

Corporate Moral Responsibility: What Can We Infer from Our Understanding of Organisations?

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ABSTRACT. The question of corporate moral responsibility – whether corporate bodies can be held morally responsible for their actions – has been debated by a number of writers since the 1970s. This discussion is intended to add to that debate, and focuses for that purpose on our understanding of the organisation. Though the integrity of the organisation has been called into question by the postmodern view of organisations, that view does not necessarily rule out the attribution of corporate agency, any more than the postmodern view of the person rules out the attribution of individual agency. The postmodern view is opposed to a reifying, metaphysical view of corporate agency, but a semantic view of corporate agency would seem to sit more comfortably with it. A bigger problem for the idea of corporate moral responsibility arises from the fact that in Kantian terms organisations are not ends in themselves. In that sense they are not like persons, and this must limit their autonomy, and their responsibility. This aspect of organisations also limits their punishability. For these reasons corporate moral responsibility must be seen as more limited than the responsibility of persons.

KEY WORDS: agent, corporate, moral, personhood, postmodern, responsibility

Introduction

“Corporate moral responsibility” is a confusing phrase, with at least two quite distinct meanings. Many of its manifestations in the literature of business ethics refer simply to the quality of corporate behaviour. In this meaning a responsible corporation is one that behaves well – wisely, prudently and morally. However, that is not the meaning that I intend to deal with here. My concern is with its other meaning, that of holding corporations responsible for their actions

in the way that we may hold an individual responsible for their actions. The question of whether or not it makes moral and philosophical sense to hold corporate bodies corporately responsible – whether in fact the idea of corporate responsibility, as against individual responsibility, makes any sense – is one which has been debated for at least two decades in the literature of business ethics. I intend to add to that debate.

My starting-point is the issue as it has evolved since the 1970s. The main contours of that issue can be identified through the arguments of writers such as French (1979, 1984), and Goodpaster (1983) who both take the view that corporate moral responsibility is a valid concept; and through the arguments put against their positions. The essence of the pro-responsibility position as put by the aforementioned writers is that many organisations show characteristics equivalent to those which qualify human beings for moral responsibility. For French the crucial characteristic is that of agency. For an organisation this involves having an internal structure which can organise the knowledge, perceptions and motivations of the individuals making up the corporation into a corporate decision. The organisation also needs to have its own “memory” in the form of records. An internal decision structure that is able to organise all these elements, argues French, can create a process which goes beyond the sum of individual decision-making processes to constitute a corporate decision process. Herein is the basis of agency, and of moral responsibility. Goodpaster (1983) argues rather similarly that we can find cognitive attributes such as perception, reasoning, co-ordination and implementation; and moral



elements such as rationality and respect in many organisations; and that organisations can on that basis be treated as moral actors with moral dispositions.

Arguments against this position have until recently tended to be based on the identification of aspects of the corporation which are not reconcilable with moral responsibility. Velasquez (1983), for instance, focuses on the notion of intentionality, arguing that a corporation cannot act intentionally because the corporate “mind” is not in control of any actions. Actions are performed by individuals acting on the corporation’s behalf, and they are the intentional actions of those individuals, not of the corporation. The link between intention and action which exists in an individual does not exist in the corporation, argues Velasquez. Ranken (1987) focuses on the ability of the corporation to act in a way that is morally motivated. What might be referred to as corporate motivation is in fact simply institutionalised corporate practices, procedures and culture, in which the organisation is initially passive, and subsequently no more than reactive. That “motivation” is propelled and sustained by proactive, motivated individuals within or outside the organisation, and is not attributable to the organisation.

An intermediate position is offered by Gibson (1995), who moves away from the question of corporate intention, focusing instead on corporate irresponsibility and negligence. He argues that corporate intention to do harm will not generally be identifiable. What could be more easily identifiable is a lack of awareness of risk, a lack of concern, perhaps a degree of irresponsibility. These “dispositions” can be readily absorbed by the culture of an organisation or part of an organisation, and can be extremely difficult for individuals to resist. In such a context the organisation might be seen as having a moral equivalent of civil liability, where we would not be looking for intention in order to hold the miscreant liable, but rather a lack of care leading to harmful consequences. Gibson does not argue that the concept of intention is erroneous, simply that the concept of negligence is more productive. However, shifting focus to corporate negligence does not in fact remove the problem of

corporate intention. A negligent corporation is one that can be held responsible for its failure to act prudently and with thought to the consequences of its actions. To be held responsible for its negligent actions or inaction it must be capable of acting otherwise – in this context, of acting prudently and far-sightedly. And prudent, far-sighted action involves intention, even if it is only the negative intention of avoiding certain outcomes. So a culpably negligent corporation must be capable of such intentional action. The problem of intention simply returns by another route, despite Gibson’s efforts.

A more fundamental rethinking of the issues is undertaken by Ouyang and Shiner (1995), who focus on the arguments originally put forward by French, but who by implication reframe the entire debate. Their criticism of French is based on a specific fault in the logic of his argument, in that he derives metaphysical propositions concerning the nature of organisations from a semantic proposition concerning the way in which we can meaningfully talk about organisations. He makes an unwarranted leap from a proposition using a definition of agency which is semantic, to a proposition using a definition of agency which is essentially metaphysical. He bases a sequence of metaphysical claims about organisations on that foundation, which Ouyang and Shiner argue is insecure. In fact although their focus is on French, their wider point is that arguments for corporate responsibility and personhood based on metaphysical propositions are probably generally unsustainable, and that it is more profitable to argue from semantic premises to a semantic account of corporate responsibility. This has considerable implications for the debate in that it moves the focus away from a concern with the “nature” of organisations and toward a concern with their meaning. This issue will emerge again in the next section of this discussion.

I propose to consider two aspects of organisations which, I shall argue, have significance for the issues of corporate responsibility. First, I shall consider two contemporary models of the organisation, and compare them in terms of their appropriateness for the location of moral responsibility. Then I shall consider the moral status of

the organisation, and its implications for corporate responsibility.

Ideas about organisations

I would argue that certain trends of thinking about organisations support the idea of organisational responsibility as presented by French. For instance, the organisational learning model of Argyris and Schon (1978) suggests that organisations are dynamic systems which have the capacity to learn and to become more open in terms of acknowledging realities about themselves and their environment. In some ways this model treats the organisation as analogous to smaller groups (for instance families) and to the individual. Somewhat related to this idea is Sridhar and Camburn's (1993) model of organisational moral development. This is more anthropomorphic than Argyris and Schon, in that it deliberately and extensively applies a model (that of Kohlberg, 1981) developed to understand individual moral development, and applies that to the organisational context.

These approaches reify the organisation to some degree, viewing it as an autonomous phenomenon with its own dynamics and a high degree of independence from social and psychological processes at other levels. Some linkage can be made between the metaphysical emphasis of French's approach to corporate personhood and the reifying approach of these perspectives. French's concern with those aspects of the corporation that make its personhood real, though pursued in a different conceptual framework, strongly imply a reifying view of the corporation.

Opposed to this view is an approach to organisational thinking influenced by post-modernism. This approach includes arguments to the effect that organisations ought not to be seen as unitary organisms with centrally co-ordinated knowledge and purpose. Clegg (1990), Thompson (1993) and Willmott (1994) all in different ways suggest that the contemporary organisation should not be seen as what Willmott terms "reified entities" (Willmott, p. 122) but rather as shifting patterns of groupings and activities with uncertain bound-

aries and a contingent existence influenced by other factors. For instance Clegg questions the principle of impersonal corporate relationships operating independently of other social forces, citing the importance of family relationships in some Asian corporations. Writers like Handy (1993) have brought into the mainstream a view of at least some organisations characterised by "task culture" as systems of shifting alliances and collaborations, coherent but contingent with regard to the agendas of the participating individuals and groupings. These arguments and evidence seem to weaken the reifying approach significantly. The idea of the organisation as agent becomes somewhat problematic if what we refer to as the "organisational act" is the endpoint of a process of bargaining, manoeuvring, compromise or simply chance. So, we might argue, it makes no sense to attribute intention and responsibility to such outcomes, when they may not represent anyone's real desires or intentions, but rather the lowest common denominator or, possibly, the roll of the interpersonal or intergroup dice.

This postmodern approach seems to have something in common with Ouyang and Shiner's argument against a metaphysical exploration of corporate characteristics. If organisations can be seen as socially constructed phenomena, and are in that sense no more and no less than what we can say they are, a semantic approach as argued by Ouyang and Shiner seems to have considerable relevance, and argues against metaphysical speculation and reifying analyses of organisations, both of which appear flawed.

Organisations and persons as social constructs

It seems at first sight that postmodern views of the organisation are inimical to the idea of corporate moral responsibility. However, if we take the view that organisations are socially constructed and are what we can say they are, then likewise corporate actions are what we can say they are. A semantic account of corporate moral responsibility, recommended by Ouyang and Shiner, becomes the most realistic possibility. And I propose to argue that it is in fact possible

to sustain that version of corporate moral responsibility.

My first argument does not relate to what we can say about organisations, but rather to what we can say about individual persons – human beings. The Enlightenment idea that the person is a focused continuous self, a sharp discrete node of awareness which can therefore contain and retain all sensations, thoughts and decisions, has been widely attacked. Social and psychological perspectives on the person from writers such as Harre (1983), have re-framed it as a much more contingent and constructed phenomenon. From a psychological point of view we know that continuity of awareness is frequently interrupted and that memory is an unreliable and constantly reconstructed vessel of identity. Despite this we have not abandoned the idea of the person as the fundamental moral actor in our moral discourse. This is because we cannot find a substitute subject to the person, when seeking to attribute actions. To attribute actions to the superego, to the mind, to the memory, to the hypothalamus, all lead to nonsensical statements. As Lucas (1995) argues, personal agency remains the most viable basis for moral thinking and talking about actions. All the other factors I mentioned can be seen as ways in which we attempt to explain those actions – but not to attribute them. The element of free will seems crucial here and though we can identify numerous factors which influence our actions, there are relatively few which allow us to say that we did not choose to act in a particular way. Likewise the continuous social identity of the person, though socially constructed to some degree, is not prevented by that fact from allowing the meaningful attribution of responsibility for past actions. We do not have to reify the person to find that the logic of moral discourse reinstates the person as an actor.

If my argument holds, then the fact that organisations are also social constructs does not in itself preclude their having agency and responsibility attributable to them. It may indeed be a legitimate aspect of the social construction of organisations to attribute agency to them, not because they are “real” but because they are the appropriate subjects for statements referring to certain actions. The fact of their being inter-

nally differentiated does not mean that decisions cannot be attributed to them. We can find verifiable reductionist social and psychological explanations and analyses of the actions of organisations just as we can for the actions of persons but, as with persons, that in itself does not mean that we cannot ascribe agency to organisations.

Individual acts and corporate acts

My second argument concerns the relationship between the actions of individual corporate employees (particularly those at the highest level who contribute to corporate decisions) and the actions of the corporation. The argument against corporate responsibility in the postmodern organisation must be that corporate actions in that context may not reflect the intentions of the people running the corporation – indeed to speak of “running the corporation” is itself problematic. Therefore they are not in any sense intended actions, and perhaps should not really be called actions at all. However, I would argue that the intention of a corporate act need not reflect the intentions of any individual or group within the corporation. We can refer to the actions of the corporation separately from the actions of any of its employees, however senior. The statement “Corporation P did X” is not reducible to statements such as “Chief Executive A did X” or “Executives B, C, D and E did X” or “each and every employee of Corporation P did X” or even “The Board of Corporation P did X”. All these statements mean different things, and all will need different evidence to verify them. That is true however “tight a ship” the corporation may be, however much the goals of senior management and board members are at one with one another and with corporate policy. Each board member may be seen to vote for the corporation to perform action X, but they still cannot be said to have performed action X. As individuals they can be said to be supporting a particular course of action, but not as individuals to be performing it. Only the organisation can be said to be performing it. It may be that each individual intended *their* act, and

could be praised, blamed or punished for that. That does not mean they intended the corporate act. And the same is true where the organisation is not a “tight ship” – where the causal relationship between individual actions and corporate actions is less direct, more contingent and problematic – where we might see the post-modern organisation at work. If there is a corporate body to refer to, and a means of verifying claims about its actions, then we can refer to corporate actions, and to the possibility of corporate responsibility, however paradoxical, ironic, or conflictual is the relationship between corporate decisions and the goals of individuals contributing to those decisions.

Organisations and personhood

So far I have focused on the degree to which the corporation can have actions, and responsibility for those actions, attributed to it. I have sought to avoid metaphysical arguments in favour of arguments focusing on what can be said about corporate responsibility in the context of a post-modern view of the organisation as a social construct. I now propose to shift focus onto the moral status of the corporation where, I believe, a major problem for this idea of corporate responsibility lies. Our conception of moral responsibility is still heavily dependent on Kant’s formulation of the principle of autonomy (Paton, 1978). Kant argued that we can only make moral judgements on actions taken by autonomous beings, and such beings must be able to will that their actions become universal law. This requires them to be able to apply reason in identifying their ends and their duty, and a good will to do their duty. Such beings are ends in themselves, because they do not exist for any other purpose than those ends which they autonomously and morally choose. Any beings who do not conform to those requirements are not autonomous and their actions should not be morally judged.

Organisations are not ends in themselves. All organisations, even the most powerful, exist for a purpose. That purpose is the purpose of those who create the organisation, or those who control it. Organisations can never be ends in

themselves because it makes no sense to have an organisation which exists with no purpose. Such an idea is self-contradictory and absurd in that purpose, I would suggest, is part of the definition of “organisation”. Expressed in social terms purpose is implicit in the way we construct organisations socially. Organisations are ultimately people coming together in an “organised” way, and this can by definition never be purposeless. If the purpose becomes irrelevant – if it ceases to justify the existence of the organisation, then it is quite appropriate to bring its existence to an end. So organisations do not have the intrinsic moral value of persons.

Taking a Kantian view this would also seem to compromise their autonomy, and their ability to be held morally responsible. From that viewpoint the moral importance of the person derives in part from the fact that the person must choose her/his purposes entirely, as they have no “given” purpose as such. That choice involves the exercise of reason. Within that framework we cannot see organisations as autonomous and therefore we cannot hold them responsible. However, organisations differ from other non-persons in that they can have powers of reasoning attributable to them, along with reasoned choices as to *how* they pursue their allotted purpose, even though they cannot choose *what* purpose that shall be. Such choices can be willed to be universal rules. There is in that sense a second-order autonomy available to organisations, and that, I would argue, allows a degree of responsibility, albeit more limited than that of persons.

I cannot see a way that the problem of the organisation’s moral status can be fully resolved. It seems to me inescapable that in Kantian terms organisations cannot have personhood ascribed to them, despite their person-likeness in some respects, because they cannot be ends in themselves. But this does not stop them from having agency ascribed to them. Perhaps we should accept that they inhabit a category of their own which is neither fully person or fully non-person. This may seem rather too easy and inexact a way out, but I think it is possible to map at least part of a boundary between “full personhood” and “corporate personhood” with some precision. As

examples of this, two aspects of corporate behaviour would seem to require a quite different response from that we might make to equivalent individual behaviour, because of this difference in moral status.

The limits of corporate acts

One difference between persons and corporations concerns the range of actions which could be attributed to a corporation. Because organisations are not ends in themselves, but exist for specified purposes, I think it can be argued that actions which are not formally part of the organisation's purpose cannot be said to be actions of the organisation. The organisation can only be said to act where those involved in its activities – those who in a sense constitute it – operate within its purposes and requirements. If those people start to do things that the organisation does not exist to do – that does not accord with its basic instruments – they cease to act on behalf of the organisation, and become a group of people engaged in another activity. This is the case even if those people are coterminous with the directorate of the organisation. They cease to act as that directorate if their activity falls outside the organisations remit. If the management of the Ford Motor Company started using the resources of the Company to create a military force for the purpose of intimidating the US Government, it would make no sense to say that this was the action of Ford. Ford cannot be a military power. That is not what the organisation is. It would make sense to say that a particular management have hijacked Ford's resources for their own purposes. If this argument holds, it has considerable implications for our response to corporate wrongdoing, because it implies that the organisation can only do wrong in pursuit of its purpose. The organisation cannot be held responsible for actions that go beyond or against that purpose. In the case of such actions, all responsibility would be located with the individuals involved in these actions.

It could be argued against this that organisations *can* control their purposes and be in that

sense autonomous because all the organisation needs to do is to decide to change its purpose, and embark on its new agenda. The issue here becomes complex. Some organisations certainly can change their purpose by internal decision. If my amateur drama group wishes to transform itself into an operatic society it is free to do that, through amendment of its constitution by vote of the membership. That is an internal matter for the organisation. But the kind of organisations which we are mainly concerned with in exploration of corporate responsibility are usually not of this sort. Our concern is mainly with commercial corporations or state corporate bodies of various sorts, and they work differently from an amateur drama group in that they have their legitimacy and their purpose conferred on them by individuals or bodies who are in a sense external to the organisation – certainly external to its management and workforce. In the case of private corporations that legitimising and purpose-giving is provided by the shareholders. In the public sector it is provided in a number of ways. For instance, in the British National Health Service most corporate providers are set up by central government, which thereby confers purpose and legitimacy on that provider. These providers of purpose and legitimacy have been referred to as the organisation's "constituency" (Wilmot, 1997) and in this kind of organisation a change of purpose requires the agreement of the constituency. So if Ford's shareholders agreed to Ford Motors becoming a military power it would make sense morally to say that resultant actions would be the actions of Ford Motors, and Ford Motors could be held corporately responsible.

If the Board of a British National Health Service Trust, set up by government to provide health care, decided to go into the arms trade instead, by my argument this would not be an action of that trust, but of the Board members as a group of individuals. On the other hand if the government agreed to this development, this would be an action of the trust. Purpose is built into the definition of organisations, and particular kinds of purpose and powers over purpose are built into our definitions of particular kinds

of corporate body. So my argument rests upon the logic of definition, and the moral implications of that logic, rather than metaphysical claims about the nature of organisations.

Punishing organisations

The argument which I have just outlined places a boundary on the extent of corporate responsibility. However, it still allows a wide range of corporate wrongdoing, especially in the commercial sector, where the purpose of the corporation is to maximise its profits, and thereby dividends to shareholders. The pursuit of such a purpose can clearly be the occasion for wrongdoing of many kinds. Society and the state must respond to such wrongdoing, and it is this response which exposes the other major consequence of the difference of moral status between the corporation and the person. The fact that corporate moral responsibility is different from personal moral responsibility can be seen from the difficulties that arise in punishing corporations for wrongdoing. Because persons are ends in themselves and have the autonomy to choose their own goals, retribution can reasonably take the form of restriction in pursuing those goals, through financial penalty, restriction of freedom or loss of social honour. This thwarting is sufficiently aversive to constitute punishment, sufficiently personal to punish that individual only. On the other hand most personal goals are substitutable to a degree where the person is not destroyed because certain goals are thwarted. As French (1984) acknowledged, corporations cannot be hurt in the same way. Fines and other restrictions will hurt employees and shareholders as individuals, but will not necessarily hurt the corporation as a whole. I would add to this a converse problem, which is that more draconian restrictions (such as very heavy fines) might completely prevent the corporation from doing what it exists to do, and effectively destroy it. So corporate punishability is much more unsatisfactory as a concept than individual punishability. Pure retribution – imposing an aversive experience simply to restore the moral balance between

wrongdoer and wronged – really does not work on the organisation because it cannot be hurt in the same way as an individual.

However, there are other purposes for punishment, particularly deterrence and reform, and these may be workable where retribution is not. So far my discussion has drawn on Kantian perspective of punishability as linked to autonomy and responsibility. But this framework appears to have failed in respect of punishment. A different approach is needed to make sense of corporate punishment, rooted in the fact that the need to punish miscreant organisations must rest ultimately on the need to prevent undesirable behaviour by such organisations, and appropriate punishment in this context must be punishment that succeeds in preventing that behaviour, thereby preventing harm and promoting well-being. This alternative view of punishment represents what Hart calls “the utilitarian position” (Hart, 1968, p. 72), and is concerned with ensuring that the effect of punishment is to achieve the greatest possible diminution in harmful behaviour by organisations, set against the harm done by the punishment. This differs clearly from the retributive view that punishment must restore the moral balance after wrongdoing. In the utilitarian perspective, corporate dissolution may be quite an acceptable outcome, either as a deterrent to other organisations, or as the most appropriate way of preventing further harm being done by a particularly delinquent corporation. Ouyang and Shiner (1995) also argue that the morality of outcome is more relevant to organisational wrongdoing than the morality of action, and the prevention of bad outcomes is a more appropriate focus for the punishment of organisations than exacting retribution for the intrinsic badness of the action itself. This approach allows the state and community to retain the option of corporate punishment in a way that recognises the capacity of corporations for rational choice (because the effectiveness of deterrent punishment depends on that capacity in those who are to be deterred) whilst at the same time avoiding the problems created by retribution. One implication of the utilitarian approach to corporate punishment is that

my argument concerning corporate purpose becomes less important. If we are concerned with corporate retribution, it matters whether it was truly the organisation that was acting. If we are concerned with the deterrent or controlling effects of punishment, what matters is that the actions being punished are prevented in future. And it may be that to punish a corporation for the actions of its executives acting outside the corporate remit is the most effective way of stopping those actions. This may be unjust to the corporation. But as corporations are not persons, perhaps we can justify that injustice by the benefits that will accrue to many persons from the stopping of particular abuses.

Conclusion

I have argued that we can attribute agency to modern corporations, despite the complex and problematic nature of those corporations as social institutions, but that attribution of agency rests on what we find we can *say* about the actions of corporations rather than on the metaphysics of their “nature”. I have also argued that we should see the corporate responsibility arising from that agency as more limited than individual responsibility, depending as it does on a more limited kind of autonomy. However the issue of organisational punishability remains complex. If we cannot exact retribution from the responsible wrongdoer but can only seek to control or deter, we may wonder whether there is any point in worrying about corporate responsibility in the first place. I would offer two responses to this. First, concern with corporate agency is itself worthwhile. Although punishment-as-deterrence does not recognise moral responsibility in quite the same way as does punishment-as-retribution, it nonetheless does recognise the punishee as a rational agent, and in that sense the ability to justify the threat of corporate punishment may be a useful outcome of our reflections on corporate responsibility. And second, the location of responsibility is in any case a requirement in discussion of the morality of corporate actions. Our ability to understand and respond appropri-

ately to the actions of corporations depends on our ability to discuss and analyse those actions in a coherent way. Such analysis will be greatly impaired if we lack an understanding of corporate responsibility.

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