Shakur, on the way to a prison cell, said: "My mother was a revolutionary Black Panther and all that. But I also saw my mother as a crack addict. So I answer to no one. I follow my heart." Journalist Murray Kempton responded in his elegant prose: "The child is well advised to distrust any heart that instructs him to answer to no one." The choice, as Kempton indicates, is not between listening to one's heart or listening to another person. We listen with the heart to voices. How well we listen and to whom we listen depend on many factors, some beyond our control.

A person who was inundated with foolish, abusive, or criminal voices early in life is going to have difficulties later on, unless circumstances provide a wealth of countervailing voices. Nevertheless, each of us retains the ability to be responsible for responding to, for taking a step away from whatever bondage the past leaves us in. A man at age thirty-five or sixty-five can one day stop blaming his parents or an unfortunate accident for all the woes of his life. It is not the time to declare: "I am responsible for my life." But it may be the time to say: "Being responsible to my life, I accept responsibility for taking a step toward reform of this life."

I have restricted this discussion of voices mainly to other people, especially parents and friends. "Human beings," wrote John Stuart Mill, "owe to each other help to distinguish the better from the worse, and encouragement to choose the former and avoid the latter." There are other voices and other connections than those I have adverted to, the description of which belongs in the next chapter. Especially in our day, there are groups and organizations and institutions that are invariably part of being responsible to. Personal self-dividedness cannot be solved exclusively by interpersonal exchanges. Or put somewhat differently, the physical individual that is a human person is related to other large entities that have some of the characteristics of a person. It is to interaction with these constructed persons that we turn now.

CHAPTER 5

CORPORATELY RESPONSIBLE

This chapter extends the discussion of the previous chapter by extending the meaning of the term "personal." It deals with bodies (corporations) of more than one human being that have characteristics of the personal. This extension of "personal" stretches the term beyond common usage, but a basis for so using the word goes back in history for many centuries. Some corporations have long been recognized as legal persons. However, it is often assumed that such a use is a "convenient fiction." The issue of responsibility raises a question whether the personhood of corporations is morally real or just a figure of speech.

I wish to emphasize that there are two distinct questions at issue in this chapter which is entitled "corporately responsible." Consistent with the distinction used throughout this book, one has to ask about being responsible to corporations before asking whether and how corporations are responsible for actions. The first question is important on its own terms and would deserve attention even if the answer to the second question were that corporations are not morally responsible for anything. I think that corporations do have responsibility for some actions. But that question is best addressed only after exploring how corporations of many kinds are involved in every act of responsibility.

This chapter, therefore, not only follows chapter 4 but dovetails back into its meaning of personal. I have said that these two chapters are an attempt to overcome the split in modern ethics between individual and collective. Chapter 4 was mainly concerned to show the inadequacy of "individual"; this chapter does the same with "collective." Both are concerned with the "personal" as an alternative to the split itself of individual and collective. Persons are beings that can be responsible for actions; before that, persons are beings that listen and
answer. The question of responsibility cannot be handled if the only choice is between individual and collective. It can be dealt with by distinguishing between different kinds of persons.

When the division is between individual and collective, responsibility inevitably gets assigned to the first. Individual responsibility plus collective responsibility equals individual responsibility. Peter French, who more than any other writer has sought to change this equation, writes: “Almost all Western moral philosophers have approached the subject of responsibility armed with the assumption that the only interesting and important things to be said on the topic must be about individual human beings.”

There is nothing particularly wrong about either of the words individual or collective. It is just that they do not provide any texture for exploring responsible to and responsible for. For that exploration, the description here is of a relation between the naturally existing person and various groupings that sometimes act with sufficient unity to be responsible for actions. Those groups that perform responsible acts are called artificial persons. Their existence depends on artifice, on the deliberate designing of their ability to act as a unity.

Sometimes, of course, a collection of individuals is just manyness, individuals without a distinctive pattern of operation. But if interaction occurs over a period of time, there usually grows up an organizing pattern. There are no firm rules in our language for differentiating groups, communities, organizations, institutions, conglomerates. I use the word “corporation” as a comprehensive term; it has a sufficiently rich etymology and broad history to serve this purpose. The biggest problem with “corporation” is that in the twentieth century the business world exercises undue control. I deal with the business corporation toward the end of this chapter as one example, admittedly one very powerful example, of a corporation. But the premise of the discussion is that all personal responsibility is in some way corporate, and some corporate activity carries personal responsibility for actions.

Peter French, in explaining why the idea of responsibility became individualized and segregated from corporations, writes: “The grand individualistic tradition that characterizes much of our moral thought has its taproot in Western religion’s conception of personal salvation. . . . Morally, organizations and collectives do not exist and, mutatis mutandis, the notions of corporate and collective responsibility are illusionary.” I do not think that this statement does justice to the medieval church, which had a strong sense of corporateness. It is true that the Christian (and Muslim) conception of “personal salvation” was in the background of later Western individualism. But to the extent that the salvation was personal and not just individual, there remained an integral connection to body, community, and organized power.

The Christian and Muslim doctrine of the resurrection of the body was an affirmation that to be a person requires bodiliness. The bodily or corporate human being interacts with other corporate entities. In Christianity, one could be saved only with the corporate efforts of the church, the “body of Christ.” The medieval Christian was responsible to God, but the keys of the kingdom had been given to church ministers. It was not enough to confess one’s sins to God in private; one had to submit the sins to the church tribunal in the sacrament of penance. The forgiveness of God was expressed by the church’s representative.

At the least, it seems highly paradoxical to say that medieval Christendom believed that “morally, organizations and collectives do not exist.” It seems more likely that our individualistic notions of morality arose in rebellion against the communion of saints and the mystical body. Jean Piaget’s criticism of Christianity comes more from this direction. He writes in his Moral Judgment of the Child that “only in theology, that is to say, in the most conservative of our institutions, does the idea of Original Sin keep alive the idea of collective responsibility.” For Piaget as for most writers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, “collective responsibility” was a primitive myth that Western Enlightenment was finally freeing us from. Responsibility, it now seemed clear, was an individual’s task. However, in the past few decades the question has come back to haunt us. World War II, especially the horror of the Holocaust, revived the question, and it has not gone away. Peter French mentions that he got interested in the question because of the Vietnam War.

By the seventeenth century the movement to an individualistic responsibility was becoming evident. As I traced in the previous chapter, the Cartesian revolution placed the burden of responding on the individual’s reason and will; thus the individual was not the bodily organism but the mind in its solitariness. Descartes, Leibniz, and many others at the beginning of modern philosophy were brilliant young mathematicians. Corporateness could be left behind in their minds. But any philosophy with a more psychological or political bent could
not so easily sunder the ties to bodiliness. Peter French invokes the names of Rousseau, Burke, Hegel, and Bradley in support of the thesis that the human being starts out a potential person. He or she has to cooperate with corporate reality in becoming a person. “To be a full-fledged human moral person is to find a place (or places) in the structure of corporate entities.”

There is a parallel or analogy here with the distinction in chapter 3 between the nonmoral and moral meanings of responsibility. A human infant is a responsible being; it responds to its own body and the people and things of its environment. The infant, however, is only potentially a morally responsible being. It becomes morally responsible for its actions as it acquires a wider and deeper sense of responsibility to. That begins with the infant’s relation to the parent or caregiver. But before the child becomes morally responsible, he or she has to run up against organized power and take a stand on competing interests.

On the whole, corporations enhance human freedom, making possible the full flowering of personhood. The individual-becoming-person tries out various masks or roles in the corporate world, discovering, adapting, and inventing the person he or she becomes. This description may sound too rosy. Inevitably there are “role conflicts” that require difficult, sometimes painful, resolution. The principle nonetheless stands: human freedom can only be exercised in institutions, organizations, and corporations.

In our day this principle may sound outlandish, given the connotations of institution or corporation. The institution is widely thought to be the great enemy of individual freedom. The bigger the institution, the bigger the threat that it seems to pose to individual freedom. The government runs the biggest institutions, and therefore it is from the government one needs the most protection. And, indeed, the Bill of Rights and the check-and-balance system of the government seem built on the premise that one cannot trust the government’s institutions. Other institutions that gather power within their walls—universities, churches, big business—are also not to be trusted. Roman Catholics today, who are upset at what pope and bishops say, attack the “institutional church,” presumably on the belief that a noninstitutional church exists.

I do not carry any strong brief for the term “institution.” It is overworked in the twentieth century and does not help much to locate exactly what kind of institution and what policies of that institution are blameworthy. Like people attacking “the system,” the rejection of institutions is a cry of frustration that usually obscures who or what is the problem. To the extent that the term institution is used, it should simply be as an aspect of experience by which human beings are linked to one another through set structures. In general, “corporation” has more flexibility and better connotations than does “institution.”

I have acknowledged the fact that most times when people say “corporation” they mean business corporation. Life in the corporate world suggests offices in skyscrapers rather than the pleasures of the body and the person’s relation to the dozens of communities and organizations that make up personal life. It may seem quixotic to fight against the business world’s takeover of the corporation. Yet, there is enough in the meaning of the word to stage a resistance. For example, there are plenty of not-for-profit corporations that are not mere anomalies. They stand in a tradition many centuries long of bodies that bear hardly any resemblance to AT&T, GM, or Exxon.

Before describing examples of corporations and their responsibility, it is necessary to make an extended comment on the term most often paired with individual: social. When people talk about individuals taking responsibility for their lives, the contrast is very often to social responsibility. Sometimes the term comes up in discussions of big business; more regularly it is associated with government programs where the individual has failed his or her responsibility. As an alternative to “collective,” social is an advance in clarity and particularity. Unfortunately, it does not go far enough to get at the question of responsibility. Just as with collective, the addition of individual responsibility and social responsibility usually equals individual responsibility. Someone or some group may succeed in changing that equation but history does not give any firm backing for that hope.

Social/Society

When Margaret Thatcher was the British Prime Minister, she antagonized her liberal opponents by dismantling much of the country’s social-welfare policy. The justification she gave in a line that became infamous is that “there is no society, only individuals and their families.” The claim infuriated her critics in part because she was using liberal language against itself. To say that society does not exist is an
exaggeration but not a preposterous claim. The term “society” on its own says very little beyond referring to a group of individuals. In the language that Thatcher—and many of her critics—assumed, if society does not exist then indeed only individuals do. (It would have been interesting if someone had thought to ask Thatcher whether the monarchy, the British government, or England exists.) The alternative to beginning with “individual” and “society” is to begin with persons in a variety of communal and organizational relations.

“Society” has become the twentieth century’s word of choice to summarize the human situation. The social sciences took over the study of the human being, looking at men and women not in their individual biographies but in their congregating patterns. To say that “man is social” tells us only of a characteristic “he” shares with many animals. Society means living together and interacting.

The United States is rich in studies of social interaction. One influential school, called “symbolic interactionism,” concentrates on symbols of communication. This viewpoint does bring out specifically human characteristics. Its strength but also its limitation is that “it implicates the individual with society and society with the individual.”9 Studying the interaction between individual human beings has produced fascinating data; Erving Goffman’s studies of how people stand in elevators or pass each other on the street are illuminating.9 The data are useful so long as social interaction is not made equivalent to the entire field of human relations.

When individual and society are assumed to be the ultimate markers, everything else gets spoken of as units small or large “in society.” A main question then about any organization is how it helps individuals to get along in society. The concern of the schools in the twentieth century has been to socialize the child. Emile Durkheim’s influential writing on education placed “socialization” as the aim of education: “Education, far from having as its unique or principal object the individual and his interests, is above all the means by which society perpetually recreates the conditions of its very existence.”10

Similar to education, the government is thought of as something existing “in society,” and its purpose is defined by and for society. There are constant debates about how the government should balance individual interests and social needs. “The dilemmas of the black underclass pose in stark terms the most pressing unresolved problem of the social and moral sciences: how to reconcile individual and social responsibility.”11

“Society” did not start out as an abstract, comprehensive term. Greek philosophers did not really have a word for what we now mean by “society.” Aristotle describes the human being as the political animal, one that lives in the city (polis) and engages in speech.12 Society was a Roman invention, a recognition that human beings can form “associations” for a multitude of purposes. A sociedades was a grouping for a specific purpose, much like the word “association” still connotes in English today. When the Christian church first appeared in Rome it was confused with a funeral society.

The church, of course, had bigger ideas, offering itself as a nonpolitical and nonethnic association destined to encompass the earth. It sought to gather all the nations to itself, not on the basis of the Greek city-state or Jewish bloodlines but by call of God in Christ. Later in the Middle Ages, theologians reflected on the form of the church itself. The description then given of the church was a “perfect society,” a description that was not a boast of human artifice but a praise of God.

Within Roman law, sociedades got tied down to its mundane meaning as one type of organization. The law distinguished between sociedades and universitas. The first was a contractual arrangement among individuals, the assets of the group remaining in possession of the contractors. The second was an entity distinct from individual human beings; it possessed rights and obligations as an organization. Thus was born the notion of legal personhood. Organizations that qualified received this recognition as a privilege bestowed by government. A society, in contrast, did not have rights or obligations. It could not be legally responsible for actions.13

A more developed form of legal and corporate actor began in the thirteenth century. The granting of town charters by the king in England created a sense of autonomy for towns, such as Cambridge, distinct from the natural person of the king. Something similar happened in continental Europe with individual churches having their existence as corporate actors. The business corporation got its start with trading companies (for example, the East India Company) and banking companies that began as family enterprises but became independent actors.14

These two strands of history—the worldwide gathering of the human race and the contracting of a small partnership—met at the
beginning of modern times to give us the meaning of “society.” By the
eighteenth century, the perfect society of the church was badly frag-
mented, but the hope and need for a universal gathering of the race
did not recede. Society became a kind of church without Christ to
which one must belong, even if reluctantly, to receive one’s credentials
as part of humanity. What underwrites and sustains society is a “social
contract.”

A number of thinkers, including Locke and Rousseau, elaborated
versions of the story whereby the human race contracts with itself to
get things started. Rousseau acknowledged the mythical character of
the story: “The man who speaks of the ‘state of nature’ speaks of a state
which no longer exists, which may never have existed, and which
probably never will exist.” Still, it is necessary to have this myth of an
original contract “in order to judge correctly our present condition.”

Each human being accepts the protection of society while taking on
contractual obligations as a social being.

Rousseau was not enamored of this overarching society. He hoped
that there would be a time when the individual would be perfectly
congruent with the “general will,” but until then man (the individual
and natural man) and society would be at odds. Rousseau was a forerun-
ner of modern psychology in trying to explain how, starting with
untainted individuals, society can produce deluded and vicious char-
acters. He distinguishes between two kinds of love, one in touch with
human nature within the self, the other mediated by society’s other
individuals and interests.

Rousseau’s educational program in Emile was to shield the boy as
long as possible from contact with society. The tutor’s job is mainly
negative, allowing the body to develop inner strength before the
inevitable clash with society. The student was not to hear of religion
until age fifteen; his first love affair was not to occur until age eighteen.
His companion was to be Sophie, the perfect woman who had never
broken with nature. At the end of Emile, the tutor hands his charge
over to Sophie with the hope that the young man will retain through
the woman a connection to nature. In a subsequent novel, Rousseau
acknowledged that the program would not work. Sophie ends up
promiscuous and unfaithful, Emile becomes a complete solitary but as
happy as he can be in his isolation.

Rousseau’s successor in the twentieth century is Freud rather than
Dewey. Although, John Dewey is sometimes associated with

Rousseau, he is quite critical of Rousseau. For Dewey, the revolution
had already occurred: democracy meant that there need not be a con-
lict of individual and society. Dewey constantly speaks of education
as a social process that addresses the social needs of “man.” At least
until the 1930s, Dewey was brightly optimistic about social transforma-
tion and the ability of schoolteachers to lead the charge. “The pri-
mary business of school is to train children in cooperation and
mutually helpful living; to foster in them the consciousness of mutual
interdependence; and to help them practically in making the adjust-
ments that will carry this spirit into overt deeds.”

While “society” became the frame for individual life, its meaning
was to be influenced by another development in the late nineteenth
century: the enormous growth of the business corporation. When the
United States was formed, there was little attention to this possibility.
An association of partners to form a corporation was expected, but the
resulting arrangement would be “a summarizing device for contract-
ing partners.” When Tocqueville described the country, he found the
tendency of the citizens to “form associations” one of the most striking
features. The business association did not especially stand out. “They
have not only commercial and manufacturing companies, in which all
take part, but associations of a thousand other kinds.”

The country was unprepared for the dramatic expansion of the
(business) corporation. These societies within society became centers
of overwhelming economic power, unregulated by any effective rules
of conduct. Regulation was supposed to happen at the state level, but
states began competing to see which one could have the fewest rules
and thereby attract the most business. New Jersey led the way until it
was outdone at its own game by Delaware. One district judge said that
if Delaware were a person it would be indicted. Individual workers
felt helpless before the power of the company until labor unions pro-
vided some leverage for bargaining: one corporation talking to
another.

In the rapidly advancing technological world, some individuals
inevitably fell behind. They needed help to adjust to a world of com-
plicated organizations and technical skills. The progressive movement
at the turn of the century addressed the problem of the displaced indi-
vidual. Just about everybody agreed upon being “progressive,” but
there were two widely divergent means for achieving progress: apply
scientific principles for the management of individuals or treat individuals with compassion and humanize the workplace.

For the first kind of progressive reform, a new science (Taylorism) was applied in factories, breaking down work into units that required simpler skills. The same principles were advocated for the schools, which had to turn out reliable workers. As Nathan Bishop, the first superintendent of schools in Boston said of school reform, the same principles apply "as in any manufacturing or business enterprise." The other kind of progressive reform also found its way into the schools, making them kinder places, more understanding of academic deficiencies. Progressive education eventually tipped to the side of this second progressivism. John Dewey remained a complex combination of both kinds; hence his alienation in the 1930s from the movement he is credited with starting.

The compassionate progressivism that dominated the schools did not penetrate very far into the factories. Compassion for slow learners and enthusiasm for group discussion did not sound like the way to make the best profit. If there was to be help for individuals who did not fit the modern job market, it would have to come from private agencies or from the government. Thus, progressive politics was the main opponent of progressive business; they agreed only on the fact that there were individuals who did not fit.

Throughout a century of discussion about government welfare programs, the terms of the dispute have altered little. Almost everyone is progressive and liberal—in the nineteenth-century sense of valuing the individual. We have two political parties that might be called conservatively liberal and liberally liberal. These parties have never been models of logical design. Both profess the need for welfare reform; they differ on the means but not the goal. Comparing today's reform proposals to the Works Progress Administration (WPA) of Roosevelt, James Fallows writes: "The goal would be the same now: to reinforce the idea that the society runs on work, and that individuals are finally responsible for themselves." If any politicians disagree with this sentiment, either they do not speak up or else they are not heard.

If it is true that "individuals are finally responsible for themselves," then the government's role is temporary and as minimal as possible: get the individual worker back on his or her feet to join other individuals in the "society [that] runs on work." For those people who believe that more help is needed, the alternative has been "social responsibil-

ity." In the early part of this century, the business world ridiculed the idea. In recent decades, it has often been a good business move to express concern for social responsibility. However, social responsibility remains mainly a government activity that is to complement individual responsibility but not substitute for it.

The terms "social" and "individual" are not going to disappear; they serve many useful purposes. But they are extremely limited for expressing the idea of responsibility. "Social responsibility" could conceivably mean being responsible to society. That is, an individual human being's or a corporation's general responsiveness to obligation could be called "social responsibility." Unfortunately, responsible to was all but disappearing just as "social responsibility" came into common use. What the phrase instead suggests in the twentieth century is that an agent named "society" is responsible for activities such as housing the homeless. As numerous poor people would testify, society does not seem to care.

Throughout the twentieth century, Christian moralists have called for the development of "social ethics" to cope with the large and powerful institutions that fill the landscape. It is regularly said that the church does well with "individual ethics" but that its "social ethics" is deficient. One of the best-known ethics books of the twentieth century is Moral Man and Immoral Society by Reinhold Niebuhr. The title was catchy, even if the thesis is difficult to make sense of. Where does the immorality come from? In the book, the total contrast of "man" and society is never explained. For example, in attacking hypocrisy, Niebuhr indicates a continuity: "Naturally this defect in individuals becomes more apparent in the less moral life of nations." In the second edition of the book, thirty years after the first, the author acknowledges that the title 'Moral Man and Immoral Society' suggests the distinction too unqualifiedly. But the title "is nevertheless a fair indication of the argument."

Niebuhr's thesis that individuals are good, society is bad has been a favorite theme of staunch defenders of the individual against "mass society," throwing together government, business, universities, mass media, and every other place in life where the lonely individual confronts intimidating power. The classic educational example of this mind-set is the book Summerhill, a description of a school founded in England at the beginning of the century. The founder and longtime head of the school, A. S. Neill, says at the beginning of the book: "That
society is sick no one can deny; that society does not want to lose its sickness is also undeniable. It fights every human effort.” The school’s philosophy is to develop strong individuals who would never be able to reform society but who would keep their individuality intact. The book had great success in this country during the 1960s when young people were protesting against “the system,” which included the schools they were in.

Given the premise that individual responsibility is obvious and good, but is it enough, the debate becomes whether there is a need for social responsibility as well. At most, defenders of social responsibility can make the case that it will help and not undermine individual responsibility. Given the history of “society” as an aggregate of individuals, whatever success social responsibility has is measured by the multiplying of individual responsibility. Thus the equation: individual responsibility plus social responsibility equals individual responsibility.

The split of individual and social becomes especially problematic when the question of “guilt” arises. As I have previously noted, responsibility and guilt often slide together. To assign guilt is to assume someone’s responsibility for actions. And when guilt is assigned it usually assumes a world of individuals in which one of those individuals is guilty and others are not. What happens, however, when horrible crimes seem to be the product of a large group, such as the modern nation-state? Especially during the last half of this century, the question has been a haunting one. In this chapter, I address only the present aspect of the question. In the seventh chapter, the question is expanded to include the past.

Whenever the phrase “collective guilt” comes up, the predictable response begins: “I don’t believe in collective guilt, but . . .” and what follows is indeed a version of collective guilt. Wasn’t Nazism a collective evil? Wasn’t the German nation implicated in Nazism? Not being clear about how to fix guilt, we let it float free in vague, conspiratorial accusations. When a terrorist explosion happens, whole countries, ethnic groups, or religions are painted with guilt. Not “Hamas,” or some identifiable group, planted the bomb on an Israeli bus but “Muslim fundamentalists” or perhaps “Muslims” are guilty. At the time of a vicious killing of Jews in a van on the Brooklyn Bridge, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani rightly calmed the city by insisting: “This act of evil is not the act of a people, but it’s the act of a person or persons.” A question nonetheless remains of how we relate persons to organizations and groups.

One strategy is to separate “the people” from the government; it was not the Iraqis who were guilty in the Gulf War but the Iraqi government. If the government is not democratically elected but is run by a dictator, the guilt gets easily assigned: Saddam Hussein did it. Allan Bloom claimed that when he asked students to name something truly evil, they could only come up with one word: Hitler. And since Hitler is an aberration, there is little else to say about evil. Jimmy Carter was elected president in 1976 on the promise to provide the country “with a government as good as its people.” It is flattering and comforting to “the people” to be told they are blameless. But unless the government can be reduced to an individual (“Nixon’s the one”), then assigning guilt to a government is almost as problematic as saying the country is guilty. The difference is that several million instead of several hundred million are guilty.

Attempts to find a way out of this problem are usually better at criticizing the inadequate concept of “collective guilt” than providing an alternative. Victor Frankl writes: “As for the concept of collective guilt, I personally think it is totally unjustified to hold one person responsible for the behavior of another person or a collective of persons.” The first thing Frankl denies is holding one person responsible for the behavior of another, which is not usually the question at issue. The second thing he denies is that a person is responsible for “a collective of persons.” If the “collective” is simply a grouping of individuals, then the individual person does have a share in the guilt; if the collective is not an aggregate of individuals, then who is responsible for the behavior?

A favorite example here is a lynch mob. A group of people do something horrible that an individual would not do. Who is guilty of hanging the accused? Frankl’s book is about life in a concentration camp, not too far a cry from a lynch mob. Surely he implies that there was something at work here other than individuals being guilty. But his strongly individualistic psychology provides no language for analyzing who and what was responsible.

The distinguished contemporary philosopher Jürgen Habermas says in an interview: “There is no collective guilt. Anyone who is guilty has to answer for it as an individual. At the same time there is something like a collective responsibility for the intellectual and cul-
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tural situation in which mass crimes become possible." Habermas
helpfully moves from guilt to responsibility, which is a more flexible
term. However, saying that there is “something like a collective
responsibility” does not do much to clarify a person’s relation to the
intellectual and cultural situation. The first link to that situation is
being responsible to it. If that is not affirmed, then “something like a
collective responsibility” will blur right back into collective guilt.

The intellectual and cultural situation is always a set of overlapping
communities and organizations that shape one as a person and pro-
vide the corporate context in which a person accepts responsibility for
certain deeds. The choice is not between individual responsibility and
collective responsibility. Actions are both personal and corporate. The
degree to which I am responsible for corporate activities will indicate
if I should feel guilty for misdeeds.

Communities and Organizations

In arranging the description that follows, I employ several ways to
distinguish among corporate forms. One crude division is by size, a
factor not of itself decisive but never entirely to be neglected. A per-
sonal sense of responsibility certainly feels different when the corpora-
tion is four people rather than four million. However, once it is a
sizeable organization—whether four thousand or four million
people—differences in responsibility do not primarily depend on size.
The shape and purpose of the organization and one’s relation to its
internal structure are more important than size.

Even with a very small group, a variety of structures is possible. In a
dinner party of four, the waiter is attentive to how the check is to be
made out. Not only are some ways more bothersome than others, but
the waiter can probably guess the size of the tip by knowing the
arrangement for the payment of the bill. If the group wants four sepa-
rate checks, that is a collective form of payment: collect from each of
four people who happen to be at one table. However, the group might
say: put everything on one check and we will figure out what each of
us owes. A further coalescing would be indicated by their saying: give
us one check and we will split it evenly into four parts. Or, finally, one
of the people may be a business executive with fellow workers. In the
last case, an expense account attached to an official position may
effortlessly swallow the bill. The waiter’s tip is likely to rise in the
above progression from first case to last.

The smallest conceivable group is two people. Ordinarily the word
group is not used because we imagine that the two can directly com-
unicate without organized procedures. We are often mistaken about
the ease of “interpersonal” exchange and then are shocked on discover-
ing misunderstandings and conflict. Even two people who seem
perfectly matched for what they are doing, whether marriage, stage
acting, tutoring, or apprenticeship, operate in an environment of nat-
ural and artificial beings, including language with all its ambiguities.

Action by two people can be entirely separate, shared equally, or be
exercised through an instrument that is distinguishable from the two
parties. State law recognizes such distinctions in the way bank
accounts and small corporations operate. Several decades ago I was a
member of a group of people who founded a nonprofit educational
corporation. Over the years the members drifted away until I and a
friend remained not only as the sole officers but as the whole corpo-
ration. I find it sometimes helpful to be the president of a corporation
when I talk to other corporations. I sign legal documents, including
checks, in the role of president, distinct from other roles in life that I
play. The privileges I receive are entirely legal and, although the proce-
dures are minimal, I am aware of being tied to larger corporate enti-
ties. Similarly, a married couple is not incorporated as a legal
corporation, but they are a corporate reality. The persons are respon-
sible to each other, and for some activities, such as buying a house or fil-
ing a joint tax return, they are responsible for the corporate act.

Our sense of responsibility for actions develops through personal
interaction with one and usually with more than one but still a small
group of people. If “community” is used for a union of humans that
differentiates persons as it unites them, then the fundamental com-
munity is restricted to a few people. If we look first just at numbers, a
group that clearly deserves the term community would have an upper
limit of a dozen or less. Students of group interaction often cite eight to
eleven as an ideal number.

The reason for the limit can be seen in the formula for the number of
combinations in a set. To be a community means interacting with each
person, that is, one can listen to and answer to each person. The num-
ber of combinations (x) in a set of (n) elements is 2 to the n power
minus 1. When n=5, x=31; when n=6, x= 63; when the set goes from 10
to 11 the number of combinations increases by 1024; when one is the
twenty-fifth person to enter a room, one carries 33 million combina-
tions. If being a responsible member of a group entails interacting with
the whole group, growth in size quickly makes community a mathe-
matical impossibility. Multinational corporations or federal govern-
ments need established impersonal structures of listening and
answering. So do organizations of fifteen people.

The heading of this section is community and organization. Rather
than these two terms standing for opposed entities, the meanings
shade into each other, with "community" emphasizing a simpler
human-to-human exchange, and "organization" bringing out im-
personal arrangements and a concern with objects. As already noted,
communities have some organizing, and organization can connote
groups that range from those that try their best to be personalizing and
communal to groups that try to eliminate the personal touch.

An overly sharp contrast of community and organization is trace-
able to the 1890s. "Community" was the usual translation for the
German Gemeinschaft, which was opposed by society and organiza-
tion. Community was given a nostalgic meaning, the small town where
everyone knew everyone else. Society and organization became
associated with large cities, modern business, and powerful govern-
ment.

Community is often imagined as a defense against the lonely and
heartless world of mass society and its impersonal bureaucracy. And,
indeed, most people do value communal experience in the fam-
ily, neighborhood, friendships, and local religious groups to provide a
personal tone that they do not usually meet at the post office, the
supermarket, or the Department of Motor Vehicles. Exceptions, how-
ever, do exist; some people get their communal experience at the post
office, the supermarket, or in jail.

Community suggests a degree of reciprocity in personal exchange,
the possibility of having intimate knowledge of a person's life history.
In our mobile world with media of instantaneous communication,
there is nothing unusual about a person not knowing who lives in the
next apartment, while at the same time maintaining a close relation
with a person three thousand miles away. Many people live in a set of
fragmented communities, but everyone has some sense of communal
relations in their lives.

A person's life can be profoundly shaped by responsibility to some-
on whom they speak with only once a month or twice a year. People
can feel kinship with a writer whom they have never met. The books,
the ideas, perhaps organizations that partially embody the ideas can
be an object of personal response. A person can be responsible to an
entity that is not itself responsible for actions. A person can be inspired
by a great cause that is not a corporate actor. Someone might, for ex-
ample, respond to the ideal of humanity, even though humanity does
not do anything on its own.

At this point it will be helpful to describe the corporate responsi-
Bility of communities and organizations, starting with the family com-
community and ending with the business organization. In between are
numerous groups that can be more or less communal, including
urban, national, religious, and professional groups. The natural per-
son has to listen to the artificial person thereby accepting personal and
corporate responsibility for actions. Depending on their kind, corpora-
tions have to listen to single persons and groups of people, including a
wider public than the people within their organization. Then when the
corporation acts, it has to do so through a mechanism that can estab-
ish personal and corporate responsibility.

The family is for everyone the first and for nearly everyone the most
lasting experience of community. There is endless debate over how to
use the term family. At the far end today in the United States, a family
can be any two or more people who declare they are. The tendency sim-
ply to invent what family means has a long history in the United States.
In the seventeenth century, the Puritans distinguished between the nat-
ural or biological family, which did not much interest them, and the
Christian family that had undergone conversion. The adult converts
chose to become a real family. Children were always anomalous because
they were not yet converted. The married couple were the family; every-
one else, including the children, were out at the blurry edges.

Although the conversion experience did not typify later immigrant
populations, other conditions conspired to identify family as mainly
the small household. Marriage as a contract between two parties has
always been held in high regard; children, especially after economic
changes in the nineteenth century, are something of a luxury.

Frequently today one hears a comparison of "traditional family" and
today's scene. More often than not, the context is a dire warning
about the disintegration of the family. When it is said that only 5 or 10
percent of households are traditional families, the assumed model includes father at work, mother at home, and three or four children. Obviously some things have changed. However, in other ways there is striking continuity from the seventeenth century to the present. The Synod of Boston in 1679 was certain that the family had completely disintegrated; every generation since then seems to have thought the same, but a replacement of the family has never appeared on the horizon.39

The three-generation household is not typical today, but neither was it in the colonial period.40 Grandparents were important then and still are. (Grandparents like to be close to their grandchildren, but free to go home.) Today more than 95 percent of children under age fourteen live with one or both parents; that is as high as ever. Most one-parent families make heroic efforts to stay together.41

For thousands of years the chief characteristic of the family has been the relation of parents and child. In most of history, family also included other relatives. I admit that the term family has some arbitrariness, but I think it makes sense to concentrate on the parent-child relation as the main note of what a family is. At least for the purpose of discussing responsibility, the relation of parent and child should not be treated as a peripheral extra, a tendency that is unfortunately too common in writing in the United States on the family.

With the primary meaning of family being the parent-and-child relation, other relatives surround the central unit. Nonfamilial groupings may deserve protection and encouragement, but they should be distinguished from the family. A couple who do not have children should be able to get tax benefits, insurance, and inheritance provisions. A gay couple should be able to receive the same recognition. But a couple constitute a different kind of corporation than a family.

Such a distinction has in fact found recognition in recent decades, mainly by the avenue of divorce law, not ideally the way to go about this issue. Divorce courts can recognize that two twenty-year-olds with no assets constitute a different kind of reality than a couple married for twenty years, who have three children, a house, and longstanding social relations. Personal and corporate responsibility differ in the two cases.42

Family responsibility means that family members are responsible to each other. That responsibility lies heaviest on the parents to listen to each other. The quality of the parents’ interaction is the chief influence on whether children listen to their parents.

The parents’ responsibility to their children is greater than the child’s being responsible to parents. Parent and child move in the direction of mutuality, but it takes years to get there. During infancy, the parent is responsible for most of the actions of the child. This responsibility should continuously lessen as the child gets older. At the end of life, the positions sometimes reverse; the adult son or daughter may have to take over responsibility for many of the actions of an aged parent.

Can the family function as a corporate unit with responsibility for its actions distinct from individual family members? The answer is yes, but how such commitment occurs is in a state of transition. The government in its 1990 census eliminated the category of “head of household” because many people complained that it was anachronism. The assumption that the father is the head comes down to us from centuries past. Father had the power; father “made the decisions.” Today this is often not the case, whether or not there is a father in the household. Nonetheless, families do decide things, big and small, from buying a house to choosing tonight’s video tape.

Families do not need a set of externally imposed rules to decide things; they do have to work out new ways to share in the deciding. “One person, one vote” is not an adequate principle, at least not all the time. Very young children need protection from equality of rights, even though they should start exercising many rights at an early age. They sometimes want voice but not vote. A sloppy and inappropriate democracy will lead to frustration and chaos. A “responsible family” will have parents who listen to each other and listen to their children. When decisions occur, whether by father, mother, or children, the action will represent the whole family’s interest as far as possible.

This principle continues to hold even if the family unit is broken by death or divorce. When parents die, one child is likely to be executor of the will. The good of the family ought to remain paramount. When divorce occurs, the parents have to continue to be responsible to the children. And so long as the child is an economic dependent, the parents remain responsible for the child’s welfare. Most of the time today (but not necessarily in the future) that means the father supplying money to the mother, who is caring for the child. The irresponsibility of divorced fathers is frequently bemoaned. Divorce courts and ordinary
speech have not helped to fix the responsibility clearly. “Alimony” is not the right way to discuss financial arrangements in divorce cases. The child’s welfare ought to be the centerpiece. How much does it cost to care for the child? Who can pay it? Who is going to pay?43

Families and households are small communities embedded in political communities and organizations. A city or a nation is not the family writ large. It cannot duplicate the intimacy of the family; its dealings are not governed by love.44 It can, however, have communal qualities, a respect for persons, a celebration of human freedom. The alternative to being a family household is not a business bureaucracy. A city ought to be a place with pride in its history; a place of good talk and creative art; a place for people to experience a community more diverse than family or household can provide. As Aristotle said, “similar people cannot bring a city into existence.”45

Cities provide benefits to their inhabitants; in turn the citizens have to be responsible to their place. No number of police can make a city law-abiding if the citizens have no respect for its texture and do not cherish what the city makes possible. The United States has always had a problem with cherishing and supporting its cities. Already in 1647, William Bradford was complaining that people were moving out of downtown Plymouth: “The town was like an ancient mother grown old and forsaken by her children, though not in their affections yet in regard to their bodily presence.”46 Not everyone has to live in big cities but the problems of living in a political community travel to the suburban mall, rural village, or seaside resort.

Cities and towns provide the space for corporate activities of every kind. A city expresses itself not only through its government but also through its artists, religious communities, civic associations, business firms, professional groups, sports teams, universities. All of these groups have to work together in a climate of cooperation. The urban government has to be sensitive to the life pulse so that its decisions represent the best interests of the whole city. Municipal governments have legally determined structures to exercise corporate decisions. Included in the government ought to be the protection of minority views and convenient access to the means for expressing disagreement.

The dominant political community for most people is the nation. It should have the same principles as the city, although the size and complexity of national governments are bewildering. If you do not wish to be responsible for (in a small way) what a city is doing, you can usu-
for more than five hundred years, and it continues strong as ever. People in the United States are responsible to the idea; elsewhere, people are attracted or repelled by the idea. The danger both within and without the country arises when people cannot distinguish the idea from the country behind the idea.6 Millions of immigrants have come expecting to find America and have been disappointed to find the United States. Those who stayed have often come to appreciate that the country is a partial embodiment of the dream of liberty and wealth.

No president is likely to stop saying “God bless America.” Every president in history has wielded the power of America in support of programs of the United States government. Without America, a collection of immigrants in flight from various places could not have maintained a United States federation. England had the monarchy; the United States had America.

What is sometimes called excessive patriotism (“America is number one”) should not be called patriotism at all. It is not a love of the patria or nation so much as a love of the idea of the nation. America has never lost a war because of definition it cannot. However, like every political actor, the United States has a mixed record in fighting wars, keeping treaties, and assisting other nations. Most people in the United States think of their country as extremely generous to other countries. America may be altruistic, but the United States is way down the list of countries in giving foreign aid (less than one-quarter of 1 percent of its budget).

A United States citizen has a share in responsibility for the country’s actions, both good and bad. That will follow from being responsible to the country and its history, a responsibility that recognizes the good things that the country has provided. The final sentence of Colin Powell’s My American Journey expresses that sentiment: “My responsibility, our responsibility as lucky Americans, is to try to give back to this country as much as it has given to us, as we continue our American journey together.”

The most obvious way to exercise national responsibility is by voting. Even in the most important elections, only about half of the voters exercise this right and obligation. Some people have big obstacles that prevent their voting. Some people proudly announce they do not vote because neither candidate satisfies them. That is not a defensible position; responsibility often means choosing the lesser of two evils. Voting, it is true, can be frustrating when the process leading to it is controlled by powerful economic interests. However, the proper response is in the direction of doing more than voting instead of proudly announcing one’s purity of intention by doing nothing.

A responsible citizen contributes to the country by doing good work, political and otherwise. Most people do not have to be deeply involved in party politics; the system could not bear having most people active in political organizations. There are other things to do in life; one has to have trust in those who represent the community. However, on some issues of passionate interest the citizen has to speak up. If a nation is doing something immoral, one has a responsibility to protest by some means. If one does not protest, then one accepts responsibility for a share in the immoral activity. The Talmud warns: “Whoever can protest and prevent his household from committing a sin and does not, is accountable for the sins of his household. If he could protest and prevent his fellow citizens from committing a sin and does not, he is accountable for the sins of his fellow citizens.”

The protest, of course, may not be successful at preventing evil deeds. Usually one cannot tell until after protest has been attempted. When protest is unsuccessful, one’s responsibility for the activity is lessened but does not disappear; it may be lessened to the point where one does not feel guilty. However, any sensitive citizen of the United States knows that the food on the table, the gas in the car, the clothes in the closet are not without ethical taint. Those who are recipients of a country that can get its way with power have to ask what their responsibility is. Wallowing in guilt does not do anyone any good; thanksgiving, generosity, civility, and a desire for greater justice would be appropriate qualities of response.

There are numerous corporate realities that people belong to within nations and some that cross national boundaries. Among the latter are religious and professional groups. Each of the world’s great religions was a transnational corporation centuries before ITT or McDonald’s came to be. A person is shaped by his or her response to the ideals and practices of a religious body. How much an individual person is responsible for actions of the institution varies according to the internal organization and the person’s place in it. A Baptist has a different relation to the Baptist convention than a Roman Catholic has to actions of the United States Catholic Conference. There is a tradition of being
Jewish but no clear-cut central organization responsible for what Judaism does. Identifying oneself as Baptist, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, or Jewish indicates an acceptance of some degree of responsibility for actions by the group. But a Catholic does not become guilty of every crime by every Catholic organization in the world.

Most religious people have some differences with policies of organizations representing the group. If a person finds himself or herself completely at variance with the corporate view, the responsibility is not so much to leave as to accept that one has already left. When one continues with a religious group, while dissenting on some important issues, one would be responsible for expressing protest in appropriate forums. For example, a Roman Catholic would presumably agree with Pope John Paul II in Crossing the Threshold of Hope that "irresponsible global population" is unacceptable and that "the right path is that which the church calls responsible parenthood." The loyal Roman Catholic might strongly disagree about the interpretation of "responsible parenthood."

Once when I was giving a talk that I had been requested to give on the Catholic church, I heard myself say: "I am not an official of this church; I do not speak for this church." I stopped and reflected on my denial. I rephrased my stance by saying that "I do speak for this church, although in no official way." I have not only the right but the duty, according to whatever position I occupy, to speak to fellow Catholics and to people who are not Catholic about this corporation. If I were not willing at all to speak for the organization I should deny I am a member. I may have no more influence over decisions in the Vatican than do nearly all of the other eight hundred million Catholic people, but I have to take seriously the responsibility for whatever influence I do have.

Not surprisingly, a person's relation to his or her profession has similarities to religious membership. Professions have their historical origin in religious commitment. In modern times, professions have claimed privileges on the basis of special knowledge and service to the community. At their best, professions continue to be communities of skilled and dedicated people, willing to place an ideal of service above economic self-interest. At their worst, they are islands of privilege for the upper middle class, with a degree from a professional school being the gateway to power and money. The responsibility of the professional is not to let the ideal slip down into crass self-interest. Every profession has a code of ethics which calls the person to accept duties beyond ordinary ethics; the term responsibility is central in most of these codes. In return the professional is given license, privileges that the nonprofessional does not receive. A professional will not take responsibility for his or her work unless he or she is first responsible to the ideals of the profession. The profession itself is not a responsible agent, but professional associations are a mark of modern professions. Medicine does not wield power; the American Medical Association does.

At least until recently, a professional association differed from a labor union. Because of the imbalance of power with management, the labor union had to use threats of disruption to gain benefits for the membership. The professional association took its case public by educational means; the members were engaged in work they believed in and believed to be of service to the public. A lot of blurring has occurred in recent years. For example, schoolteachers, who had never used the tactic of strike until the 1960s, have used it frequently since. The problem, in part, was that the professional association failed in the early part of the century, a situation that made the labor union route more attractive. The good side of the blurring is that some laborers now have benefits once reserved to professionals (better control of one's time and way of working). There remains the need for some kinds of work to be in the hands of skilled and dedicated people. Perhaps more gradations are needed rather than a single division between laborer and professional.

Can professional associations take corporate action? To the extent they represent the profession and have an established order of command, an association can act for the benefit of its members and the wider public. The ethical challenge is not the former but the latter. There is no reason why the American Medical Association, American Bar Association, American Psychiatric Association, and all the rest should not look out for their members. The professional life, however, is supposed to be a pull beyond self-interest.

It can be a responsibility of a professional person to speak out in criticism of the professional association if the organization becomes a defense against any public criticism of its members. If there is racial or gender bias within a profession (something that has affected nearly all modern professions), the professional body has to act, spurred by its members. In contrast to laborers, most professionals have some pro-
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tection when they criticize. University professors, the gatekeepers to professions, have the most protection. They have a corresponding duty to criticize their own profession when it is deserving and to speak candidly about the ambiguities of professional power generally.

The business corporation is at the end of the community-organization spectrum, deliberately organized to channel its energies toward buying and selling products. Though at the end, the business corporation falls within the general category of corporations discussed in this chapter. Often when the question of corporate responsibility is raised, the assumption is that the business world is the only question, and no meaningful comparisons are possible. Business corporation equals corporation.

Although businesses are oriented to making a product and thereby a profit, they are also places of livelihood in the older sense of that word: a way of life and not just a way of "making a living." For a business corporation to sustain success over a long period of time it needs a degree of community. Detroit's automobile industry seems to have learned the lesson after a long decline. If you simply string workers along an assembly line that requires their hands but not their heads, the product as well as the people will eventually deteriorate. European and Japanese automobile makers were the force that finally brought some change to Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler.

If business corporations are aware of the value of community within themselves, that is a help when they look at their effect on community (familial, religious, urban) outside themselves. If the corporation is responsible to its own workers, one can hope that it will be responsible to the communities it interacts with and that it will accept responsibility for more than making money. It ought not to take responsibility for the lives of its workers, as the George Pullmans and Andrew Carnegies did in the nineteenth century. It ought to take responsibility for its own actions that impinge on the lives of both workers and non-workers in its orbit.

When business corporations are asked to do good in addition to their business dealings, the result is usually either dismissal of the idea as impractical or else displays of public relations. In an essay entitled "Do Business? Do Good? No. Do Both," David Bollier writes: "A growing number of companies are discovering, however, that real synergies can occur when moral idealism and traditional management are combined. This is not a tale of 'social responsibility' in business which focuses on philanthropy and community service. . . . Instead these communities combine doing real business and doing real good."

I think there is room for skepticism about how much "real good" some businesses can do, but at the least they could reduce "real evil" they do and perhaps even do some good. More noteworthy in Bollier's description of corporate responsibility is the curt dismissal of "social responsibility." He is probably accurate in identifying this phrase's meaning in the business world as "philanthropy and community service." And while philanthropy and community service are welcome, that is not the main line of business reform. We do not need business people thinking profit plus social responsibility. We need them to be responsible to the total environment and responsible for the effects of their actions.

Today, practically everyone is responsible to large business corporations, and most people have some degree of responsibility for what these corporations do. James Coleman has a useful classification for measuring the natural person's responsibility for a corporation's actions. Someone may be: (1) customer, (2) employee, (3) neighbor, (4) member/owner. The first two may have some limited responsibility for the company's actions; the third has no responsibility; the fourth ultimately holds most of the responsibility. Of course, there are further distinctions, especially in the second and fourth categories: employee and member/owner.

At least within the law, an employee's liability is strictly limited. An employee is not held responsible for actions that if undertaken on one's own authority are not criminal; an employee is held responsible for actions that are criminal, as defined by the law of the land. The fact that one was obeying commands to perform criminal acts is a mitigating circumstance but does not excuse.

Many people are part owners of business corporations, though they may not know it. Their pension plan or bank account is invested in the stock market. The multinational, multiproduct corporation is so complex that it would be a full-time job trying to avoid all involvement with products one considers irresponsible. One can easily avoid buying Philip Morris stock, but does one's pension plan have in its portfolio mutual funds that invest in a company that has cigarettes among its products? If one considers automobiles among the chief destroyers of lives and cities, how does one avoid all relations to the production, sale, and use of cars? Those who denounce big business as evil and
proclaim their innocence of involvement do not have much ground to stand on. Perhaps there is space on the Amish landscape untainted by business. Most of us can only try to divest ourselves of what seems patently immoral and to support what seems relatively benign. Each of us lives with ethical compromises. A person could miss the big issues of responsibility if his or her whole attention is taken up with remaining free of any business evil.

Large business corporations have clear lines of authority and chains of command. The corporation acts through a board of directors and officials. If the corporation does some dastardly deed, it makes sense that the corporation should be held liable for punishment. What about individual officials? Reforms in recent years have been in the direction of “opening up” the corporation and making natural persons more liable to punishment. In such cases the question is whether the natural person initiated the activity, or, if not, could reasonably have been expected to have the knowledge and power to stop it.

The law and morality often part here. Officials of a company may escape indictment even when they are morally culpable. At the time of Watergate, many people were surprised to find out the continuous attention to preserving the president’s “deniability,” his insulation from guilty knowledge. The Watergate hearings were a textbook full of cases of culpable ignorance. Superior to inferior: “Get rid of this problem,” and the unspoken condition: “Don’t let me in on the details.” The superior is always safe if he or she is willing to throw the inferior to the legal hounds. Richard Nixon violated the rules of this game when, according to the tape recording, he said to his two closest advisors that he would not cut them off. He sealed his fate that morning, brought down by some sense of community or friendship. Nixon had not invented the rules of the corporation for avoiding indictment. The rules were well known in the business world. Nowhere is culpable ignorance played so well as in the upper echelons of business corporations.

Too much attention, however, can be given to the spectacular evil action that periodically hits the news media. Slapping a big fine on the company and indicting some provides satisfaction to an angry public. But, as Peter French says in reflecting on Exxon’s great oil spill in Prince William Sound, “our interest should not be in making the party liable for any particular oil spill, it should be in establishing the assignment of responsibility for general environmental protection itself.”

Yes, Exxon deserves a multibillion dollar fine; yes, the captain who was inattentive, incompetent, or drunk deserves punishment; both parties are responsible for the disaster. The bigger issue is how this failure functions to change the culture of the corporation. Will Exxon change some of its procedures and better monitor both its equipment and its people? One failure does not make a company bad; the big question is whether it is becoming a more responsible company by reflecting on past experience and incorporating adjustments.

The artificial person that is the business corporation parallels the natural person in being responsible for more than it intends and more than an isolated act. Like an individual human being, a business corporation does not set out to do wrong; it seeks its own good. But corporations, like natural persons, have inner divisions and an unconscious (the company design) from which most decisions emanate. Most of the corporation’s actions and their effects are not intended, at least in the sense of a living person having a conscious intention that the corporation perform a certain act.

Corporations, as much or more than natural persons, ordinarily live by habit, by doing what they always do. But there are people in the company—supervisors, managers, administrators, executives—who are paid to be conscious of what the company is doing. Even when a result is not intended, the company is responsible for the effect if it did know of the effect or could have known. Sometimes officials hide knowledge from the public; tobacco executives are not the only ones who have hidden studies documenting the lethal effects of their product. Much more often, officials hide themselves from the knowledge. What they do not know they are not legally responsible for.

A main moral reform of business corporations would be to change the patterns of responsible to. A bureaucracy is designed to channel information downward in the most efficient way and to prevent information flowing in the other direction. That is, responsibility to means reporting to my immediate superior. Most information is filtered out along the way so that it will not reach the top. The enemy for the man at the pinnacle is excess moral information.

Some corporations build in alternative routes of information to cope with unusual situations. But to go around or over the head of one’s superior is not usually a career enhancing move. Taking one’s case to the news media is an almost certain trigger to finding a new job. The term “whistle blower” was coined a few decades ago for moral heroes
who reveal the company's dark secrets to 60 Minutes or 20/20. The world will probably always need such people who risk career, reputation, and life in being responsible to a moral ideal beyond profits.

Serious reform also requires change in the design of the company itself. James Coleman offers examples of what he believes are post-bureaucratic reforms. For example, each section of an assembly line would have the authority to accept or reject the product of an earlier part of the line.60 Responsible to takes on a clearer meaning here with personal and communal qualities. I think it is unlikely that bureaucracy is about to disappear. But the physical design of a building, as well as ordinary rituals of the workday, can either facilitate or obstruct the flow of moral knowledge. A person in a communal setting is likely to be truthful. An individual in a noncommunal setting (the classic bureaucratic arrangement) cannot tell the truth. Not mainly because people lie. The inferior's knowledge is piecemeal, and the superior can only hear a fragment of that.

Companies do bad things not because they are composed of bad people who deliberately sacrifice moral goods to high profits. Companies do bad things mostly because they are composed of self-divided people who are expected to block out what is irrelevant to the company's purposes. Not enough in their immediate environment engages their full range of listening. They cannot hear their own bodies, their co-workers, the ambiguities in their product's effects, their desire to be integral human beings. To exercise their personal and corporate responsibility they need to feel that they are working in an organization so designed that it does not suppress the best part of themselves.

CHAPTER 6

HUMANLY RESPONSIBLE

This chapter is in some respects an extension of the previous one. The field of responsibility broadens here beyond the human world. The last chapter moved from interpersonal concerns to interaction with the largest corporations. If "corporation" refers to any organized body, then one could speak of the world itself and all the great forces of nature as corporations that human beings interact with. We readily speak of the ocean as a body of water and, though it has been less common in modern times, the earth has traditionally been imagined as the mother's body from which we all come.

The responsibility discussed in this chapter, therefore, certainly has a corporate character. The caution that I need to express immediately is that the movement to extend ethical concerns beyond the human is not merely an extension to larger objects or more objects. "Environmental ethics" is not a coda to regular ethics, nor is it one more practical application of ethics. Instead, the last three decades have seen the beginning of a challenge to what ethics has been assumed to mean. No one is sure where this will lead us, but we are confronted with rethinking the most basic ideas we have used to categorize experience.

The distinction used in the previous chapter between natural person and artificial person suggests there is more to say about person. But environmental concerns do not seem to fit within this distinction. They do turn our attention back to the meaning of natural person and the relation of human beings to a natural (in the sense of nonartificial) world around them.

What the humans invent as artificial persons are necessarily at a remove from natural beings. The business corporation, in particular, interacts with the environment mainly on the basis of use. No one expects Exxon's relation to the earth's oil to be one of friendship, won-