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Corporate Social Responsibility and Corporate Moral Responsibility: Historical Trajectories and Conceptual Boundaries

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Abstract: This study examines the historical and conceptual relationship between corporate social responsibility (CSR) and corporate moral responsibility (CMR), two distinct but unevenly developed concepts referring to corporate responsibilities beyond purely economic concerns. Drawing on key CSR and CMR literature, the paper traces the evolution of both concepts from early formulations to contemporary debates, highlighting their different trajectories and shifting relationship. The analysis shows that CSR became a widely developed field of inquiry, while CMR remained more narrowly focused on debates around corporate moral agency. It also indicates that CSR and CMR were initially treated largely separately, before being examined together more explicitly from the 2000s onward. Three main directions can be identified in this later literature: (1) treating CSR and CMR as distinct constructs, (2) incorporating moral responsibility into CSR, and (3) comparing CSR and CMR as related or potentially competing frameworks. The paper contributes to the literature by offering a conceptual overview of how the relationship between CSR and CMR has been articulated and by clarifying the main points of connection, overlap, and divergence between the two concepts.

Keywords: Corporate social responsibility, corporate moral responsibility, corporate moral agency, business ethics

JEL Classification: M14, L21, B15

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INTRODUCTION

The literature on corporate responsibility has been predominantly framed through the lens of corporate social responsibility (CSR), which has become a well-established and extensively studied construct in management, business, and organisational studies (Carroll, 2015; Latapí Agudelo, Jóhannsdóttir, & Davídsdóttir, 2019; Moura-Leite & Padgett, 2011).

In contrast, alternative perspectives within this field have received far less scholarly attention. Corporate moral responsibility (CMR), in particular, remains underdeveloped as a distinct line of inquiry. A preliminary search in the Web of Science (Clarivate) and Scopus databases illustrates a pronounced asymmetry between the two constructs. While the term "corporate social responsibility" yields 42,285 records in Web of Science and 36,459 records in Scopus, the term "corporate moral responsibility" returns only 137 and 13 records, respectively[i]. These figures highlight the overwhelming prominence of CSR within the corporate responsibility discourse and the relative marginalisation of CMR. One possible explanation for this imbalance is that CMR has often been discussed alongside CSR, to the extent that the two constructs appear intertwined (Hamza & Jarboui, 2020). Nevertheless, important conceptual distinctions remain, and failing to differentiate them may obscure important theoretical nuances regarding the nature, sources, and scope of corporate responsibility.

Against this background, the present paper seeks to clarify the relationship between CSR and CMR by examining their historical development, conceptual similarities, and key differences. In doing so, it aims to offer a more nuanced understanding of corporate responsibility and to highlight the value of incorporating a moral perspective into a field that has been predominantly shaped by the CSR paradigm. To achieve this, the remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews the origins and early development of CSR. Although CSR's historical evolution has been extensively examined in prior literature (Carroll, 1999, 2015; Carroll & Shabana, 2010; Chaffee, 2017; Jiang, 2020; Latapí Agudelo et al., 2019; Marens, 2008; Moura-Leite & Padgett, 2011; Phillips, Schrempf-Stirling, & Stutz, 2020; Yevdokimova, Kuznietsov, Sakovska, & Zamlynskyi, 2018), this study revisits key developments as a necessary basis for the subsequent comparative analysis. The paper then considers the parallel emergence of CMR and the distinct intellectual trajectories through which CSR and CMR evolved, emphasising their limited interaction during early development. The final section examines the later development of the CSR–CMR relationship by identifying three main directions in the literature: the continued treatment of the two concepts as distinct constructs, the incorporation of moral responsibility into CSR, and the explicit examination of CSR and CMR in relation to one another.

ORIGINS OF CSR

The idea that corporations have responsibilities toward societies is not new (Latapí Agudelo et al., 2019; Santini, Ladeira, Dalmoro, & de Matos, 2021). Some authors trace its origins back to Ancient Rome, when institutions such as asylums, orphanages, or hospitals were established for social purposes (Chaffee, 2017). Although companies have long engaged in various forms of social welfare (Chaffee, 2017; Latapí Agudelo et al., 2019), and earlier scholarship had already argued that they hold responsibilities beyond profit-making (Dodd, 1932), more systematic conceptualisations of the nature of these responsibilities only emerged after 1950.

Thus, the modern discussion of corporate responsibility began to take shape with Bowen's (1953) seminal work, *Social Responsibilities of the Businessman*, which introduced the idea of social responsibility in business and is widely regarded as a starting point of the CSR literature (Latapí Agudelo et al., 2019; Marens, 2008; Moura-Leite & Padgett, 2011; Santini et al., 2021). Bowen argued that businesspeople have an obligation to align their policies, decisions, and actions with society's objectives and values, recognising that managerial decisions affect not only firms, but also stakeholders and society more broadly.

During the following years, this understanding of corporate responsibility continued to gain traction. Eells (1956) argued that corporations have a responsibility to contribute to the welfare of the societies in which they operate, while Davis (1960) conceptualised social responsibility in business and management as an obligation of business leaders to support both the economic development of society and the promotion its human values. Davis also extended Bowen's perspective by suggesting that socially responsible behaviour may generate long-term economic benefits for firms. Although he cautioned that such justifications may sometimes represent post-hoc rationalisations for ethical choices, this view helped shift social responsibility from a purely normative obligation toward a potential source of organisational advantage (Davis, 1960).

Following these early contributions, numerous scholars further developed the concept of social responsibility in business throughout the 1960s

(Davis, 1967; Davis & Blomstrom, 1966; W. C. Frederick, 1960; McGuire, 1963). Despite some differences in emphasis, these works generally shared the view that the responsibilities of corporations should extend beyond economic and legal obligations and address broader societal needs (Davis & Blomstrom, 1966; McGuire, 1963). While some contemporary views suggested that managers should voluntarily sacrifice immediate profits for the public good, Frederick (1960) argued that this was naive; instead, he posited that society needed institutional mechanisms to direct the profit motive into socially useful channels. Nevertheless, Davis (1967) cautioned against attributing unlimited responsibility to corporations, noting that firms must also attend to their own organisational needs and objectives.

Importantly, the terminology employed during this period remained relatively broad and generic, with scholars referring to "social responsibility" in business, management, or corporations rather than using a single established label (Carroll, 1999; Yevdokimova et al., 2018). What is now known as corporate social responsibility (CSR) gained prominence after Walton's *Corporate Social Responsibilities* (1967), which contributed to the visibility and institutionalisation of the concept. The author stressed CSR's voluntary nature, the indirect link between corporations and other voluntary organisations, and the recognition that CSR activities involve costs that may not always generate directly measurable economic returns.

EVOLUTION OF CSR AND EMERGENCE OF CMR

From this point onward, the CSR literature evolved rapidly, with scholars refining, reinterpreting, and systematising the concept in response to both theoretical developments and emerging managerial challenges (Carroll, 1979; Davis, 1973; Fitch, 1976; Johnson, 1971; Manne & Wallich, 1972; Post & Preston, 1975; Sethi, 1975; Steiner, 1971; Votaw, 1973; Zenisek, 1979). Among these contributions, Carroll's (1979) framework remains particularly influential, for integrating prior perspectives into a unified conceptual model (Herciu, 2021; Latapí Agudelo et al., 2019; Moura-Leite & Padgett, 2011). According to the author, CSR encompasses the economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary expectations that society has of corporations.

Beyond definitional and conceptual clarification, CSR research increasingly addressed its applications in business practice and adaptation to different organisational contexts (Eilbirt & Parket, 1973; Steiner, 1971; Tuzzolino & Armandi, 1981). Furthermore, Manne & Wallich (1972) explored the feasibility, usefulness, and broader implications of CSR initiatives, while other authors advanced arguments both for and against CSR (Davis, 1973; Jones, 1980). Substantial attention was also devoted to whether socially responsible behaviour could contribute to financial results and long-term organisational success (Aupperle, Carroll, & Hatfield, 1985; Cochran & Wood, 1984; Drucker, 1984; Johnson, 1971).

However, the growing prominence of CSR was not without criticism. One of the most influential critiques was advanced by Milton Friedman in *The Social Responsibility of Business Is to Increase Its Profits* (M. Friedman, 1970), where he argued that the primary purpose of corporations should remain economic and that CSR initiatives represent an unjustified use of firm resources. In this view, companies' only responsibility was to increase profits while operating within the law and fundamental ethical custom. Although still widely discussed (Denning, 2013; Dunn & Burton, 2006), Friedman's position did not fundamentally alter the trajectory of CSR scholarship. At the time, corporations were already facing growing pressure to address environmental pollution, corporate externalities, and broader social expectations, with widespread protests contributing to stricter regulations in the United States (Latapí Agudelo et al., 2019). Consequently, CSR gained increasing prominence throughout the 1970s and subsequent decades, both in practice and in academia. Firms began to adopt CSR initiatives either voluntarily or in response to regulatory requirements (Carroll, 2015; Herciu, 2021; Latapí Agudelo et al., 2019), while scholars further developed and debated the concept through extensive empirical and conceptual work, as noted above (Aupperle et al., 1985; Carroll, 1979; Cochran & Wood, 1984; Davis, 1973; Drucker, 1984; Eilbirt & Parket, 1973; Fitch, 1976; Johnson, 1971; Jones, 1980; Manne & Wallich, 1972; Post & Preston, 1975; Sethi, 1975; Steiner, 1971; Tuzzolino & Armandi, 1981; Votaw, 1973; Zenisek, 1979).

By the time CSR had established itself as a prominent framework in both academic and managerial discourse, CMR remained only marginally explored. Although morality has long been central to philosophical inquiry, from classical thinkers such as Aristotle and Cicero (Nill & Schibrowsky, 2007), to Immanuel Kant (Bird, 2026), CMR was not explicitly addressed in the literature until the second half of the twentieth century. One possible explanation for this delay is that morality was traditionally defined as referring to the right or good conduct of individuals toward others (Schmidt, 2020). In this sense, moral responsibility was largely treated as an individual-level construct, which could not easily be extended to collective entities (Ladd, 1970; McMahon, 1995). As a result, early debates on corporate responsibility were more readily framed in economic, legal, or social terms, rather than in explicitly moral ones. Nevertheless, some scholars began to address moral issues within business and organisational settings. For example, Selekman (1959), emphasised the moral responsibilities of business leaders toward their employees, particularly the duty to recognise workers' rights to organise and engage in collective bargaining. Although his work did not conceptualise CMR as a distinct construct, it contributed to the early development of moral thinking in business. A more direct engagement with the question of moral agency appeared in the work of Ladd (1970). However, rather than focusing specifically on corporations, he examined organisations more broadly and rejected the idea that they could be considered moral agents, arguing that they are inherently impersonal entities and that morality can only be attributed to individual human beings. Despite these early contributions, the possibility that corporations themselves could bear moral responsibility remained largely unexplored. It was not until French's seminal article, *The Corporation as a Moral Person*, that CMR was explicitly formulated as a distinct theoretical perspective (French, 1979). French argued that corporations can be held morally responsible insofar as they meet two conditions: causality, meaning that their actions produce identifiable outcomes, and intentionality, meaning that those actions are guided by decision-making processes and directed toward specific objectives. Central to this argument is the notion of *corporate internal decision structures*, through which corporations organise and synthesise the actions of individuals into collective decisions. These structures allow corporations to develop intentions distinct from those of any single individual, thereby enabling them to be regarded as moral actors.

DIVERGENT DEVELOPMENT OF CSR AND CMR

Although CSR and CMR emerged during roughly the same period, the two concepts followed different developmental trajectories. While CSR evolved into a mature and multifaceted field of inquiry, CMR remained largely confined to normative debates concerning the moral status of corporations.

In the case of CSR, the growing body of research facilitated the expansion of the field into several new areas of inquiry. These included, among others, *corporate social responsiveness* (Sethi, 1975; Sturdivant & Ginter, 1977), defined as the adaptation of corporate behaviour to societal needs (Sethi, 1975), *corporate social performance*, which focused on firms' broader societal impact (Bhambri & Sonnenfeld, 1988; Carroll, 1979; Sethi, 1975; Swanson, 1999; Wartick & Cochran, 1985; Wood, 1991), and *corporate social policy process*, conceptualised as the institutional integration of social responsibility, responsiveness, and business ethics within organisations (Epstein, 1987). Further developments included *corporate citizenship* (Carroll, 1998), based on the idea that, much like the citizens of a state, corporations possess both rights and responsibilities, *stakeholder theory* and *stakeholder management* (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Freeman, 1984; Reed, 1999), which emphasise considering the effects of corporate actions on multiple stakeholders rather than shareholders alone, *the triple bottom line*, according to which corporate performance should be assessed in terms of economic, social, and environmental outcomes (Elkington, 1998), and *business ethics* (Carroll, 1999; Epstein, 1987), which further formalised the normative dimension of corporate behaviour.

In contrast to the rapid theoretical expansion and diversification of CSR, the literature on CMR remained largely confined to a sustained philosophical debate over the moral status of corporations, revolving around a central issue brought to the forefront by French (1979): whether corporations can be regarded as moral agents and therefore held morally responsible for their actions (Hasnas, 2012). Against this backdrop, subsequent authors primarily focused on identifying and debating the criteria for the attribution of moral responsibility to corporations. Although scholars differed in emphasis, critics of French's position generally argued that firms and corporations cannot be regarded as proper subjects of moral evaluation, since they are not human beings and only individuals possess moral consciousness in a Kantian sense (Danley, 1980, 1999; Keeley, 1981; Kerlin, 1997; Ladd, 1984; McMahon, 1995; Velasquez, 1983). Importantly, these scholars did not deny that corporations, or the individuals acting within them, could be held accountable for harmful conduct (Kerlin, 1997; Ladd, 1984). Rather, they rejected the attribution of moral agency—and, by extension, moral responsibility—to corporations themselves. By contrast, scholars who supported French's position (even if only partially, as some argued that causality and intentionality alone were not the only sufficient conditions for attributing moral responsibility to corporations) maintained that corporations can be regarded as proper subjects of moral evaluation maintained that corporations can be regarded as proper subjects of moral evaluation because their decision-making processes and organisational structures enable morally relevant deliberation and action (Donaldson, 1982; Goodpaster & Matthews, 1982; Moore, 1999; Patricia Hogue Werhane, 1985). Within this debate, French remained actively engaged, critically responding to objections raised by other scholars (French, 1996), while also revisiting and refining his own account of the conditions under which moral responsibility can be attributed to corporations (French, 1995). In this revised formulation, these conditions included: (1) the capacity to act intentionally, on the basis of a plan, purpose, or interest; (2) the ability to engage in rational deliberation when making decisions; and (3) the capacity to respond to ethical criticism by adjusting corporate conduct, even where such change conflicts with corporate interests.

CSR AND CMR: FROM PARALLEL DEVELOPMENT TO EMERGING INTERSECTIONS

From the 2000s onward, literature addressing CSR and CMR evolved along three main directions. The first continued to treat the constructs as distinct, with studies focusing primarily on either CSR or CMR. The second incorporated moral responsibility into CSR, with many scholars conceptualising CSR as an inherently moral obligation. The third and more integrative direction examined CSR and CMR jointly by comparing the two concepts or exploring the ways in which they overlap and interact.

Regarding the first direction, debates surrounding CMR continued throughout the following years. Several scholars defended or further developed the view that corporations can be regarded as morally responsible. For example, Soares (2003) emphasised the importance of collective moral responsibility, arguing that denying it could allow corporations to evade blame for harmful conduct. Similarly, Silver (2005), Arnold (2006), Pettit (2007), Dubbink & Smith (2011), Abun (2015), Tuomela & Mäkelä (2016) and Morrison et al. (2022) examined various characteristics that could justify attributing moral responsibility to corporations, including intentionality and the capacity of internal decision-making bodies to evaluate the consequences of corporate actions. Conversely, other scholars continued to reject this position. Velasquez (2003), Hasnas (2012), and Strudler (2023) all believed that treating the corporation as a moral agent is inherently unjust. Since the firm is composed of multiple individuals, including those alienated from decision-making or unaware of the wrongdoing, sanctioning the organisation as a whole for misconduct functions as a collective punishment that unfairly penalises innocent people rather than the actual wrongdoers. For example, shutting down a company because of misconduct may unfairly penalise uninvolved parties: owners or managers in the case of employees' misconduct, and employees in the case of unethical decisions made by governing bodies. A different critique is offered by Moen (2024), who does not primarily frame the issue in terms of unfairness but argues that the concept of CMR is unnecessary, since responsibility for corporate misconduct can ultimately be traced back to individual agents rather than the corporation as an autonomous moral actor. Apart from these two polarised directions, a third perspective has emerged that seeks to move beyond the traditional debate. Instead of focusing on whether corporations qualify as moral agents, these scholars propose a shift toward a non-agential or pragmatic approach. For example, while Wilmot (2001), Dempsey (2013), Sepinwall (2015) and Cheng-Guajardo (2018) employ different frameworks, they share the view that the obsession with establishing corporate moral agency is an unnecessary theoretical hurdle. They all argue that we can (and should) hold corporations accountable based on their functional operations and practical impacts, effectively bypassing the need to classify them as moral persons. Similarly, Sepinwall (2016) reviews the arguments on both sides of the corporate moral agency debate, yet she concludes that the practical necessity of holding someone accountable should always lead back to the source of the action, pointing to the undeniable moral agency of the specific individuals involved. In her view, attributing responsibility requires identifying the actual agents whose choices produced the outcome, ensuring that accountability is not diluted by the corporate structure. Taking this pragmatic turn a step further, Rönnegard (2015, 2024) argues that instead of engaging in the impossible task of assigning moral conscience to a corporation, business ethics should shift its foundational paradigm toward legal accountability and political philosophy. Since corporations lack the awareness and autonomy required for moral responsibility, they should be governed by clear laws rather than voluntary ethical prescriptions.

A comparable divergence of views persisted within the CSR literature as well. Some scholars continued to defend the shareholder-oriented perspective originally articulated by Friedman (1970). For example, Henderson (2001) argued that corporations should pursue no objectives beyond profit maximisation, emphasising that firms cannot reliably identify or represent society's interests given their diversity and complexity. In contrast, Denning (2013) advanced a strong critique of the profit-maximisation approach, arguing that an exclusive focus on shareholder value risks undermining the economy's broader social purpose by neglecting the interests of customers, employees, and society. Beyond this narrow theoretical impasse, however, the CSR literature has pursued a much more diverse and pragmatic path. In particular, the concept increasingly evolved from being viewed primarily as a normative obligation to being understood as a strategic approach capable of generating value for firms (Carroll & Shabana, 2010; Chandler, 2022; Heslin & Ochoa, 2008; Husted & Allen, 2007; Lantos, 2001; Porter & Kramer, 2007; Werther & Chandler, 2005). The literature on strategic CSR argues that socially responsible initiatives can contribute to improved financial performance (Lantos, 2001), competitive advantage (Porter & Kramer, 2007), and enhanced brand legitimacy (Werther & Chandler, 2005). At the same time, the broader CSR literature continued to refine and expand the definitions of the concept (Jiang, 2020; Smith, 2001; van Marrewijk, 2003), explore its impact on stakeholders (Ellemers & Chopova, 2021) and develop related research streams, such as *corporate social performance* (Wood, 2010), *corporate citizenship* (Scherer & Palazzo, 2008; Waddock, 2004b, 2004a), *corporate sustainability* (Montiel & Delgado-Ceballos, 2014; van Marrewijk, 2003), *corporate conscience* (Goodpaster, 2011), *stakeholder theory* (A. L. Friedman & Miles, 2002) and *creating shared value*, viewed as a corporate objective and a necessary step toward achieving economic and social progress (Kramer & Pfitzer, 2016; Porter & Kramer, 2011, 2019).

Regarding the second direction, the boundaries between CMR and CSR gradually became less distinct as CSR started to be discussed as a moral obligation. Early discussions of business responsibility had already suggested that business actors have 'obligations' toward society (Bowen, 1953; Davis, 1960). However, these did not yet explicitly conceptualise CSR as a moral duty. Moreover, Walton's (1967) influential account emphasised the voluntary character of CSR, which complicates its interpretation as a strict obligation. Later on, Carroll (1991) had brought CSR and morality into closer dialogue by highlighting the importance of moral management in addressing stakeholder responsibilities through a CSR framework. Building on this, several subsequent scholars described CSR not merely as a strategic practice but as a moral obligation or duty (Berger-Walliser & Scott, 2018; Brønn & Vidaver-Cohen, 2009; Graafland & van de Ven, 2006; Hamza & Jarboui, 2020; Mitnick, Windsor, & Wood, 2023; Smith, 2003; Windsor, 2006). Particularly relevant in this regard is the distinction proposed by Hamza and Jarboui (2020) between CSR as an **opportunity** and CSR as a moral **obligation**.

According to the authors, the key difference between the two perspectives lies in the underlying motivation for engagement in CSR: extrinsic considerations, such as the pursuit of benefits and competitive advantages, versus intrinsic moral concerns. When CSR is viewed as an **opportunity**, it is understood as a strategic behaviour motivated by organisational gains or the avoidance of potential disadvantages and negative public perceptions. This may include both symbolic CSR, which comprises superficial initiatives and mainly seeks to shape public perceptions, and substantive CSR, which aims to generate genuine social impact and requires stronger organisational commitment. However, even substantive CSR remains instrumental when it is pursued primarily to create competitive advantage. This logic helps explain why some authors have criticised CSR as a public relations tool rather than a genuine moral commitment (Frankental, 2001), especially as CSR is increasingly incorporated into marketing strategies and campaigns (Quezado, Cavalcante, Fortes, & Ramos, 2022; Smith, 2003; Šontaitė-Petkevičienė, 2015). However, CSR communication may also be necessary for initiatives to reach relevant audiences and achieve their intended impact (Ramesh et al., 2018). Moreover, in some countries, companies are legally required to disclose CSR-related information through dedicated reports (Cote, 2021), although such reports may still be used primarily to project a favourable public image rather than reflect genuine commitment (Hamza & Jarboui, 2020), reinforcing Frankenthal's (2001) concern that CSR often functions only as a public relations tool. In his view, CSR acquires real substance only when it addresses the interests of all stakeholders, is embedded in organisational policies and practices, is socially and environmentally sustainable, can be publicly monitored and evaluated, and is integrated throughout the organisation at both horizontal and vertical levels (Frankental, 2001). However, the debate over whether CSR is merely a public relations practice falls outside the scope of the present study.

When CSR is understood as an **obligation** or duty, by contrast, it reflects a corporation's moral conviction that it has ethical responsibilities toward society. Under this interpretation, CSR practices are not primarily driven by legal requirements, social expectations, or strategic benefits, but by an intrinsic commitment to doing good, altruism, and moral values (Hamza & Jarboui, 2020). From this perspective, CSR may be seen as inherently encompassing CMR, insofar as it is regarded as a moral duty that corporations owe to society.

However, this conceptual convergence paved the way for a third direction in the literature, in which CSR and CMR were examined together. Recognising the risk of theoretical ambiguity, scholars in this stream sought to clarify the similarities and differences between the two concepts. A foundational work in this regard is that of Werhane's (2008), which discusses CSR and CMR as distinct, yet related, constructs.

Werhane (2008) acknowledges that CSR has often been expanded into an "umbrella term," regarding a firm's overall impact and responsibilities, but maintains a critical distinction between CSR and CMR. She reviews early definitions of CSR, provided by authors such as Carroll (1979) and Davis & Blomstrom (1975, cited in Werhane, 2008). Although later contributions extended corporate responsibilities to a broader range of stakeholders, Werhane argues that early conceptualisations of CSR primarily framed it as concerning the relationship between corporations and society at large, rather than their obligations toward specific stakeholder groups. Building on this interpretation, she suggests that CSR is often manifested through philanthropic or voluntary actions, such as donations or charitable engagement. However, these activities may function as a "fig leaf," allowing companies to appear socially responsible while neglecting core obligations toward primary stakeholders, including employees, customers, suppliers, and shareholders. On this basis, Werhane defines CMR as the normative moral obligations arising from a firm's existence, operations, and its direct impact on primary stakeholders. CMR therefore concerns what corporations ought to do for stakeholders as a matter of moral obligation, whereas CSR refers to voluntary responses to broader societal issues. For instance, a coal mining company bears a primary moral obligation to address the environmental consequences of its operations, which falls under CMR, while CSR would involve broader discretionary initiatives. Werhane also warns against focusing exclusively on either concept: CSR alone may create unrealistic expectations of corporate philanthropy, whereas CMR alone may overlook broader societal needs. Nevertheless, a corporation that fulfils its moral obligations without actively engaging in CSR should not necessarily be regarded as morally deficient. By contrast, one that undertakes CSR activities while neglecting fundamental stakeholder obligations, such as paying employees on time, raises more serious ethical concerns. To avoid such shortcomings, Werhane (2008) proposes **systems thinking** as the appropriate lens for understanding both CMR and CSR. This approach views every action, whether individual or corporate, not as an isolated event, but as part of a broader, interconnected system in which actions have consequences for multiple actors and social processes. Therefore, corporations can be regarded as genuinely responsible only if they assess how their activities affect as many stakeholders as possible. She concludes that, rather than expecting companies to assume responsibilities beyond their capacity, such as solving broader societal problems through philanthropy or charitable initiatives alone, they should adopt a systems-thinking perspective that enables them to recognise and evaluate the wider impact of their decisions and operations across multiple dimensions of society, beyond their immediate sphere of activity.

A more recent and radical contribution to this integrative direction is offered by Hess (2025), who contrasts CSR and CMR as competing paradigms for understanding firm responsibility. Hess argues that firms' duties toward those affected by their activities should be approached through the language of moral responsibility rather than the broader and less precise vocabulary of social responsibility. From this perspective, CSR is criticised for having become conceptually unstable, as it has gradually expanded to include a wide range of related but distinct frameworks, such as stakeholder theory, corporate citizenship, sustainability, triple bottom line or strategic CSR. This proliferation has weakened CSR's coherence as a normative framework. Moreover, CSR tends to mask the extent to which firms increasingly enter domains traditionally associated with governmental authority (such as public health or human rights), a phenomenon she describes as corporate political responsibility (CPR). By contrast, CMR more clearly distinguishes firms' moral obligations from their possible political roles and is grounded in established moral theories and concepts, such as obligation, agency, accountability, harm, justification, and responsibility. Thus, Hess moves beyond Werhane's distinction between CSR and CMR by arguing not only that the two concepts should be differentiated, but also that CSR should be replaced by CMR as the dominant paradigm.

A similar shift is also echoed from a corporate governance perspective by Sridhar et al. (2024). Although they do not directly engage with the philosophical debate surrounding the conceptual boundaries between CSR and CMR, their call for a paradigm shift from CSR to CMR suggests that the move toward moral responsibility is not confined to theoretical discussions but is also beginning to appear in empirical research. Taken together, these contributions reinforce the need to examine CSR and CMR jointly, since their relationship is not merely one of conceptual overlap, but also one of possible paradigmatic competition.

This threefold development shows that the relationship between CSR and CMR has evolved from separation to implicit conceptual proximity, and finally to explicit comparison. First, the two concepts developed largely as distinct constructs, with CSR expanding into multiple practical and theoretical streams, while CMR remained centred on questions of moral agency, attribution of responsibility, and accountability. Second, moral responsibility was increasingly incorporated into CSR itself, as scholars began to frame socially responsible behaviour not only as a strategic practice, but also as a moral obligation of corporations. Third, this relationship became explicit, with CSR and CMR examined as distinct yet related concepts, complementary dimensions of corporate responsibility, or, more recently, potentially competing paradigms. This evolution highlights the need for a clearer account of where CSR and CMR overlap, where they diverge, and what each concept contributes to contemporary debates on corporate responsibility.

CONCLUSIONS

This article examined the historical and conceptual relationship between CSR and CMR, clarifying how the two concepts have been articulated in the literature. Its main contribution lies in tracing the different evolution of this relationship, from early separation to conceptual proximity, and finally to explicit comparison. This clarification is particularly important given the increasing prominence of corporate responsibility in both business practice and academic debates, which have been accompanied by an expansion of related concepts, frameworks, and expectations. In this context, a clearer understanding of how CSR and CMR have been defined and connected may help reduce conceptual ambiguity and provide a more solid foundation for future theoretical and empirical research.

This article is not without limitations. Its aim was not to provide an exhaustive or systematic review of the CSR and CMR literature, but rather to trace the main historical and conceptual developments through which the relationship between the two concepts has evolved. Future research could further examine how CSR and CMR are used across different disciplinary, institutional, and empirical contexts, and whether CMR can provide a clearer normative framework for assessing corporate conduct in morally complex situations.

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