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Participatory Moral Reasons: Their Scope and Strength

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A familiar part of ordinary moral thought is this idea: when other people are conducting some worthwhile joint activity, there is a reason for you to join in on the same terms as them. Morality does not tell you that you *must* always do this, but it exerts some pressure on you to join in. It is thinking of this form that explains the moral pressure we feel to pick up our litter like other beachgoers, pay our taxes like other taxpayers, take on administrative roles like other members of the department, and put some money in the museum collection box like other museum visitors.

We also recognize moral reasons *not* to participate in bad joint activities—not to cooperate with a criminal gang, for example, or throw toxic chemicals down the drain. However, in this essay, I will focus on reasons of the first, positive kind—reasons to participate in worthwhile joint activity—reserving the label 'participatory moral reasons' for these.[1]

Participatory moral reasons do not always give rise to moral requirements. Sometimes they are outweighed: if my litter blows down the beach just as I get an emergency phone call, I should ignore my litter and attend to the emergency instead. But sometimes they do give rise to moral requirements, and failing to join in is morally wrong. Ordinarily, I am morally required to pick up my litter, pay my taxes, and (yes) take on my fair share of departmental administration. Here, I face the question, 'Why aren't you joining in on the same terms as

1. In Cullity (2018: ch. 11), I use this phrase more broadly, to cover both negative and positive participatory reasons. A 'moral reason' for you to do something, I take it, is a fact that does count morally in favor of your doing it, whether you like it or not.

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everyone else?' When I lack an adequate answer to that question, that can make my failure to join in *unfair* and therefore wrong.[2]

Various questions can be raised about these ideas. Imputing them to ordinary moral thought is not yet an argument in their favor. What can be said in support of them, and what is their relationship to the rest of morality? Elsewhere, I make an attempt to answer those questions, but in this essay, my focus is on a pair of questions that lie downstream, not upstream, from here (Cullity 1995, 2008, 2018: ch. 3). Suppose we take these ideas seriously: just how should they be developed and applied? The world is full of worthwhile joint activities, on a scale ranging from neighborhood book clubs to global climate action. So just which groups and which joint actions are the ones with respect to which I have participatory moral reasons? And just when do those reasons give rise to moral requirements?

In what follows, the aim will be to identify the answers to those questions—the scope question and the requirement question, I'll call them—by drawing out the implications of the simple pattern of thought I have begun by describing. One might wonder how much can be established by this way of proceeding. From something as broad and general as the set of ideas just described, can we really draw the resources we need to answer these two questions? I'll argue that we can. Starting from our ordinary practice of recognizing participatory reasons, we can ask what are the 'worthwhile joint actions' that it makes sense to see as giving rise to those reasons, and what it makes sense to treat as an adequate response to the question, 'Why aren't you joining in on the same terms as everyone else?' The essay begins with a fuller description of the ordinary pattern of thought concerning participatory moral reasons that I take as the starting-point for this discussion (section 1), and a fuller explanation of the scope and requirement questions I set out to answer (section 2). The central sections (sections 3 and 4) provide my answers. I will then turn (in section 5) to consider some of the worries these answers might provoke and explain why I think those worries are misplaced.

1. Participatory Moral Thought

Participatory moral thought is a distinctive kind of unselfishness that good people display in the way they relate to others. It involves thinking about what *we* can achieve when we act together rather than severally. A person who thinks in this way recognizes that contributions are needed from people situated like

2. For the emphasis on this pattern of thought in social and developmental psychologists' studies of human morality, see Graham et al. (2011) and Tomasello (2015).

her in order for a worthwhile joint action to occur, that the action is occurring because those contributions are being provided by others, and that this gives her a reason to contribute on the same terms.

This pattern of thought belongs to a broader range of ways in which appreciating the value of what *we* can do together can move a person to act (see Bratman 2014; Gilbert 2014; List and Pettit 2011; Tuomela 2007; Jankovic and Ludwig 2018).[3] For example, if no one is picking up their litter and the beach is getting spoiled, you could still think, 'We ought to pick up our litter' and be motivated by that thought to do so yourself. There could be various reasons for doing that: it might encourage others to do so too, or express your disapproval of what others are doing, or perhaps just be a refusal to join a bad pattern of behavior. But this kind of unilateral action is not *participatory*: it is only once there is a joint action that the question 'Why aren't you joining in on the same terms as everyone else?' arises and complaints of unfairness can be made.

Participatory moral thought implicitly works with a distinction between two groups. There is the group that is actually performing the worthwhile joint action—for example, those beachgoers who are actually picking up their litter. We can call this *the acting group*. And then there is the broader group of those who have participatory moral reasons to join in—those for whom, if they are not joining in, the question 'Why aren't you joining in on the same terms as everyone else?' arises. We can call this *the qualifying group*—this includes all those beachgoers who could be picking up their own litter. Participatory moral thought involves seeing that you belong to the qualifying group and that, because of this, you have a reason to join the acting group. The question 'What determines the boundaries of the qualifying group?' is one we will return to.

This pattern of thought is ubiquitous. We display it on a small and everyday scale when, arriving at a café, we each join in with the rest of the group in moving the tables so that we can sit together. And on a larger scale, we display it when we see that our environment and heritage should be preserved for the benefit of future generations, and we each see this as a reason to join in the efforts that are being made to do that. This way of thinking—recognizing the fact that a worthwhile joint action is being performed as a reason to join in oneself—is something we expect of a morally decent person.

I say that participatory moral thought recognizes reasons to contribute to joint actions that are 'worthwhile'. This is best interpreted simply in terms of whether a joint action is itself supported by sufficient reasons. In participatory moral thought, your attention is directed first toward whether there are good reasons for *us* to be doing something, and then treats that as a reason for joining

3. For discussion of 'team reasoning' and its implications for social rationality, see, e.g., Sugden 1993, Gold and Sugden 2007, Hakli, Miller, and Tuomela 2010, and Duijf 2021.

in. A joint action can be worthwhile without being optimal. The gift we are giving our retiring colleague does not have to be the very best way of expressing our good wishes in order for me to have a reason to contribute to purchasing it. And when a group cooperates to produce a public good, there is usually some respect in which the process of producing it is less than perfect—but that does not stop me from being guilty of free riding if I take it without paying my fair share.

This of course invites the question: Exactly what does it take for a joint action to be supported by sufficient reasons and thus worthwhile? But that question is too large to answer here. I don't see any way of doing so short of a grand general theory of what it takes for reasons for any action to be sufficient. What I am pointing out is simply this: in participatory moral thought, we do make judgments about whether a group's joint action is supported by sufficient reasons and treat this as counting in favor of joining in on the same terms as others.

This allows that the reasons that make a joint action worthwhile can come from many sources. They need not themselves be moral reasons. A joint action can be worthwhile because it benefits the cooperating group: putting the tables together at the café is an action of this kind. However, although here the reasons supporting the *group's* action are not moral (they are reasons of collective self-interest), the participatory reasons for individuals to join in are moral: they are reasons of fairness not to free-ride on the other contributors. On the other hand, joint actions can be altruistic—they can be worthwhile for moral reasons—such as when we preserve the environment for future generations or save a drowning person by rowing a lifeboat together.[4] In cases like these, where the point of the joint action is not to benefit the cooperating group, it makes less sense to accuse a noncontributor of free riding. Instead, the complaint can be put like this: either you fail to register the importance of the joint action or you prefer to leave it to others to carry it out. You are either callous or unfair.

2. Two Questions

So far, I have been describing what I take to be a familiar part of ordinary moral thought. If we take these moral ideas seriously, just how should they be applied? We can now look more closely at two questions that participatory moral thought invites: the scope question and the requirement question.

The scope question asks: Just which groups, and which actions of those groups, are the ones with respect to which I have participatory moral reasons? We can break this question into three subsidiary ones.

4. They can also be moral reasons to do what supports in-group justice.

The actions that generate participatory moral reasons, I have been saying, are 'worthwhile joint actions'; to be worthwhile is to be supported by sufficient reasons. But just what should we count as a 'joint action'? If a disparate collection of individuals scattered around different parts of the world each perform a random act of kindness today, then there is a group (that collection) and something that group does (helping the equally scattered collection of beneficiaries). Let's suppose that the help given is worthwhile. Is this enough to give us the kind of worthwhile joint action that generates participatory reasons for others to join in? If not, what is needed instead? Must there be a collective decision-making process by a group agent, such as a corporation that makes decisions through its board of directors? Or do the joint actions that generate participatory reasons lie somewhere on the spectrum between those two extremes?

The second issue is this. Often, there will be broader or narrower ways of demarcating *the group* that is acting together, and when we ask whether the group's joint action is worthwhile, this can matter. For example, suppose there is an earthquake in Haiti, an appeal for donations is launched to support those affected, and I am wondering whether my donation would contribute to a worthwhile joint action. How should I conceive of the group whose joint action I could join? Is it the group of donors to Haiti earthquake appeals? Donors to Oxfam? Donors to Western charities operating in developing countries? Australian donors to the Oxfam appeal for the 2021 earthquake? This matters, because these groups may have different track records. Perhaps the overall record of Western interventions in Haiti is bad while the overall record of Oxfam's humanitarian actions is good. So, whether there is a participatory moral reason for me to contribute apparently depends on how the group I would be joining is defined. How do we settle this?

The third issue of scope concerns the relationship *I* must bear to a group in order for me to have a participatory reason to join it. The world is full of worthwhile joint actions, most of which are remote from me. Some groups are sustaining worthy efforts to preserve the architectural heritage of Samarkand. The Toucan Rescue Ranch in Puerto Rico does worthwhile work; so does the Shetland Fishermen's Association. But do I really have any reason to join the actions of *those* groups? Doesn't there need to be some relevant connection between myself and a worthwhile joint action before there is a moral reason for me to join it? If so, what is that connection? Using the earlier language, how do we settle who belongs to the qualifying group of those who have participatory reasons to join the acting group?

Those are the issues we need to address in answering the scope question, which concerns which joint actions I have participatory moral reasons to join in. Beyond this lies the requirement question: When there is a participatory moral reason, what does it take for acting on that reason to be morally *required*—required in the sense

that it is wrong not to act on it? Often, apparently, acting on a participatory moral reason is morally optional. There is *a* reason for me to join the local volunteer park care group, donate to the Refugee Council of Australia, and contribute to the latest citizen science project, but (apparently) it is morally optional to do these things. However, participation in worthwhile joint actions is not always morally optional. If I ride on the trams without paying, my free-riding can be morally wrong. And if I could have helped to save a drowning person but instead walk off and leave the effort of helping to the other bystanders, that could be morally wrong too. So what does it take for participatory moral reasons to generate moral requirements?

3. The Scope Question

I think we can identify a set of answers to the scope and requirement questions by looking more carefully at what is implied by the structure of participatory moral thought itself. To explain this, I'll start with the scope question. This was divided above into three subsidiary issues. We can consider these in turn.

Which Actions?

The first part of the scope question asks: What exactly should be counted as joint actions? We can approach this by asking: If there are reasons of the kind that participatory moral thought recognizes, to which class of actions will they apply?

We can start with a general point. For a pattern of behavior to count as an action, there must be some end or aim toward which it is directed. This is not to say that all actions must aim to cause some further outcome, separate from the action itself: an action might aim to express or symbolize an idea, rather than to produce some further effect. But in order for what you do to be an action and not just a piece of behavior, there must be some end toward which control is exercised in directing it.

A joint *action*, then, must have an end toward which it is directed. We can next notice that there are two different ways of talking about what a group aims to do. When, at the end of the concert, the audience aims to get out of the concert hall swiftly and safely, this is a collection of individual aims—each person has an aim that could be achieved independently of the others. The orchestra's aim of playing the symphony, by contrast, could not be achieved by some players and not others: the orchestra's playing the symphony is not equivalent to what is done by any individual player. Participatory moral thought, as described above, is concerned with actions of the second type, not the first. It is a kind of unselfishness in which one thinks about what can be achieved when we act together,

rather than severally. So, the joint actions it is concerned with are those directed toward ends whose attainment by the group is not equivalent to what is attained by any individual member.

Participatory moral thought carries a second implication concerning joint actions. Someone who thinks in this way intends their individual action as a contribution toward what is done by the group—their contribution is not accidental. And, in being motivated by a willingness to contribute on the same terms as others, they recognize that others' contributions are not accidental either. They see that a worthwhile joint action is occurring because of others' contributions, and that this gives them a reason to contribute on the same terms. So, the joint actions that participatory moral thought is concerned with are those that are being performed because each contributor intends their action as a contribution toward what is achieved by the group.

Notice that this does not say that in order for me to have a participatory moral reason to contribute to a worthwhile joint action, the other contributors must themselves be motivated by participatory moral reasons. That would make such reasons impossible, since no one could have such a reason unless someone else had one already. Joint actions have to get started from motives other than participatory ones, and once they are started they can be sustained by a variety of different motives (as most actions are). What is required for a participatory moral reason is that a joint action is being sustained by others' contributory *intentions*—their individual actions must be directed toward contributing to the joint action—but this is compatible with many different motives for contributing.

For example, suppose all other taxpayers were motivated to pay their taxes solely by the fear of penalties for tax evasion. That would not stop their actions from being intentional contributions to the provision of public services: even if their motive for contributing is to avoid penalties, they can still prefer that the money they reluctantly pay does get spent on public services. And if they are paying, you can then have a participatory moral reason to do so too—a reason they can point to by saying, 'In failing to contribute to the provision of public services on the same terms as us, you are treating us unfairly'.

So, in summary, the joint actions to which participatory moral thought applies have two defining features. A group performs a joint action just when

1. each contributor to what the group does intends their individual action as a contribution toward the group's attaining a particular end; and
2. the group's attaining that end is not equivalent to what is attained by any individual.

We can call the end toward which a joint action is directed the group's *joint aim*—remembering that this can include what an action itself expresses and

not just the effects it produces. A joint action of protest, for example, could be worthwhile because it expresses opposition to an unjust policy even if it will not change the policy.

Above, we noted a spectrum of weaker and stronger ways of talking about actions with a plural subject: things that *we* do. The joint actions that meet conditions (1) and (2) lie in the middle of this spectrum. They require more than just coincident individual actions of the same type, like the collection of random acts of kindness.[5] However, they do not require the kind of collective decision-making process that makes talk of a collective agent appropriate. The practice of picking up our litter could develop spontaneously, or a worthwhile petition could be launched unilaterally by one person, without being initiated by any collective decision. The joint actions of keeping the beach clean, or sending a powerful message to policymakers, could nonetheless meet conditions (1) and (2), and thereby give rise to participatory reasons. What is required is that the joint action is being performed because of contributors' participatory intentions, but not that there is any mutual recognition of participatory intentions between any two contributors. We might all be and remain strangers to each other.

Which Groups?

This supplies the first part of an answer to the scope question: an account of the *joint actions* that are relevant to participatory moral thought. Building on this, let's turn now to the second part. What counts as 'the group' whose joint action needs to be assessed as worthwhile? This can be approached as follows. A joint action has a joint aim, toward the attainment of which individual contributors intend their own individual actions as a contribution. The group that performs the action is the set of individuals who act with this shared contributory intention. The identity of a group is determined by its joint aim, which is in turn determined by the contributory intentions of its members.

To see what this implies, we can return to the example of the Haiti earthquake donors, where there is a range of broader and narrower candidates for the group I could join. We can now rule out some of these as failing to constitute a group with a joint aim. I may be an Australian philosopher of Anglo-Irish heritage who donates to Oxfam, but the set of individuals who happen to meet that description are not acting with the intention of contributing to what is attained

5. We could imagine a case in which individual benefactors' acts of kindness were intended as contributions toward the larger set of benefits produced by them all. Then the account of participatory moral thought given here would attribute to me an additional, participatory reason for returning someone's lost wallet: that it contributes to a worthwhile joint action. I don't see that as an objection to the account.

by *that* group. So, it is not performing the kind of joint action I could have a participatory moral reason to join.

However, while this rules out some criteria of group identity, it allows many others. And it allows that these can overlap. When an individual performs a contributory action, it can be intended as a contribution to the joint aims of more than one group, and consequently the joint actions of smaller groups can be nested within larger ones. A donation can be intended as a contribution toward Oxfam's relief efforts in the 2021 Haiti emergency while also being intended as a contribution toward the humanitarian work done by Oxfam more generally, to earthquake relief globally, to Western aid efforts in Haiti, and so on.

This makes it a mistake to ask: Which is *the* correct description of the group whose actions, if worthwhile, give us participatory reasons? When contributors intend their actions as contributions to the joint actions of more than one group, each of these groups is potentially a source of participatory moral reasons. This creates two possibilities worth noting. One is that although a larger group's joint action is worthwhile, the joint action of a smaller group nested within it is not: Oxfam's Haiti relief work is doing more harm than good, say, but 2021 Haiti earthquake relief efforts, overall, are doing more good than harm. Then I have participatory reasons to contribute to the larger group's action but not the smaller one—that is, to donate to some other relief agency. There is also the converse possibility. Perhaps Western nongovernmental organizations' (NGOs) Haiti earthquake relief efforts, taken overall, are doing more harm than good, but Oxfam is an exception: its work is worthwhile, all things considered. Then participatory reasons are generated by the joint action being performed by Oxfam donors but not the broader joint action of all those who are contributing to Western NGOs. It is true that the narrower joint action is itself a part of the broader one. But this does not extinguish your participatory reason. It just means that the participatory reason comes from the more specific fact that your action is a donation to Oxfam and not from the more general fact that it is a contribution to Western NGOs.[6]

Which Individuals?

We now come to the third part of the scope question: When a group is performing a worthwhile joint action, what relationship must *I* bear to it in order for

6. I am not denying that the harm done by actions of the broader type can be relevant to whether the narrower joint action *is* worthwhile. For a discussion of this issue in relation to humanitarian aid, see Cullity (2004: ch. 3).

there to be a participatory reason for *me* to join in? What determines whether I belong to the qualifying group or not?

Again, we can approach this by asking: When a person engages in participatory moral thought, what does that commit her to? A person who thinks in this way recognizes the fact that a joint activity is worthwhile as a reason to join in on the same terms as other participants. So, when she is looking for an answer to the question 'What determines whether I belong to the qualifying group or not?' she should ask herself: What answer to that question did those who are now performing the action give? Prior to contributing, what characteristic did they recognize as qualifying them to contribute? What feature, possessed by group members before they started contributing, is the feature whose recognition by them explains why they joined?

The answer to this may be: being a beachgoer, being a tram user, being a museum visitor, having the capacity to help earthquake victims, being an energy consumer, having a taxable income, or being a member of the department. In general, there will be some description that participants see as qualifying them to participate in the joint action, which explains why they are participating. When this is true, my meeting the same description is what qualifies me to join in on the same terms as them. It is by reference to the attitudes of the acting group—the group that is actually performing the joint action—that we specify the defining features of the qualifying group—the group of those who have participatory moral reasons to join in. The qualifying group is the group of all those possessing the feature whose recognition has motivated contributors to join the acting group.

This sensibly restricts the worthwhile joint actions that I have participatory moral reasons to join. I need to be a Shetland fisherman in order to be a candidate for joining the Shetland Fishermen's Association. However, in other cases—preserving the architectural heritage of Samarkand, for example—we need to know more about the joint action before being able to say whether I belong to the qualifying group or not. Are the contributors a group of Uzbeks who are acting in order to protect their national heritage, or a group of global citizens protecting humanity's cultural heritage? In the former case, I would need to be an Uzbek to have a participatory reason to contribute. But in the latter case, I *do* have a participatory moral reason to contribute: it could be outweighed by other reasons, but there is something to be said, morally, for joining in on the same terms as other global citizens who are performing this worthwhile joint action.

It is tempting to think, in a case like this, that since the difference my own contribution will make to the joint action will be insignificant, the reason to make it must also be insignificant.[7] But participatory moral reasons are reasons

7. For a defence of this view, see Tannsjo (1989). For a survey of different treatments of this issue, see Nefsky (2019).

of fairness, not difference-making. Worthwhile joint actions can be performed by very large groups, no member of which individually makes a significant difference: the group of those who are reducing their plastic use as a contribution toward improving the state of the world's oceans, for example. If so, a reason to join in on the same terms as everyone else will be a reason to make the same individual contribution that others are making, despite the fact that no individual contribution makes a significant difference to what is achieved by the group.

4. The Requirement Question

This treatment of the scope question generates a lot of participatory reasons. That does seem to me an accurate reflection of the implications of participatory moral thought and, moreover, a plausible view. If I get out my credit card and make a donation to UNESCO, earmarked for the upkeep of historic buildings in Samarkand, there *is* something to be said for what I'm doing—in joining with other global citizens to protect the heritage of humanity, my action has a feature that counts morally toward performing it.

However, surely morality does not *require* me to do this. After all, there are many other no-less-worthy causes I could be supporting instead—more than I could ever actually manage to join. On the other hand, some contributory actions *are* morally required. So, what can be said by way of a general explanation of the difference between the cases where participatory moral reasons do give rise to moral requirements and those where they do not?

Wrong Action

To address this, we can start by sharpening the question. What morality *requires* us to do, as it is usually understood, is what it would be morally wrong not to do. However, talk of an action's being *morally wrong* can be interpreted in different ways. Here, I will concentrate on one of these.

We can call this the *inadequate reasons conception* of wrongness. On this conception, what it is for an action to be morally wrong is for there to be serious other-regarding reasons against it and no adequate countervailing reason in its favor. This leaves open various more specific theories of what it is for reasons to be 'other-regarding', an other-regarding reason to be 'serious', or a countervailing reason to be 'adequate'. So, the inadequate reasons conception of wrongness is a family of different views.[8]

8. Different views within this family make the adequacy of countervailing reasons depend simply on the relative strengths of the reasons for and against the action (Ross 1930: ch. 2); on

However, exploring those differences will not be necessary here. On any view within this family, whether it is wrong for me not to contribute to a joint action will depend on whether I have an adequate answer to the challenge 'Why aren't you willing to contribute on the same terms as everyone else?' Suppose we conceive of participatory moral requirements in this way—as depending on the adequacy of my answer to that challenge. What would count as an adequate answer?

Three Generalization Tests

When that challenge is posed, there is a general strategy of justification that can sensibly be adopted in reply. I can invite those who pose the challenge to consider the following possibility. Suppose everyone else had the same reasons as I do for not joining in. Could *we* all then collectively justify our not performing the action by appealing to these reasons? That is a yardstick by which to measure whether I am unfairly making a special case of myself when I appeal to these reasons to justify my nonparticipation. If the reasons I have are reasons which, were everyone else to possess them, would justify us in not performing the joint action at all, then I can invoke those reasons to justify not joining in without any unfairness. A permission not to join in under these conditions is not something I am implicitly claiming for myself as a special privilege. It can reasonably be extended to everyone else.

The thought here is that I can show that my participation is not morally required by showing that I meet a *generalization test*. My reasons for not joining in qualify as adequate because if everyone else had those reasons, we would all be justified in not performing the joint action, so I am not unfairly failing to join in on the same terms as everyone else.

This thought can be sharpened in three more specific ways, giving three different but related generalization tests that can establish that my participation in a worthwhile joint action is not morally required.

The first test asks:

1. If everyone had the same reasons as me for not participating, would the joint action be worthwhile?

whether the action calls for reactive attitudes such as resentment, indignation, and blame (Watson 2004: ch. 8); on which reasons must be recognized as prevailing if our interaction is to be governed by the exchange of reasons rather than coercion (Scanlon 1998: ch. 5); or on whether the action meets the demands of second-person accountability we are entitled to address to each other (Darwall 2006: ch. 5).

The case where my litter blows down the beach just as I get an emergency phone call gives us an application of this test. If the other beachgoers were all in the same circumstances as me, then we ought not to be maintaining a clean beach: we ought to be dealing with the more important emergencies instead. In those circumstances, the reasons for keeping the beach clean would be outweighed, so this joint action would not be worthwhile. Therefore, when I attend to an emergency rather than picking up my litter, I am not failing to contribute to a worthwhile joint action on the same terms as everyone else.

That first test is something I can sensibly appeal to when the cost of my participation—the cost to me, or the cost in terms of compromising some other important goal—is much higher than it is for others. It allows me to explain why that higher cost is relevant to the fairness of my not participating: it is relevant because if everyone faced the same cost, the joint action would no longer be worthwhile. It is only worthwhile because others do not face the costs of participation that I do.

A different kind of case illustrates a second test. Suppose what makes our joint action worthwhile is its moral value. A demonstration has been organized, let's say, in support of a more humane refugee policy. I am carrying an injury that would not be worsened by participating in the demonstration but would cause me a lot of discomfort. Then that could surely justify me in not joining in, but the answer to question (1) might still be 'yes'. If everyone else faced the same cost of participation, our joint action might still be worthwhile. If so, the first generalization test will not establish that I am not morally required to participate, but there is a second test I can appeal to. It asks:

2. When the reasons making a joint action worthwhile are moral reasons, if everyone had the same reasons as me for not participating, would the joint action be morally required?

If demonstrating caused as much discomfort for every other demonstrator as it does for me, going ahead with the demonstration would be morally optional: there would be no moral complaint against us for not acting. But then I am not making an objectionably special case of myself when I invoke my discomfort to justify not joining in. Earlier, we saw that failures to join with others in altruistic joint actions can be criticized as either callous or unfair. But now those criticisms do not apply. I am not callous, since the reasons I have for not participating are reasons that would justify all of us in not acting, and I am not unfair, since the permission I am claiming can reasonably be extended to everyone else.[9]

9. No such test applies to joint actions of collective self-interest. Such actions need not be morally required in order to generate participatory moral requirements. Here, a justification for not joining in is owed to the other participants, not to nongroup members.

That is a case where the burden of joining in is higher for me than for others. However, the second generalization test also covers cases where that is not true. Suppose that, of the many worthwhile public-spirited joint actions that are under way, I join a campaign for disability rights but not the local park care volunteer group. There is a reason for me to join the latter group as well, but I can deny that I am morally required to do so by appealing to (2). If the members of the volunteer park care group all stopped spending their time looking after the park and spent it on campaigning for disability rights instead, their joint action would not be morally wrong. So, if I campaign for disability rights instead of looking after the park, I am not acting morally wrongly either. Again, the permission I claim can reasonably be extended to everyone else.[10]

Now consider another kind of example. Suppose someone mows my front lawn while I'm out, then sends me a bill. They have been doing the same for my neighbors, and some of them have been paying the bills, since they regard this as a contribution toward keeping the neighborhood looking nice. What the paying neighbors are doing then meets the description of a joint action, and if they are not being overcharged for the service, the action could qualify as worthwhile. So participatory moral thought, as I have described it, implies that there is a reason for me to join in and pay too. *That* implication seems acceptable: it would be like joining the volunteer park care group. However, surely this kind of arrangement would not impose a moral *requirement* on me to pay.[11]

This can be explained by means of a further, third, generalization test. If we recognized a requirement to pay for the lawn mower's service here, then fairness would dictate that we also recognize a requirement to pay for any other comparable unsolicited service. Call that *fairly generalizing* the requirement. Then we can ask:

3. Would the fair generalization of the requirement to participate in this joint action be worthwhile?

In a case like the unsolicited lawn mower, the answer is 'no'. A commercial system that recognized a general liability to pay for unsolicited services in this way would be a disastrously inefficient way to run a market for services. So, I do not make a special case of myself in refusing to meet the demand for payment: it is a

10. Notice that when this reasoning applies to each of a set of worthwhile activities severally, that does not guarantee that it will apply to all of them collectively. The question 'Why aren't you joining *some* worthwhile public-spirited activity in your spare time?' still calls for an answer, and lacking it could make my failure to join any of them morally wrong, even though with respect to each of them my failure to join that activity is not.

11. For Nozick's use of examples like this in arguing that it is unfair for the state to force us to pay for unsolicited public goods, see Nozick (1974: 93–95).

demand of a type that we are all better off not recognizing. So, there is no unfairness in refusing to pay, and this is not morally wrong.[12]

This gives us three generalization tests that can help us to answer the requirement question. Passing any of these tests will allow me to answer the challenge 'Why are you not joining in on the same terms as everyone else?' without unfairly making a special case of myself. So, they supply three ways in which declining to participate in a worthwhile joint action need not be wrong. Perhaps there are other ways: we would need to exhaust all the possibilities in order to have a sufficient condition for when there *is* a moral requirement to participate. But this does give us a way of addressing the requirement question.[13]

5. Implications

Participatory moral thought invites the scope and requirement questions; but it also implies a set of answers to them, I have argued. Are the resulting views acceptable, on reflection? I'll now turn to considering some of the worries they might provoke, and argue that those worries are misplaced.

Conditional Participation

The simple picture of participatory moral thought from which I started—a picture on which worthwhile joint action generates moral reasons for individuals to join in—might seem too simple. Examples of the strategic dynamics of group participation encourage this reaction (see Dietz 2016). For example, consider a version of Rousseau's stag hunt (Rousseau 1993: 25; Skyrms 2001). Several of us have set out together to hunt a stag, and we are now just leaving each other's eyesight. Each of the other hunters has an incentive to go their own way and catch a hare for themselves, leaving me to waste my time pursuing a stag on my own. Before they do so, we are engaged in the joint action of hunting a stag. And hunting a stag is worthwhile: this is the action with the best payoff for every hunter. But isn't it naïve for me to commit myself to participating in the joint action if this exposes me to being abandoned by the others and going hungry? If this is part of 'ordinary moral thinking', then ordinary moral thinking needs to be improved.[14]

12. For further discussion of the third generalization test, see Cullity (1995: 14–19, 28–30).

13. Of course, we can be self-serving when we apply these tests, as we can in making any evaluation of our own behavior. Whether my action is morally wrong depends on whether it does pass these tests and not whether I think it does.

14. I am grateful to Stephen Finlay and John Hawthorne for this challenge.

However, the participatory moral thought described above does not tell me to behave in this naïve way. That implication is blocked in three ways. First, the most that can be directly inferred from a joint action's being worthwhile is that I have *a* reason to join in, not that it is morally required. Secondly, the participatory reasons I have in relation to a worthwhile joint action are reasons to join in on the same terms as the other participants. If the others' commitment to continuing to hunt the stag is conditional (either on not having the opportunity to catch a hare or on others' not defecting to catch a hare) then any participatory reasons I have will only be reasons to form a similarly conditional commitment. And thirdly, if enough other hunters are likely to defect, then our joint action of stag hunting ceases to be worthwhile. An action's being worthwhile is not settled solely by whether it has an aim, which there is sufficient reason to achieve. It must also be sufficiently likely to achieve its aim. If enough others are likely to defect, that will not be true. So, the joint action will not be worthwhile and will not generate a moral reason for me to participate.

Multiple Backup Cases

Sometimes, it can make sense for a number of different individuals to perform an action of the same type together, in order to raise the likelihood of securing an important result. If there is one drowning person, and several of us are standing on the side of the boat, each holding a life ring, it could make sense for all of us to throw our life rings in the water, coordinating our actions with each other, as part of a joint effort to save the person. However, it might seem that the earlier description of joint actions cannot allow for this. That description required that the group attaining its joint aim is not equivalent to what is attained by any individual. But here, if the drowning person reaches a life ring and is saved, they are saved by the individual who threw that life ring. So, our account seems committed to saying there is no joint action and therefore no participatory moral reason. That seems wrong.

I think that *is* wrong, but our account of joint actions is consistent with this. The group is doing something worthwhile that is not equivalent to what is done by any individual member—namely, making it likely that the victim is rescued. So, with respect to *that* joint aim, there is a worthwhile joint action that I have a reason to join by throwing in my life ring along with everyone else's.

Group-Defining Attitudes

In addressing the scope question, it was claimed that whether you have a participatory reason to contribute to a worthwhile joint action—that is, whether you

belong to the qualifying group—is settled by reference to the attitudes of those who are performing the action (the acting group). You are part of the qualifying group if you have the feature whose recognition has motivated contributors to join the acting group.

One might then worry about the following kind of case. Suppose a society consists of two self-identified subgroups: the Blues and the Greens. When the whole society faces a common threat, some of the Greens work to address it, thinking of themselves as contributing toward the Greens' addressing the threat. Doesn't the proposed view carry the implication that other Greens have a participatory moral reason to join the efforts to address the threat, but Blues do not? That seems unfair.[15]

This worry has a two-part answer. First, recall that groups and their joint actions can be nested. It is possible for individual contributors to intend their actions as contributions toward the Greens' addressing the threat and to intend the Greens' joint action as a contribution to what our society does overall to address the threat. If so, individual Blues still have participatory reasons to join the latter, broader, joint action, if not the former, narrower, one. But secondly, suppose that is not true. The Greens conceive of their joint action exclusively: they are intending their efforts solely as a contribution to a *Greens'* solution to the problem, and not as part of a broader action that includes any non-Green contributors. Then if I am not a Green, it will indeed be true that there is no joint action that I have a participatory moral reason to join.[16] The Blues are not treating the Greens unfairly by failing to contribute to the Greens' joint action on the same terms as other contributors, so *that* moral complaint does not apply. However, this does not imply that Blues have no reason to do anything about the threat. They may still have other (nonparticipatory) reasons to act to address it and to relieve the Greens of the sole burden of doing so.

Differing Intentions and Motives

Our answer to the scope question makes reference to the intentions and motives of contributors. Its account of joint actions explains these in terms of a group's joint aim, the content of which is determined by the contributory intentions of the members of the group. And its account of the defining features of the qualifying group—the group of those who have participatory moral reasons to contribute

15. I am grateful to Ryan Cox for this challenge.

16. This assumes that I cannot become a Green just by joining in their action—that there are criteria for group identity independent of participation in the joint action itself.

to a joint action—explains these in terms of the feature whose recognition has motivated contributors to join the acting group.

This might seem to rely on an unrealistic idealization. It requires that all participants in a joint action share the same intentions and motives. But within real-world cooperating groups of any size, the intentions and motives of individual participants are not uniform. The people who turn up to a climate change rally are not a set of psychological clones: some are doing it to embarrass the government, some to impress their grandchildren, some to make the voice of youth heard, and so on. So, if real-world participants in group action do not act with coincident intentions and motives, are the conditions described above for generating participatory reasons ever really satisfied?

In response, I agree that psychological realism requires recognizing that contributory intentions and motives are not uniform, but it also requires recognizing that contributors can act from more than one intention and motive. This was noted when it was pointed out that smaller groups and their joint actions (Oxfam's 2021 Haiti earthquake appeal) can be nested within larger ones (global humanitarian relief). I can be intending to contribute both to the smaller group and the larger one—perhaps to contribute to the smaller group *as* a contribution to the larger one—and when I do I will share the latter contributory intention with other members of the larger group, even though our other contributory intentions differ. This point applies equally to the attitudes whose content determines the identity of qualifying groups. Young people joining a climate change rally can be motivated by thoughts about what Australian youth can achieve together and by seeing this as part of joint action by global youth. What is required for participatory moral reasons is that members of the acting group have some participatory attitudes with shared content, not that their participatory attitudes fully coincide.

It is true that this account implies that if there is no such shared content at all, then there is no joint action and therefore no participatory reason. However, that is a plausible view. There is then no common set of terms on which participants are joining forces to act together; and the pattern that is distinctive of participatory moral thought—thinking as a member of the group and being willing to join in on the same terms as others—will not apply. We would then have a case like the random acts of kindness, where there is no joint aim to which participatory reasons could apply.

A corollary is worth noticing. A joint action exists only when there is an acting group whose members each have the intention of contributing towards the attainment of the same joint aim. However, this allows that there may be more than one qualifying group who have participatory moral reasons to contribute to the same joint action. For example, the participants in the climate rally may be a coalition of those who stand to be harmed by climate change (the young) and

those responsible for causing it (the old). By intending to contribute towards the same joint aim, this coalition can create a joint action. But there need not be any shared description, even a very general one, which *all* contributors to the joint action see as qualifying them to contribute. One acting group can contain several qualifying groups, which each generate participatory reasons to contribute to the same joint action.

Testing the Generalization Tests

I illustrated the first generalization test with the example of taking an emergency call while my litter blows down the beach. Applying this test, we ask:

1. If everyone had the same reasons as me, would the joint action be worthwhile?

Since the answer is 'no', I am not making an objectionably special case of myself when I ignore my litter and take the call.

However, suppose we change the stakes. We are in a deadly pandemic: I know that 90 percent vaccination coverage is sufficient to control the pandemic, that less than 10 percent of the population would have a severe reaction to the vaccine, and that I would have the severe reaction. We can also stipulate that, if everyone were susceptible to the severe reaction, it would still be worthwhile for everyone to get vaccinated: the pandemic deaths would be worse than the vaccine reactions. So now the answer to question (1) is 'yes': if everyone had the same reaction, it would still be worthwhile for everyone to get vaccinated. Moreover, this case is not captured by the other two generalization tests either. But surely I can reasonably refrain from getting vaccinated under these circumstances.[17]

This is a worry about what the generalization tests fail to imply, rather than what they do imply. My earlier claim was the three tests provide three ways of justifying nonparticipation in worthwhile joint action, but not that they are the only ways of doing so. So, if the three tests don't show that I can reasonably refuse to get vaccinated, this leaves it open that something else could.

Still, it would be good to be able to supply the materials for handling this sort of case. And, in fact, our treatment of the scope and requirement questions does give us those materials. Two candidate joint actions should be distinguished: getting everyone vaccinated, and getting those who won't have severe reactions vaccinated. Having made this distinction, it is clear that we have decisive reason to do the latter in preference to the former: the former achieves no more good

17. I am grateful to Dimitri Gallow for this example.

and does additional harm. So, we lack sufficient reason to do the former rather than the latter: the latter action is worthwhile, but the former is not. So only the latter action is one that I have a participatory reason to join.

Piling On

Participatory moral reasons, I claimed, are reasons of fairness, not difference-making. They are reasons to participate in worthwhile joint actions on the same terms as others. When a group is very large, those terms can include being someone who does not make a significant difference to what is achieved by the group.

This may seem to carry absurd implications. It can seem to recommend 'piling on' by adding myself to a group that is performing some worthwhile large-scale joint action, even when my joining in is pointless. In a rescue case in which enough people have already stepped forward to ensure that the lifeboat is operated effectively, it apparently tells me that I have a moral reason to add myself to the rescue team, although this will do no significant good. But isn't that a mistake? If my participation will make no significant difference to what is achieved by the group, but I can achieve something worthwhile by spending my time in some other way, shouldn't I do that instead?[18]

However, to see why it does not carry this absurd implication, we can distinguish between some different possible kinds of large-scale joint action. In one kind, there is a limit to how well the action meets its joint aim. Jonathan Glover's example (taken up by Derek Parfit) of a thousand people each adding a pint of water to a tank that will be taken to succor a thousand thirsty men illustrates this possibility (Parfit 1984: 76). After a thousand pints have been added, the tank is full. If I then add another pint after it has been filled, this will simply make the tank overflow and my pint will have been wasted.

In this case, we can explain why there is no participatory reason to add my pint by pointing out that it will not contribute to a worthwhile joint action. The first one thousand contributors together perform the worthwhile action of filling the tank. Once the tank is full, the group acts wastefully if it adds further members: it (the group) is then wasting resources that would be better used elsewhere. The group lacks sufficient reason to do that, so *that* action would not be worthwhile. After the tank is full, there is no worthwhile joint action to which I would be contributing by adding a further pint.

Having noticed this, we can extend the point to a further range of cases. Sometimes, a joint action will continue to meet its aim better as the number of

18. I am grateful to Katie Steele for this challenge.

contributors increases, but adding extra contributors makes a diminishing marginal difference to how well the aim is met. A joint rescue case could be like that: with each extra rescuer the likelihood that an endangered person will be saved may rise, but by progressively smaller amounts. In such a case it can also be true that above a certain threshold, the labor of the extra contributors would be better spent in other ways. If so, then again the joint action containing extra contributors above that threshold will not be worthwhile, so there is no participatory moral reason to join it.

However, not all cases of joint action by very large groups are like that. In a political protest, a fifty-thousand-person protest might be twice as effective as a twenty-five-thousand-person protest, and a one-hundred-thousand-person protest might be twice as effective as a fifty-thousand-person protest. If so, then (provided the protest is itself worthwhile) the group continues to perform a worthwhile joint action as it increases in size, and every additional person who joins in is contributing to a worthwhile joint action. This can be true despite the fact that no individual demonstrator makes a significant difference to what is achieved by the group. Since *that* is true of all the other contributors, my making no significant difference is not an obstacle to my having a reason to participate on the same terms as everyone else.

6. Conclusion

I began with a simple and I hope recognizable description of one part of ordinary moral thinking—the part I call *participatory moral thought*. One set of questions to ask about this part of morality concerns what further justification it can be given. Another concerns just how to interpret and apply it, and that has been the focus of this essay. From the structure of participatory moral thought itself, I have argued, we can derive answers to the scope and requirement questions with which I began.

Admittedly, this doesn't give us a full set of answers to all the questions we might have about when it is right or wrong to participate in joint action. But no one essay could do that. A discussion that told you what was *all* things considered right or wrong would need to cover all of the moral reasons that can bear on an action, so it would need to be a complete theory of the whole of morality.

This discussion hasn't taken us that far, but it does get us quite a long way. In particular, an implication worth highlighting is that participatory moral reasons can apply to joint actions on a very large—even global—scale, like action to address climate change or combat a global pandemic. Moral reasons to participate in joint action do not rely on the expected difference you make to the achievement of a joint aim. If they did, reasons to join in very large-scale joint

actions would be hard to come by, since the expected difference you make to those is very small. But instead, they rely on whether the joint action is achieving something worthwhile, what kind of contribution is being made by the members of the acting group who are performing the action, and whether you qualify as a candidate for joining in on the same terms as them. In large-scale actions where *no* individual contributor makes a significant expected difference, you can still face the question: 'Why aren't you joining in on the same terms as us?'

We have seen that sometimes, that question has a good answer: there are generalization tests that can show that the reasons you have for not joining in would, if generalized, justify everyone else in not performing the action too. However, in the cases of climate action and pandemic vaccination, there are few of us who pass those tests. So, unless there is some other good reason for not joining in, morality tells us to do so.

It is sometimes pessimistically suggested that our inherited repertoire of moral ideas is inadequate to deal with the challenges of a globalized world (e.g., Persson and Savulescu 2017). That repertoire of ideas, this line of thought goes, evolved to help us with the challenges of small-group communal life: it does not scale up to equip us to meet the challenges that require global action. But this discussion suggests that that thought is mistaken. The moral pressure there is to contribute to worthwhile joint action on the same terms as other contributors does not diminish as the scale of joint action increases. The question we are left with is not a question about morality—what does morality tell us is right?—but rather a question about us: Will we do it?[19]

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19. My work on this paper has been greatly helped by probing comments from Tom Douglas, Rebecca Brown, two anonymous readers for this journal, and audiences at the University of Sydney and the Australian Catholic University.

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