

The Moral Roles of Organizations and Their Members
ESPF / PPE Workshop

- **Date:** Wednesday, May 29
- **Location:** Faculty of Philosophy, [Oude Boteringestraat 52](#)
Room Omega (ground floor, modern part of the building)
- **Speakers:** Stephanie Collins, Fabian Corver, Wim Dubbink, Michiel Eigner, Job de Grefte, Niels de Haan, Frank Hindriks
- **How to register:** If you would like to participate, please contact Michael Eigner (m.eigner@rug.nl) and let him know your dietary requirements (lunch is included). **The deadline for registration is May 17.**

- **Schedule:**

9.00-9.15 COFFEE & ARRIVAL

9.15-10.00 **Wim Dubbink**, "On Fulfilling your Organizational Role as Play Actor. Making Room for Moral Freedom in Organizations."

10.00-10.45 **Niels de Haan and Frank Hindriks**, "In Praise of Collective Agents"

10.45-11.00 BREAK

11.00 – 11.45 **Job de Grefte**, "Individual and Collective Corporate Responsibility"

11.45 – 12.30 **Fabian Corver**, "Explaining Collective Agency: Internalist Interpretivism"

12.30 – 13.15 LUNCH

13.15 – 14.00 **Michael Eigner**, "Corporate Moral Uneasiness"

14.00 – 14.45 **Frank Hindriks**, "The Corporation: Private or Public?"

14.45-15.15 BREAK

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15.15 – 17.00 **Stephanie Collins**, "Corporate Legitimacy"

- **ABSTRACTS**

Wim Dubbink, “On Fulfilling your Organizational Role as Play Actor. Making Room for Moral Freedom in Organizations.”

Counteracting organizational misconduct is an important motive of today’s research dedicated to the organization. An important segment of that research focuses on the possibility of enhancing the morality of the organizational representatives and – in view of that - the institutional make-up of the organization promoting the envisioned conduct. I argue that – paradoxically – in much of this literature, morality is left out of the equation. This presentation tries to compensate for that omission.

A proper conceptualization of morality would interpret the practice (of morality) immanently. It would thus highlight the difficulties and paradoxes one has to deal with in trying to use morality as an instrument of governance. Important among these is that human beings must be interpreted ambiguously: as free (unruly) and unfree agents (objects in cause effect relations) at the same time. The idea that we have to interpret human beings as ambiguous beings, morally speaking, has consequences for the ways in which we can hold human beings responsible in organizations. I argue that Ricoeur’s metaphor of the “play actor” is fitting in this respect.

Niels de Haan and Frank Hindriks (SCOOP Fellow), “In Praise of Collective Agents”

A collective agent can be praiseworthy without any of its members being praiseworthy. To support this ‘discontinuity thesis’, we focus on the role of motivation in moral responsibility. An agent who is praiseworthy for doing the right thing must have done it for the right reason. We argue that it is possible that the collective agent was appropriately motivated, while its members were not. Subsequently, we provide an account of corporate moral concern, which gives substance to this second discontinuity thesis about the moral motivation of collective agents.

Job de Grefte, “Individual and Collective Corporate Responsibility”

In collective ethics, scrutinising the link between individual and collective action is crucial. Current literature provides robust frameworks to connect these types of actions meaningfully, yet the moral dimensions of these frameworks sometimes remain inadequately addressed. This presentation addresses one such lacuna by extending Michael Bratman’s influential theory of institutional intentionality into the moral domain, focussing on the integration of individual and collective moral responsibilities.

Michael Bratman's theory originally concentrates on the dynamics of shared activities and the underlying intentions that drive cooperative efforts within institutions. It lays a solid foundation for understanding institutional decisions and intentionality. However, the potential of this theory to inform on issues of moral responsibility at the institutional level has not been fully realized. My proposal seeks to expand Bratman's framework to establish a clear line of argument from institutional actions to the emergence of institutional moral responsibilities. In particular, I will delve into how these responsibilities interact with the moral obligations of individual members within the institution.

This work is important for delineating responsibilities in scenarios that involve both individual errors and institutional failures. It provides a basis for corporate governance and the development of social policies. By systematically analyzing the interplay between individual behaviors and institutional directives, this model facilitates a deeper understanding of how these elements merge to form morally significant actions. The ensuing discussion promises to open fresh perspectives on assessing responsibilities, prompting a critical reevaluation of ethical accountability in complex institutional contexts.

Fabian Corver (SCOOP PhD student), "Explaining Collective Agency: A Defense of Corporate Internalist Interpretivism"

Proponents of collective agency often defend their accounts on the basis of an interpretivist understanding of intentional states. So far, most theorists rely upon the successful extension of Daniel Dennett's *Intentional Systems Theory* (IST) to organized collectives. This results in a black box approach to collective agency in which interpreters ascribe corporate intentional states based on the external behavior of collectives. In this paper, I argue that this approach is too restrictive and based on a problematic analogy between the *brain-mind* relation, relevant to interpreting individuals, and the *individual-collective* relation, relevant to interpreting organized collectives. I propose that the relevant sources of evidence for ascribing corporate intentional states must include knowledge of the intentional states and actions of individuals involved in the internal processes within such collectives. I develop a novel interpretivist account, drawing on recent work by Michael Bratman (2022), and in particular his notion of *plan-theoretic constructions*, which better captures the internal dynamics relevant to ascribing corporate intentional states. Whereas current interpretivist accounts are externalist, my proposal is a form of *corporate internalist*

interpretivism. I argue that the latter is to be preferred to the former because it is more descriptively adequate.

Michael Eigner (SCOOP PhD student), "Corporate Moral Uneasiness"

Individuals regularly face moral dilemmas within collective structures, notably in the workplace. Conflicts arise when individual moral commitments clash with role-obligations, compelling individuals to navigate between the lesser and greater evils. Many such situations can be captured in terms of moral injury and moral distress. However, both notions grapple with conceptual ambiguities and primarily concern situations where people are implicated in significant harm, due to which they experience major distress. To bridge this conceptual gap, I introduce the notion of *Corporate Moral Uneasiness*. This concept pertains to minor conflicts between one's professional responsibilities and personal convictions, resulting in minor psychological distress. Despite being a less intense phenomenon, moral uneasiness is likely prevalent within corporations and, over time, can significantly influence the moral compass of these collectives.

Frank Hindriks (SCOOP Fellow), "The Corporation: Private or Public?"

Milton Friedman maintained that the social responsibility of the corporation is to maximize profit. But he actually argued that doing so is, proximally, a contractual duty that corporations owe to their owners. Ultimately, it is justified by the invisible hand, which transforms the pursuit of self-interest in maximal social welfare. This is the unintended consequence of free market exchanges between private actors. However, publicly listed corporations are not owned by their shareholders. Instead, they own themselves. Furthermore, they are neither private nor free. First, the corporate form is defined by law. This means that corporations are semi-public. Second, the corporate aim is dictated by law. This limits their freedom and constrains their autonomy. The upshot is that corporations have a legal responsibility to maximize profit. So, Friedman was right only in that, as things are, it is problematic to expect corporations to contribute to society in ways other than profit-maximization.

Stephanie Collins, "Corporate Legitimacy"

Legitimacy is usually viewed as the purview of nation-states. Is it, therefore, a *category error* if we apply the concept of legitimacy to organizations other than nation-states—such as, for example, business-corporations? This paper argues that it is not a category error: we can mould the concept of 'legitimacy' so that it extends to non-state

organizations, including business-corporations. There is such a thing as a 'legitimate corporation.' On the proposed account, our application of the concept of 'legitimacy' to any given organization requires that we clarify the *proper function* of that (type of) organization. Therefore, the paper's analysis of 'legitimate corporations' provides a more general lesson for social ontology and social ethics: when extending a moral concept from one type of social entity to another, it will often pay to attend to the different functions served by those different social entities.