Individual Responsibility for Collective Harm

Summary / Zusammenfassung
Collective harms are harms brought about by collections of agents, rather than by a single agent. Examples of collective harms include a variety of environmental problems, such as dangerous climate change. The defining features of the scenarios in question are the following: 1) The causal relations between individuals' actions and the bad collective outcome are complex - no single agent's action is sufficient for the harm to occur, and no single agent's action may even be a necessary condition of the harm. 2) There are either no institutions regulating the behavior of the agents involved, or the existing institutional regulation is insufficient. 3) There is a "collective action problem" with regard to these harms in the sense that many agents would be willing to stop contributing to them, but only if there is a guarantee that others will do the same, since the compliers would otherwise be at a disadvantage compared to the non-compliers.

The project investigates the moral duties of individual agents in such scenarios of collective harm. The first part of the project is concerned with the problem of complex causal relationships and establishes which conditions need to be met for an individual agent's actions to count as a contribution to collective harm. The second part deals with the question of how non-ideal circumstances (institutional failure/non-compliance of other agents) might influence individuals' moral duties to avoid contributing to collective harms. The third part assesses the relationship between moral and political duties in the scenarios in question.

Keywords / Suchbegriffe
collective harms, individual agents, moral duties

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