

Gianluca Cavallo

**Moral Injustice. How an  
Unfair Distribution of Moral  
Burdens Harms the Individual  
and Our Society as a Whole\***

*Abstract*

Moral agency cannot be understood if one makes abstraction from the social conditions of agency. If the latter are taken into account, it becomes clear that acting in accordance with one's values does not depend solely on the agent's own intentions. The ability to act morally depends on what kinds of responsibilities one bears and is co-determined by political and structural conditions. As a result of an unfair division of moral labor, some subjects are structurally over-exposed to moral insecurity and failure. This can be defined as moral injustice. First, the paper explores the psychological dynamics of the experience of moral insecurity and failure, explaining the reasons why people feel guilt or shame despite the lack of control over the circumstances of the action and how they cope with these negative emotions, which can lead to aggressiveness and moral blindness. Second, it explores the social dynamics which lead to moral injustice, understood as an unfair distribution of moral burdens. Finally, it shows how moral injustice affects people's well-being and the quality of our democratic life and should therefore be considered a politically relevant issue.

*Keywords:* moral blindness; guilt; moral shame; moral distress; feminist moral philosophy; moral injustice.

\* This article is the runner-up of the Young Researcher Award for the best article on the topic *Forms of Injustice* sponsored by the Department of Political and Social Studies at the University of Salerno and by the Italian Society for Women in Philosophy (SWIP Italia).

## *Introduction*

The usual assumption in contemporary moral philosophy is that anyone who is fully conscious and capable of making autonomous decisions can be considered a moral agent. The latter, in turn, is regarded as a person capable of acting in accordance with what they consider valuable. In this respect there are no differences among moral agents. The underlying egalitarianism and universalism of this assumption stand in contrast to the exclusion of women, slaves, and other subjects, which was typical both in ancient and in a great part of modern moral philosophy. Aristotle, for instance, thought that a specific social status – that of free male citizens – was necessary to be considered full-fledged moral agents (Nussbaum 1995, 122). Even though the usual contemporary approach is based on important democratic values, it is based on a form of universalism which, by making abstraction from the social conditions of agency, becomes blind to power differentials. This kind of universalism has been criticized especially by feminist and non-white philosophers. Drawing inspiration from this line of critical thinking, and especially from the work of Marget Urban Walker (2001; 2007), I will argue that certain social conditions jeopardize the subject's moral capabilities, resulting in moral insecurity and moral failure.

It is a common-sense truth that not everyone shares the same responsibilities. Indeed, who is supposed to bear responsibility for what and, moreover, what counts as responsibility are questions with no obvious answers. However, since responsibility is a key concept for any form of moral theorizing, they cannot be left aside. As Walker argues, answering them requires an analysis of power relations and shared cultural values. As she states: "We are not all responsible for the same things, in the same ways, at the same costs, or with similar exposure to demand or blame by the same judges" (Walker 2007, 106). The fact that parenting, for example, counts as a responsibility, seems obvious to us, but it was not obvious in ancient Sparta, and the fact that only mothers are responsible for childcare is something many people nowadays no longer accept as obvious. One could object that these differences are not relevant for moral theory, since everyone ought to follow the same moral law, regardless of their actual social roles and corresponding responsibilities. However, here is exactly where the limit of abstract moral theorizing

comes to the fore: it does not take into account the material conditions which make moral agency possible. Different social positions not only entail specific responsibilities that others may not have, but they also impact access to the resources needed to fulfill those responsibilities. If these resources are limited, the ability to act as a moral agent will be impaired. By ‘resources’ I mean not only money or material goods, but also, and especially, power and authority, as well as time, mental and physical energy, and whatever is needed to perform the required moral action. Some moral philosophers would rejoin that if one lacks the necessary resources to perform an action, one is relieved of responsibility, because no one can be morally required to do something one cannot do, according to the principle that ‘ought implies can’. Yet the distinction between what is possible and what is not is far from obvious. In many cases one realizes that something is impossible to do – in other words, that the available resources are insufficient – only while trying to do it. As we will see, this makes a substantial difference. It means that, in real life, people often *are* held – by others or by themselves – responsible for things they cannot do or they cannot do the way they are expected or they themselves wish to do. Saying that they are not, in fact, responsible would be to disregard the reality of moral practices, the way shared “moral understandings” (Walker 2007) shape people’s own personal and social identities. However, a moral theory which makes abstraction from the reality of moral practices condemns itself to irrelevance.

The ability to fulfill one’s responsibilities therefore depends on what kinds of responsibilities one is supposed to discharge and on the resources one has available. This means that some people bear responsibilities they cannot (fully) discharge, because they lack the necessary resources, whereas other people do not bear the same kinds of responsibilities or are in a better position to discharge them. Let us take as an example a woman who, while working full-time, bears responsibility for household and child care, because a traditional division of roles still applies in her family. It is not unlikely that this woman will not be in a position to perform her care work in the way other people, and perhaps she herself, expects it to be done. She will therefore be subject to blame and self-criticism in a way unknown to her husband, who does not bear the same kind of responsibilities. We can imagine another woman, richer than the first one, who can delegate much of the care work she cannot

do to other women. Having access to greater material resources, she will be spared, at least in part, the blame and self-criticism to which the other woman is subjected. An unfair distribution of responsibilities and resources results in what I will call *moral injustice*. I will explore its causes in the second part of the paper and point out its consequences for our democratic societies in the concluding paragraph. Before addressing these aspects, however, I will focus on the psychological experience of being unable to act in accordance with what one considers valuable. In doing so, I will challenge another common assumption, namely, that negative moral emotions, such as guilt and (moral) shame,<sup>1</sup> can be considered appropriate reactions only when they arise as a result of intentional violations of moral values.

### 1. *Moral insecurity and moral failure*

When a moral agent fails to fulfill what they see as their moral responsibility, they feel shame or guilt (O’Hear 1977; Piers 1971). If it is true that, as I have argued in the introduction, some people bear responsibilities they cannot (fully) discharge, it follows that some people cannot avoid feeling shame or guilt. This emotional dimension of moral agency is neglected by those moral philosophers who stick to (a specific understanding of) the principle that ought implies can. It is irrational, from their perspective, to feel guilty for having failed to do something that was impossible for the agent to do. However, it is an emotional reaction many people experience in their everyday life and, as Lisa Tessman writes at the beginning of her insightful book on moral failure, if we dismiss emotional reactions as irrational, “the result is a moral theory that does not really suit the kinds of creatures that we are” (Tessman 2015, 2). This does not mean that we should accept emotional reactions at face value.

---

<sup>1</sup> Shame is often considered a social emotion, arising as a result of the subject’s exposure to the gaze of others. However, as some authors have pointed out, shame can also be a private experience, and result from one’s inability to meet one’s self-ideal. This is called moral shame. Throughout the paper, I will always mean moral shame, even if I will omit the adjective. On shame and its relation to injustice, see Cavallo (2021).

They could be the result of mistaken beliefs, ideologies, or unconscious motives (*ibidem*, 31). Guilt and shame clearly fall into this category. However, there are cases in which guilt and shame result from our firmest beliefs and values. This is clear in the case the subject fails to do what was possible. One feels guilty if one commits – or witnesses without intervening or protesting – something which one considers to be immoral; one feels shame if, as a consequence of immoral action or complicity, one starts seeing oneself as being of lower value than one had previously assumed. Discounting these emotional reactions would amount to a form of irrational denial or suppression. The same applies to those cases in which the subject's ability to act is impaired by the circumstances. If a social worker A, for instance, believes that it is their responsibility to help an immigrant worker B find a job, it is not unlikely that A will feel guilty if they fail to help B find a job, even if this is due, at least in part, to the fact that B is discriminated against by most employers, something for which A bears no responsibility. This can happen if A believes that, despite discrimination, it is not impossible for B to find a job; in this case, A will believe, *a fortiori*, that the fact that B has not found a job is attributable at least in part to A's own failure. However, even if A would eventually come to the conclusion that there is nothing else to do to help B find a job, A may still experience a form of uneasiness, because A was involved in a situation which resulted in the violation of something valuable (namely, B's right to work). Bernard Williams has called this feeling of uneasiness a "moral remainder" (Williams 1973, 179), which is a sign of what the subject considers valuable. Dismissing negative emotional reactions to unintentional violations of moral values amounts to arguing that people should forget about their values as soon as they realize that it is difficult to put them in place. The ability to forget what one values would then count as a virtue. Williams, however, does not think that guilt is an appropriate term to describe this moral remainder. He thinks it is rather regret.<sup>2</sup> He shares with other authors the idea that guilt is not appropriate for those cases in which the subject could not have done otherwise. However, these authors ignore the possibility that

---

<sup>2</sup> The same does Gowans (1994, 148), quoted by Tessman (2015, 33), who in turn does not disagree on this point.

the subject fails to achieve a goal which they believed was attainable and instead turned out to be impossible to achieve. In this case, the subject is likely to experience guilt and shame. If a goal is set, it is considered attainable. Failure to achieve it is then experienced as failure. Within the moral domain, failure equals the inability to achieve moral goals and is experienced in the form of guilt and shame. Regret is a feeling one has for having to give up on a certain goal *before* even trying to achieve it.<sup>3</sup> Imagine a person who decides to give up studying music and never becomes a musician. The goal was not, in itself, unattainable, but the person had good reasons to believe it was better to give up. If music is still important to this person, they may regret not having become a musician. However, there is no experience of failure, because becoming a musician was no longer the person's goal. On the contrary, if someone has to give up on a goal *after* having tried to achieve it, they will have to acknowledge their failure and will be more likely to experience shame and, in the case of moral goals, guilt rather than simply regret. If that person really wanted to become a musician and had to give up after years of intensive training because they realized they were not skilled enough, it is odd to think they would simply regret not having become a musician. It is more likely that they would feel ashamed for having invested so much time and energy in something they are not good at. Similar to this attempted musician, moral agents are committed to realizing moral goals which they consider valuable and attainable. Thus, if they fail to do so, they are more likely to experience guilt and shame rather than simply regret. This is due precisely to the fact that ought implies can. As Lisa Tessman suggests, this principle should be understood in the sense that moral requirements imply something which "would necessarily be possible (and actual) in every good-enough world" (Tessman 2015, 46). This is, at least, how people experience the force of moral requirements: as something that ought to be possible, even when it is not, and continues to hold for people even if they are unable to act accordingly in the present moment

---

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, this is what Williams talks about (1973, 170), as he analyzes moral dilemmas, which are situations in which one has to give up on one of two conflicting moral goals. The same applies to the other authors quoted in the previous footnote. It is quite curious to note that the idea that pursuing a moral goal could be impossible due to external constraints is almost absent in moral philosophy.

given the circumstances. In this sense, moral requirements are similar to desires: just as the fact that someone cannot satisfy a desire at a specific time does not necessarily mean that they no longer have that desire, the fact that a moral requirement cannot be fulfilled under specific circumstances does not necessarily mean that the requirement ceases to hold for the subject.<sup>4</sup>

Going back to the example of the social worker, one could still argue that A's emotional reaction is irrational, since the fact that A's goal turned out to be unattainable shows that A had wrongly assessed the circumstances and overestimated A's own moral capabilities. The conclusion would be that one must be realistic about one's moral capabilities and adequately take into account external constraints. In this way, one would avoid setting unattainable moral goals and thus experiencing moral failure. Indeed, it is perfectly possible to imagine that A<sub>2</sub> (a colleague of A's) does not feel guilty even though they cannot help B find a job. A<sub>2</sub> does not have strong emotional reactions; A<sub>2</sub> believes there is nothing to be done to change the situation and that A should learn to accept reality. However, A<sub>2</sub> is not necessarily more rational than A. A<sub>2</sub>'s appeal to reality could be a form of what in psychoanalysis is called 'rationalization', defined by Laplanche and Pontalis as an "attempt to present an explanation that is either logically consistent or ethically acceptable for attitudes, actions, ideas, feelings, etc." (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973, 375). A very common way of rationalizing is indeed to make "appeal to reality" (*ibidem*, 376) in order to conceal the true motives of one's behavior. At worst, appealing to reality may be a way of denying an inner conflict and justifying forms of emotional detachment or even immoral behavior, thus rendering the subject blind to all kinds of moral considerations (cf. Dejours 1998, 155ff.). As Laplanche and Pontalis state, since any behavior is susceptible of rational explanation, it is often difficult to distinguish between true motives and rationalizations. However, whereas true motives are the expression of the subject's own beliefs, rationalization

---

<sup>4</sup> Someone could argue that, just as there can be irrational desires, there can be irrational moral beliefs. At this point of the argumentation, however, I am not interested in defending the rationality of someone's moral beliefs, as I am only interested in describing the experience of moral failure. On the social origin of moral requirements, see the next page of the paper.

“finds solid support in established ideologies (...)” (*ibidem*). An immediate emotional reaction is certainly more likely to be an expression of a person’s beliefs than a realistic, detached assessment. This, of course, does not mean that a person’s beliefs cannot be irrational, nor that reality should not be taken into account. What I want to point out is simply that the lack of an emotional reaction is not necessarily preferable to its occurrence. Which reaction is more rational is debatable. If one has high moral standards, reality itself may appear irrational, and negative emotional responses may be considered the consequence of a sound appraisal of the evils of reality. On the other hand, if one thinks that reality cannot or should not be changed, negative emotional responses may appear as irrational. This also means that people who tend to experience guilt and shame are people who believe things ought to be different, consider themselves (co-)responsible for bringing about change, and believe that change is possible. This is confirmed by empirical evidence (e.g., Montada and Schneider 1989).

Does this mean that only a few “moral saints” (Wolf 1982) experience negative emotions when faced with the impossibility of meeting their high moral standards? If this were the case, it would not make sense to speak of a moral injustice: the fact that some people cannot fulfill their responsibilities would be due solely to the fact that they have too high moral standards. However, while this may be true in some cases, it must be remembered that values are not a creation of the subject. One learns to see certain things as valuable by participating to what Alisdair MacIntyre calls “practices” (MacIntyre 2007, 187). By engaging in a practice, one learns to value the goals that define the practice itself. One learns what it means to be a good football player by playing football, and one cannot be a good football player without valuing excellent playing and scoring. In the same way, one learns to value certain goals by being a social worker (to stick with our previous example), and one cannot be a good social worker if one neglects those values. Values are constitutive of the practice in which one engages and define what it means to be a good practitioner. They determine the goals of the practice, which must be assumed to be attainable, for otherwise the practice itself would be absurd. Thus, the inability to achieve these goals is experienced as a fail-



ure.<sup>5</sup> This is why a person can – reasonably – experience guilt and shame for having failed to achieve a goal which is constitutive of the practice in which they are engaged.

One could still argue that the fact that the goal turned out to be unattainable should, *a posteriori*, justify the subject. However, it is not entirely accurate to say that the goal turned out to be unattainable. How can A know for sure that helping B was impossible? In most cases, the only thing that is sure is that A was unable to achieve a goal. It is hard to assess whether the goal actually was unattainable. This means that A remains insecure about the justification of their choice. This is what I call moral insecurity, which can have different causes. Under certain circumstances, the price of doing X may be too high for A. In such cases, A will decide to do Y instead of X because Y appears to be the lesser evil. However, A may: (1) feel responsible for being in a situation in which A is forced to choose Y (Williams 1993, 69-74); (2) worry about not having correctly assessed the situation and, accordingly, misjudging the possible consequences of X (Hill 1991, 67-84);<sup>6</sup> (3) realize that the choice of Y was motivated by the fear of possible negative consequences for A-self (Frankfurt 1998, 39-40). In cases (1)-(3), A cannot rule out that X would have been feasible if only A (1) had not made wrong decisions in the past; (2) had assessed the situation more accurately; or (3) had had the courage to bear the possible negative consequences of X. However, if X was actually possible – which A cannot rule out in all these cases – not doing X constitutes a culpable moral failure. Thus, in all these cases, A cannot be sure whether Y can be justified. A believes, or wants to believe, that their behavior was justified, but the possibility that it was not

---

<sup>5</sup> One experiences failure *as a practitioner*. What is at stake is the meaning of one's engagement in the practice, or even the meaning of the practice itself. This shows that being able to act in accordance to what one considers valuable is not only a moral, but also an existential question. However, I do not have the space to explore this dimension here.

<sup>6</sup> A common approach in moral philosophy is to consider something as a moral requirement only if acting upon it will produce the state of affairs with the highest value, *all things considered*. One of the problems with this approach is that the agent is not necessarily in a position to develop an all-things-considered reasoning and is therefore left with moral insecurity.

leaves room for guilt and shame. Indeed, guilt and shame do not only arise, as it is often assumed, when the subject has clearly violated a moral principle. As Nancy Sherman writes:

sometimes (...) feeling guilt involves an *open* question of an individual's moral responsibility (...) [A] person remains genuinely uncertain, not sure what to believe about his or her moral responsibility given the question of causal involvement, whether an individual could have or should have known the consequences of his or her actions (...) or could have or should have found a more graceful way out of complicity. (...) In the case of subjective guilt, to call it 'irrational' or recalcitrant can be dismissive, encouraging us to overlook the genuine figuring out that is often part of the psychological process of healthy ownership of responsibility (2014, 223-224).

The complexity of moral life often makes it hard for the subject to assess their own behavior. As a result, the subject may experience guilt and shame (perhaps transiently or inconstantly).

Another source of moral insecurity is what Immanuel Kant calls "imperfect duties". Imperfect duties prescribe generic ends to be pursued (e.g., the well-being of others), without saying anything "about the kind and extent of actions" (Kant 1991, 240) that ought to be undertaken in view of these ends. The extent to which the subject is bound by these duties is left to the subject's own sensibility. For example, nurses' work aims at promoting the patients' well-being. However, it is not always clear what exactly this duty requires, who is supposed to do what, when, and how. The problem with imperfect duties is that "no specific limits can be assigned to what should be done" (*ibidem*, 197). As a consequence, the subject cannot know whether they have fulfilled their responsibility by doing what they have done the way they have done it. It is always possible to do more and to do it differently. Thus, the subject has no clear criteria upon which to judge what they have done or omitted. This can result in "moral distress" and give rise to guilt and self-criticism (Campbell *et al.* 2016).

The reader might wonder why I am insisting so much on guilt and other negative self-directed emotions. One could argue that being realistic about one's moral capabilities and adequately taking into account external constraints does not necessarily translate into passive accep-

tance of reality, as I have argued before. The alternative between guilt and submission is a false alternative. When people realize that external factors make it impossible to realize what one considers valuable, they have neither reason to feel guilty nor to accept the situation as it is. The most appropriate emotional reaction is anger (or outrage), which can motivate people to express criticism and, if possible, to engage in a struggle to change reality. I do not want to downplay the importance of anger, nor am I arguing that this kind of emotional reaction is unlikely or inappropriate. Anger can, indeed, be a successful motivator and sustain people's efforts to bring about real change. However, if the individual is unable to act upon this anger – for example, because they fear the consequences – or if they make the experience of repeated failures, anger turns either towards oneself in the form of self-blame, giving rise to “guilt, self-criticism and low self-esteem” (McCarthy and Deady 2008, 256), or against other people in the form of aggressiveness, which no longer has to do with a struggle for justice. It can turn against colleagues who still represent the work ethos: they are “slackers”, who work too “slowly” and inefficiently; “old dinosaurs” or “idealists”; it can be “women” and “faggots” who are too “weak” and “feminine” to confront reality with “virile” courage; it can be patients who “deserve” to be neglected and mistreated, and so on (Dejours 1998, 113-121; Molinier 2006, 248-251; Gaignard 2007; Rolo 2015, 66-70; Duarte and Dejours 2019). These developments are easily explained. At first, one feels hindered in one's course of action, but still continues to believe in one's own moral capacity to act autonomously. One is outraged at those who made it impossible to pursue the right course of action and at those colleagues who seem ready to compromise. However, if one is repeatedly impeded or coerced and is unable to resist or to achieve meaningful change, one begins to doubt one's capacities as a moral agent. Being forced to accept what one judges to be morally wrong, one finds oneself guilty of complicity. As Alvita K. Nathaniel (2006) writes, moral conflicts must be followed by a decision: either make a stand (resisting coercion, breaking the rules, whistleblowing, protesting, etc.) or give up by submitting to the circumstances. Talking about work, and following Hirschman (1970), we can add a third option, which is to quit the organization. Protesting and resigning are always viable options, motivated by anger, for preserving one's sense of integrity. However, they are often perceived as either difficult to attain

because of structural problems (e.g., widespread racism), or particularly risky, considering the possibility of incurring ostracism, job loss, financial insecurity, and other negative consequences. This is why people often feel forced to accept the circumstances as they are and renounce trying to change reality. When this happens, anger can no longer lead to any positive resolution of the conflict and thus gives way to self-blame and/or aggressiveness. The latter, however, is nothing but a way to cope with one's sense of unworthiness, to escape one's guilt by projecting it onto others (Rolo 2019, 53-54). This explains why I have been insisting on guilt and other negative self-directed emotions.

## *2. Moral injustice*

So far, we have seen how the inability to act in accordance with one's moral values gives rise to feelings of guilt and shame. This is due to the fact that moral goals, which define and constitute the practice in which the subject engages, are not in themselves impossible to attain and the subject who is unable to meet them is either unsure about the justification for their behavior or experiences moral failure. However, it is not yet clear what this has to do with injustice. The point is that, even though anyone can experience them, some people are more exposed to moral insecurity and failure than others, and this is not due (primarily) to psychological differences, but to an unfair distribution of moral burdens. In order to clarify this thesis, let me go back once again to the social worker's example and add some further elements to it. Let us imagine that in a specific country there is widespread agreement on the moral principle that refugees ought to be welcomed, aided and given the opportunity to live an autonomous life in the hosting country. One could say that this is a responsibility carried by society as a whole. In this sense, it is recognized as a universal moral principle. But, of course, it is not a universal moral principle. Many people disagree and many of those who claim to agree actually behave in ways and hold beliefs that run against it. Moreover, only a few people among those who agree are actually responsible for carrying out the work involved in following this moral principle. The fact of working in close contact with people generates specific expectations and moral obligations that are not experienced by those

who manage resources from an office, or simply pay taxes or make donations to social organizations. Societies can agree on universal moral duties, but, as Walker points out, “only certain sorts of actual connections, dependencies-in-fact, generate moral obligations on specific persons” (2007, 92). The kind of moral obligation that arises for social workers out of these relationships of dependency can be described as an imperfect duty of benevolence, for it cannot be said what exactly this duty requires. This is, already, a first source of moral insecurity. Discharging this duty is complicated by the fact that some people – such as racist employers – will stand in the way, exposing social workers to the risk of moral failure. Moreover, social workers have to fulfill their responsibilities with the means someone else has deemed sufficient without knowing exactly what the actual work entails and without even consulting them (let alone the fact that those decision makers may not even care about the moral principle which they pay lip service to). The power to decide what resources to allocate does not lie in the hands of those who are responsible for carrying out the actual work. As a result, social workers may lack the resources to fulfill their specific responsibilities and therefore experience moral failure. Those who are not directly involved in social work, including the organization’s managers, the general public, racist employers and powerful decision makers, do not experience moral failure, even though they see it as a common responsibility to aid refugees, because they do not bear the same responsibilities towards them, they do not see their faces, hear their voices, know their suffering. So, although the moral duty is universal, only some people carry the burden of responsibility and are exposed to moral insecurity and failure.

Of course, any job comes with specific responsibilities and associated risks of failure and any social activity can be regarded as a contribution to the realization of a universal duty (e.g., fostering general well-being). Thus, one could argue that – to stay with our example – decision makers carry responsibilities which are not carried by social workers and will be exposed to forms of insecurity and failure unknown to social workers. It is simply a matter of division of (moral) labor. This objection, however, overlooks two important points. First, the power differential. While decision makers have the power to determine the circumstances under which others carry out their responsibilities, the reverse is not true. Second, moral failure is experienced very differently by those who directly wit-

ness the harm caused (or have reasons to fear possible harm as a direct consequence of their behavior) and by those who see it from a distance, if at all. Let us consider the example of a team of construction workers who have to build a tunnel with substandard materials. These people will likely feel guilty about the risk their own work poses to future drivers crossing the tunnel, whereas those who have decided what resources to spend on construction materials, who can more easily ignore the risk they entail, can avoid the experience of guilt. This applies to all kinds of hierarchical organizations. The problem arises when decision makers at the top of the hierarchical ladder disregard the “internal goods” (MacIntyre 2007, 188) of the practice – i.e., its constitutive values – and manage the organization on the basis of a different set of standards. This can be both a matter of different moral sensibilities and, more often, a structural problem, as public and private managers are more and more oriented towards standards of efficiency and profit maximization which are incompatible with the practical rationality which informs the workers’ activity (Dejours *et al.* 2018, 160-261). The absence of democratic decision-making structures within most public and private organizations makes it impossible to find a compromise between workers and managers. It also makes it difficult for workers to share and elaborate the conflicts they experience and to form alliances in order to bring about significant change (*ibidem*). The ability to realize the goods internal to the practice is thus structurally undermined. This makes it nearly impossible for the less powerful to avoid the experience of moral insecurity and unintentional moral failure.

The social division of (moral) labor is not a neutral fact, but has moral and political implications, as it places disproportionately heavy moral burdens on the shoulders of specific subjects. Women, for example, bear the heaviest load of caregiving responsibilities and are disproportionately represented in the social work sector, which means that they are exposed more than men to moral insecurity as a result of imperfect duties. Moreover, just as it is more difficult for a poor woman to fulfill her responsibilities than it is for a rich woman (see the example at the beginning of the paper), it is more difficult for an immigrant worker – be it a woman or a man – to fulfill their familial duties than it is for a white citizen, as the former suffers discrimination in the labor and housing markets. If a person, for instance, has to take on two or more different

jobs in order to feed their children and yet cannot provide their family with decent housing conditions, they will probably not be able to be the kind of parent they would like to be. It is hard to live in accordance with one's own values under conditions of financial constraint and discrimination.<sup>7</sup> As these examples show, the distribution of moral burdens reflects differences in class, gender and 'race'. Paradoxically, it is those who have the least power who end up feeling the guiltiest. Those who have the most power, or enjoy other kinds of privilege, can avoid the experiences of moral insecurity and failure thanks to their social, cognitive and emotional distance from the life of those who suffer (or are exposed to harm).

*Conclusion: The political relevance of moral injustice*

Let me briefly sum up the argument developed so far. I have argued that moral agency cannot be understood if one makes abstraction from the social conditions of agency. If the latter are taken into account, it becomes clear that values are not individually chosen, but are constitutive of the practices in which people are involved, and that acting in accordance with one's values does not depend solely on the agent's own intentions. The ability to act morally depends on what kinds of responsibilities one bears and on the availability of the necessary resources. As a result of an unfair division of moral labor, some subjects are structurally over-exposed to moral insecurity and failure. This is what I have called moral injustice.

Unfortunately, moral injustice is not necessarily experienced as such, as it can be experienced simply as a matter of personal failure. Yet, ac-

---

<sup>7</sup> One could argue that people's values vary depending on their social conditions and that poorer people do not necessarily wish to live the same life richer people live. While this is certainly true, the difference should not be over-emphasized. I take it that spending time with one's children and providing the family with decent housing is a minimum standard most people share. Insisting on the difference conveys the idea that poorer people are immoral (or amoral), as if they were not full-fledged moral agents, not civilized enough to be concerned about morality. This is a derogatory view which further infringes on people's dignity.

knowledging the societal factors contributing to one's failure can transform a moral issue into a political one.<sup>8</sup> This does not necessarily lead to the endorsement of a progressive political agenda, as adherence to values can also lean towards conservatism. For instance, there can be women who, like Phyllis Schlafly, believe they should be granted the necessary resources to stay at home and fulfill what they see as their traditional female role. However, in the second part of the paper I have exposed some arguments that show in what sense the current distribution of moral burdens can be considered unfair. It is not simply a matter of granting the resources needed to fulfill one's (traditional) duties, but of recognizing the fact that some people have to carry heavier moral burdens than others due to their social identity and position; moreover, these people are often unable to influence relevant decisions that affect their ability to fulfill those very responsibilities. In other words, they have to carry responsibility for the consequences of other people's decisions. Thus, moral injustice can only be overcome through the implementation of democratic decision-making procedures in all kinds of societal organizations, from the family to the state level. This would also open up the possibility for a revision of the values governing the practices in which people participate, as moral burdens would be subject to negotiation. This is what the history of feminism shows. The participation of women to public democratic life has led to a redistribution of moral burdens, even though this is still an ongoing process.

The unfairness of the current division of moral labor also becomes clear if we look at the consequences of moral suffering at work, as described in the empirical literature. In fact, reiterated experiences of moral insecurity and/or moral failure can result in what is known in the literature on nursing as "moral distress", which can lead to self-blame, low self-esteem, as well physiological reactions such as crying, sleep disturbances, nightmares, loss of appetite, headaches, diarrhea, vomiting, palpitations, burnout, depression, numbness, etc. (McCarthy and Deady 2008; Campbell *et al.* 2016; Deschenes *et al.* 2020). The subject can resort to different coping strategies. As already mentioned, they can resist coercion, or quit the organization. However, these options come at

---

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of this possibility see Wiinikka-Lydon 2017.



a cost that the subject is often unwilling to bear. Therefore, often the only available coping strategy is to repress one's guilt by projecting it onto others or by denying the reality of the conflict. In the former case, the subject becomes aggressive; in the latter, it becomes morally blind, i.e., indifferent to moral demands.<sup>9</sup> When the defense mechanism collapses, as a result of unexpected and undeniable events, moral suffering can lead to psychological breakdown, depression, alcoholism or even suicide (Dejours 1998, 177), or transform into a "reaction of desperate rebellion, which can extend to acts of violence, breakage, theft, revenge, sabotage, etc." (*ibidem*, 177-178). Thus, a further reason to consider the current division of moral labor within organizations unfair is that it has a considerable negative impact on the well-being of those people who are overexposed to moral insecurity and failure. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, moral injustice puts at serious risk the credibility, validity and viability of our shared moral values, and therefore our democratic life, by making it hard or even impossible for many people to act accordingly. Moreover, since the inability to act according to one's values leads to negative feelings such as guilt and shame, which people try to avoid by rationalizing their behavior, moral injustice also fosters a dangerous attitude of moral indifference, which in turn undermines people's ability to empathize and to act in solidarity with their fellow human beings.

## References

- Bauman Z., Donskis L. (2013), *Moral Blindness. The Loss of Sensitivity in Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge, Polity Press.
- Campbell S.M., Ulrich C.M., Grady C. (2016), "A Broader Understanding of Moral Distress", *The American journal of bioethics*, vol. 16, n. 12, pp. 2-9.
- Cavallo G. (2021), "Injustice, Shame, and the Moral Grammar of Social Struggles", *Critical Horizons*, vol. 22, n. 4, pp. 386-401.
- Dejours C. (1998), *Souffrance en France. La banalisation de l'injustice sociale*, Paris, Seuil.
- Dejours C., Deranty J.-P., Renault E., Smith N.H. (2018), *The Return of Work in Critical Theory. Self, Society, Politics*, New York, Columbia University Press.

---

<sup>9</sup> On moral blindness, see Bauman and Donskis 2013.

- Deschenes S., Gagnon M., Park T., Kunyk D. (2020), "Moral Distress. A Concept Clarification", *Nursing Ethics*, vol. 27, n. 4, pp. 1127-1146.
- Duarte A., Dejours C. (2019), "Le harcèlement au travail et ses conséquences psychopathologiques : une clinique qui se transforme", *L'Évolution Psychiatrique*, vol. 84, n. 2, pp. 337-345.
- Frankfurt H.G. (1998), *The Importance of What We Care About. Philosophical Essays*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Gaignard L. (2007), "Les figures psychopathologiques de la culpabilité objective", in C. Dejours (dir.), *Conjurer la violence*, Paris, Payot et Rivages, pp. 151-171.
- Gowans C. (1994), *Innocence Lost. An Examination of Inescapable Moral Wrongdoing*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hill T.E. (1991), *Autonomy and Self-respect*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Hirschman A.O. (1970), *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty. Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press.
- Kant I. (1991), *The Metaphysics of Morals* [1785], Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Laplanche J., Pontalis J.-B. (1973), *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, London, The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis.
- MacIntyre A. (2007), *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory*, Third Edition, Notre Dame, Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press.
- McCarthy J., Deady R. (2008), "Moral Distress Reconsidered", *Nursing Ethics*, vol. 15, n. 2, pp. 254-262.
- Nathaniel A.K. (2006), "Moral Reckoning in Nursing", *Western Journal of Nursing Research*, vol. 28, n. 4, pp. 419-438.
- Nussbaum M. (1995), "Aristotle on Human Nature and the Foundation of Ethics", in J.E.J. Altham and R. Harrison (eds), *World, Mind, and Ethics. Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 86-131.
- O'Hear A. (1977), "Guilt and Shame as Moral Concepts", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society. New Series*, n. 77, pp. 73-86.
- Molinier P. (2006), *Les enjeux psychiques du travail. Introduction à la psychodynamique du travail*, Édition revue et corrigée, Paris, Payot et Rivages.
- Montada L., Schneider A. (1989), "Justice and Emotional Reactions to the disadvantaged", *Social Justice Research*, vol. 3, n. 4, pp. 313-344.
- Piers G. (1971), "Shame and Guilt. A Psychoanalytic Study", in G. Piers, M.B. Singer, *Shame and Guilt. A Psychoanalytic and a Cultural Study*, New York, Norton, pp. 15-55.

- Rolo D. (2019), "Stratégies et idéologies défensives: la question des défenses de Travail, *usure mentale à Souffrance en France*, Travailler, vol. 42, n. 2, pp. 43-56.
- (2015), *Mentir au travail*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France.
- Sherman N. (2014), "Recovering Lost Goodness. Shame, Guilt, and Self-Empathy", *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, vol. 31, n. 2, pp. 217-235.
- Tessman L. (2015), *Moral Failure. On the Impossible Demands of Morality*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Walker M.U. (2007), *Moral Understandings. A Feminist Study in Ethics* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- (2001), "Seeing Power in Morality. A Proposal for Feminist Naturalism in Ethics", in P. DesAutels and J. Waugh (eds), *Feminists Doing Ethics*, Lanham, MD, Rowman & Littlefield, pp. 3-14.
- Wiinikka-Lydon J. (2017), "Moral Injury as Inherent Political Critique: The Prophetic Possibilities of a New Term", *Political Theology*, vol. 18, n. 3, pp. 219-232.
- Williams B. (1993), *Shame and Necessity*, Berkeley, University of California Press.
- (1973), "Ethical Consistency", in *Problems of the Self. Philosophical Papers 1956-1972*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 166-186.
- Wolf S. (1982), "Moral Saints", *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 79, n. 8, pp. 419-439.

