

Problems of responsibility

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A vicar in a hamlet of grape growers and wine makers had contributed significantly to their economic welfare. They showed their thanks by donating a barrel of wine to the vicar. Each wine maker agreed to contribute two liters of the best wine from his or her cellar, and poured the agreed upon amount into a special barrel.

The gift was presented at a special ceremony. The festive celebration began with several solemn speeches. Then the special barrel was opened and the first glass was presented to the vicar. To everyone's shock, the glass contained nothing but pure water. The atmosphere changed from one of festiveness to one of shame.

Who is responsible in this case? Each individual? No individual? Or shared responsibility?

In today's highly developed industrial societies, shaped by technology and advanced economies and highly dependent on institutions and organizations, the problem of distributing responsibility is becoming increasingly complex.

Individual actions are often obscured by collective actions, particularly when many people are involved.

On one hand, collective actions may be the actions of organizations or groups within organizations, referred to as corporate actions. On the other hand, collective actions may be the independent actions of many individuals operating independently but coupled by strategic and/or competitive conditions, referred to as non-corporate actions (e.g. the wine grower problem). Both actions have a responsibility distribution problem: attributing and distributing responsibility to individuals or groups.

Negative external, synergistic and/or cumulative effects may occur if numerous individuals or individual corporations make decisions that primarily respond to their individual needs versus collective needs. Actions or decisions that appear to be harmless as individual actions can lead to significant damages or even loss of valuable property when collectively executed.

The central question is how to distribute responsibility among and/or within groups and organizations. In contrast to common belief, collective responsibility cannot be analyzed completely in terms only of individual responsibilities. There is always a connection between corporate responsibility and individual responsibility.

How to distribute the consequences of collective action? It is imperative that operationally manageable models to distribute and enforce responsibility be developed. Operational and efficient measures, such legal sanctions as product liability and anti-littering laws, financial incentives including production changes and criteria for property rights for public goods must be developed and deployed.

The following should serve as a guideline for these developments: "As many laws, regulations and prohibitions as necessary; as many incentives, individual initiatives and as much individual responsibility as possible."

Another aspect of responsibility distribution involves the responsibility of corporations and some or all of its members as to how individual responsibility and co-responsibility — the delegation of responsibility, etc. — is determined. Ideally, for such corporate actions, responsibility can be determined or allocated. Corporations, their members and their corporate members, among others, also can be held morally responsible.

It seems necessary to differentiate between specific forms of individual and collective responsibilities. In particular, the latter should not be used to downplay or dilute individual moral responsibilities that are as important as ever. Both types of responsibility must be accepted and enforced.