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## The Possibility of Group Ethics: A Defense and New Approach

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### Abstract

The first part of this paper discusses the two primary theories that have attempted to provide groups with moral status. By examining their respective methods for assigning moral rights to a group, I elucidate problems in both accounts, showing them insufficient in their attempt to defend group ethics. The corporate account establishes a group identity entirely separable from the identities of its individuals. However, this allows the rights of the individuals to clash with those of the group. The collective account asserts that the group identity, and the only source of a group's moral status, lies in the sum of the rights of its members, creating a group-as-a-whole. This, however, poses the practical problem of changing numbers within a group, and shifts in membership. I introduce my own group identity theory, the extension account, which provides the possibility of a group that can hold rights by virtue of its being made of autonomous individuals who all bear moral standing and are subject to the moral responsibilities relevant to their membership within the group. The extension account establishes an identity of the group-itself, separate from its members, but the origin of its moral status is extended directly from the individuals who comprise it.

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**Cover Page Footnote**

Note: Mr. Bishop's paper was selected as an Honorable Mention for Best Paper at the 2011 Undergraduate Philosophy Conference.

# The Possibility of Group Ethics: A Defense and New Approach

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## Abstract

The first part of this paper discusses the two primary theories that have attempted to provide groups with moral status. By examining their respective methods for assigning moral rights to a group, I elucidate problems in both accounts, showing them insufficient in their attempt to defend group ethics. The corporate account establishes a group identity entirely separable from the identities of its individuals. However, this allows the rights of the individuals to clash with those of the group. The collective account asserts that the group identity, and the only source of a group's moral status, lies in the sum of the rights of its members, creating a group-as-a-whole. This, however, poses the practical problem of changing numbers within a group, and shifts in membership. I introduce my own group identity theory, the extension account, which provides the possibility of a group that can hold rights by virtue of its being made of autonomous individuals who all bear moral standing and are subject to the moral responsibilities relevant to their membership within the group. The extension account establishes an identity of the group-itself, separate from its members, but the origin of its moral status is extended directly from the individuals who comprise it.

Philosophical discussion of the ethics of world issues in the past few decades has been considerably focused on what is called 'group rights.' The issue of group rights arises only when any party involved in a conflict consists of more than one person, which can be called a group. In the case that a group is involved in a conflict, two questions must be asked: 1) Can a group be considered an entity with its own identity? 2) Can that entity be considered to hold moral rights or possess moral standing? As far as I can tell, most evaluations of group ethics hinge on one primary category that aims to distinguish a relationship between the group identity and the individual identities of its human members in order to provide it with moral status, which I will call group identity theories. In this paper I will attempt to examine the common approaches to these questions, highlighting two specific group identity theories, and provide a new theory that both avoids the types of errors found in those approaches and argues that groups can possess moral rights separate from, but connected to, the rights provided their individual members.

Group identity theories try to establish that groups can have identities that could possibly possess moral relevance separate from the identities of their individuals. According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, there are two primary arguments for this type of theory: a corporate account, and a collective account (Jones). The corporate account is the conception of group rights that has been traditionally accepted, where a group, regardless of the people who comprise it, has its own moral identity. In this way, the identity of the group is entirely separable from the individual rights that each member of the group possesses. An important aspect of this theory is that the rights of the individual members of the group do not bear great significance on the rights of the group as a whole, and because of this, the body of the group can change over time without affecting its moral status. Take for example a business or institution that can be said to have rights, such as a college or university. It can be agreed that, although colleges and universities do have rights that other people and institutions must respect, those rights have very little to do with the rights of an individual student or even an individual faculty member. This could be a problem if the college arbitrarily decides that it is in its own best interest to eliminate one of its staff members, or one of its students. Then, the interests of the group would conflict with the interests of its members. It is plausible, then, that the rights of the group may outweigh whatever rights its individuals possess, favoring an unpalatable yet ethical outcome where individual moral status has little bearing.

Many philosophers reject the corporate theory because they find it extremely difficult to imagine a group moral identity that is not reducible to the separate rights of its individuals. Most of its opponents are advocates of a choice theory of ethics that only allows rights and moral standing to sentient beings who are capable of autonomous decision-making. A group, no matter of what it consists, and despite its possible right to be self-determining, cannot make decisions independent of its members, and therefore is unable to bear any sort of rights. This problem is one of the reasons that a more modern group identity theory has recently developed.

To counter the issue, the collective account does not separate the identity of the group from those of its members. Instead, this account ascribes moral standing by setting the rights of the group as the sum of the rights of its members. Therefore, a group can possess a moral claim only when the individual rights of each of its members conflate to produce a commonly held claim for the group. Although this theory avoids entirely separating the group entity from its members, it does set up a different, contingent, set of moral rights. These rights, however, are not limited to rights that members of the group can hold individually, since the collection of members can possess rights that none of them could have singly. Consider, for example, any sports team at a college. Any member of the team has the right to skip class in order to compete with the team on days where class time and competitions conflict. The right to skip class without reproach is not a right that any member of the team holds individually. Each member

only possesses this right as a member of the group where their individual rights both to be a member of the team and to be involved in team activities is added to form a group right to be excused from class on days when they compete. Although this is not a scenario of any moral consequence, it is a good example of an incident where the summed rights of the individuals in a group provide a new right for the group. This separate set of rights constitutes the rights of the group as a whole, instead of the rights of the group itself (as with the corporate account). By putting emphasis on the group as a whole, the collectivist theory avoids the possibility of neglecting the rights and interests of the individuals within the group.

Despite this correction to the corporate approach, the collective account has some of its own minor faults. By ascribing a group's moral status only through the sum of the rights of its members, we are saying the moral identity must logically change every time there is a change in its membership, whereas with the corporate account, the identity would stay the same regardless. The collective account is then not practically applicable to many groups which, in reality, we commonly assume have a moral identity, or at least rights as a group, e.g., against harm, such as the rights of an indigenous people to retain their heritage and culture. Although the members of this group are constantly changing, with births and deaths, and even people who voluntarily leave the group and adopt a lifestyle of modernity, we commonly think that the group right to maintain its culture holds true and does not significantly change with a shift in membership. Most people would even argue that the right of that group to retain their heritage is no less important, in any way, simply because of the loss of one member.

The difference between the two theories in the way they connect the identity of the group with the identities of its individual members is best understood through the analogy of Theseus' ship. The story goes that Theseus set out on a voyage with his ship, but that during the trip the ship incurred some damage. In order to keep his ship afloat and continue his venture, Theseus replaced some of the ship's damaged boards with new, sturdy ones. As the voyage continued over a long stretch of time, every single board of the ship was eventually damaged and replaced. By the end of his trip, Theseus was sailing on a ship that did not contain any of its original members, but while his vessel had undergone change, he had never set foot from the ship on which he started (Cohen). The big question, the question that illuminates the important difference between the two accounts, is this: Is the ship with which Theseus ends his journey the same ship with which he began?

The corporate account would argue that it is. It asserts that the ship had its own identity throughout the voyage, namely being Theseus' Ship, and that the identity of the ship did not change, although its members did. In this view the identity of the ship is not contingent on those of its members, because it has a purpose of its own. Inversely, the collective account would say that as soon as the first planks were removed and

replaced, the ship's identity was, at least slightly, changed. This makes sense if you consider that the vessel is not entirely made of the same pieces of wood with which it began, so the initial ship is not identical to the current, and consequently the identity cannot be the same. At what point though, has the identity of the ship changed so drastically that it is no longer Theseus' original ship?

Some errors are evident in both interpretations of the question. The corporate account would suggest that the idea of the ship, with the purpose of being a ship and carrying Theseus, is what gives it an identity and a set of moral rights separate from the identity of each of its separate pieces of wood, which, intuitively, seems extremely impractical. By this logic, it is the concept of the ship that makes it the ship of Theseus, and it does not actually need any of its individual components—initial or otherwise—in order to retain its identity as the ship of Theseus. On the other hand, the collective approach would suggest that the first piece of wood replaced carries with it the identity of Theseus' initial vessel making it a different ship, with a completely separate identity than the one with which it started. Considering the implications that these questions have when translated to the moral rights of a group, it is clear that both accounts have some issues that need resolved if possible.

A different approach to providing groups with moral status, one which will aim to correct the problems evident in both the corporate and collective accounts of group identity theories, must then be taken into consideration. This new approach I will call the extension account, and with it I will attempt to provide the possibility of a group that can hold rights by virtue of its being made of autonomous individuals who all bear moral standing and are subject to moral responsibilities which are relevant to their membership within the group. Unlike the collective theory, the moral identity of the group would not be a sum of the rights of its members. Instead, it is an extension of any relevant rights that any one individual in the group possesses. When I say relevant rights, I mean rights that the individual can hold in relation to the group. This makes logical sense only if you consider that in order to be a member of a collective whole an individual has to have a set of pre-existing rights that are pertinent to that person's membership in the group and held in common with the group's other members. More specifically, none of the individual moral values that any member can carry in relation to the group can conflict with any other rights of any other members. So while the sports team members all have the right to be excused from class to participate in competition, none of them could morally possess the right to force another player to skip the competition. It is important that, although this is a protection of a player's individual right to be involved in team activities, it is a right that is common to all members of the group and related to that member's (or any member's) inclusion in the group. Therefore, it is a right of the group extended from the rights of its individual members onto the identity of the group itself.

By connecting the moral claims of the group directly with the rights of the individual within the group, the extension approach precludes the possibility of encroaching on the rights of its members. The group's interests could not conflict or counter the interests of its individuals because any right that the group itself possesses is a derivative of the rights of its member. However, by extending the moral claim of the individual to the moral rights of the group itself, the rights are being extended from one entity, the individual, to another, separate entity, the group. Even though the moral status of the group is directly derived from that of its components, the moral identity of the group is separate, creating a distinction between the origin of moral rights and that of moral identity. Like the corporate theory, the extension account sets up a moral identity of the group itself. It may seem non sequitur to say that the rights are entirely contingent on the individuals, but the identity of the group is something separate. It may help, however, to think of it in terms of the classic argument against abortion. According to Marry Anne Warren, that argument is as follows:

Every person has a right to life.

A fetus is a person.

Therefore, a fetus has a right to life. (Warren 434)

Warren argues that there are two distinct definitions of a person in this argument. In the first premise, the word person refers to a morally relevant person who possesses full moral rights. In the second, though, Warren argues that the word person refers to the anatomical or biological definition of a person, which does not automatically provide it with moral rights. This distinction between the identity of a person and the origin of its moral status is the same principle which creates the distinction in the extension account of group identity theories. Like the corporate theory, the identity of the group is based on the idea and the purpose of that group's existence. It avoids the impracticality of separating the identity of the whole from those of its members by allowing the group to be morally relevant only through the rights of its individuals, and ensures that the rights of each individual are protected against conflict with the whole. In the same way that a fetus is able to develop into a person with a moral definition because it initially has the biological structure, a group is able to claim a moral identity, as opposed to a mere group identity, because its structure is such that its separate components have the ability to possess rights.

So, it seems that the extension account does avoid the glaring problem found within the corporate account, but I have yet to address the problem in the collective account of the group identity necessarily changing every time membership within the group shifts in some way. It may be best to examine this aspect of the argument with the analogy of the ship of Theseus as well. The extension approach would conclude that the ship with which Theseus ends his voyage still retains the identity of 'Theseus' ship.' Because the identity of the ship is provided in the concept of it, specifically the idea that Theseus



owns a ship and is using it throughout his voyage, and anchored by virtue of each piece of wood being made to fit the original ship (i.e. it has rights in common with, and that do not conflict with, the other member of the group) the identity of the ship does not change from Theseus' original ship. This means that even if individual pieces of the ship are replaced by newer, sturdier boards, the ship does not lose its identity. The new boards are meant to fit the original identity of the ship and have the capability of possessing the same characteristics as each individual component of the original, so the ship's components are merely changing over time, which is practically applicable to groups in reality. Any group must necessarily change over time because no person is infinite. Thus, the extension account precludes the necessity both of the group losing any moral status by the loss of any one member, or of the identity necessarily changing.

There are, however, problems with my own theory that, for the purpose of this paper, I don't have time to fully defend. For example, what if, instead of continually changing over time and finally becoming a ship that did not contain any of its original pieces, Theseus merely built a different ship with the same identity (the idea that Theseus owns a ship and is using it throughout his voyage), and the exact same form so that each component of the new ship could fit perfectly into the old ship. Would Theseus' new ship be the same as the one on which he began his voyage. The answer is obviously no. The ship on which Theseus began his voyage would lose its identity as soon as it lost its purpose. It would no longer be the ship of Theseus. Although the exact identity would transfer from the old ship to the new, they would not both possess the same identity at the same time. I think that it is also important to take into account, for the purpose of the analogy and not the paradox itself, the practicality of any group entirely mimicking another, with the same purpose and the same form. It doesn't happen. Another problem with the extension approach is that it is unclear how many members of the group can leave or be lost and still allow the group moral identity to remain the same. It seems reasonable, according to this theory, that no matter how many members a group loses, as long as the remaining members are together for the same purpose, that the group does not need to lose its identity, especially if the identity of the group is provided as an extension of the relevant rights of any one individual.

There are other questions about the theory that this paper has yet to address, some of which I have considered, many of which I'm sure I have not. However, so far my account of group identity theories addresses the glaring issues found in the other two primary accounts without presenting, to my knowledge, any of its own logical fallacies. It is not yet a complete theory of group ethics, but it does supply a sound method of providing groups with moral rights.

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