

The Transport Union:
Are New Corporations Responsible for Fixing the Devastation of the Past?

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The world has irrevocably changed. Food, and even air, is scarce. Billions perished in the Free Navy Conflict. As society begins the steps of recovery, a new corporation, the Transport Union, is born. It is designed to fill an economic opportunity and to save lives: Sol System needs new infrastructure to get much-needed resources through the Ring gates. If successful, the Transport Union will help save the lives of many; but are they morally required to help?

Holden thinks they are. He holds the newly created Transport Union responsible for helping Sol System recover since they have the ability to help, rather than relying on one of the existing political entities that are struggling to recover. The residents of Sol System will starve without resources from the colonies, and the newly formed Transport Union has a duty to prevent that. This chapter will show why.

When Holden, Naomi, Michio Pa, and the heads of the Earth and Mars governments meet on Ceres Station, the Free Navy ships have just vanished while all simultaneously going through the Sol gate. Their disappearance means a sudden end to a grueling conflict. During the fight, the Free Navy dropped rocks on Earth, killing billions of people and rendering the planet nearly unlivable. They also attempted to kill the leaders of Mars and the OPA. While fighting back, Mars and Earth lost many people and ships, leaving them struggling to survive in the aftermath of the chaos. The OPA lost their leader, Fred Johnson. Amidst all this loss and destruction, Holden proposes the creation of the Transport Union.

Typically, we think that the person to blame for a situation is the person who is responsible for fixing it. Ideally, we'd like to hold the Free Navy responsible for cleaning up their mess. They are gone, however; presumed dead. Instead of using blame to determine responsibility, Holden places responsibility going forward on someone else: the Transport Union.

"We need a fast, efficient way to trade with the colony worlds for raw materials. So that's why I'm proposing an independent union with the sole and specific task of coordinating shipments through the gates.... Moving supplies and people safely between solar systems is a new niche. And it's one we need filled quickly and efficiently. In the proposal, I called it the spacing guild, but I'm not married to that name."ⁱ

Holden appeals to what philosophers call forward-looking responsibility. Under forward-looking responsibility, if a person is able to make a positive difference to the current circumstances, they are responsible for doing so. For example, when Holden routinely makes coffee for the *Rocinante's* crew, he does so easily and without much extra effort on his part. It makes his crew feel happy and cared for. Since Holden can provide a helpful service at little cost to himself, it is his responsibility to do so.

But this isn't enough. Sure, it's great when Holden makes everyone coffee, but why is he *required* to do so? Similarly, it might be great if the Transport Union kept the citizens of Sol System alive while they make their profit, but are they *morally obligated* to help?

Moral duties can help us make sense of these obligations. Duties come from our relationships with the people around us. Holden has a caring, almost familial relationship with the members of the *Roci's* crew. He is also their leader. From these relationships come duties of care, compassion, and commitment. As part of their family and their leader, he owes it to them to take care of them. He fulfills this duty partly by bringing them coffee.

Other duties come from other kinds of relationships. If you have a child, you have a parental duty to make sure your child has enough food to eat. A customer service representative has a contractual duty to make sure customers are attended to. Performers have expectation-based duties to entertain their audience. These duties give structure and force to the expectations of forward-looking responsibility.

Holden relies on the Belters' duty not to let people starve unnecessarily when he calls on them to form the Transport Union. This duty comes from their shared relationship of being human. As Holden says in the meeting on Ceres just before proposing the Transport Union, "We have maybe a year or two to really find ways to generate the food and clean water and clean air that we're all going to need. And we probably can't do that in our solar system unless just a lot more people die."ⁱⁱ Holden then calls on the Belters to fill the transport niche. He expects the Belters to protect the citizens of Sol System. As moral people, they have a duty to help their fellow human beings when they can.

Not only are the Belters able to make a difference, but as moral creatures humans have a duty to save others when we can. This combination of *potential impact* and a *duty to act* explains why the Transport Union is responsible for helping Sol System recover from the Free Navy Conflict.

Potential Impact

At the meeting on Ceres, Holden lists the damage done during the Free Navy Conflict and points to the creation of the Transport Union as a solution.

"No niche for the Belt. The need for traffic control through the gates. Now add to that the fact that Earth, Mars – all of us really – have taken enough damage in the last few years that our infrastructure won't carry us. We have maybe a year or two to really find ways to generate the food and clean water and clean air that we're all going to need.... We need a fast, efficient way to trade with the colony worlds for raw materials. So that's why I'm proposing an independent union with the sole and specific task of coordinating shipments through the gates."

Though the Transport Union isn't to blame for the destruction of Sol System, they are responsible for repairing the damage. Holden relies on forward-looking responsibility to hold the Transport Union responsible for giving aid to Sol System.

Forward-looking responsibility focuses on the *potential impact* that an agent can have, rather than on their past actions that brought about a situation. If someone can act in a way that makes the world better, then they are responsible for doing so. This responsibility isn't directed at specific actions, but rather broader goals of what the world could look like. Proponents of forward-looking responsibility argue that it's a helpful structure to use for global problems like racism or the environment. In those cases, like in the aftermath of the Free Navy Conflict, the most effective way to make a difference is to focus on what *can be* done rather than on what *was* done. In order to actually make that difference, someone has to be held responsible going forward.

We can see this play out in *Leviathan Wakes* when the *Canterbury*, the ice hauler Holden and his crew work on at the start of the series, encounters an emergency signal from another ship. As the closest ship to the one in distress, the *Canterbury* has a responsibility to respond to the beacon. This is the law of the solar system: the closest ship to an emergency signal must stop and help. Space is too large and too hostile to wait for the next ship to come along. So, since the nearest ship *can* help, they *must*.

By stopping to help, the crew of the *Canterbury* were able to act to bring about a better state of affairs. One potential future was to ignore the beacon and go on their way, leaving the distressed ship to suffer on its own. Since the *Cant's* crew didn't know what sort of emergency the other ship was in, this could mean leaving everyone on the ship for dead. Another potential future didn't involve that harm. By stopping to help, the *Cant's* crew was making the world a better place. Following the tenets of forward-looking responsibility, because the *Cant's* crew could make a difference, they were *responsible* for doing so.

The example of the Transport Union gives us a similar case. Sol System is in chaos after the war, and its citizens are starving and suffocating without the resources they normally get from a now-battered Earth. The new colonies through the Ring Gates can offer supplies, but don't have the ships needed to transport the goods. Additionally, if too many ships from the colonies come through the Ring gates too quickly, they will exceed the load limit of the network and ships going through will disappear.

Just as with the *Canterbury's* case, after the Free Navy Conflict the blameworthy party isn't the party that can help. The Free Navy is to blame for the current state of affairs, but they disappeared while exceeding the Ring network's load limits going through Sol Gate at the end of the Free Navy Conflict. The governments of Mars and Earth – who also participated in the war – are unable to help. They are recovering from the destruction of their fleets and the obliteration of Earth from the dropped rocks during the war.

The Belters, however, have proven that they can make a difference. Michio Pa saved several Belter stations during the war by shuttling supplies around Sol System. Given their physiology and culture, Belters are well suited for living outside of a gravity well, and so make ideal caretakers of the Ring system. By forming the Transport Union, the Belters will take on the task of regulating traffic through the Ring network and distributing resources between the colonies and Sol System. In

doing so, the Transport Union has a *potential impact*: to keep the people of Sol System from starving and suffocating without necessary resources.

The Transport Union can make a difference. Forward-looking responsibility says that they must act. They can take an action, at relatively little risk to themselves, that will improve the current situation.

But why *should* they?

Normative Force

As good people, we should act to make the world a better place. A preferable state of events is just that: preferable. Forward-looking responsibility assumes that the ability to make a difference determines who is responsible, that *potential impact* is enough to determine moral responsibility.

But Belters have suffered at the hands of the Inners. Individually, they are treated differently by Inners, just like when Holden's father Cesar uses a pejorative name for Belters in front of Naomi. Cesar doesn't seem to see anything wrong with telling his son to "go give those fucking *skinnies* hell"ⁱⁱⁱ in front of Naomi, a Belter. Inners have also discriminated against Belters as a group for centuries. The Belters provide a valuable mining service for the Inners, yet are oppressed and mistrusted by the Inners. Belters' life in low gravity environments causes them to grow taller and more gangly than most Inners, and they are treated differently by Inners because of this. We see this on the *Edward Israel* in *Cibola Burn* when Havelock has to put aside his distaste for Belters. Instead, Havelock has to stand up for one of his Belter crew who had his locker peed in by Inners.

Now, Inners have won the social battle: the discovery of the new colonies through the Ring gates threatens to make all of Belter culture obsolete. Humanity no longer needs to survive on stations outside gravity wells. The resources from the colonies can support Sol System, and so the Belters' mining endeavors are no longer needed. It would be really wonderful if the Belters via the Transport Union were to put all that aside and help save the other citizens of Sol System, but it doesn't seem morally required that they do so just because they can. Why do the Belters owe anything to a group that has treated them so badly in the past?

Why should the Transport Union help a group that has denigrated its members for centuries? The Transport Union's ability to make a difference doesn't justify their responsibility in this situation, and so we need something more than just forward-looking responsibility.

Duty to Act

To support their *potential impact* and explain Holden's reasoning, the Transport Union also has a *duty to act*. This duty is in response to Sol's citizens' essential right to life.

Earlier, we talked about the duties Holden has as a captain and member of the *Rocinante's* crew. As part of that hierarchical relationship, his crew have the right to not be put in unnecessary danger and the right to be reimbursed for their work. Because of these rights, Holden has a duty to protect his crew and make sure they are paid. As part of their familial relationship, Naomi, Amos, and Alex have the

right to be cared for and treated with respect by Holden. So, Holden has a duty to care for and respect them.

Duties come from the relationships we are in with others. The type and strength of a duty is reflective of the type of relationship it comes from. These relationships give rights to the people in them. Each right brings with it a corresponding duty to act in others.

Duties can also come from the essential aspects of the people who are in the relationship. Here, 'essential' refers to the essence or nature of the person. Examples of these kinds of duties come from essential rights of the people involved: our duty to respect the life and liberty of those around us come from essential human rights. In all these relationships, one person's right creates a duty to act in the people around them.

As humans, the citizens of Sol System have an essential right to life. This essential aspect of the people of Sol System explains the Transport Union's duty to help. The right to life creates duties that the Transport Union must fulfill, such as their duty not to let people die when they can avoid it.

Remember why the *Canterbury's* crew stopped to answer the distress beacon? We can use that case to draw out our intuitions about this duty not to let people die. Forward-looking responsibility argues that because when they receive the distress beacon the *Cant's* crew can save the lives of others without risking their own life, they should. While it would be morally great if they were to act to save those people, it isn't just the fact that they can help that morally requires them to act. As humans, the *Cant's* crew also has a duty not to let people die when they can avoid it. They can save the lives of an unknown number of people with one simple action, and so don't risk their own right to life to protect others' right to life. The duty to act also explains why the *Cant's* away party left the distressed ship when the situation got dangerous: the situation shifted and their lives were suddenly at risk, so they no longer had a duty to protect others' right to life. However, since when the *Cant* receives the emergency beacon only the crew of the other ship's lives are at stake, the *Cant's* crew has a duty to help them.

Similarly, the Transport Union is able to help keep the citizens of Sol System from dying at little risk to themselves. The Transport Union doesn't have to put their own survival on the line in order to help. They even stand to turn a profit while doing so. So, since their equivalent right to life (or whatever that would look like for a corporation) isn't on the line, they have a duty to protect the Sol citizen's right to life by not letting people die when they can avoid it.

Holden relies on this duty to explain why the Transport Union is responsible for helping. He invokes the impending lack of resources in Sol System and the problem of the disappearing ships when he's discussing the formation of the Transport Union. People will die in Sol System without resources from the new colonies. People will also disappear going through the Ring gates without some coordinating authority. People's right to life is at stake, and this elicits a corresponding duty in those around them.

The Transport Union can help save people without risking any significant right of their own. Because of this, they have a *duty to act*.

Further Applications

Holden holds the Transport Union responsible for helping the citizens of Sol System because they have the ability to make a difference and have a duty not to let people die avoidable deaths. This argument for moral responsibility also applies beyond the Transport Union after the Free Navy Conflict.

Holden's argument applies to the Transport Union later in the series as well. In *Persepolis Rising*, Holden again argues that the Transport Union is responsible for helping because they can make a difference and people's lives are at stake. Holden brings Governor Houston back from Freehold for trial rather than notifying Freehold of their three-year suspension from the Ring gates like he was supposed to. He believes the Transport Union has a responsibility to put the governor on trial because cutting off the colony will likely kill the colonists. The colony is not yet self-sustaining, and a three-year ban from interaction with Sol System will cause the colonists to starve. As with helping Sol System after the Free Navy Conflict, here again the Transport Union is able to make a difference and has a duty to respect the colonists' right to life.

We can bring Holden's argument into the wider context of our world today. We face several ongoing crises, from racial injustice to environmental collapse. Just like the Transport Union, companies today have the ability to make a difference. Corporations can choose to change their hiring or production policies, invest in more socially conscious processes, or donate part of their profits to relevant causes. Doing so even has the potential to save lives: the lives of communities of color living near polluting industries, the lives of people living in coastal areas that will soon be flooded or demolished by tropical storms, and the lives of future generations whose security depends on the actions we take today.

Corporations have a *duty to act* when people are suffering needlessly. This gives normative force to their *potential impact*, and calls on them to help. Thus, corporations are morally responsible for helping change the world we live in today.

**Please note: some minor editing changes may have been made in the final, published copy.*

ⁱ James S. A. Corey, *Babylon's Ashes*, 1st edition (New York: Orbit, 2016), 518.

ⁱⁱ Corey, 518.

ⁱⁱⁱ Corey, 128.