

UNITED WISDOM

Collective Punishment and Individual Responsibility

Relationships and Intimacy

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Epigraph

> *on their own merits*

George Orwell, *Notes on Nationalism*, subsection on indifference to reality. A fragment from the negative clause: Orwell describes judgments based on actions' qualities being displaced by allegiance to a side.

What this article is about

When one person's action affects a whole group, responding to the group as a whole can be tempting. It is quicker: there is no need to establish who decided, who could have intervened, or who learned about it afterwards. A shared label seems to offer a convenient explanation. Yet it combines different things: membership, influence, participation in an action, and an obligation to help afterwards. Without distinctions, blame falls on whoever is easiest to reach, while particular responsibility disappears among many people.

This article examines that substitution through a hypothetical voluntary community. It does not assess a particular armed conflict or establish legal guilt. Its question is narrower: how can we respond to harm without treating membership as proof of participation? A measure affecting everyone may sometimes be necessary to stop an unsafe activity. Several people may sometimes share responsibility for an agreed decision. Neither the need for a measure nor a shared history, however, establishes what each person did. Making distinctions helps identify both the harm and the actual obligation more precisely.

I. When a convenient label replaces an account of the action

Imagine a cultural centre where several independent workshops share a hall. During an evening class, a large window is broken. The next day, the manager, Larisa, announces that every member of that workshop must pay for the replacement and that their classes will stop until payment is made. Her explanation is that a group answers for its people. This hypothetical scene is deliberately simple: there is no established crime or official procedure, only damage, an organiser's instruction, and people with different connections to what happened.

The damage itself should not be minimised. Classes cannot safely continue beside an open gap, and money for repairs needs to be found. This does not yet establish that every member

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broke the window or authorised someone to break it. Nina was working in another room that evening. Denis arrived after the incident. Maxim led the class, but what he actually witnessed remains unclear. Artyom acknowledges moving a heavy shelving unit near the window. The workshop's name brings these people together on a timetable; an account of the incident currently distinguishes them.

The phrase about the group's responsibility invites everyone to stop distinguishing. It might mean several different things: the organisers promised to cover damage; participants jointly decided to move the unit; the leader failed to provide agreed conditions; or the entire workshop must now endure the temporary closure. Each claim needs its own basis. Until that basis is specified, a general word may help manage the situation while obscuring whom a demand addresses and what it concerns.

Orwell's essay on nationalism contains a historical, polemical argument: affiliation with a side can change how an action is judged. We use it as a philosophical warning, not as research into this workshop. The useful question works in either direction: would we describe the same action in the same terms if someone from another group had done it? If our account changes before the information about the action changes, the label is already doing some of the work that facts should do.

This applies to both accusation and defence. We might punish every outsider for one person's action; we might refuse to examine an insider's action because they belong to a respected community. Both moves remove the action from the centre of attention. The first step, therefore, is not to declare a group good or bad. It is to restore a short account: what happened, what is known, what information is missing, and what separate role each named person played. Such an account does not settle the dispute, but it gives the next conversation a definite subject.

II. Four different relationships to shared harm

Membership means that someone is connected to an association. Participation means a particular action: moving an object, approving a decision, issuing an instruction, or supplying resources. Influence concerns the opportunity available to that person to change what happened. An obligation after an incident may arise from an earlier agreement, an accepted role, or a new voluntary decision. These relationships may coincide in one person, but their coincidence needs to be demonstrated rather than assumed.

In our scene, Artyom directly moved the shelving unit. If confirmed, his action has a different connection to the damage from Nina's membership. Maxim might have had a separate obligation to organise the move if he accepted that responsibility and had the necessary authority. The title of leader, however, does not tell us whether he was nearby, could

intervene, or what rule applied. Influence also varies: someone authorised to stop a class and a first-time visitor watching it have different means at their disposal.

This examination should not become a competition to find convenient explanations. A participant may underestimate their influence, an organiser may overestimate a subordinate's, and witnesses may know only part of an episode. Questions about a person's role are therefore needed on both sides. Asking why someone failed to stop an event is insufficient. We also need to ask whether they knew of the risk, could act at that moment, had the relevant authority, and would have faced an unacceptable danger by intervening. We are not deriving a universal measure of culpability from a single characteristic.

There is also contribution after the event. Denis is willing to help fit temporary protection over the gap. This new action is useful, but does not establish his involvement in the damage. Nina cannot afford to pay someone else's share, but supplies a photograph of the unit's position before the class. Her evidence does not turn her into an obligated payer. Separating assistance from an admission of fault matters particularly when people fear that agreeing to help with repairs will later be treated as admitting everything.

The reverse substitution is also possible. Someone who caused harm may provide substantial help and demand that its usefulness closes the question about their earlier action. Assistance may matter for restoration, but it does not erase an account of what happened. Distinguishing the two lets us retain two statements together: gratitude for what is being done now, and the need to discuss the earlier action separately. Individual responsibility becomes more precise when subsequent contributions cannot purchase its removal and a membership list cannot allocate it.

III. A shared measure can restrict everyone without declaring everyone at fault

After the damage, the hall closes temporarily. Every workshop is affected, including people who were not in the building. This shared consequence does not by itself amount to collective punishment. If the open gap makes using the room unsafe, closure addresses the condition of the room. Its subject is whether the hall can be used now, not the moral character of each visitor. Maintaining that distinction requires a clear explanation of the reason, limits, and conditions for ending the measure.

Larisa could say that classes in the hall are suspended until safe protection is installed, access to other rooms remains available, and payment will be discussed separately. The temporary restriction would then have an observable endpoint. Once protection is fitted, its basis changes. If the organiser instead says that everyone will lose access until the group identifies

a culprit, the restriction serves a different function. It pressures people regardless of what they know. An apparently identical closure begins to operate differently.

A measure's meaning cannot be established from its name alone. An instruction may be called technical but remain in force after the obstruction is removed. It may be called a fair shared contribution, while people lose access for refusing to admit someone else's fault. Looking at the connection between the reason and the action is more useful. What is being protected now? Why is this particular measure necessary for that protection? What new information would change the decision? Who checks whether its basis still exists? Answers do not guarantee fairness, but make mismatches easier to identify.

The opposite difficulty also exists: any restriction affecting everyone might be called punishment, preventing discussion of a real obstacle. Nina can challenge a bill for someone else's action without thereby making the hall safe for her class. Different questions can have different answers. Distinguishing responsibility does not mean demanding the immediate resumption of every activity. It means that a temporary necessity should not quietly become an admission that everyone is culpable.

The cost of a shared measure also deserves attention. Moving a class may particularly affect someone who has already paid for travel or is available only at specific times. That cost is real even when the measure has a sound basis. It may be reduced by providing another room, returning unused payments under the applicable agreement, or specifying when the next update will come. These possibilities illustrate organisation, rather than establish legal duties. They show that explaining necessity does not remove the organiser's question about how its consequences are distributed.

IV. Joint decisions connect actions, not people's essential character

Now change the hypothetical scene. Five participants agreed in advance to move the unit without assistance and divided the roles. One held the structure, another directed the move, and a third decided not to clear the passage. They are now more than people sharing a workshop's name: they have a joint history of action. Examining the decision together is appropriate because a connection between participation and the event is known, not because the five represent a particular kind of person.

Even joint participation, however, does not make every role identical. Someone might have supported the move without knowing the route had changed; agreed only to the original safe plan; or left before the decision that led to the damage. Clarification does not necessarily exonerate that person. It establishes which claim they should hear and which question they

should answer. A shared discussion may be useful when it restores distinctions, and harmful when it forbids them as signs of disloyalty.

A shared obligation may also be accepted voluntarily. Suppose the workshop agreed in advance to maintain a small fund for damage to shared equipment. A participant might pay their agreed contribution despite not breaking anything themselves. The payment rests on their participation in an agreement, rather than a new accusation. Even shared payments therefore need accurate language. We can say that costs are being covered by an agreed fund. Without an additional basis, we cannot say that every payer caused the damage.

The importance of timing becomes visible here. Conditions voluntarily accepted before an event differ from a demand introduced afterwards. A new member may never have received information about the fund. The amount might be much greater than anticipated. Someone may have agreed to cover ordinary wear rather than any action by another participant. A reference to shared responsibility should therefore lead to a particular agreement, its scope, and its applicability, instead of closing the conversation with one formula.

Reasonable shared action can continue without a shared accusation. Participants can restore the space together, change the procedure for moving equipment, and discuss the organisers' roles. Such cooperation rests on a shared interest in using the hall in future. If everyone must first be made to acknowledge fault, admission becomes a ticket to useful work. This extra condition makes responsibility less accurate: people either say something that is not theirs to say, or decline to help so they can retain the ability to object.

V. Pressuring people close to someone does not clarify responsibility

The substitution becomes particularly visible when a demand reaches someone through their connection to an alleged participant. In our scene, Larisa approaches Artyom's sister, who leads another workshop: she must persuade him to pay everything, or her classes will stop too. Perhaps his sister knows Artyom well. Closeness, however, does not show that she can control his decision. The demand acquires a new addressee and a new threat, while the action needing examination remains the same.

Such pressure is often explained in terms of effectiveness. Direct conversation has not worked; a relative or colleague may be able to exert influence. Presumed influence, however, is not an accepted obligation. The organiser uses a third person's dependence on a shared resource to obtain a response from someone else. Establishing that the new addressee participated in the damage is no longer necessary. Being reachable and vulnerable to a restriction is enough. This change of basis distinguishes the pressure from investigating a shared role.

This does not mean that people close to someone can never help with a difficult conversation. His sister may voluntarily offer to pass on a message if doing so is safe and does not make her a permanent intermediary. Artyom may ask a familiar person to attend the discussion. Voluntary assistance, however, retains the option to decline and does not confirm someone else's fault. A compelled intermediary becomes both a participant in another person's dispute and an instrument of pressure. It is difficult to know when the assignment ends or what depends on their own actions.

At a broader level, the same question arises around reputation. A community member hears that their words cannot be trusted until their group answers for something. There may be real reasons to distrust a particular organisation, such as its own decisions or concealed information. Yet an individual interlocutor needs a particular claim: what did they communicate, confirm, decide, or do? Origin alone does not allow their answer to be checked. Abandoning that question turns a conversation into an exchange between representatives rather than people.

Transferring pressure can also conceal inaction by those with greater authority. The organiser who established the working procedure remains outside the examination, while an accessible relative is made to find money. Limiting a general accusation therefore protects more than an uninvolved person. It keeps attention on the actual points of decision. The conversation becomes less convenient, but gains a chance to ask what happened when the action occurred, instead of allocating today's pressure along lines of personal closeness.

VI. The harmed person needs restoration and clarity, not an arbitrary substitute

Refusing to declare everyone culpable is sometimes perceived as refusing to support the harmed person. In the hypothetical scene, Pavel, the owner of the premises, hears long explanations about roles while the window remains open. His frustration is understandable: abstract protection of uninvolved people should not be all he receives. Yet the choice between accusing everyone and doing nothing is false. Temporary protection can be organised, information preserved, and a well-founded allocation of repair costs investigated at the same time.

It helps to distinguish immediate action from the eventual allocation of obligations. Who can cover the gap now? What resources can be used without a forced admission of fault? What information is needed for the next decision? When will participants receive an update? Pavel then receives an understandable course of action rather than a promise of perfect justice. Nina can help or decline without signing someone else's admission. Artyom hears a question about his action, rather than about everyone around him.

Distinguishing questions should not become a way to postpone an answer indefinitely. Information can be collected for a long time even when the main connection has been acknowledged, leaving the cost with the harmed person. A temporary arrangement therefore needs a review date and an explanation of the remaining uncertainties. If Artyom has confirmed moving the unit, that part of the account is established. If the cost is undetermined, it remains a separate question. Uncertainty about the amount does not cancel an acknowledged action; an acknowledged action does not make every proposed amount self-evident.

Jane Addams's work on social ethics examines inequality in charitable relationships. We draw on this historical argument only in a narrow respect: good intentions do not give one participant an indisputable authority to define another's position. A damaged hall and charitable assistance are different situations. Their connection here concerns asymmetry: who describes the problem, who sets the conditions, and who pays for the consequences of that description? This does not resolve the dispute, but helps examine how the response is organised.

Restoration becomes more precise when an arbitrary substitute is not offered in place of the proper addressee. A shared payment might quickly cover costs while leaving the procedure behind the damage unexamined. Rejecting a general bill might be fair to Nina and still insufficient for Pavel. Both limits need to remain visible. One person's non-participation does not close another's claim; the seriousness of damage does not establish participation by every available payer. Practical work takes place in this difficult space between them.

VII. An objection should concern the basis, without defending everyone

Nina can state her objection narrowly: she did not participate in moving the unit, make the relevant decision, or enter an agreement to pay for such damage. She therefore asks for a separate explanation of the bill's basis. This is stronger and more precise than saying that the workshop as a whole did nothing wrong. That statement would require her to defend actions she knows nothing about, making anything less than a complete defence look like acceptance of a general accusation.

Larisa, in turn, can provide a particular basis. If an agreed fund exists, she shows the applicable provision and calculation. If she believes Nina participated in the decision, she explains the information supporting that belief and provides an opportunity to respond. If membership is the sole argument, this becomes apparent without a long dispute over the workshop's moral qualities. Such a conversation does not guarantee a concession. Its limited result is that the demand acquires an addressee and a reason that can be examined.

Not everyone can calmly speak with a person controlling an important resource. Objecting may risk exclusion, loss of work, or another serious cost. Advice simply to state one's position is then insufficient. Within a voluntary community, a written request for clarification, a chosen intermediary's presence, or a pause may be possible. When there is a threat, ending direct pressure and seeking appropriate support matter more than demonstrating the precision of one's wording. This article does not recommend enduring coercion for the sake of a properly conducted conversation.

Nor is there an obligation to represent every uninvolved person. Nina may answer only for herself. Denis can separately explain when he arrived. Maxim needs to discuss his accepted role. If someone remains silent, the others are not required to guess their motive or compensate for the lack of a response by acknowledging collective fault. Evidence about a particular moment and a statement about an entire group have different scopes. Preserving that scope is useful even when participants support one another.

Once the basis has been explained, the question of review remains. Who can correct a wrongly addressed demand? What happens if information changes? Will an uninvolved participant retain access after objecting? This last check distinguishes a real opportunity to respond from a formal invitation to acknowledge a decision. It helps examine the personal basis of a demand and keep responsibility connected to a particular action. Membership remains a known part of someone's history, but by itself does not answer the claim addressed to them.

VIII. A community can remain shared while its members give different answers

People may fear that refusing collective fault will destroy togetherness. If everyone answers only for their own actions, who will care for the space? This fear combines individual responsibility with a refusal of mutual assistance. Participants can share a purpose, fund, safety rules, and willingness to support restoration. They can accept new obligations for the future. None of this requires claiming that the same connection to a hall means the same role in every incident.

Understandable grounds can instead help people know the limits of participation. Nina understands what joining the workshop entails. Maxim knows which decisions belong to his organisational role. Artyom can acknowledge a particular action without turning it into a characterisation of the whole group. Pavel can see the procedure for addressing damage. This promises neither agreement nor a lasting community. It does, however, allow future conditions to be discussed without deciding every time which member morally represents everyone else.

It also helps to distinguish shared memory from a personal admission. A community can remember an incident, revise its rules, and publicly report completed repairs. An individual need not describe themselves as at fault for an event in which they did not participate. At the same time, the group's history should not be cleansed of an inconvenient action merely because not everyone committed it. A statement identifying particular participants is more precise than either a general accusation or a general claim of innocence.

In our scene, a possible outcome remains hypothetical. The hall is protected, expenses described, Artyom's acknowledged action discussed separately, organisers' roles clarified, and fund contributions used only within the accepted agreement. Someone may still leave the workshop. Someone may reject the calculation. We do not present this arrangement as a successful experiment. It shows which questions can be separated so that damage is not answered by the incidental membership of an accessible person.

Individual responsibility is not necessarily gentler than collective accusation. It may ask more demanding questions of the person who actually decided and acted, instead of distributing their role among many others. It can also limit an organiser's instruction when general discipline has become an explanation for every bill. Its point is a precise address: identifying the action, the basis of an obligation, and the limits of a demand. Membership can then remain part of someone's history without becoming ready-made proof of another person's action.

What this means in practice

If a general demand is addressed to you in a voluntary group after someone else's action, and discussion is safe, a limited experiment is possible: ask to distinguish the incident's description, the immediate necessary measure, and the basis of your personal obligation. You need not first establish the innocence of the entire group. Clarify your known role and ask which action, accepted agreement, or authority connects the demand specifically to you. An unknown part of the story is better left unknown than filled with a defence of acquaintances.

An organiser can try the same examination from their side. A short note can identify what is established, what remains unclear, why a temporary measure is needed now, and when it will be reviewed. Describe a shared payment by its actual basis: an agreed fund, a voluntary contribution, or an obligation under separate discussion. Do not automatically record help after an incident as an admission of participation. If new information reveals a mistake, correct the demand's addressee and tell those who received the earlier account.

The experiment's intended result is narrow: distinguishing the fact of an action, the need to stop an activity, and a dispute over the allocation of costs. It does not guarantee a fair decision and does not replace professional assistance where needed. Nobody is obliged to investigate a dangerous incident themselves, mediate on behalf of someone close, or purchase

participation in discussion by admitting someone else's fault. Stop the experiment if there is a threat, coercion, or no safe way to object. The option to decline it remains available without an explanation.

After discussion, check one particular result: did the demand change when its basis was clarified? If not, what information is genuinely still needed? This keeps the conversation from becoming an endless recital of moral principles. It ends with an understandable, applicable basis; an honestly acknowledged absence of one; or a decision not to continue unsafe contact. Even a small clarification can restore someone's ability to answer for what they did, and a group's ability to pursue shared work without an arbitrary accusation against everyone.

Key quotation

> *according to who does them*

George Orwell, *Notes on Nationalism*, subsection on indifference to reality; a fragment of his critical description of judging actions by a side's affiliation.

Connections between traditions

In a historical political polemic, Orwell asks whether judgments change when the side's name changes. Here, that question helps keep the particular action central. It is not a procedure for establishing fault and supplies no evidence about the hypothetical scene.

Addams examines the social ethics of assistance and the difficulties of unequal positions. The connection is limited to the structure of a response: a good intention does not make one's description of another person indisputable. Charity and damage are different subjects, and the same obligations are not established for every situation.

Both approaches support a useful editorial question: what grounds a demand addressed to this particular person? Their historical subjects differ. The distinctions between membership, participation, influence, and accepted obligation offered here organise that question; they are not a joint theory of collective punishment attributed to the two authors.

Sources

1. George Orwell. *Notes on Nationalism* (1945). A selected continuous portion, including the opening definition and the start of Indifference to Reality, was read in the Orwell Foundation version: essay text.

2. Jane Addams. *Democracy and Social Ethics* (1902), Chapter II, Charitable Effort. The chapter's opening and concluding portions were read; a limited historical argument concerning unequal assistance is used. Project Gutenberg version: book text.

Tags

responsibility, membership, collective punishment, shared measures, restoration, voluntary community, individual action, participation, influence, authority, accepted obligations, agreement, shared fund, temporary restriction, grounds for a demand, harm, non-participation, testimony, review, safety, pressure, mediation, option to decline, allocation of costs, assistance, reputation, shared memory, organisational role, particular claim, George Orwell, Jane Addams, social ethics

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