

WHERE THE HARM COMES FROM:
ETHICS OF MEDIATING COLLECTIVES

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Abstract. This article defines the intermediate level between personal agency and global issues of injustice as a complex system of *mediating collectives*, the agency of which must be addressed specifically in organizational and ontological but also in ethical and political terms. We target three domains of global injustice: economic, environmental, and gender-related, following the threads of briefly stated cases in these domains. Our conclusion suggests recommendations for dealing more realistically and more efficiently with global injustice that obstinately thrives from somewhere deep into the structures of the contemporary world. Our recommendations will bear on (a) individual responsibility in a collective, (b) virtuous direct and indirect action, (c) awareness of and communication with interdependent collectives, (d) optimal communication within every collective, (e) readiness for joint-action as an authentic group-agent.

Keywords: harm, injustice, agency, ethics, mediation, collectives

1. QUESTIONS AND METHODS

This article stems from the collaborative intersection of diverse research fields: A. de Lastic works on collective agency and the philosophy of the firm as a collective agent, F. Verrax teaches and

publishes on sustainability, engineering ethics, global injustice (environmental, economic), and new medias, and M. Puech investigates contemporary value systems (technology, sustainability, ordinary wisdom). We suppose the reader to be unfamiliar with at least some of the disciplinary fields we are referring to, therefore we briefly remind basic definitions and contexts for each of them.

Our topic is global structural injustice construed in terms of wealth inequalities, environmental degradation and basic human rights violations. We proceed from the hypothesis that this question is a moral one because these wrongful facts and actions qualify as morally bad, *evil*, but we use the more neutral notion of *harm* in order to avoid religious prejudices and even a theory of natural evil that would impair our pragmatically oriented approach. We adopt an open-minded framework of virtue ethics (Besser and Slote 2015; Sandler and Cafaro 2005) to tackle this harm and to formulate applied ethics recommendations for midsize collectives. Our path will be marked out by a series of transverse real-world cases of global injustice: (a) *the 1% vs the 99%* in the distribution of world's wealth (Stiglitz 2012), (b) *climate change* and its wrongful outcomes on the poor and on the global ecosystem (Martínez Alier 2003; Jamieson 2014), (c) *femicide*: the intentional killing of female humans, directly or indirectly, even before birth, only because they are females (Radford and Russell 1992; Dayan 2018; Weil, Corradi, and Naudi 2018).

There certainly is global structural harm beyond economy, environment, and human rights, but we believe we are yet taking into account a representative share of what goes wrong in the non-ideal world.

Whose agency lies behind the global harm? Let us consider two of its main dimensions, the global structural economic injustice and the global structural ecosystems devastation. From a moral point of view, this harm would indeed deserve to be called "evil", and not only sad, regrettable, unacceptable, etc., because it is human-made and it remains modifiable by humans: we are in the moral domain. Theories of conspiracy come to quick conclusions by incriminating

a hidden malevolent collective human agency and thus reviving in different versions the age-old symbolism of the scapegoat. Handy scapegoats are easily found, from sorcerers and unbelievers to males and capitalists, extremists and terrorists. One of the numerous weaknesses of any conspiracy theory is that it relies on a theory of personal evil agency that fits perfectly with the Abrahamic religious notion of "sin" but not with the contemporary ethics of collective agency. If there is something rotten in the Kingdom, it must come from a finite number of individuals who can be identified and eradicated, so they say. But if the global harm is *not* due to the actions of an assignable number of persons, it is a conspiracy with no conspirator, and this drives us right back into the notion we are examining in this article: an undefined global agency which by no means is the common secret plan of some wicked individuals.

This article defines a mediating level between personal agency and global issues in order to avoid two easy but objectionable explanations for global injustice: neither *personal agency*, which would justify intense moral pressure put on human persons, nor *global agency*, which leads to devising "just" global institutions or to debunking global conspiracies. Our proposal is to focus on an intermediate and inter-mediating level of largely unstructured collectives, myriads of them, constituting a collective agency that prospers as evil always does: remaining unnoticed, even to the perpetrators themselves. We have in mind a variety of contexts: what happens, or does not happen, in family circles, cohabitants or domestic communities of any kind, neighbourhood, local associations (civic, cultural, religious, jogging or swimming partners), small business units and mid-level management teams, etc., what is discussed and shared and what is not, how collective decisions are made and how personal decisions (buying a new phone, eating organic, refusing to move the office to another part of the town, confronting the new slightly macho employee, etc.) are influenced by and influence (more important!) other personal and group actions. In the most optimistic view of *active intermediating collectives*, the local political and administrative institutions, where

they function to accomplish their duty and not to mainly sustain themselves, can be generously counted in.

2. INJUSTICE: GLOBAL, STRUCTURAL, AND BAD

Let us recognize and characterize global harm through a certain number of facts and thereby define what we will take as global injustice whilst searching also a common structural cause behind the diversity of its instantiations.

a) Global Economic Injustice

It has become rather mundane to talk about economic injustice. What we mean by global economic injustice has been measured in various ways, the most convincing one probably being the 99%/1% ratio: the richest 1% owns more wealth than the whole of the rest of humanity (Crédit Suisse 2017).

We assimilate extreme poverty with global injustice in two ways: first, extreme poverty does not allow people and communities to fulfil their basic needs nor human rights. Following the seminal work by Amartya Sen, we can also argue that extreme poverty does not allow for equal capabilities, hence for individuals' opportunity to fulfilment (Sen 2009). This stand is rather consensual among philosophers, including utilitarians. Second, we believe that extreme economic inequalities are bad per se and, in this perspective, we do not agree with a utilitarian view that considers it harmless, if not positive, to increase the wealth of the richest while the poorest remain as poor.

Many economists and policymakers believe however that this situation is morally acceptable insofar as it is continuously getting better. Without entering the necessarily technical debate, we can at least acknowledge the existing controversies among economists - for instance, Crédit Suisse estimated that 82% of all growth in global wealth in 2017 went to the top 1%, while the bottom half of humanity saw no increase at all (Crédit Suisse 2017, 10).. As

philosophers, we wonder whether the fact that some indicators may show a betterment of one aspect in an otherwise deeply iniquitous situation makes it more morally acceptable. At the very least, it seems to us that we can assess the phenomenon of irreducible extreme poverty as a piece of significant evidence for the existence of apparently irreducible harm in the contemporary non-ideal world.

b) Environmental Injustice

If climate change, as well as resources depletion and biodiversity loss, are global phenomena that are and will be affecting everyone on Earth, we follow the analysis by Martínez-Alier (2003) and others, who argue that the poorest humans, both at the individual and collective level, are the most vulnerable to climate change and to other environmental degradations. In this perspective, climate change appears to bring about a twofold global injustice: those who have the least will lose the most; those who are the most responsible (individually and collectively) will be impacted the least. This is a paradigmatic global *structural* injustice.

Concretely, this injustice arises:

- At the national level: The three most affected countries by extreme weather events between 1994 and 2013 were Honduras, Myanmar and Haiti. Of the ten most affected countries by climate change in the period 1994–2013, nine were developing countries in the low income or lower-middle-income country group (Kreft et al. 2014).
- Within the same country, between the haves and the have-nots: the very likely price increase in electricity and basic commodities, including food, without even mentioning the issue of environmental taxation, will affect in priority the poorest.
- Between men and women: Women being, still, mostly in charge with house chores such as gathering firewood or water in many parts of the world, the increasing scarcity of such resources will impose an uneven burden on men and women.

- Between humans and non-humans: the unprecedented loss of biodiversity, in terms of both number of species and of organisms, the so-called “sixth extinction,” (Barnosky et al. 2011; Leakey and Lewin 1996) has been proven a direct result of human activity.

c) Gender Injustice

Even though there are many different indicators of gender-based injustice (unequal access to education worldwide, unequal pay, unequal share of household chores, percentage of women being victims of rape and prostitution, etc.) we have decided to focus on the phenomenon of femicide as a particularly tragic proxy for gender-based injustice and as an indisputable case of moral harm. We take the definition of “femicide” coined by Radford and Russell (1992): “situations in which women are permitted to die as a result of misogynous attitude or social practices.” (Weil et al. 2018, 80) A more provocative, yet insightful definition, by the same authors, suggests that “Femicide is the killing of women *qua* women, often condoned by, if not sponsored, by the state and/or by religious institutions” (Radford and Russell 1992, 1).

Concretely, femicide covers two distinct phenomena:

- The killing of women by men: 87 000 women were killed intentionally in 2017. 58% of these homicides were perpetrated by their male partners, ex-partners or family members (sometimes female), including dowry quarrels or so-called “crimes of honour” (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2018). Another statistic reflects the gender imbalance of domestic violence: of all the persons who were killed by their domestic partner in 2017, 82% were women. Outside domestic violence, some have argued that the killing of women in the context of sexual violence, typically after a rape, can also be called a femicide or feminicide (Jablonka 2016). Finally, there is a rich documentation of femicides within very diverse geographical and cultural contexts: in San Juarez, Mexico, close to the American

border, hundreds of young indigenous women are killed - they are referred to as “las inditas del sur” (Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán 2014).

- Sex-selective abortion: Gender-based abortion, the practice of killing female fetuses, because a family prefers to welcome a baby boy, is most common in Africa and Asia, where there has been an estimation of 100 million women “missing”, according to a well-known article by Amartya Sen (1990). In India, the program “Beti Bachao, Beti Pado” (Save the Girl, Educate the Girl) was launched in 2015 as an attempt to address this issue, but with little results so far.

Altogether, these factual harms raise the question: who is responsible? The couple who decides to get an abortion, hoping for a boy next time? The family that may be encouraging them as a way to save the dowry’s money? The community that endorses unreasonable dowry’s customs and more generally the unjust treatment of women? The government who shows little dedication in efficiently tackling the issue? The local authorities who officially enforce the law but in the field deals with persistent traditions, corruption and even threats? We suggest: the intricate and systemic whole, in which levels can be defined and addressed in a typically non-global and non-ideal manner (individuals according to their gender, families, local communities, authorities level by level, etc.).

Finally, it is noteworthy that these three types of injustice are not separated but can stack: in this perspective, being a poor woman living in a country that is particularly vulnerable to climate change is being prone to a triple injustice and triple harm. Should being a relatively well-off male and/or living in a country where climate change is lenient count as a *passive* evil agency of a new sort? This is the kind of absurd shortcut that we want to prevent in drawing attention to intermediate collectives and their non-neutral agency.

An inconvenient basic fact concerning global injustice raises the stakes: it is still there to stay as a global structure, in spite of resisting intellectual, institutional and personal endeavours to mitigate,

compensate or by any means get rid of it. Global economic injustice (a) is described by Stiglitz as endangering our future (Stiglitz 2012) in an atmosphere of discontents after decades of unfulfilled promises (W.T.O., I.F.M. and U.N.'s agencies) (Stiglitz 2002). Environmental crisis in general (b) features in “serious fictions” like Oreskes and Conway’s (Oreskes and Conway 2014) as the coming inevitable collapse of our civilization and it leads well-intended philosophers like Jamieson (2014) to evoking a “dark time” due to the failure of human reason and institutions. Gender injustice (c) fares as badly as the other human rights, even worse perhaps because the issue is denied as being already solved in “enlightened” countries and as being a non-issue in the rest of the world.

Watching how campaigns to raise consciousness and institutions devised to bring justice are often rapidly neutralized, countered or in the worst case massively counter-productive, one is reminded of Ivan Illich’s theory of counter-productive institutions (let us recall how broad his vision of injustice was, which included for instance “shadow work”, prefiguring women or undocumented immigrants abuses), reinforced by recent critiques of our obsession with bureaucracy (Graeber 2015).

Neither global institutions nor virtue preaching discourses seems to work quick enough or efficiently enough. We even suspect a systemic counter-productivity of patronizing institutions and of the guilt-ridden individuals they produce - while inducing in the other individuals the typical self-satisfactory feeling that all these complicated bad affairs are delegated to the good (institutional) hands.

A reasonable answer to the question “why can’t we fix it?” could be: because we still don’t understand what is broken, what doesn’t work as it should. Hence, the efforts of people, governments, lobbies of any kind to set up largely useless institutional initiatives. Is there some sort of *category mistake* (an ontological misunderstanding that sabotages action from the inside) in the efforts to identify the source of global structural injustice as an evil collective agency? According to the two main interpretations of

agency, this harmful agency is situated in individuals (and then it should be treated by voluntary or forced personal moralization) or in a group agency, a conspiracy (and then it should be treated by the force of law, national and supranational). The practical results of both these approaches are currently considered disheartening and this is the stimulus to step back to an initial category mistake. But it might not be the notion of group-agency or collective agency in itself, rather the oversimplified qualification of this agency as "bad" in the perspective of a punitive backwards-looking responsibility. Let us take global structural issues as due to a cloud of collective interacting agencies, and consider this system in a constructive outlook of forward-looking responsibility. The focus remains on the agency, but neither the traditional personal one nor a global group-agent.

3. COLLECTIVES, ORGANIZATIONS, NETWORKS

The existing, emerging and future kinds of collectives, some of them organizations in the traditional sense and the others networks in many innovative ways, can be subjects of a global ethics based on virtue ethics in its currently burgeoning varieties (Sandler 2007, chap. 5). Building upwards from personal ethics and towards justice can be done with a program (Slote 2007) of care, empathy, and moral virtues (revisited). The decisive step in our view is to identify the intermediating collectives, whatever their organizational nature, and to suggest for them specific virtues.

The three transverse themes as we are following them originating from a more global entity that cannot simply be taken as a group-agent. They come from a systemic entity comprising culture, social values, incumbent economic structures, existing political systems. The transverse question, it appears, ought then to be: how are the new kinds of intermediating agency actually mingling with these systemic issues and from there on how can they rearrange the whole systemic mess with some likelihood to improve it?

A little bit of ontology is required here to clarify the nature and identity of a group-agent. From the vast and controversial literature on the subject, a consensus emerges: *collective organizations* like enterprises (business firms), governments, NGOs, and so many other forms are things and, more precisely, they are “social objects” that can be seen like “corporate agents”. These organizations essentially act in the world. Amazon launches delivery by drones, Greenpeace saves whales, the Spanish government allows a vote for the independence of a province. But in these expressions do we mean that Greenpeace actually acts as a group-agent, as a whole? Or do we use this image but we actually mean that some individuals, some parts or members of Greenpeace once save whales? Does the group embody a specific identity or does it just possess the cumulative identity of its parts? The answer to this question justifies understanding the behaviour of firms and national states as “corporate agents.” This is still a moot point in legal and philosophical theories.

Two main options are explored.

(1) *The individual or a definite part takes precedence over the whole.* This prevailing of the individual over the collective entity is known as “methodological individualism” in the sociological tradition. It is a paradigm of social sciences according to which collective phenomena can (and must) be described and explained from the properties and actions of individuals and their mutual interactions (bottom-up approach). Coleman dubbed these groups “multi-agents” systems. This interpretation leads to the tenet that any decision or action of the collective reflects (more or less clearly) the overall decisions and actions of individuals (Coleman 1990).

Thus considered, the group can always be reduced to its parts. Peter French affirms that the intentions of the company are always reducible to human intentions (French 1979). From an ethical point of view, this position suggests that collective responsibility can be reduced to individual responsibility. This position amounts to consider that there is no responsibility of the group as such; this is only a manner of speaking.

(2) *It exists a singular identity of the group.* This second position considers that there is a singular identity of the group, which is a reality distinct from the individuals making up the group. This position leads to recognizing that group-agent responsibility and individual responsibilities are distinct.

We are more sympathetic to this second option, which gives a singular and autonomous place to the existence, responsibility, and agency of diverse levels of collectives and basically opens the question: which collective to deal with which issue?

To go further, after assuming the singular existence of a group or an organization we need to fully understand it as a social object, namely an object that is not defined only by its physical instantiation but also by a *collective intention*, that is to say by the projections the agents make on it. The social object, like a firm or a bank note, is a whole composed of physical and mental elements. Without collective intentions, the firm is just a building and the bank note just a paper sheet. But social objects like firms, governments, hospitals, schools and so on have something essential in common: their principal intrinsic property is constituted by individuals. The unity and independence of the collective intention and collective agency make sense out of this intrinsic property, under complex conditions that we need to put forward now.

There are four conditions to qualify a group, whereas the intention is common to all its members: a shared goal, individual contributions to achieve the goal, interdependence (each one formulates one's intentions partly because they believe that others share these intentions), and common consciousness. The common intention allows joint action. But how can a multi-member group evolve from a multiplicity of dispositions (or "attitudes") to a unique goal approved by all the group members? To answer this question, List and Pettit introduce the concept of "aggregative function", which is a vector starting from individual dispositions towards the emergence of an autonomous group aim (List and Pettit 2011). The joint commitments required for the emergence of the group is easy to be described, according to Margaret Gilbert: "How are joint

commitments formed? To put it very generally, in a situation where there are no special background understandings, each person must express to the others that he is in a certain broadly speaking mental state, such that common knowledge among them that all have made, the appropriate expressions suffices to create a joint commitment of them all. I refer to this state as “readiness” for joint commitment. As to common knowledge, suffice it to say that the expressions in question must be “out in the open” as far as the parties-to-be are concerned.” (Gilbert 2015, 80).

The autonomous group aims and the resulting joint commitment are the base of collective agency. Furthermore, an organization can access superior agentive properties that are: having representational states of the environment, building a motivational state that specifies the things needed by the environment, being able to rely on these two previous "intentional" states to intervene properly in the environment (List and Pettit 2011).

The reality of the group-agent, based on the intrinsic conditions of agency and on the possibility of a single group’s aim cannot be cogently contested. Therefore, the entity as group-agent can be subject to criticism, accusation etc. For example, when BP is held responsible for an oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, it is considered as an agent that can be prosecuted as such. This position does not prevent recognizing individual responsibilities. Each member of the group is in a sense individually morally responsible for the outcome of the joint action but each is individually responsible jointly with the others (Miller and Makela 2005, 234). There is no paradox in group agency but the superposition of collective and individual responsibility. They are linked but they are different. From this perspective, the individual agent, belonging to numerous formal and informal collectives, carries a multiply folded responsibility and agency. It is not advisable to manage this kind of complex interdependence with a mechanical engineering logic, typical Western-style rationalizing. It is worth trying to implement in one’s mind a Daoist, Buddhist or ecological sense of harmony in systemic interdependence (Hershock 2012, 2006; Naess 1989)

There is another form of the collective agent: the networks and new collectives (especially political collectives). For example, a consumer's or a brand community, the "Yellow Vests" movement in France (2018-2019), the Anonymous on the Internet, a local collective for welcoming refugees, etc. Since the 2000s, this kind of collective is more and more important in public life and in the media, it gathers all types of population and gains public support up to the point of becoming the only remaining collective deserving trust, confronted to companies, state governments or other "stable" major institutions. A comprehensive study of this new logic in social movements is due to Manuel Castells (Castells 2012) and the phenomenon as a whole, supported by the Internet, Facebook, and other iconic medias of the 21st century, is a literal deployment of what was announced as the "wisdom of crowds" (Surowiecki 2004) or "organizing without organizations" (Shirky 2008). These groups possess the same nature, identity, and type of collective agency than the standard group-agents mentioned before, in the sense that they have a real group identity and an autonomous collective agency, most of the times a very visible and communicative one. But their operational inner working is not the same and that makes a real difference for the global collective injustice issue.

These types of collectives are informal. For them, the individual is as important as the whole, and they have a network organization. Some midsize organizations or even informal networks inside large organizations can have the same characteristics – and so they can be mediating collectives for global change, from the inside of large existing structures. We propose this Table for identifying the main differences:

Group agents: firms, governments, NGOs	New collectives and some midsize informal organizations
Formal	Informal
Vertical/Pyramidal	Horizontal organization

The whole is more important	The individual is as important as the group
Contractual adhesion	Adhesion by acting
Orderly constitution	Viral constitution
Top-down	Bottom-up
Process	Emergence

The value of these new collectives is based on the non-dissolution of the person in the group, and this comes from: 1) Actions. Participation in the group is only made by individual voluntary acts and not by formal, contractual, or theoretical adhesion; 2) The fact that they are uncontrollable. These types of collectives are very difficult to be controlled by other organizations because they are elusive. There is no one or no whole to seize. The movement emerges from below and it is not governed by a board. To deconstruct it, it is not possible to remove the head of the group, it is necessary to treat each individuality, one by one. This is obviously complicated especially when the collective is very widespread; Precisely, 3) thanks to the previously mentioned features and thanks to the Internet, the new collectives can grow at a very high speed, they can spread very quickly: it is "viral."

Finally, new collectives appear as very powerful in a time of public inertness and they are sometimes the only remaining option for solving social problems. The governance of the common resources could, according to Ostrom, be assured by voluntary organizations, by collectives able to take charge of the common goods in a mature collaborative way:

“Success in starting small-scale initial institutions enables a group of individuals to build on the social capital thus created to solve larger problems with larger and more complex institutional arrangements. Current theories of collective action do not stress the process of accretion of institutional capital. Thus, one problem in using them as foundations for policy analysis is that they do not focus on the incremental self-transformations that frequently are

involved in the process of supplying institutions. Learning is an incremental, self-transforming process.” (Ostrom 2011, 190).

Defending the commons depends on companies and institutions as group-agents but also on individuals belonging to these groups and, maybe, we can hope for more efficiency from there than from classical organizations. In this process, learning is central, as stressed by Ostrom. For the agent-groups this learning amounts to a duty to know, legally called "duty of vigilance". Its correspondence to the virtue of awareness is obvious.

For addressing problems as big and systemic as inequality, climate change and femicide, we have to consider organizations and new collectives in their possible counter-productive outcomes, as well as in their potential game-changer action. To begin with, a robust theory of personal bonds in informal collectives can be drawn from the famous article on the strength of weak ties by Granovetter (Granovetter 1973). We are advocating here for the strength of weak-ties collectives and affirming they are an indispensable mediation agency for global issues (they address the global bottom-up from individual ethics). The weakness and dangers of informal collectives, large mobs or small occasional crowds, is a well-attested phenomenon in history as in personal experience, but the new kind of collectives in the 21st century is aware of that and consciously insists on the need to subvert the traditional model of a governance by the “knowing few.”

How can the agency of a collective, even an informal one, take over individual responsibility or, better, transpose it to a higher level? We have argued that an organization is a full-agent in its own right, that it can be held responsible for its actions because it has all the characteristics of agency: 1) It has a normative capacity that allows significant normative choices involving the possibility of doing something good or bad, correct or false. 2) It has a judgmental capacity. 3) It is able to organize itself for acting according to pursued collective desires and it is able to choose between several proposals. A collective agent is able to self-regulate.

The term "legal person" states that a corporation or a group may be considered responsible as a person would, a fictitious or artificial person, but nevertheless a person, able to assume responsibility, and who has duties and rights. However, it is one thing to posit the legal existence of the legal person from a performative point of view, in the restricted arena of jurisdiction; it is another to imagine this personification as intrinsic, considering that the person must have a material consistency. But we have previously recognized that the agent-group may perform judgments and moral acts, it may enter into engagements with other agents, and it may be a source or target of requests. It acts, then it is.

In terms of nature and degrees of responsibility, there is then no difference between a "classical organization" and new collectives: they have the same duty to assume their responsibility.

For an organization, responsibility is multiple. If we talk about corporate responsibility, we talk about the responsibility of the group, therefore collective responsibility. The organization's responsibility is named "corporate social responsibility" (CSR) and it contains responsibility for the stakeholders affected by its actions. To better understand the limits of its responsibility and how it is distributed, let us analyse its stakeholders. Global issues, after all, are nothing but unlimited stakeholders issues.

Against Milton Friedman, well known for defending the idea that the sole responsibility of the company is to maximize its profit and consequently the benefit for its shareholders (Friedman 1970), more and more people and organizations now consider that companies have to compensate their outsourced costs for the community (pollution, accidents, unemployment...) (Carroll 1979, 500). It is now admitted that a company has to assume its social and environmental impact. In theory, we should be in a fairer world.

But applying this theory meets some difficulties. How is the responsibility chain organized within a group-agent? To answer this question, we have to differentiate between the "classical organization" and these new collectives. They have the same duty

towards society and the environment, but not the same organization for implementing it.

(1) When the organization is constituted like a firm, a hospital, a school, it is rather easy to attribute its responsibility as a group because the entity is well identified. It can be governed as an autonomous entity. In case of a problem, there is a person, a legal person to bring legal action against. It is always possible to ask for a report on wage levels, carbon impact, gender equality and so on.

But in the case of other organizations, below the radar of business, social or environmental law, it could be complicated to attribute individual responsibility. In fact, the level of responsibility of members in relation to the group is not the same depending on whether they work for the group or they otherwise participate in the achievement of the group's objectives - and depending on their precise level of participation. The problem happens when a task is divided between too many people because this prevents people from seeing the purpose of the task, including its moral purpose. In this way, it can be said that there is a significant risk of dilution of individual responsibility. And this is a preoccupying ethical flaw in an organization.

This issue of collective responsibility and group agent has been addressed by social psychology in a seminal work (Latané and Darley 1970) that analyses the phenomenon of dilution of responsibility as playing a key part in collective agency's fault. Following several sensational stories from the 1960s and 1970s in which victims of rape and/or murder were not helped, nor the police called, despite the presence of numerous witnesses, the concept of dilution of responsibility emerged, consisting of three components:

Social influence: what are the others doing? Peer pressure here means that in a situation of potential danger, an individual first spends some time observing the action, or inaction, of others. This behaviour tends to result in strong inertia: if nobody is doing anything, perhaps it is not that serious.

- *Evaluation apprehension: what if I'm wrong in my perception or interpretation of the situation?* Following the first aspect, this propensity enhances the need for making situations of injustice as clear and explicit as possible, and it explains why modern evil prospers in ambiguity.
- *Diffusion of responsibility: why should I do something if nobody else does?* It is noteworthy that this type of reasoning seldom plays a role when one is confronted with actions affecting one's own well-being - apart perhaps in early childhood. Thus, a smoker may invoke many reasons why he is not quitting (it is not a good time right now, I don't smoke that much, etc.) but it would be highly unusual to hear: "others are smoking as much, or even more than I do." Yet this is exactly the type of reasoning commonly used to justify a lack of concern or action regarding global injustice.

(2) When the organization is a network or non-formalized midsize organization, it is more complicated to hold it responsible. We can hold it symbolically responsible but not legally: we have no hold. For example, when the Occupy Wall Street movement acts, it is almost impossible to prevent them, even though individuals can be arrested on the spot or afterwards and prosecuted as responsible.

On the other hand, each member of this kind of group assumes its responsibility. We have seen that in the new kind of networks individuals are as important as the whole. This is the key factor. They, individuals, belong to the group by their acts. This is the rampart against the dilution of responsibility. This is why people being judged and imprisoned is very important in this kind of collective. The judgment is personalized because precisely individual responsibility takes precedence over collective responsibility.

Ironically, then, the existence of formal organizations, deserving the status of "moral persons" and the emergence of all sorts of informal and coalescent collectives do not wipe off individual agency but, on the contrary, they give birth to new forms of individual engagement in collective agency, particularly the inter-mediating ones we are focusing on.

4. ETHICS OF INTERMEDIATE COLLECTIVES

There is a partially transitive agency through multi-layered inter-mediating collectives, whose ethics is still weak, blurred, bloated, or non-existent. An ethics of intermediate collectives suggests a number of reasons for explaining the disappointing bad results of our best efforts against injustice.

When the *organization is conceived and shaped for maintaining personal unawareness* instead of raising personal awareness, its mediation between personal moral sense or values and the practical outcomes of the activity is a built-in feature of this organization. In some cases (slaughterhouse or the entire sector of industrial food), is there any reason to believe that this organized unawareness is not intentional? Since the most ancient empires on Earth, it seems, pyramidal organization is an excellent framework for personal unawareness and irresponsibility. “I was just obeying orders” is a frequent argument when war atrocities are prosecuted. The recent scandal dubbed “Dieselgate” in the automobile industry can be connected to the still “Taylorian” and patriarchal management style in this high-engineered commodity industry. No inter-mediating collective was able to blow the whistle, even though some of the guilty companies have been advertising for years their internal process for engineering ethics and transparency.

The timescale issue, when short-term is everything and long-term has no weight, is terribly damaging, especially for climate change and global injustice. “In the long run we are all dead”, said one of the most humanist economists (Keynes) and everyone in politics know that the number one concern for politicians is the short-term of their re-election.

Cognitive biases can be listed as five barriers blocking the climate message and many comparable subjects, the “5 Ds”: Distance, Doom, Dissonance, Denial, iDentity (Stoknes 2015).

The *crisis of institutions* and classical organizations in the early 21st century gives a final touch: if no existing institution is acceptable as representing the collective agency of citizens while individual agency

is obviously at the wrong scale for global issues, the predicament is as ominous as can be. The classic organization was representative by definition in our liberal culture: a chosen leader decides and represents the individuals. Based on the social contract theories due to Hobbes, Locke or Rousseau, this type of organization begins with a deal, either explicitly or tacitly, between individuals and the group, where individuals voluntarily give up their own power of decision against a power of representation. This type of organization, pyramidal, vertical, is still the paradigm, not only in the official political organizations like governments but also in economic organizations like companies. Organizations representing individuals are the condition of possibility for an autonomous group identity that does not boil down to a simple aggregation of individuals. But when individuals believe that organizations no longer represent them, no common agency can make sense.

In the moment of individual empowerment, supported by the Internet (Himanen 2001), the classical organization, which maintains personal unconsciousness and irresponsibility instead of raising awareness, is no longer adapted to the change in social values. But, at the same time, we need to identify group-agents because we need them to assume their social responsibility. How can we have both representative groups *and* responsible individuals?

This question belongs to the formidable task of reinventing democracy. The ethic of mediating collectives resulting from this article leads to some suggestions.

For personal responsibility, we suggest highlighting and assuming *individualities* in the group and the responsibility related to each of them. Individuals can question themselves, question the finality of their actions (is it good for me, for the group, for the environment?) and they assume the responsibility for it.

For virtuous enduring action, we suggest to act daily, oneself or as a collective, directly or indirectly, avoiding gluttony, arrogance, greed, and apathy towards humans on the non-human environment, and consider these *micro-actions* as the wanted form of virtue (Sandler and Cafaro 2005; Puech 2016).

For external communication, one may implement in the routine process or habits of every intermediate collective *an awareness and updating of all other significantly interdependent collectives* (same level, higher level, lower level).

For internal communication, what works according to our consultancy experience is a routine of horizontal discussions on applied ethical issues within relevant internal collectives, so that when a dilemma or delicate decision-making situation occurs, the *space for discussion* is already in place (Davis 2005). Better internal communication and a different storytelling (Stoknes 2015) can help to arrange this.

For group-agency, we advise validating, by open and clear constant communication within the group, the “readiness” for one or several definite *joint actions* so that they are understood and felt as actions of the collective.

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