

A Pathology of Group Agency

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Abstract: Pathologies of agency affect both groups and individuals. I present a case study of agential pathology in a group, in which supposedly rogue members of a group act in light of what they take the group’s interests and attitudes to be, but in a way that goes against the group’s explicitly stated agential point of view. I consider several practical concerns brought out by rogue member action in the context of a group agent, focusing in particular on how it undermines the agency of the group and whether or not the group agent itself may be responsible for it.

Keywords: group agency, autonomous action, collective responsibility, blameworthiness

In *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, after noting that he rarely breaks anything, Freud recounts the story of clumsily knocking over the inkpot on his desk.¹ Looking for an explanation of this uncharacteristic behaviour, he remembers that his sister visited him earlier that day and commented on the state of his desk, remarking that the only thing out of place is the doomed inkpot and insinuating that she will buy him a new one. Freud’s analysis of the case is that knocking the inkpot off the desk isn’t clumsy after all, since it is a means to a desired end, speeding up his sister’s purchase. Despite being purposive and something that Freud brings about, breaking the inkpot falls short of being an autonomous action. It may have been caused by a desire for a new inkpot and a belief that breaking the one he had would result in getting a new one, but that belief-desire pair was somehow rogue, causing the behaviour through a mechanism that doesn’t properly involve him as an agent. But it is also not simply something Freud undergoes, like a spasm or a tic, or something wholly external, like the wind blowing him over. Knocking over the inkpot is something Freud does, just not autonomously. To mark this distinction, I’ll use “action” for autonomous action, and “activity” for this kind of non-autonomous doing.²

The story Freud tells captures the agential experience of having our agency called into question by attitudes or behaviours of ours that we don’t endorse

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1. Freud 2001: 167–68. The title of the chapter in which this story is told is translated as “Bungled Actions” (*Das Vergreifen*).
 2. These labels are used in the same way in Frankfurt 1988: 58. This case is employed to draw the same distinction in Velleman 2015: 12–13.

or employ in deliberation, although in a more mundane way than familiar examples of addiction, obsession, and compulsion. Activities are deviations from proper agential functioning. As isolated occurrences, these deviations are often unnoticed or minor hiccups, used to populate stories like Freud's. But when they regularly occur for an agent in a discernible pattern, it starts to undermine that agent's agency, as the more serious examples just mentioned suggest. We can think of a regular occurrence of a deviation from proper agential functioning as a pathology of agency.³ Pathologies of agency affect both individuals and groups. In the same way individual agency is undermined by an unacknowledged part of an individual regularly acting in place of the agent, so too is group agency undermined by unauthorized members of the group regularly acting in place of it.

Group action is not usually an exercise of complete unity between agreeable and dedicated contributors diligently working together without any interruptions, unwillingness, or outright dissent. Sometimes group members are simply unmotivated or unconvinced of the worth of the group, for good reason or not. In which case, the group may struggle to achieve its ends, but this is a matter of apathy rather than pathology. At other times, though, some seemingly uncooperative agents in a group context may genuinely have the group's interests at heart, and be highly motivated to advance them. They may be acting the way they do because they are trying to institute a change in line with their perception of what would be good for the group. Further, their actions may be brought about by way of the structure of the group, the patterns, interactions and connections it creates between its members. This places such agents in an ambiguous relation to the groups of which they are a part. They are members of the group and, although unauthorized by the larger whole, they nonetheless act on account of their membership and with the group's aims, or what they take its aims to be, in mind. These members may be no less effective at achieving the group's unendorsed aims than Freud's rogue belief-desire pair is at causing his sister to buy him a new ink pot.

There is a similarity between Freud's rogue desires and unauthorized group members, a similarity explored in part by way of a case study presented in the next section. I'll argue that such members' actions amount to group activity. The group activity from the case study is, unlike Freud's, not a one-off occurrence. It is a repeated behaviour of the group in question, and therefore, I'll claim, a group pathology, for which the group may be responsible.

3. There are two potentially misleading connotations of the word "pathology": medical and social. That is, one could see the following discussion as an attempt to "diagnose" a group with an illness, as, for example, in Hoffman 2019, or as an attempt to appeal to the idea of social pathology in the sense of Honneth 2014 to understand the behaviour of groups. Neither is intended by the use of "pathology" in this paper. Instead, the intended meaning is a structural deviation from a norm, and the scope is restricted to agency.

1. A Pathological Group

On August 12, 2017, at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, Alex Michal Ramos participated in a brutal assault of DeAndre Harris. Ramos was arrested a few days later in Georgia. For his individual role, he was convicted and sentenced to six years in prison on May 3, 2018.⁴

Ramos is an associate⁵ of the Atlanta chapter of the Proud Boys, a far-right, neo-fascist organization that promotes political violence and is active in the United States, Australia, and the UK, among others. It has thousands of members,⁶ a strict set of conditions for membership,⁷ a hierarchical organizational structure lead by a chairman and an Elder Chapter,⁸ and a uniform consisting of a black Fred Perry polo with neon yellow piping. At one time, it had an official website that disseminated the group's position on a variety of issues, related their recent activities, and listed a professional staff, including a Production Director and a Web Content Manager.⁹ According to their self-conception, they are not a white supremacist group. Instead, they are "Western Chauvinists." As put forward in an article meant to give the definitive statement, being a western chauvinist means that, in a "proud and unabashed" manner, one "is a proponent of Western Civilization, someone who supports a secular government whose legal code is informed by Judeo-Christian ethics and whose origins lie in the Greco-Roman tradition of the republic."¹⁰ And, the same article clarifies, "It has nothing to do with race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, or even national origin."¹¹

In part because of this self-conception, the leader of the Proud Boys at the time, Gavin McInnes, formally disavowed the Unite the Right rally, which he thought had too much white supremacist involvement, three months before it took place.¹² After the events of the rally, and all the backlash those events caused, McInnes's attempts to distance the Proud Boys from white supremacy intensified. In a blog post entitled, "We Are Not Alt-Right," he suggests that you cannot see a Proud Boy at an Alt-right rally, including the Unite the Right rally, because "You either see someone who used to be a Proud Boy or someone who is dressed the same as us."¹³ And, in a TV interview, McInnes claims that "If anyone from our group showed up at Unite the Right, they were in-

4. Shapira 2018.

5. NJToday 2018.

6. Southern Poverty Law Center 2021.

7. Morlin 2017.

8. Crosbie 2018.

9. Culklin 2017. The website has since been taken down.

10. Elders 2019.

11. Ibid.

12. Houpt 2017.

13. McInnes 2017.

stantly booted, never spoken to again, ex-persona non-grata.”¹⁴ Despite this claim, there are current members who have admitted to attending the rally, including McInnes’s eventual replacement as the leader of the Proud Boys, Enrique Tarrío.¹⁵ Perhaps more damning, the organizer of the Unite the Right rally, Jason Kessler, is a former Proud Boys member and, according to some reports, was a member at the time of planning it.¹⁶ He also repeatedly appeared on Gavin McInnes’s TV show, before the rally to promote it and after the rally to answer for it.¹⁷

In the aftermath of Charlottesville, much of the discussion centered around the following question: are the Proud Boys, as a group, responsible for Ramos’s (and other members’¹⁸) action?¹⁹ A version of this thought is tentatively approached by Dante Nero, a former member of the Proud Boys sometimes described as the Proud Boys’ “Pope.”²⁰

Everybody is not perpetuating violence, but the complicitness in knowing that there’s violence going on, the complicitness in that you’re not checking people who have racist and violent tendencies makes you part of the problem. . . . So is . . . the Proud Boys solely responsible for Charlottesville? Absolutely not. There are members who just—I’m quite sure there are members who just joined because their friend was in it . . . [but] the philosophy emboldens that. It makes a safe haven for those kinds of racist ideas.

What is particularly interesting about that quote is the way in which Nero uses the concept of complicity. We usually think of an individual being complicit in the behaviour of a group to which that individual stands in some relation. But Nero’s point is about the *group’s* complicity in the behaviour of its members.

We should, of course, be skeptical of the Proud Boys’ denial of the claim that they are a white supremacist group. But the Proud Boys are important precisely because of this denial, which gives their position a certain ambiguity that in turn leads to a sales pitch for potential members that is more widely appealing than explicit white supremacy. The success the Proud Boys have had recruiting members shows that there is a pool of aggrieved (mostly, but not all, white) men, who do not think of themselves as racist, but share a set of attitudes on cultural issues. Dante Nero is a prime example, a black man who joined the group, going so far as to get a Proud Boys tattoo on his neck, largely because he thought it has the correct position on cultural issues. Further, this

14. ABC News 2018.

15. Ibid. For two days between Tarrío and McInnes, Jason Lee Van Dyke was leader (Merlan, 2018).

16. Lind 2017.

17. ABC News 2018.

18. I’m ignoring the distinction between being an associate (like Ramos) and being a member.

19. One headline explicitly attributed participation in the rally to the Proud Boys, see ABC News 2018.

20. Ibid.

ambiguity has tempered the reactions of law enforcement, at least in the USA. After several news organizations, including the *Washington Post* and NPR, reported that the FBI classifies the Proud Boys as an extremist group with ties to white nationalism, the FBI released an official statement denying that the Proud Boys are so classified.²¹ Whether or not the participation of members of the Proud Boys in white supremacist rallies is an activity of the group is crucial to evaluating their denial and the FBI's classification.

Just as knocking over the inkpot is an activity of Freud's, attending a white supremacist rally is an activity of the Proud Boys. Both Freud and the Proud Boys passively do something that fails to rise to the level of autonomous action. But this is where the similarity ends. We may assume that Freud doesn't regularly go around knocking over his household objects. For the Proud Boys, on the other hand, this isn't an irregular occurrence. The Unite the Right rally is just one of several white supremacist rallies with Proud Boys attendance,²² including the January 6, 2021, incident at the United States Capitol.²³ The behaviour of the Proud Boys at these events reveals something about the character of the group, something that the group doesn't want to admit to itself or denies in its official statements for public relations purposes. The racist and violent tendencies of its members are not a coincidence, not an oversight, and certainly not an unwelcome invasion of an otherwise respectable group. The failure to recognize this discernible pattern of behaviour or the duplicity in refusing to acknowledge and address it as a group not only undermines the Proud Boys' ability to function as an agent, it raises the question whether moral condemnation is warranted.

Nero may be right that the Proud Boys are not responsible for the rally itself. But the relevant questions are whether it participated in the rally, and if so, whether it is responsible for that participation. If it is responsible, that responsibility stems from Nero's idea: the group's organization results in its members' participation, even if such participation isn't an endorsed part of the group's purpose, because of the structure of relations the group creates between its members. Making this thought plausible requires answering three questions raised by the previous discussion in more detail: How can we make sense of the idea of group activity? What makes a group activity pathological? And under what conditions is a group responsible for its activities?

21. McMillan and Rosenberg 2018.

22. Anti-Defamation League 2020.

23. Benner and Feuer 2021.

2. (Group) Agency, Control, and Implicit Programming

Pathological activity is a deficient form of agency, and for the case study, group agency in particular. A fundamental feature of autonomous agency, individual or group, is the ability to make decisions and then act in light of those decisions. Being an agent in this sense then requires having a set of attitudes, things like beliefs, desires, preferences, values, aims, and so on, which I'll call the agent's "point of view,"²⁴ and, at least sometimes, working from that point of view to a judgment about what to do now or in the future. When an agent does something not in line with this point of view, it is criticisable from a rational perspective. Further, there are several plausible requirements of rationality on the point of view itself, for example having transitive preferences or intending the necessary means to chosen ends. These may be combined into a general idea of rational unity. Rational unity is the inescapable, internal normative standard of agency,²⁵ and commits an agent to taking steps to rationally unify their point of view and, through their judgments about what they have reason to do, bring their actions in line with it.

Some groups of human beings, as groups, are capable of establishing a point of view and acting on it rationally.²⁶ Maintaining a minimally rational point of view requires a way of generating the attitudes that comprise the point of view, a group-level decision-making procedure that moves from the attitudes to judgments about what to do, and mechanisms guiding the group's behaviour on account of those judgments. In many cases, the decision-making procedure is explicit, as are the membership conditions of the group, entry and exit, and the organizational structure of the group that generates the attitudes and executes the actions.²⁷ Groups act through their members, and when a group acts autonomously, those members are authorized by the group's organizational structure.

An action is autonomous only if its agent has control over it. This creates a special problem for groups. When an individual agent does something autonomously, there is no other candidate for control over the action that is also an agent. For groups, there is more than one possible agential controller. The member (or members) who enacts the group plan is also an agent, and so also has control over what they do. In fact, it is a stricter sense of control because

24. This understanding of a point of view is developed in the work of Carol Rovane. Consult, for example, Rovane 2005 for a general discussion and Rovane 2014 for an elaboration of the idea in the context of group agency.

25. For doubts that we have reasons to comply with rational requirements, see Kolodny 2005.

26. Versions of this claim are argued for in French 1984, Rovane 1998, Copp 2007, List and Pettit 2011, and Collins 2019, among others.

27. I am going to focus on groups with these features, some of which may not be necessary for the claims in this paper.

it is control over their own body, rather than the control the group has over the individual on the basis of its organizational structure. So, the special problem of control for groups is: How can both the individual and the group control for an action? If the individual has control over the action, it seems to undermine the control of the group. And if the group has control of the action, it seems to undermine the control of the individual. Since groups must act through their individual members, one might think that, in the end, the control lies with the members. And since members are also agents it appears that there is no agency left over for the group. What we need to understand autonomous group action, as well as group responsibility, is an understanding of control that overcomes this challenge.

Such an understanding is proposed by Christian List and Philip Pettit, based on a metaphor from computing.²⁸ According to them, a group can program for an outcome, which the member(s) then implement. Programming for an outcome means arranging things so that the outcome is highly probable. Implementing a program is playing the immediate productive role. In this way, “there can be higher-level and lower-level factors that are causally relevant to one and the same event—and this, despite the fact that neither factor causes the other, and that neither combines with the other as part of a larger cause.”²⁹ That is, control requires causal relevance, and being causally efficacious, playing the immediate productive role, is only one way of being causally relevant. The other is when a factor sets the condition under which something occurs without being the productive element, that is, when it invariably leads to some effect under variation of its realization. The instantiation of such a factor produces a range of possibilities, any one of which would be enough to produce the effect. Focus on this factor adds to causal explanations in that it provides information about what would happen in a range of situations. For groups then, the individual member actually brings about the outcome and the group makes certain, more or less, the existence of a causally efficacious individual in its membership. Because both of these roles are, in the sought-after way, causally relevant to the production of the outcome, we may appeal to either of them in explanations of why that outcome came about.³⁰

In the standard case, the group programs for actions by way of its organizational structure in line with its point of view. Call this “explicit programming.” This is the kind of programming List and Pettit have in mind. How-

28. For List and Pettit’s discussion, see List and Pettit 2011.

29. List and Pettit 2011: 161.

30. This framework is introduced in Jackson and Pettit 1988 and discussed further in Jackson and Pettit 1990. It is then developed and applied to issues in social science in Jackson and Pettit 1992 and group responsibility in Pettit 2007. Those discussions make clear that programming control is a modal notion concerning robustness. That is the understanding of programming I adopt in this paper.

ever, from their discussion, it is clear that programming doesn't require the exercise of agency, nor even a point of view. One of their examples involves water boiling programming for the breaking of a flask.³¹ Imagine the temperature is raised high enough to make a flask crack. Say that we want to explain why this happened. The salient lower-level factor, simplifying a little, is that a certain molecule or group of molecules collides with a molecular bond in the surface of the flask; the flask broke because this molecule (or group of molecules) moved with this velocity, in this direction, and so on. The salient higher-level factor is the temperature of the water; the flask broke because the water reached boiling point. It appears that the lower-level factor is basic—it does the causing—while 'boiling point,' an abstract statistic measuring mean molecular motion, does not cause anything. It may seem that the higher-level factor is explanatorily inert. Yet, the higher-level explanation provides useful information too, since the rise in temperature means that the rate of motion of the water molecules will increase, and an increase in the rate of motion means that it is very likely that some molecule will have the effect we are attempting to explain. The rise in temperature, that is, means that there will almost certainly be a number of molecular collisions, any one of which would crack the container. The rise in temperature programs for the cracking by "arranging things non-causally" in order to "ensure the existence of" the direct cause at the lower level. That programming explanation conveys valuable information not contained in an explanation focused on the exact molecule that did in fact break the glass.

Agents too may arrange things non-causally without doing so because that arrangement will result in outcomes in line with the explicit results of their decision-making processes. There may be features of a group that program for certain kinds of member action, without those kinds of action being endorsed by that group's point of view. This is Nero's point. Certainly, what played the causally efficacious role in the assault at Unite the Right were Alex Ramos' psychological attitudes.³² For him, the assault wasn't an activity; it was an in-

31. This example is discussed in Jackson and Pettit 1990: 109, Jackson and Pettit 1992: 118, and List and Pettit 2011: 211.

32. Note that one may also see psychological attitudes as programming causes, and only neurological states as causally efficacious. In fact, this is the context in which the idea of programming/implementing causes was developed with the aim of solving an issue regarding functionalism, broad content, and mental causation. The papers collected in Jackson, Pettit, and Smith 1998 present the original impetus for and progression of their view. This possibility appears to obscure the relation between programming and implementing causes. Jackson and Pettit offer two ways to understand it. On the first, causal efficaciousness is a property only of some fundamental level, perhaps the level described by physics, and all higher-order explanations are programming explanations (Jackson and Pettit 1990). On the second, the distinction is relative, with an arbitrary level being designated as involving causal efficaciousness and the higher levels involving programming (Jackson and Pettit

tentional action. But in explaining that event we shouldn't confine ourselves to causal efficacy, we must also consider causal relevance. And as the water boiling programs for the breaking of the flask, something about the way the Proud Boys are organized—a combination of the members it accepts, the places it meets, the discussions it fosters on its social media pages, the overlap between its point of view and the points of view of more extremist organizations, and the shared understandings its point of view it generates in its members—is programming for participation in acts of violence at white supremacist rallies. In other words, the network of relations it creates amongst its members by way of its norms, incentives, and social infrastructure leads its members to participate in these rallies, without that participation ever being put through a group decision making procedure, except when it is explicitly disavowed. This structure of relations meets List and Pettit's test for programming: these features of the group arrange things such that some members of the group, maybe these, maybe those, perform the relevant actions for participation in a white supremacist rally. This participation may be realized in many different ways, but the way the event is actually realized does have group members in the active role.

It is important that we recognize not only explicit programming, but also the possibility of implicit programming in group agents.³³ Otherwise, when attempting to use this approach to understand Proud Boys case, we would come to the false conclusion that they are actually programming against participation in white supremacist rallies. That participation is, after all, something the endorsed part of group's point of view discourages, and indeed, that discouragement may filter out certain ways of realizing the group's participation. There is therefore the possibility of cross-purpose between what a group explicitly programs for and what it implicitly programs for. The implicit programming may arrange things so that the members participate, while the explicit programming may limit the ways in which they do so.

A set of member behaviours is something a group does if the group programs for it. And it is something a group does autonomously if and only if

1992). Jackson and Pettit do not make a final choice between these two possibilities, and, for present purposes, it doesn't matter which is right.

33. Shockley (2007) employs a non-explicit notion of programming, adapted from Pettit's earlier discussions (see footnote 30), to extend group responsibility to non-agential groups, such as crowds and mobs. His approach differs from that here in several ways. First, his main aim is to show that agency is not a necessary condition on responsibility, rather than showing the conditions under which activities of agents are a proper target of responsibility attribution. He is therefore not interested in groups that *do* anything at all (2007: 442), and so doesn't see his version of non-agential programming as tied to activities. Second, and relatedly, his notion of responsibility doesn't incorporate the ideas developed in the next section, in particular acting as a group member, since the groups he considers do not have definite membership conditions.

that programming is explicit. But since a group can implicitly program for things, some of the things it does are not autonomous actions—they are not the result of a process starting from the group’s point of view, moving through its decision-making procedure, and ending in action. This is the category, so far largely unrecognized, of group activity. At the same time, not all the things an agent brings about are the result of its activities or actions. Some things it brings about don’t involve agency at all. If Freud’s arm had been moved by a spasm, knocking over the inkpot wouldn’t have been an instance of activity. What’s missing in this case is an appropriate relation to Freud’s point of view that grants the behaviour the purposefulness or goal-directedness of the original case. In order to engage group agency, the relation between the outcome and the point of view needs to go by way of the individual members’ conception of what they’re doing. Group activities require a particular lower-level causal path through their members attitudes in addition to being implicitly programmed for.

3. Acting as Group Member and Pathological Group Activity

The programmed for actions of individual group members bear the appropriate relation to the group if the individuals are *acting as a group member*. What is it to act as a group member?³⁴

In the standard case, acting as a group member is a matter of being authorized by the group’s organizational structure to execute the action a group decides upon and acting in part because of that authorization. The non-standard case involves a relation between the individual member’s judgment about what to do and the group’s attitudes. Call this “attitude relation.” This relation holds when a group member reasons from the group point of view to the judgment about what to do now, in a *prima facie* acceptable way. That is, at least one group attitude, expressible in first-person plural terms, features as a premise in the reasoning the individual undertakes to arrive at a decision about what to do, where the individual truly believes that they are accurately representing the group attitude, treats that attitude as their own, and is aiming to serve the interests of the group. For example, consider the following reconstruction of a piece of reasoning Ramos could have engaged in before committing the assault: We [the Proud Boys] aim to promote Western Civilization; Achieving this goal requires engaging in violent public acts aimed at achieving it; Assaulting this person at a publicized rally is engaging in a violent public act

34. See Tuomela 2007 for an informative discussion of this question within the context of his broader account of group agency and an alternative answer. One distinctive feature of Tuomela’s account, at least in that book, is that groups don’t act as such (2007: 128, 134, 145, 251). In using the distinction between action and activity, I deny that claim.

aimed at promoting Western Civilization; As a member of the Proud Boys, I am committed to doing my part; Being committed to doing my part gives me reason to do my part; Assaulting this person would be doing my part; I have reason to assault this person. From a rational perspective, there is nothing wrong with this, as a piece of reasoning. It involves *prima facie* good patterns of transitioning from one attitude to another. And Ramos's belief that he accurately represents the attitudes of the group is true, since the first and second premise are explicitly endorsed.³⁵

Attitude relation gives candidates for individual actions that are also group activities or actions, and for which group they are candidates, because it specifies which group agent's attitudes are moving the individual to act. But this condition alone is not enough to make an individual action a group activity. The individual actions also need to be implicitly programmed for by the group. Individual members may use legitimate processes of practical reasoning to arrive at decisions about what to do in situations that are none of the group's concern. During the course of the assault, it is possible that Ramos engaged in reasoning satisfying the attitude relation condition with respect to, say, his boxing gym. He could have reasoned from general attitudes the gym has about how violent interactions are supposed to be conducted to particular actions during the assault. But that doesn't make it the case that in attending a white supremacist rally he was acting as a member of his boxing gym. The boxing gym, we may assume, doesn't program for participation in white supremacist rallies, but the Proud Boys do.

Acting as a group member allows for several stances to the group's point of view. A conformist group member may be earnestly doing their best to follow through on the group's aims, even if they don't have explicit authorization. A dissident member may engage in similar reasoning with the further belief that they are failing to obey some explicit directive of the group. Dissident members thus recognize that, although they are reasoning from one part of the group's point of view, they are also violating another part of it, perhaps with an aim to changing it. Among the dissidents we can distinguish between the reformists, who accept a lot of the group's point of view but would like to change a little, and the revolutionaries, who accept only a little, but would like to change a lot. For example, Ramos may have been aware of McInnes's formal disavowal of the rally and decided that disavowal was a mistake, thinking that given the group's point of view, it ought to have participated more enthusiastically in the rally. Ramos's motives may have been even more revolutionary, trying to use the rally to shift the group's point of view in a more explicitly white supremacist direction. What is essential is that the dissident member is committed to upholding and furthering some part of the group's point of view,

35. See May 1987: 65 for an alternative account of group-based individual attitudes.

uses that part of the point of view to reason to a judgment about what to do, and acts in a way programmed for by the group. In that case, dissident member action counts as group activity, even if it is aimed at changing that group.

So, individual member action, dissident or not, constitutes group activity when it is implicitly programmed for by the group and the individual members' reasoning satisfies attitude relation. Those activities are pathological when they fit a pattern of repeated behaviour that conflicts with the group's point of view, undermining the rational unity of the group.

4. Responsibility for Pathological Activities

Holding responsible, in the sense of assigning praise or blame, is holding to some external normative standard, rather than simply making a causal judgment.³⁶ Both Freud and the Proud Boys fail to meet a rational standard in that they fail to instantiate rational unity with respect to a particular issue, and, as a result, bring about outcomes through means they do not endorse. The task of this section is to consider when a group activity fails to meet a moral standard.³⁷

We may draw a distinction between influence, on the one hand, and activity or action, on the other. A group may bring about many things through its influence. These are consequences of its previous actions or activities. For example, another tragic event that took place at the Unite the Right rally was the murder of Heather Heyer.³⁸ That murder was committed by someone who was not a member of any of the group agents that organized or participated in Unite the Right. It therefore wasn't a group activity or an autonomous group action. However, the perpetrator was affected by white supremacist ideas promoted by many of those groups. He read their material, absorbed their ideas, re-posted their images on social media, and adopted their symbols.³⁹ The act he committed is very likely to be in part the result of the influence these groups had on him. Insofar as groups can be responsible for their influence on non-members, they may be responsible for Heather Heyer's murder as well.

A group activity is not the consequence of a group action that involves a causal path through non-members; it is something the group does, even though it doesn't rise to the level of autonomous action. The group's influence causes a distinct individual to do something, whereas the group's implicit programming makes it certain, more or less, that one of its members or another does

36. My focus here is on backward-looking responsibility, rather than forward-looking responsibility, and blameworthiness rather than praiseworthiness.

37. See Shockley 2007 for a related discussion of group responsibility, although without the restrictions to activities of groups and to group agents.

38. Caron 2017.

39. Binder 2017.

something.⁴⁰ Groups may be responsible for not just the influence they have, but also their activities, as well as, of course, their autonomous actions. These are distinct. The thing we are assigning responsibility for is different in each case. And we treat responsibility for actions differently than responsibility for the consequences of actions, and differently than responsibility for activities. Whether something is an activity of the group's will make a difference to our normative judgments. A group ought to take care what it implicitly programs for in addition to the care it should take with respect to its actions and influence.

Two plausible conditions on fairly attributing responsibility are control and foreseeability. Both of these may fail to be satisfied with activities *simpliciter*. Programming for is an account of group control. However, it may be that the kind of control required for responsibility involves explicit programming rather than implicit programming, since only explicit programming goes by way of authorization by the group's organizational structure. For implicit programming, the group may not be aware of what it is programming for, which calls into question whether it is the kind of control that licenses responsibility judgments. Because of this unawareness, the mechanism involved may not be responsive in the appropriate ways to moral considerations. The same issue arises with foreseeability. If the group is faultlessly unaware of what it is programming for, then it may not seem to be in the right epistemic condition to be responsible for its activity. These issues make it likely that groups are not responsible for all their activities, which is similar to the individual case, since Freud likely isn't responsible for knocking over his inkpot.⁴¹ Leaving aside the question of responsibility for activities in general, these worries do not apply to pathological activities, at least for groups. Because pathological activities are repeated, at some point, the group ought to be able to realize what it is programming for. After a certain point, the group is culpable for its ignorance. It should be able to foresee its future activity in relevantly similar situations.

As Nero points out, the Proud Boys certainly are aware of the racist and violent tendencies of its members, and the likelihood of their participation in the Unite the Right rally. And paying attention to the role Proud Boys events were playing in increasing the probability its members attend the rally should have made the Proud Boys aware of what they were programming for. So, it is plausible that they had the epistemic position required for responsibility.

Once a group is aware of what it is programming for, it has the capacity to change it. What groups program for is a result of the network of relations they create among their members. Since the group has control over its orga-

40. Please refer to footnote 32 for references to Jackson and Pettit's development of this idea.

41. Of course, sometimes both individuals and groups may be responsible for one-off activities they are able to foresee. That is, it is not the case that agents are only responsible for repeated activities.

nizational structure and membership conditions, the two things that generate this network, this mechanism can and should be responsive to moral considerations. A group can change the structure of relations it creates among its members by, for example, changing parts of its point of view, restricting interpretations of that point of view, filtering out certain behaviours by members at group events, sanctioning violators, and perhaps most importantly, regulating its membership. So, at least for pathological group activity, these two conditions are satisfied. Since we are dealing with things properly attributed to an agent, and things which that agent has control over and can foresee, there is no reason to think that holding groups responsible for those things would be unfair. Notice that this may also be a matter of negligence or omission. In the right conditions, a group may be responsible for an activity because it fails to take the steps required to change what it is programming for.⁴² Finally, the fact that these actions do not have the ‘full consent of the will’ of the group may reduce the degree of responsibility it is fair to assign when compared to autonomous actions. If, however, these behaviours remain activities because of an engineered agential dysfunction aimed exactly at dodging legal and ethical responsibility, it may not.

Even if it wouldn’t be unfair to assign partial responsibility, why should we blame groups for their pathological activities? The reasons for going in for blame for pathological activities are in many ways similar to those for actions or consequences. For the Proud Boys, attending a White Supremacist rally is morally wrong and something properly attributable to them, so blaming them is an accurate application of our moral standards, and may be what they deserve. It may also be the most effective way to get them to stop. But expressing blame, publicly assigning responsibility to the Proud Boys, has an aim beyond accuracy, desert, and desirability. It attempts to change our shared understanding of the moral landscape. And should this moral understanding reach the wrongdoer, it would confront them with the moral wrongness of their activity. Conscientious agents so confronted are prompted to modify their behaviour.⁴³ When the agent is not conscientious but instead appears to be uncaring and uncomprehending of the reasons for this shared moral understanding, it may still

42. This does not entail that a group programs for everything it fails to program against. That is, these failures to act in order to change its programming are not themselves instances of programming. Many thanks to an anonymous reviewer for prompting me to deepen this point.

43. This purpose for the communicative act of blaming is developed in Fricker 2016. Her paradigmatic cases involve second-personal relations and direct blaming (171–74), but she extends her account to the third-personal case at issue here (178). Rather than committing to a particular account of moral responsibility, blame, and blameworthiness, I have here aimed to show that the case includes features that make blame appropriate on a wide range of theories about what blame is and what it is for.

make sense to assign blame ‘proleptically’; that is, to treat the blamed party *as if* they were capable of recognizing the reasons they had to act differently rather than as already recognizing those reasons but failing to act on them. In this case it may be little more than a distant hope, still one hope is that by treating them this way they will come to see things differently and recognize the reasons they have to change what they do.

As a matter of fact, the blame assigned to the Proud Boys in discussions following their participation in white supremacists rallies did in fact lead to a change in behaviour, although not one more in line with a shared moral conception. Instead, they became more circumspect in their public announcements, for example deleting their official website and defense of Western Chauvinism. Even when the above-mentioned aim fails, however, it serves an important purpose. The Proud Boys response brings to light a failure to recognize the full significance of their behaviour and a lack of remorse, a failure and lack that licenses social disqualification. This is in fact what happened, as the Proud Boys were banned from Facebook, Twitter, and other social media sites, in part because of the shared moral understanding created by the public outrage at the Proud Boys’ role in Charlottesville.⁴⁴ And, recently, their designation as a terrorist organization by the Canadian government led the Canadian chapter to disband.⁴⁵ Their incompetence in regulating their own membership, point of view, and organizational structure so as to avoid participation in white supremacists rallies in the face of this shared understanding, which in part results from this lack of recognition of their responsibilities, suggests that the FBI made a mistake in their classification and the Canadian government got it right. A group that programs for participation in white supremacists acts and, when that is pointed out, fails to change its organizational structure so as to avoid such participation is not appropriately responsive to our shared moral understanding.

5. Conclusion

Insofar as the conditions described above have been met, Nero is right: the Proud Boys are partially responsible for participating in a violent white supremacist rally because participating in white supremacist rallies is a morally wrong pathological group activity of the Proud Boys. And the Proud Boys are in part responsible for Ramos’s behaviour because Ramos’s behaviour in part constitutes its participation. It constitutes Proud Boys participation because it was programmed for by the group and carried out by way of group members acting as group members.

44. Sommer 2018.

45. *Guardian* 2021.

More generally, there is a realm of agency for groups in between passive happenings and autonomous actions, just as there is for individuals. This is the realm of rogue, reformist, or revolutionary members of a group acting with the group's interests and aims at heart. On one hand, these members go against some things a group explicitly endorses, but, on the other, they have a vision of what they think the group should be, a vision based on an accurate understanding of what the group is. When their actions are the result of practical reasoning guided by the actual first-personal attitudes of the group, and when the group itself programs for that action, what those individuals do is group activity, for which the group may be responsible.

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