (for discussion see Guerrero 2007, Rosen 2008, Biebel 2017, and Weatherson 2019.) According to this controversial view, whether a subject justifiably believes that *p* depends not only on truth conducive factors such as her evidence for *p* and the reliability of the process that produced her belief that *p*, but also pragmatic and moral factors such as what is at stake. If one rejects encroachment, one will accept that a subject can justifiably falsely believe that *p* on the same basis in two different situations which differ in the stakes. For instance, in DeRose's bank case, a subject could justifiably but falsely believe that the bank is open on Saturday on the basis of her recent visit in both the low stakes situation in which nothing much turns on this, and a high-stakes situation in which she stands to lose her house and render her family homeless if she is wrong. Given the difference in stakes, she might be blameless for acting on *p* in the low stakes situation but blameworthy for doing so in the high-stakes situation. Many deny encroachment because of its controversial consequences. As a result, they should deny that

justified false belief is sufficient for the kind of blameless ignorance which excuses wrongdoing.⁵

In conclusion, it's implausible to identify the kind of blameless ignorance which potentially excuses wrongdoing with lack of true belief, lack of knowledge, or justified false belief. Thus, existing accounts of group true belief, justified belief and knowledge do not provide a satisfactory account of what it is for a group to be blamelessly ignorant. Instead, it might be suggested that whether a group is blamelessly ignorant is a function of whether its members are blamelessly ignorant. I consider that suggestion in the next section.

3. Group blameless ignorance as a function of member blameless ignorance.

Realists about group agency have argued that our normative assessment of a group and its members can diverge. For instance, Pettit argues that a group agent can be blameworthy for doing something even though individual members are blameless “so far as they are blamelessly ignorant of any harm that is collectively done; reasonably believe that they won't make a difference to the harm done, or at least not the right kind of difference; and act under a sense of duress or pressure from others” (2007:196). Given that realists allow that a group can be blameworthy for doing something even though its individual members are blameless, it seems that they ought to hold that a group can fail to have an excuse from blameless ignorance for doing something even though its individual members do have such an excuse. Indeed, we can flesh out that possibility in several different ways.

Realists standardly hold that a group can believe that p even if none of its members believe that p but instead disbelieve p (e.g. Gilbert 1989; List and Pettit 2011). As a result, they would allow that a group can fail to be blamelessly ignorant that p even if all of its members are blamelessly ignorant that p. For instance, suppose that a group truly believes that p while its members believe that not-p. In this situation, the group is aware that p even though its members are ignorant that p. If we add detail so that the member's false beliefs that not-p are blameless, then we have a case in which the members of the group are blamelessly ignorant, but the group is not.

For instance, consider List and Pettit's suggestion that a group's belief in a conclusion is formed via a premise-based procedure, as illustrated in the following table:

	a	b	c	(a and b and c)
M1	Yes	Yes	No	No
M2	Yes	No	Yes	No
M3	No	Yes	Yes	No
Group	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Here, the group's belief in the premises is determined via majority voting, but its belief in the conclusion is determined by its views on the premises. Thus, the group believes the true conjunction (a and b and c), although its members believe that the conjunction is false. Furthermore, suppose that although the evidence available to each member supports the conjunction, each member makes a blameless mistake in assessing the evidence and thus comes to blamelessly believe that the evidence supports only 2 of the relevant 3 propositions. In such circumstances, each member is blamelessly ignorant of the conjunction, although the group is aware of the truth of the conjunction. Thus, a realist who argues that group belief can

⁵ For discussion of the controversial consequences of encroachment see, inter alia, Schaffer 2006, Brown 2008, DeRose 2009, Fantl and McGrath 2009, Reed 2010, Anderson and Hawthorne 2019.

come apart from the belief of its members would deny that group blameless ignorance is a function of member blameless ignorance.

In addition, a realist can argue that group blameless ignorance is not a function of member blameless ignorance even in cases in which there is no divergence between the beliefs of the group and its members. We can see that by considering “differential-risk” cases in which the group and its members face different degrees of risk (Mathiesen 2011). For instance, consider a group whose members are in a much higher stakes position with respect to p than is the group. The members and the group have evidence, e , that supports p without making p certain. On the basis of e , the members and the group believe that p .⁶ Since p is in fact false, the members and the group are ignorant that p . Given the different stakes, it may be plausible that the members are blameworthy for their ignorance whereas the group is not. For instance, perhaps every member of the group is deciding whether to make a very risky private investment which will be disastrous for them and their families if not- p . Thus every member is in a high-stakes situation with respect to p in the light of which believing that p on the basis of e is blameworthy. Given the stakes, they ought to have carried out much more rigorous investigations into p . By contrast, suppose that the question of whether p is very low-risk for the group. Perhaps, even though one of the group’s investments does turn on the question of p , given the financial scale of that particular investment vis-à-vis other investments of the firm and its overall financial health, this is a low risk investment for the group. Given that the group is in a low stakes situation, the group may have carried out all the investigations it ought to have done. So, the group is blameless in believing that p on the basis of e and without any further investigation.⁷

Differential risk cases can also be used to demonstrate the converse: that even if the members of a group are blamelessly ignorant that p , the group itself may fail to be blamelessly ignorant. To illustrate, suppose that a group is considering an investment plan which would be disastrous in the event that not- p . Thus the group is in a high-stakes situation with respect to the proposition that p . By contrast, we can suppose that the members of the group are not in a high-stakes situation with respect to p . While they might lose their jobs if the group goes bust, perhaps they are all highly employable and could easily find alternative employment elsewhere so, for them, as individuals, p is a low risk proposition. Suppose that the group has investigated whether p , as a result of which the group and its members all have evidence e which makes probable the proposition p without making p certain. Furthermore, suppose that p is in fact false. On the basis of e , the members of the group, and the group itself, believe that p which is therefore false and constitutes ignorance that not- p . Even though the group and the members believe that p on the basis of the same evidence e , given the different risks they face, it may be that the ignorance of the members is blameless whereas the ignorance of the group is blameworthy. In particular, given the low risk situation in which

⁶ By contrast, Mathiesen (2011) imagines that, as a result of the difference in risk, “the group reaches its threshold for acceptance while no individual member has reached her threshold for acceptance”. She argues that “since there is no epistemically preferred threshold, both the group and the members are equally epistemically rational” (41).

⁷ That the stakes affect how much investigation one ought to carry out before acting is agreed both by those who accept and those who deny encroachment. Since those who deny encroachment don't allow that whether a belief is justified depends on what's at stake, they typically deny that justified belief that p is always sufficient for one to be in a good enough epistemic position to act on p (e.g. Brown 2008). Thus, they would allow there to be cases in which a subject justifiably but falsely believes that p and yet ought to have investigated more before acting. If the subject fails to do so and, as a result of her false belief does wrong, then they would deny that the subject is blamelessly ignorant for the wrongdoing.

the employees find themselves, we may suppose that they have carried out all the investigations they should have. By contrast, given the high-stakes situation in which the group finds itself, the group ought to have carried out further investigations into p.

Of course, given that the group should have carried out further investigations, some of its members may well have failed in their duties as members of the group. Nevertheless, we will see that that's compatible with a divergence in whether the ignorance of the group and the members is blameless. For instance, perhaps given the stakes facing the group, members should have inputted differently into the procedures for determining the group's beliefs (e.g. they shouldn't have voted for p), or perhaps members should have attempted to revise the group's procedures for determining group belief to make it more sensitive to the risks the group faced. Alternatively, perhaps some members should have carried out further investigations to inform the group's view or have attempted to get the group to carry out further investigations. Those who fail in their duties as members of the group may or may not be blameworthy for this failure. For instance, perhaps some members failed because they reasonably didn't understand that it was their task to carry out certain investigations, or because they reasonably thought it was pointless to do so given the failure of others to do their part, or because of mitigating circumstances (they were under too much stress at the time). Alternatively, members might have failed without an excuse, e.g. if they failed to carry out their duty due to ill-will or laziness. To the extent that members are blameworthy for failing to carry out their duties as members of the group, they may be partially blameworthy for the fact that the group is ignorant. But note that that is compatible with them being individually blamelessly ignorant that not-p.⁸ For instance, it seems compatible with some member's being blameworthy for failing to do her bit in the further investigations which the group should have undertaken that she is nonetheless blameless in believing as an individual that p. For instance, suppose that even if she had undertaken her bit of the investigation, that alone wouldn't have provided evidence that not-p but would only have done so when combined with the results of the investigations other members ought to have undertaken but didn't. Thus, although she is blameworthy for not doing her bit in the further investigations, her ignorance that not-p is nonetheless still blameless since, even if she had done her bit, the evidence would still have supported p, given the failure of others to do their bit.

We've now seen the failure of two possible ways for a realist about groups to provide an account of group blameless ignorance from existing resources. A group's being blamelessly ignorant in a way that potentially excuses wrongdoing cannot be treated as group lack of knowledge or as group justified false belief. Furthermore, group blameless ignorance that p isn't plausibly a function of member blameless ignorance that p. In the light of this failure, I turn in the next section to develop my own positive account of group blameless ignorance.

5. Group blameless ignorance: a new account.

⁸ Similarly, de Haan (2021) argues that a non-agential collective can be blameworthy for ignorance although its members are not. In his example, two members of a larger scientific team each fail in a blameworthy way to share information and so don't realise there is an imminent disease outbreak. He argues that the non-agential collective composed of these two members are collectively blameworthy for their ignorance of the outbreak, even though, considered individually, each is blamelessly ignorant (each individually considered lacks the information to realise that the outbreak is imminent). As de Haan notes, that the non-agential collective composed of these two members is blameworthy for its ignorance leaves it open whether the larger scientific team, which is a potential candidate to be a group agent, is blameworthy for the ignorance (106).

In developing an account of group blameless ignorance, I will take inspiration from leading accounts of individual blameless ignorance. As we saw earlier (S3), individual ignorance can take the form either of false belief or “deep ignorance” in which the subject doesn’t have any attitude whatsoever about the matter. The same is true for groups: group ignorance can take the form either of false belief or deep ignorance. Whatever form it takes, ignorance excuses only if it is blameless. In providing an account of what it is for group ignorance to be blameless I will follow the widely held view that S’s ignorance is blameless if it is not substandard: if it’s not the case that we could reasonably have expected S not to be ignorant (e.g. Fitzpatrick 2008, Sher 2009, Clarke 2017).⁹ What it is reasonable to expect a subject to do to avoid ignorance depends on a variety of factors including her cognitive capacities, her situation, and the moral stakes et cetera. For instance, suppose that a subject has a false view about the result of some mathematical calculation and is thus ignorant of the true result. Whether her ignorance is blameless may depend on a variety of factors including the stakes (is the calculation crucial, say, for the safety of a proposed bridge), her role (does she have a particular professional obligation to get the calculation right, e.g. is she the chief engineer planning the bridge), her situation (how much time does she have to double check before acting), and her cognitive capacity and skills (compare the chief engineer with a new intern). Similar points hold for groups. What we would expect a group to do to avoid ignorance on an issue depends on the stakes, the group’s cognitive capacity and situation, as well as the group’s official role, legislation and industry standards. Of course, in the relevant sense, “expect” has a normative reading and not an epistemic reading. If the group has a terrible track record of fulfilling its duties, then given the evidence it might not be rational to expect the group to do what it ought normatively to do. But the fact that the group has a terrible track record does not in itself excuse it from wrongdoing.

To get a better sense of the conditions under which a group might be blamelessly ignorant, it’s useful to think about how a group’s overall duty to avoid wrongdoing can generate a myriad of sub-duties (e.g. Collins 2017). To illustrate, consider a nuclear power company which is ignorant that its plants are contaminating the local environment (e.g. perhaps there is radioactive leakage into the environment from its waste management processes). Whether the nuclear power company’s ignorance is blameless will depend on whether it is the result of blameworthy failure to fulfil its duties to avoid radioactive contamination of the local environment. The duty to avoid contaminating the local environment will generate a rich and myriad range of sub-duties. These include duties to design, build, and maintain the power plant to reduce contamination risks; duties to implement appropriate HR processes concerning the recruitment, retention, training and incentivization of employees so that they are able and motivated to run the plant appropriately to avoid contamination. Of course, it’s foreseeable that there may be failures by machinery or employees for a variety of reasons (machinery may breakdown and employees may fail to carry out their roles whether through incompetence, carelessness or ill will). Thus, the company has duties to detect if things are going wrong and mitigate for any such failures. Once we understand the rich and myriad range of sub-duties which the duty to avoid contamination generates, we have a much better sense of when the group’s ignorance might be blameless or blameworthy. For instance, even if the company is ignorant that it is

⁹ An alternative approach suggests that ignorance is blameless if and only if it doesn’t trace back to an earlier akratic act (e.g. acting against one’s all things considered judgement that one ought to put a reminder in one’s diary, or gather more evidence). However, it seems that ignorance can be blameworthy even if it doesn’t trace back to an earlier akratic act. E.g., a subject may be blameworthy for forgetting her mother’s birthday, even though her forgetting doesn’t trace back to an earlier akratic action (Sher 2009).

contaminating the local environment with radioactivity, the ignorance is not blameless if it's the result of a blameworthy failure to properly design plant, or adequately train staff, or have appropriate systems for detecting and preventing plant or employee failure. Of course, even the best designed systems are not fool proof. So a nuclear company could be ignorant that it is contaminating the environment even though it's done everything we could reasonably have expected it to do to avoid such contamination. In this case, it's ignorance would be blameless.

We've seen that whether a group's ignorance is blameless depends on the nature of its duties. While we have illustrated that with a high-stakes example of a nuclear power plant, analogous points apply to all groups. For instance, suppose that a local burger shop is ignorant that it is failing to dispose of waste cooking fat properly and, as a result, it is blocking the local sewerage system with a "fat ball". To determine whether the burger shop is blamelessly ignorant for blocking the sewerage system, it is helpful to think about its duties. The burger shop has an overall duty of disposing of its waste, including cooking fat, appropriately. This overall duty generates a range of sub-duties including having systems to deal appropriately with waste cooking oil, training staff to properly operate these systems, and having duties to detect if things are going wrong and mitigate for any such failures. The particular details of these sub-duties may be affected by relevant industry standards, as well as local environmental regulation. Even if the burger shop is ignorant that it is disposing of waste cooking oil inappropriately, it's not blamelessly ignorant if the ignorance is the result of a blameworthy failure to have an appropriate system for waste oil disposal or to adequately train staff in the system, or to have an effective system for monitoring staff should they fail to act as they should.

The proposed account can accommodate the earlier results from the differential risk cases that a group may be blamelessly ignorant that *p* even though its members are not, and vice versa. First, consider the case in which a group is in a low-stakes situation with respect to *p*, while its members are individually in high stakes situations. As before, suppose that the group undertook a certain amount of investigation which yielded evidence that misleadingly supported that *p*. On the basis of that evidence, both the group and its members believe that *p*. Given that *p* is a low-stakes matter for the group, by undertaking that investigation the group may have done all that we could reasonably have expected it to do. Thus, the group's ignorance is blameless. However, given that *p* is a high-stakes matter for the members of the group individually speaking, we would reasonably have expected them to do much more to investigate *p*. Thus, their ignorance is blameworthy even though the group's is blameless. Now consider the converse case in which *p* is a high-stakes matter for the group, but low stakes for its members. As before, the group undertakes a certain amount of investigation which yields evidence that misleadingly supports that *p* as a result of which both the group and its members believe that *p*. Given that *p* is a high-stakes matter for the group, we may suppose that the group's investigation falls below what we could reasonably expect of it. Thus the group's belief that *p* is a case of blameworthy ignorance. By contrast, given that *p* is a low-stakes matter for the members of the group, we may suppose that they are blameless in believing that *p* on the basis of the evidence. Given that it is a low-stakes matter, we wouldn't have reasonably expected them to do anything more to avoid ignorance.

I've now argued that a group's ignorance is blameless when it is not the case that we could reasonably have expected the group not to be ignorant. I have illuminated what it is reasonable to expect of a group by appeal to the fact that a group's duties to avoid wrongdoing generate a myriad range of sub-duties.

6. Group action from ignorance.

So far I've argued that a group's ignorance that it is doing wrong is blameless if it is not the result of a failure by the group to do what we could reasonably expect it to do to avoid such

wrongdoing. However, in order to have an excuse from blameless ignorance, it's standardly required that one's ignorance not only be blameless but one also act from that ignorance. What is it for a group to act from its blameless ignorance? I suggest that we can cast light on that by appealing, again, to the group's duties.

As we've already seen, a group's duty to avoid wrongdoing generates a range of sub-duties. In our example of the nuclear power plant, the company's duty to avoid such contamination generates a range of sub-duties including that it should implement plant and staffing systems designed to avoid such contamination; implement systems to avoid failure of plant and staff (including routine maintenance of plant and suitable hiring, incentivization and training schemes for staff); as well as having processes to detect and react appropriately to any contamination that nonetheless arises. We appealed to such duties in explaining what it would be for the nuclear company to be blamelessly ignorant that it is contaminating the local environment. In particular, I argued that the company's ignorance that it is contaminating the local environment with radioactivity is blameworthy if it is the result of a failure by the group to do what we could reasonably expect it to do to avoid such contamination. In particular, the company's ignorance that it is contaminating the local environment would not be blameless if it is the result of blameworthy failure to design the plant properly, keep up with routine maintenance, have appropriate hiring, incentivization and training schemes, or have processes to detect any contamination that nonetheless arises.

However, even if the company is blamelessly ignorant on some occasion that it is contaminating the local environment, to have an excuse from this blameless ignorance it still needs to act from that ignorance. I suggest that the group would fail to act from its ignorance if it fails to have appropriate systems for ensuring that if contamination is detected, appropriate action is taken to prevent further contamination (e.g. shutting down the plant), and mitigating the effects of any pollution that has already occurred (e.g. warning the local community not to eat fish and compensating local fishermen for their financial losses). We can imagine that even if the company's ignorance is blameless, it may nonetheless not have the kind of systems we would reasonably expect to ensure that if contamination is detected, appropriate action is taken. For instance, perhaps if workers in the monitoring centre detect contamination, it's not clear who they should tell or who should take decisions about what to do. Alternatively, even if it is clear who should be informed and take the decision, say the chief engineer, that person might be given inappropriate latitude in deciding what to do depending on, say, considerations of the company's public image or the financial cost to the company of shutting down operations. And, perhaps, in the past, when contamination has been detected, considerations of image and financial cost have meant that the company has failed to act so as to prevent further contamination or to mitigate its effects to the detriment of the local community.

The proposed account of what it is for a group to act from its blameless ignorance fits with the institutional view of what it is for a group to act on a certain motivation suggested in Brown (2021). There, Brown suggested that a group's motivations are inherent in the processes and procedures it has to avoid wrongdoing. To the extent that a group implements complex and/or expensive procedures for avoiding wrongdoing, we can regard it as motivated to avoid that wrongdoing. To the extent that it does right as a result of these procedures and systems, this is intuitively a case in which the group does right for the right reason. It doesn't do right merely accidentally, but as a result of a deep institutional commitment to avoid wrongdoing. Likewise, I suggest that we should look to a group's procedures and processes to see whether it is not only blamelessly ignorant, but acts from that ignorance. To the extent that the group lacks procedures and processes to act appropriately when it knows, say, it's polluting the local environment, then even in a case in which it is blamelessly ignorant that it is polluting, it doesn't plausibly act from blameless ignorance.

The proposed institutional view is one on which a group could have a motivation (say to protect the environment) even if its members do not. For a group can have all the processes and procedures that we would reasonably expect for it to avoid wrongdoing even if members of the group implement these processes and procedures not because it's the right thing to do but for less attractive motivations, such as to avoid sanction. So an action of a group can count as being motivated by, say, concern for the environment, even though relevant actions of its members are not. But, as I argue elsewhere, that just seems right. A group's action is often the upshot of the action of many of its members who have varied motivations. Some may act from a genuine concern for the right, but others act from less praiseworthy motivations such as their pay packet, wish to impress others or get a promotion. As a result, any attempt to defend a summative account on which a group's motivation for action is analysed in terms of the motives of its members for performing their part in the group's action faces difficult questions. Presumably, not all of the relevant member actions need to be motivated by, say, concern for the environment for the group's action to be so motivated. For, if so, then whether a group acts for a certain motivation would be hostage to the motivation of a single member. But, if not all of the relevant member actions need to be motivated by concern for the environment for the group's action to be so motivated, what proportion needs to be so motivated? Any answer seems arbitrary. But we don't want the question of whether a group is praiseworthy for an action to be arbitrary (Brown 2021).

Even in a case in which a group's action is constituted by just one member doing something so that the issue of diverse motivations doesn't arise, summative accounts face problems. For a group member may act in such a way that a group does the right thing, where that member is motivated to act for the right reasons, in spite of, rather than because of the group having adequate processes for ensuring it does the right thing. In such a situation, it hardly seems that the group is praiseworthy for doing the right thing since its processes left that to chance. For instance, suppose that although a department commits publicly to the goal of providing good supervision for PhD students, it has no proper structure or systems for ensuring that the supervision of PhD students is adequate. For instance, there is no clear mechanism for PhD students to raise issues with their supervision, no annual reviews of PhD student progress, and no guidance to students and professors about what support students can expect from their supervisors. As it so happens, the current director of postgraduate studies deeply cares about PhD student education and so when she happens to learn that X is having inadequate supervision, transfers student X from Dr A to Dr B to ensure that X has proper supervision. (X was lucky: it was by chance that the person appointed to the role of director of postgraduate studies cares deeply about PhD student education). In virtue of the action of the director of postgraduate studies, the department does the right thing by X. But, surely the department isn't praiseworthy for doing the right thing since this happens in spite of, rather than because of, the department's processes.

Of course, there are well-known problems with group processes and procedures. In many circumstances, it's difficult to design processes and procedures to secure certain outcomes. If group members are not motivated by the relevant ends they may "play the system" in such a way that the relevant ends are not met, or only partly met (e.g. consider the UK system for evaluating university research, the REF). Thus, groups also have a duty to inculcate a group ethos in their members to try and overcome these problems. Of course, since the attempt to develop a group ethos is frequently not wholly successful, a group has a duty to plan not only for members being motivated by the relevant ethos, but also less attractive motivations such as financial reward, status, or even actively bad motivations (e.g. consider corrupt police officers or abusive sports coaches). Groups are responsible and praiseworthy for implementing systems which are robust to members who don't themselves have good motivations. Furthermore, if as a result of a group implementing such systems, the

group does the right thing, then the group is praiseworthy even if individual members are not since they only played their part for self-interested motives. For instance, a police service would surely be praiseworthy if as a result of making its systems robust to members with bad motivations, it manages to do the right thing, say arrest a mafia boss.

7. Conclusion.

We routinely treat certain kinds of groups, such as companies and governments as morally responsible agents, holding them to account for their actions. If groups are morally responsible agents, then we should expect that groups could have an excuse for wrongdoing just like individuals do. Here, I have examined what it is for a group to have an excuse for doing wrong from blameless ignorance. Following the standard approach in the individual case, this requires both that the group's ignorance is blameless and that it acted from ignorance. I've developed a novel account of what it is for a group to be blamelessly ignorant, and to act from that ignorance by appeal to the nature of a group's duties to avoid doing wrong. The account overcomes problems facing the suggestions that whether a group is blamelessly ignorant can be reduced to whether its members are blamelessly ignorant, and that group blameless ignorance is to be identified with some other group epistemic state, such as lack of knowledge or justified false belief. On the proposed account, a group can be blamelessly ignorant, even if some of its members are not blamelessly ignorant and vice versa. Furthermore, a group can act from blameless ignorance even if its members don't.

References.

- Alvarez, Maria & Clayton Littlejohn. 2017. "When ignorance is no excuse". In Philip Robichaud and JW. Wieland (eds.), *Responsibility – The Epistemic Condition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Anderson, Charity and John Hawthorne. 2019. "Knowledge, practical adequacy, and stakes". *Oxford Studies in Epistemology* 6.
- Biebel, Nathan. 2017. "Epistemic justification and the ignorance excuse". *Philosophical Studies* online early: DOI 10.1007/s11098-017-0992-4.
- Bird, Alexander. 2010. "Social knowing: the social sense of "scientific knowledge"". *Philosophical Perspectives* 24:23-56.
- Brown, Jessica. 2008. "Subject-sensitive invariantism and the knowledge norm for the practical reasoning". *Nous* 42, 2:167-189.
- Brown, Jessica. 2021. "Group motivation". *Nous*. doi:10.1111/nous.12366.
- Clarke, Randolph. 2017. "Ignorance, revision and commonsense". In Philip Robichaud and JW. Wieland (eds.), *Responsibility – the Epistemic Condition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Collins, Stephanie. 2017. "Duties of group agents and group members". *Journal of Social Philosophy* 48, 1:38-57.
- Collins, Stephanie. 2019. "Collective responsibility gaps". *Journal of Business Ethics* 154:943-954.
- Collins, Stephanie. 2019. *Group Duties: Their Existence and Their Implications for Individuals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- De Hann, Niels. 2021. "Collective culpable ignorance". *Thought: A Journal of Philosophy* 10, 99-108.
- DeRose, Keith. 2009. *The Case For Contextualism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fantl, Jeremy and Matthew McGrath. *Knowledge in an Uncertain World*. 2009. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fitzpatrick, William. 2008. "Moral responsibility and normative ignorance: entering a new sceptical challenge". *Ethics* 118, 4:589-613.

- Gilbert, Margaret. 1989. *On Social Facts*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Gilbert, Margaret. 2004. "Collective epistemology". *Episteme* 1:95-107. doi: 10.3366/epi.2004.1.2.95
- Gilbert, Margaret. 2006. "Who's to blame?" *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 30: 94-114. doi: 10.1111/j.1475-4975.2006.00130.x
- Goldman, Alvin. 1970. *A Theory of Human Action*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Guerrero, Alexander. 2007. "Don't know, don't kill: moral ignorance, culpability, and caution". *Philosophical Studies* 136, 1:59-97.
- Hawthorne, John. 2004. *Knowledge and Lotteries*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hakli, Raul. 2011. "On the dialectical justification of group beliefs." In *Collective Epistemology*, eds. Hans Bernard Schmid, Daniel Sirtes and Marcel Weber, 119-53. Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag.
- Hess, Kendy. 2014. "Because they can: the basis of the moral responsibility of (certain) collectives". *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 38, 1: 203-221.
- Hess, Kendy. 2018. "Who's responsible?". *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XLII: 1-23.
- Harman, Elizabeth. 2011. "Does moral ignorance exculpate?" *Ratio* 24:443-468.
- Isaacs, Tracy. 2011. *Moral Responsibility in Collective Contexts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lackey, Jennifer 2016. "What is justified group belief?" *Philosophical Review* 125, 3:341-396. doi: jphil198683183
- Lackey, Jennifer 2020. *Epistemology of Groups*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lawford-Smith, Holly. 2015. What "we"?. *Journal of Social Ontology* 1, 2:225-249. doi: 10.1515/jso-2015-0008
- List, Christian and Philip Pettit. 2011. *Group Agency*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mathiesen, Kay. 2006. "We are all in this together". *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 30: 240-55. doi: 10.1111/j.1475-4975.2006.00137.x
- McKenna, Michael. 2006. "Collective responsibility and agent meaning theory". *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 30, 1:16-34.
- Metz, Joseph. 2021. "An ability-based theory of responsibility for collective omissions". *Philosophical Studies* 178:2665-2685.
- Narveson, Jan. 2002. "Collective responsibility". *Journal of Ethics* 6, 2:179-198.
- Nottelman, Nikolai. 2007. *Blameworthy Belief*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Peels, Rik. 2014. "What kind of ignorance excuses?" *Philosophical Quarterly* 64: 478-496. doi: 10.1093/pq/pqu013
- Pettit, Philip. 2007. "Responsibility incorporated". *Ethics* 117:171-201. doi: 10.1086/510695
- Pettit, Philip and D Schweikard. 2016. "Joint actions and group agents". *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 36:18-39. doi: 10.1177/0048393105284169
- Quinton, Anthony. 1975. "Social objects." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 75:1-27.
- Reed, Baron. 2010. "A defence of stable invariantism". *Nous* 44, 2:224-44.
- Rosen, Gideon. 2008. "Kleinbart the oblivious and other tales of ignorance and responsibility". *The Journal of Philosophy* 105, 10:591-610.
- Schaffer, Jonathan. 2006. "The irrelevance of the subject: against subject-sensitive invariantism". *Philosophical Studies* 127:87-107.
- Sher, George. 2009. *Who Knew?* Oxford: Oxford University press.
- Stanley, Jason. 2005. *Knowledge and Practical Interests*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sverdlik, S. 1987. "Collective responsibility". *Philosophical Studies* 51, 1:61-76.
- Tollefsen, Deborah. 2015. *Groups As Agents*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Tuomela, Raimo. 2004. "Group knowledge analysed". *Episteme* 1: 109-27. doi: 103366/epi2004.1.2.109.
- Tuomela, Raimo. 2005. "We-intentions revisited". *Philosophical Studies* 125, 3:327-369.

Weatherson, Brian. 2019. *Normative Externalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
