

Structural Injustice, Shared Obligations, and Global Civil Society

Jelena Belić and Zlata Božac

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Abstract: It is frequently argued that to address structural injustice, individuals should participate in collective actions organized by civil society organizations (CSOs), but the role and the normative status of CSOs are rarely discussed. In this paper, we argue that CSOs semi-perfect our shared obligation to address structural injustice by defining shared goals as well as taking actions to further them. This assigns a special moral status to CSOs, which in turn gives rise to our duty to support them. Thus, we do not have full discretion when deciding whether to join collective actions or not. Under certain conditions, we can even be forced by others to do our share.

Keywords: civil society; collective action; shared obligations; social enforceability; structural injustice

Introduction

On December 29th, 2018, the government of Thailand finally ratified the ILO's *Work in Fishing Convention* (No. 188), which defines minimum labor standards for improving the safety, health, and medical care of workers in the fishing industry. The ratification came about after years of campaigning and pressuring the government by advocacy groups including the International Labor Rights Forum, Human Rights Watch, Anti-Slavery International, and many local organizations.¹ All these organizations had been trying not only to influence Thailand's government but also to draw the world's attention to forced labor and human trafficking in the fishing industry in Thailand, whose products are sold by the major US and European retailers.²

This example highlights at least three morally important issues. First, it instantiates what Iris Marion Young terms *structural injustice*. According to Young, structural injustice "exists when social processes put large groups of persons under systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities, at the same time that these processes enable others to dominate or to have a wide range of opportunities for developing and exercising capacities available to them" (Young 2011:52). Second, by showing how consumerist habits of the affluent are maintained by products that are often manufactured in terrible working conditions, it unfolds how individuals are connected to structural injustice: injustice results from an aggregate of numerous individual and institutional actions, many of which are not wrong in themselves. Finally, it also illustrates the important and pervasive role civil society organizations play in transforming the existing unjust structure. In this paper, we take the existence of structural injustice as our starting point and seek to clarify what the shared obligation to alleviate the injustice implies for individuals.

¹ For more information see <https://laborrights.org/c188>.

² In 2014 the Guardian conducted a thorough investigation of the slavery problem, see Hodal, Kelly and Lawrence 2014.

Recently, philosophers have argued that individuals in unstructured collectives, such as the “affluent” or the “consumers”, can hold *shared* obligations to alleviate structural injustice.³ While those involved in the debate disagree about the nature of individual responsibility for structural injustice, they share the view that individuals bear a shared prospective obligation to address the injustice.⁴ When it comes to compliance with the shared obligation, one prominent proposal is to participate in the global civil society. Civil society organizations are often seen as forces of social progress since they tend to pursue morally valuable goals, such as the improvement of working conditions or saving the environment.⁵ Once we take a closer look, however, the existing accounts of shared obligations face difficulties. Namely, individuals are encouraged to support CSOs because of the capacity of the latter to coordinate collective actions, but it is left up to them to decide how or when to do so. If there is such individual discretion, however, it is hard to see how collective actions can take place, since individuals might decide to postpone their actions or disagree about which cause to support. In other words, the normative arguments in favor of leaving discretion to individuals are in tension with the ontological assumptions concerning the capacity for collective action — the more discretion individuals have to act, the less capacity for collective action there will be.

In this paper, we develop an account of shared obligation to alleviate structural injustice which is able to avoid these difficulties. By combining the ontological claims made in social

³ We use the terms “obligation”, “duty”, and “responsibility” interchangeably to indicate moral reasons to act or to refrain from acting.

⁴ Pogge (2008) argues that the citizens of affluent countries are culpable for causing structural injustice, while Young claims that sustaining structural injustice does not entail individual culpability, since, in her view, individuals neither intend to cause the harm, nor do their individual actions make a difference to its occurrence (2011:103). We choose to remain agnostic about the nature of an individual responsibility for structural injustice and we focus on prospective obligations to address the injustice. We understand prospective obligations as forward-looking obligations to take actions in the future.

⁵ For instance, global civil society has contributed to a new global consensus on human rights and an emerging consensus on climate change (Kaldor 2012). Some of these achievements have been officially recognized, such as Amnesty International winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1977.

ontology literature with the normative claims of structural injustice literature, we develop an account that is both ontologically plausible and normatively defensible. We accept the ontological claim that individuals in unstructured collectives can hold shared obligations if they have the capacity for collective action, but we add that such a capacity can be secured by existing group agents, such as CSOs. The normative part of our argument maintains that CSOs play an important moral role since they semi-perfect our shared obligation by defining worthy moral goals and by organizing collective actions to further them. The semi-perfect nature of our shared obligation to alleviate structural injustice entails that we have less discretion in deciding which collective actions to support, and sometimes we can even be socially forced to do so.

The argument runs as follows. We start by situating our approach within the ongoing debate about the existence of shared obligations. While we agree that the shared obligation to alleviate structural injustice necessitates the capacity for collective actions, we point out that the existing collectives, such as CSOs, can secure such actions even on a global scale. We proceed by reconstructing the role CSOs play with regard to our obligations. According to our view, they specify worthy moral goals and also take actions to further these goals. Given such a normative status, individuals do not have full discretion in deciding whether or not to join these collective actions. We consider the ways in which individuals should reason about participating in collective actions, and we also argue that, if certain conditions obtain, the individuals can be forced to do their share in mitigating the injustices.

Understanding shared obligations

Large-scale global problems pose a moral conundrum since it is unclear who can bear the obligations to address them. On the one hand, there seem to be no appropriate group agents that could bear these obligations. On the other hand, individuals by themselves, given their limited capacities, cannot bear individual obligations in this respect either. Recently, philosophers expanded the subject of the investigation by arguing that individuals in unstructured collectives can bear *shared* obligations as they have the collective capacity to make a difference in solving large-scale problems. While the idea of shared obligations seems attractive because of its potential to close a responsibility gap regarding large-scale problems, it is less clear what considerations ground such obligations.⁶

There are two possible ways to define these considerations, which we will call the *lax* and the *restricted* view. According to the lax view, in order to bear shared obligations, individuals in unstructured collectives need to have a collective capacity; not necessarily to form a shared goal or act together, but something much less demanding. For instance, Gunnar Björnsson argues that an unstructured group can satisfy standards of caring about a particular outcome by virtue of its individual members caring about it. To care appropriately about something means to “be disposed to notice factors relevant to how well it goes with the object in that regard and to invest resources (cognition, action, material and social means) to promote it in light of these factors.”⁷ While sometimes bringing the outcomes members of unstructured collective care about requires coordination with others and formation of a shared goal, this is not always the case, and at least

⁶ There is an additional way to construe individuals’ obligations regarding large scale problems as individual obligations to create collectives capable of dealing with the problems (Collins 2013). Since we are concerned with the normative status of existing collectives (i.e. CSOs), we leave the duty to collectivize aside.

⁷ Obligations as ensured by caring (OEC) are, according to Björnsson (2021, ft 8), “structurally similar” to virtue ethics in the sense that the rightness of actions is closely connected to personal qualities of those performing it. However, as opposed to virtue ethics, OEC are about obligations, and the appeal to appropriate caring is less demanding than agential virtue.

some global issues, such as climate change, might be tackled without taking this step. For instance, Joan can take certain actions to tackle climate change, such as flying less in order to reduce her carbon footprint, irrespective of what others do. Individuals can take shared obligations of groups of which they are members as reasons for their own actions (Björnsson 2021; Wringer 2010). This is significant, since, according to the lax view, the unwillingness of others to do their share does not cancel the shared obligations. Proponents of this view claim that this is how activists think about their own actions.

The lax reading stipulates weak conditions for the existence of shared obligations, which implies that we bear more obligations than we tend to think. However, it is unclear whether such a weak view of shared obligations can be applied to cases of structural injustice. While it is plausible to call upon individuals to focus more on morally valuable outcomes than on what others are doing, the lax view can place too much emphasis on individual actions. It seems to suggest that individuals can sufficiently do their shares to tackle large scale problems by simply changing their behavior and individual lifestyles. While such changes are not only desirable but might even be necessary, it is hard to see in what sense they amount to activism, since, arguably, the purpose of activism is to affect the actions of others in order to bring about greater, structural changes.

This takes us to what we call the restricted view, according to which individual members of unstructured groups can bear shared obligations only if they have the ability to act collectively. To act collectively, individuals have to be able to form a shared goal and believe that others will contribute their share toward that goal (Schwenkenbecher 2013; Lawford-Smith 2012). This view is restricted in two senses. First, it makes the existence of a shared obligation conditional upon a sufficient number of members contributing to a shared goal. If an individual comes to reasonably believe that others are not doing their part, her contributory duty ceases to exist. Second, the

restricted view limits shared obligations only to those unstructured collectives where members can communicate in order to form a shared goal and correct beliefs about the contributions of others.⁸ Such communication, on this view, is practically possible only in small to medium-sized collectives, such as passers-by.

By taking the capacity to act collectively as a necessary condition for the existence of shared obligations, the restricted view avoids some of the pitfalls of the lax view with regard to alleviating structural injustice. It correctly captures the fact that individuals are tempted not to sacrifice their self-interest unless assured that others will do so as well. It also plausibly suggests that before we form a belief about the unwillingness of others to do their share, we should try to affect their willingness to act. However, it seems that the restricted view does not satisfactorily resolve the problem of shared goals formation. It suggests that the formation of shared goals at a global level is practically impossible, but it overlooks the possibility that direct communication and deliberation may yield deficient shared goals. That is to say, to get many agents to agree about a shared goal, such goals often need to be indeterminate and vague.⁹ It follows that communicating and deliberating about potential shared goals need not necessarily be a satisfactory way to form such goals. Therefore, when it comes to the formation of shared goals concerning large-scale problems, individuals in unstructured collectives can adopt goals promoted by CSOs. We will come back to this. Furthermore, through their activities existing organizations can assure others that at least some individuals take actions toward the realization of shared goals.¹⁰ If we ignore

⁸ Schwenkenbecher (2019) recently refined her view by weakening conditions for collective obligations. Instead of communicating with others in unstructured collectives, agents are required to employ ‘we-reasoning’, which is the type of moral reasoning “where agents in considering their options for acting take ‘collectively available’ options into account and act on that basis”.

⁹ We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing our attention to this.

¹⁰ Note that the restricted view can accommodate this empirical objection. Indeed, Schwenkenbecher explicitly says that if many individuals are part of a global initiative (e.g. for carbon emission reduction), if their actions contribute

these contributions, then we seem to have incorrect beliefs about the actions of others. Hence, the activities of CSOs increase the capacities for collective actions of individuals in unstructured collectives. To the extent that there are CSOs that play such a role globally, we can assign shared obligations even to large unstructured collectives.¹¹ We examine this in more detail later.

The role of CSOs is well captured in Young's discussion on structural injustice. In her words, "[b]eing responsible in relation to structural injustice means that one has an obligation *to join with others* who share that responsibility in order to transform structural processes to make their outcomes less unjust" (Young 2011: 103). "Joining with others" implies collective action, and collective action requires a form of coordination that civil society organizations and social movements can facilitate (Young 2011:69, 122). Young's insights about the role of CSOs can help us refine the restricted view concerning the necessary conditions for the existence of shared obligations to alleviate structural injustice. We agree with the ontological claim of the restricted view that the capacity for collective action is necessary to hold shared obligations, but we aim to show that existing group agents, most notably CSOs, enable collective actions by providing shared goals and by acting upon them in a morally desirable and relevant way.¹²

Before we embark upon this investigation, it is important to resolve a prior theoretical problem. It is typical to think of shared obligations to alleviate structural injustice as binding, but

to their shared goal, and if they are based upon the belief that others also contribute, then this can count as collective action (2013:315).

¹¹ Similarly, Wringer (2018) argues that individuals have a *pro tanto* duty to act in accordance with existing organizations to meet given collective obligations, since changing the organizations is complicated, time-consuming and unpredictable.

¹² It is noteworthy, however, that the existence of CSOs and their relation to unstructured collectives raise an interesting question usually disregarded by social ontology literature. This literature tends to focus on analyzing different types of collectives taken in isolation, while it is also important to understand the way they interact. For instance, how should we understand the relation between fair trade organizations, as group agents, and consumers, as members of an unstructured collective? There is a sense in which group agents make it possible for everyone to take action.

discretionary in the sense that individuals can decide how and when to participate in collective actions (Young 2011:168). Leaving discretion to agents is intended to avoid the charge of overdemandingness since it permits individuals to decide what is reasonable for them to do given their abilities and personal circumstances (Young 2011:143). However, if individuals have full discretion regarding how and when to participate, it is very unlikely that necessary collective actions will take place. Hence, the idea that shared obligations leave discretion to individuals in deciding about acting collectively seems to be in tension with the premise about the need for collective actions to tackle structural injustice. We explain this in the next section.

Discretion and collective actions

In the previous section, we argued that the views which allow agents full discretion to decide how and when to comply with their shared obligation to alleviate structural injustice are seriously deficient. So construed, the shared obligation appears to have indeterminate content and mirrors what is often called *imperfect duty*.¹³ To clarify the problems discretion creates for shared obligations, it is instructive to take a brief detour and explain what imperfect duties are.

While there is no agreement about the definition of imperfect duties¹⁴, it is broadly accepted that these duties are about vague moral goals that individuals should pursue in a way they deem appropriate.¹⁵ Imperfect duties are usually contrasted with so-called perfect duties, which have

¹³ Note that Young follows Feinberg's conceptual distinction between duties and responsibilities. The former prescribe concrete actions, whereas the latter leave agents with the discretion to decide which actions to take (Young 2011:143). We agree that there is a distinction between moral obligations that prescribe actions and those that leave decisions about actions to agents, but we think that the distinction better maps onto the distinction between perfect and imperfect duties, rather than the one between duties and responsibilities.

¹⁴ Rainbolt (2000) lists eight possible ways to define imperfect duties and finds all of them wanting.

¹⁵ This understanding dates back to Kant's view in Kant 1999.

specified content, as they correlate with rights and require concrete actions with regard to particular persons. The main motivation to distinguish between perfect and imperfect duties is to be able to identify which duties can be enforced by public institutions.

The distinction between perfect and imperfect duties as individuals' duties has attracted plenty of criticism, but we will not enter this debate here (Buchanan 1987; Gilibert 2016). Instead, we will focus on a specific problem that is relevant to the discussion of shared obligations. Namely, the indeterminacy of content of imperfect duties generates problems for complying with them. In the absence of clear action-guidance, individuals are faced with uncertainty in deciding on various occasions whether they should comply or not (Goodin 2016). Moreover, the indeterminacy of the duty's content generates what Buchanan helpfully identifies as "a powerful temptation to moral laxity" (1996: 31).¹⁶ Moral laxity is a distinctive kind of moral failure which occurs when agents fail to do enough to advance a worthy moral goal over a significant period of time. Importantly, moral laxity can stem from a lack of knowledge about what one ought to do in a particular situation and not only from slacking or a lack of proper motivation. Even well-motivated individuals might be unable to figure out what they ought to do in a particular situation. In order to decrease the epistemic burden as well as to fight off the natural propensity for moral laxity, we should seek to determine the content of moral obligations, i.e. to perfect them, rather than to assume that individuals will be trying to strengthen their moral fiber by using vague moral standards.

If indeterminate content creates these kinds of problems for complying with imperfect individual duties, it will create even greater problems for shared obligations. If individuals indeed have significant discretion in deciding how and when to participate in civil society, how will they

¹⁶ In Buchanan's words, "[i]f we are overly selective in picking our battles, we may never fight at all" (1996: 31).

come up with shared goals and act accordingly? Notice that the problem cuts all the way down to the very concept of shared obligations. That is to say, discretion impedes the collective capacity to form shared ends since individuals can disagree about which goals to pursue collectively and when to do so. If shared obligations depend upon the capacity to form shared goals, and if individual discretion undercuts this capacity, then there can be no shared obligations at all. To use the terminology of imperfect duties, shared obligations, by definition, cannot have fully indeterminate content; they cannot be imperfect duties proper. Therefore, any account of shared obligations to alleviate structural injustice that leaves individuals significant discretion is implausible. The insistence on discretion presupposes a weak account of the role of civil society organizations as a mere efficient means to achieve certain desirable ends.¹⁷ In the remainder of the paper, we attempt to show that the role of CSOs is far more important, since they *semi-perfect* our shared obligation to alleviate structural injustice. This entails that our discretion in participating in collective actions led by CSOs is limited more than we tend to think.

The moral role of civil society

As mentioned before, when it comes to perfecting the content of our moral obligations, philosophers tend to focus on public institutions which, in their view, authoritatively define the content of norms and enforce compliance with them. By doing so, institutions resolve (or at least attempt to resolve) various problems that arise among individuals, including collective action problems. Because of this perfecting role, they have special moral status, which gives rise to an

¹⁷ It also presupposes a liberal voluntarist view of civil society organizations as resulting from individuals exercising their freedom of association. For an insightful discussion about the liberal view of associations and their connection to principles of justice see Cordelli 2012.

individual's duty to support as well as to comply with them.¹⁸ While we agree that moral obligations need to be specified in order to be complied with, we also think that exclusively focusing on the role of public institutions is insufficient. If anything, the world is plagued by various injustices that public institutions, national and international alike, are either unwilling or incapable of resolving (O'Neill 2001). This suggests that we ought to evaluate the role that other types of organizations play in this regard too. With respect to many global issues, such as environmental protection or the improvement of labor standards, CSOs are often the first actors that come to mind, since their impact, regardless of being perceived positively or negatively, is undoubtedly pervasive.

There are many ways to define civil society. According to Rainer Forst, civil society is “a collective of free citizens who organize their common life in an autonomous and co-operative way” (Forst 2017:451). It might seem difficult to generalize this definition on a global level, since the concept is tightly connected to that of citizenship, and, some might think, too Western to capture different organizational forms worldwide (Forst 2017). We acknowledge that global civil society is a “fuzzy and contested concept” (Kaldor 2012), but for our purposes, we use a descriptive definition that seems rather uncontroversial. Following civil society scholars, global civil society is “the sphere of ideas, values, institutions, organizations, networks, and individuals located between the family, the state, and the market and operating beyond the confines of national societies, polities, and economies” (Kaldor et al. 2001:17). The distinctive feature of global civil society is its global dimension—the organizations attempt to address global issues, involve cross-border communities, and seek supranational solidarity (Scholte 1999). So defined, global civil

¹⁸ This is a Kantian argument about public institutions, which was further developed by Rawls (1971). For further elaborations see, for instance, Waldron 1993; Miklosi 2008.

society brings together (I)NGOs, social movements, labor unions, consumer protection bodies, peace activists, world forums, indigenous groups, professional associations, charities, faith-based organizations, foundations, etc.¹⁹For our purposes, we will set aside these organizational differences and treat global civil society as a whole.

How can we characterize the role of CSOs regarding our moral obligations? Some might think that CSOs are one of the most efficient means to achieve certain morally desirable ends.²⁰ While practical considerations are certainly important, empirical research about the efficiency of these organizations is inconclusive, as it is often difficult to measure their impact (Werher and Ahmed 2008). That being said, we leave the question of efficiency aside and explore whether CSOs are more than a mere means to morally desirable ends. Earlier we suggested that CSOs can help us define a more plausible account of the shared obligations to alleviate structural injustice. Recall the two necessary conditions for the existence of shared obligations: that individuals in unstructured collectives must be able to form a shared goal, and that they must have reasonable beliefs about others contributing toward the same goal. We proceed to explain how CSOs satisfy both conditions and accordingly, semi-perfect our shared obligations.²¹

Defining shared goals

Examining the role of CSOs can help us give more substance to the concept of ‘shared goals’.

While there are significant differences among the existing CSOs, they all pursue non-commercial

¹⁹ The definition excludes so-called service-providing NGOs, since it is contested whether or not they can be considered as part of civil society at all. By closely cooperating with and often being financed by state institutions, it is questionable to what extent these organizations are autonomous. For an illuminating discussion, see Cordelli 2016.

²⁰ For instance, Singer (2009) argues that the best way for affluent individuals to help those in dire need is to donate to effective charities. The idea inspired the effective altruism movement, see <https://www.effectivealtruism.org/>.

²¹ This is compatible with CSOs bearing obligations of their own as group agents, but we do not consider this here.

objectives, such as, for instance, respect for human dignity and rights (Werher and Ahmed 2008). Such missions usually do not stay at the rhetorical level only, but CSOs also strive to place them on the public agenda. Recall the example from the beginning of the paper: it is likely that the Thai government would never, or at least not in the foreseeable future, ratify the ILO convention and start working toward improving the working conditions in the fishing industry without having been pressured by CSOs. In the absence of functioning global institutions that are able to define and further public interests properly, CSOs make certain global issues salient and, arguably, could be said to define and, at least to some extent, represent public interests globally.

In addition, CSOs shape and reshape many informal rules that influence not only public institutions but also how we relate to one another. In this sense, they affect the beliefs and attitudes of people, often attempting to change problematic norms. In the light of global structural injustice, they also contribute to the emergence of an ethos of global solidarity. For instance, in the mid-1990s, activists of the anti-sweatshop movement raised consumers' awareness of the working conditions in which most clothes are still being produced (Young 2011). Without constant exposure to the evidence CSOs have been providing, consumers in affluent countries would probably not have been able to obtain such information, let alone take it under moral consideration.

Finally, many of our moral obligations require advancing certain moral goals, but these goals tend to be vague and general, such as not to harm others or to help those in need. Missions of CSOs specify these goals at a more practical level, thus making them more manageable and concrete. Think about Earth Hour, an annual event during which everyone on Earth is encouraged

to simultaneously turn off electric lights for an hour. While the ultimate goal of the event is to tackle climate change, it is narrowed down to a well-defined goal that can easily be achieved.²²

In sum, by pursuing specific missions and values, CSOs enable us to unite around shared goals. It follows that we need not insist that individuals in unstructured collectives need to deliberate shared goals; at least sometimes, it suffices to support the goals that are already promoted by the CSOs. To be sure, these goals are diverse and not all of them pertain to structural injustice, but some of them do significantly. We will come back to this.

Providing assurance

Earlier we argued that what makes public institutions morally relevant is not only that they specify moral obligations, but also provide the assurance that people will comply with them by coercing them to do so. One might say that CSOs also provide a kind of morally relevant assurance, albeit qualitatively very different from the institutional one.

Aside from specifying important moral goals, CSOs also identify and pursue a particular course of action in order to further these goals. For instance, they issue reports about human rights violations, provide concrete policy recommendations, and exert pressure on decision-makers both at the national and the international level to bring about certain reforms that can go as far as establishing new international institutions.²³ Such actions can be taken as contributions of CSOs toward shared goals, which in turn can assure us that CSOs are doing their part and, accordingly, give us moral reasons to act as well. Although admittedly, CSOs cannot provide the kind of

²²www.earthhour.org; the next Earth Hour will take place on March 27th, 2021.

²³ The most famous example is the enormous contribution of the Coalition for the ICC to the creation of the International Criminal Court in 1999.

assurance that coercive institutions can, they can effectively and reliably “signal” compliance with moral norms to others, thus increasing the likelihood and intensity of their participation.²⁴ We can think of the contributions of CSOs not as assurance in a strict sense, but more as a *non-coercive ushering*: they can motivate others to act by acting themselves.²⁵ To be sure, to motivate others, CSOs also need to communicate to others their successes and reasons to join.²⁶ Thus, they need to be more transparent about their actions and also open channels for participation to non-members. We will come back to this in the last section.

At this point, one might wonder why require individuals to take part in collective actions, since the actions take place all the same? There is a normative and practical reason for this requirement. Morally speaking, as CSOs supply us with shared goals, our continuous indifference to pursuing these goals might be understood as a form of free riding. If agents in unstructured collectives hold the shared obligation to alleviate structural injustice, then one can say that individuals who ignore the extent to which CSOs strive to remedy injustice through collective efforts are in effect freeriding on them. Practically speaking, to be able to do their job more effectively, CSOs need support not only in the form of donations but also in terms of giving legitimacy to their actions as well as increasing pressure on decision-makers. While many CSOs have morally worthy goals, they often lack the ability to achieve these goals on their own (Kirk 2012). Hence, to grow into bigger movements and have a greater impact, CSOs need our support.²⁷

²⁴ According to Lawford-Smith (2015), it is important that signaling is ‘reliable’ in the sense that it is the sign of genuine commitment, since only such commitment can motivate actions of others.

²⁵ This is confirmed by the studies on the so-called peer effect, which makes individuals more likely to donate to charity if they see that their peers are doing the same (The Behavioural Insights Team, 2013). Furthermore, many fundraising causes often display a “progress bar” showing how close they are to the goal, because people are more willing to give the closer the goal is to be achieved.

²⁶ We owe this point to an anonymous reviewer.

²⁷ According to the Extinction Rebellion, an organization focusing on the climate and ecological emergency, the evidence shows that they need the involvement of 3.5 % of the population to succeed, which in the UK amounts to the support by 2 million people. See <https://rebellion.earth/>

In sum, by defining important moral goals and acting toward their fulfillment, CSOs identify what needs to be done and do their share, too. In this sense, they semi-perfect our shared obligation to alleviate structural injustice, and, therefore, have special moral status. If the special moral status of public institutions entails a duty to support them, then something similar can be said about CSOs— they also have a special moral status, albeit different from the institutional one, which entails our duty to support them. However, since the perfecting role of CSOs falls short of one of the institutions, our duty to support these organizations is not as stringent as our duty to support public institutions. Nonetheless, it is a duty rather than a matter of good will. Defined this way, it may appear that our account of the shared obligation to alleviate structural injustice does not really resolve the problem we have set to resolve —if CSOs pursue different goals and we can support different CSOs, then the collective action problems might persist. We give a weaker and more robust answer to this.

“Justice for all just ain't specific enough”

As the lyrics of John Legend and Common's song “Glory”, dedicated to civil activism, suggest, the fact that one is promoting justice will not necessarily result in justice being done. Is our dedication to shared goals alone sufficient to guide our actions? On the one hand, there are many global problems and interests attached to them, and on the other hand, there is a multitude of organizations with distinct and overlapping causes that an individual could potentially support. Given these circumstances, how can we decide which action to take?

The present discussion suggests that individual discretion with regard to shared obligations is not as unlimited as it is usually thought. To explain this, it may be helpful to refer to what Young

defines as *parameters of reasoning*—principles for making decisions about our actions in relation to structural injustice (Young 2011). According to Young, individuals should reflect on their place within the unjust structure along dimensions of *power, privilege, interest* and *collective ability* and choose their actions accordingly. For our present purposes, the parameter of *collective ability* is the most relevant one: individuals should strive to act with others to transform the structures by supporting the existing civil society organizations. However, the parameter is somewhat vague and open to different interpretations.

One way of interpreting the parameter concerning collective ability is to see it as an instruction for individuals to cultivate certain dispositions or virtues, such as becoming more sensitive to injustice or more willing to act collectively (McKeown 2016). However, it remains unclear in what sense such an inward-looking view, which we dub the *virtue-based approach*, is supposed to enable collective action since coordination problems can arise even among well-motivated individuals who are willing to cooperate. There seems to be a bigger problem with the virtue-based approach: namely, it ignores certain features of our psychological make-up. While the approach aims to moderate individual moral demands, in fact, it falls short of it, since it intensifies a different kind of obstacle. By leaving obligations discretionary, it actually creates an epistemic burden, as we need to figure out what to do, and thus decreases the likelihood of us doing it. Research shows that the way in which tasks are presented to us enormously influences the probability that we will accomplish them.²⁸ Since the virtue-based approach leaves the content of shared obligations indeterminate, it is likely that compliance will be decreased and lead to the occurrence of moral laxity—if we are unsure about what we ought to do, it is probable that we will

²⁸The 2013 report of the Behavioral Insights Team (BIT) of the UK's Cabinet Office tested the usage of various behavioral techniques in prompting people to give to charitable causes, showing that the likelihood that people will conform to the norm depends quite dramatically on the way a problem or a question is presented to the test subjects.

not do anything (Buchanan 1996). The virtue-based approach, hence, simultaneously appears to be overly epistemically demanding and insufficiently morally demanding. For this reason, we need another, more robust interpretation of the parameter about collective ability, which we call the *action-based view*.

The action-based view strives to develop an action-guiding exegesis of the collective ability parameter, which is based on a more limited conception of discretion. For this purpose, it is helpful to distinguish between three dimensions of discretion: *executive*, *object-oriented* and *temporal*. They relate to three decisions that an individual has to make when deciding how to support civil society: which actions to take, whom to support, and finally when to support. While the actual extent of individual discretion varies across these dimensions, depending upon one's personal circumstances, we believe that discretion can be reasonably limited along all of them.

Let us start with the dimension where individuals have the most discretion – the executive one. The decision about which actions to undertake depends particularly on one's personal circumstances and resources. Yet, there are still certain considerations that individuals should keep in mind when deciding about the form of their support to CSOs. First of all, we are likely more resourceful than we think. The privilege of being citizens of affluent countries not only gives us more opportunities to reflect on our personal choices and habits but also provides us with a chance to act within civil society with relative ease. Possible actions include a broad range of activities, from donating, becoming a member of an organization, participating in organized events, etc.

When it comes to choosing the object(s) of support, discretion is more limited. While CSOs, with their multiple and diverse goals, reflect global value pluralism, the shared obligation to alleviate structural injustice does not entail support for all of them. Even though the question of reasonable value pluralism is still unsettled, we believe that CSOs should meet certain desiderata

so that we have moral reasons to support their actions. While we cannot provide a full account of desiderata here, we believe that they would include at least the following. To begin with, CSOs should pursue *legitimate goals*—those goals that are compatible with the principle of moral equality. Besides being egalitarian, their goals should also be *responsive to public reasons*, i.e. they need to be justifiable by appeal to some publicly shared considerations.²⁹This would, for example, exclude goals that appeal to unsubstantiated scientific claims. Given that structural injustice involves various unjust aspects of the existing global structure, CSOs should ultimately aim at reforming this structure.³⁰Further, the activities and structure of CSOs should be organized in a *participatory manner*, including those who are supposed to benefit from their activities.³¹Finally, we should favor those CSOs that aim at building alliances and coalitions at a local or global level, as coordinating with a large number of people increases the likelihood that successful large-scale collective action will take place.³²

²⁹ The debate about defining public reason is too complex to be discussed here. For a seminal work, see Rawls 1993. We need not commit to any particular account of public reason, since most of them tend to agree that common scientific truths fall under public reason.

³⁰ It may appear that these desiderata will exclude a great deal of human rights organizations, since they tend to focus on the violation of civil liberties and the promotion of rights to subsistence which may leave the existing structure intact. For an argument along these lines, see Moyn 2018. We do not dispute such a characterization of human rights organizations, but we point out that a great deal of argumentative work is done by the concept of structural injustice. Structural injustice, according to Young (2011), is not predominantly about distributive justice, but it is about unpacking various ways in which the structure affects and constrains individual actions. This suggests that structural justice may be compatible with both sufficientarian and egalitarian distributive demands, as the equal moral status might demand either. Therefore, as long as CSOs advocate structural reforms (as well as meet other desiderata) we have moral reasons to support them, irrespective of what specific rights they promote. It is also noteworthy that it is not straightforward that grievances resulting from structural injustice ought to be defined in terms of violation of rights, but examining this point is beyond the scope of the paper. We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pressing us on this point.

³¹ Scholte and Timms (2009) argue that what is crucial for the success of an organization is not so much the scale of its organization, but how it is organized. Going global does not necessarily make organizations more elitist or exclusive, as long as they offer participation and control to the victims of the structural injustice that they are trying to address.

³² The upshot of this desideratum is that individuals are required to join the ongoing collective efforts, rather than that collective actions start taking place only once individuals have already joined. We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pressing us to clarify this.

As we can see, the desiderata limit the range of CSOs to be supported, but this still leaves room for individual convictions, since it is up to individuals to decide which particular CSO from this range to support. We ought to support organizations that fall within the subset of those that meet the desiderata, but we can choose within the subset based on our convictions. For instance, if a faith-based organization and a secular one both meet the desiderata, individuals can decide which one to support based on their convictions. If there is only one such organization, however, individuals are required to support it as long as it meets the desiderata, even if it goes against personal convictions. For instance, non-believers should support a faith-based organization that aims to alleviate structural injustice if that is the only one accessible to them. Non-believers have moral reasons to do so as long as the organization meets the above-mentioned desiderata.

The temporal dimension leaves the least discretion to individuals, as the urgency of global issues does not leave much room for any delay in action. For instance, a report released in October of 2018 by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) emphasizes the urgency of structural changes necessary to mitigate the dramatic effects of climate change (IPCC 2018). Furthermore, in cases of gross human rights violations, immediate action is of paramount importance for those who suffer. Thus, individuals are morally required to start participating in those organized collective efforts that address urgent matters. While we do have discretion regarding which action to take, we have no discretion in choosing whether to act or not, as the refusal to act can impede collective action. Given the urgency of certain issues, we also think that all else equal, individuals can be socially forced to do their share. We turn to this now.

When is social enforceability permissible?

Earlier we mentioned that the coercive enforceability by public institutions is often seen as the main dividing line between perfect and imperfect duties – public institutions can coerce those subjected to them to comply with perfect duties (those with determinate content), but not with imperfect ones. The institutions secure compliance with perfect duties by issuing commands backed by the threat of sanctions. Public enforceability, however, is not the only way in which compliance with moral obligations can be secured. Earlier we suggested that CSOs can secure compliance with the shared obligation to alleviate structural injustice by what we called ‘non-coercive ushering’: motivating others to act by acting towards the fulfillment of moral goals themselves. As its name suggests, this way of calling others for action is non-coercive as it attempts to increase participation in collective actions by leading by example. That said, it is not straightforward that this is all CSOs are permitted to do in order to secure that desirable collective actions take place.

As we know from our daily lives, we can be forced in some sense to do certain things by individuals or groups, too. For instance, we force one another when we object to someone cutting a queue, when we tell people that they should recycle, or when we express public criticism for actions that we deem undesirable. Some go as far as to claim that social enforceability can be as effective (and even as oppressive) as legal or public enforceability (O’Neill 1990:224). In our view, this is exaggerated, since social enforcement does not limit freedom to the extent public enforcement does. If anything, we can always ignore social criticism or resist social pressure, no matter how uncomfortable that can be. It remains an open question whether it is permissible to force individuals to do certain things, even in this weak sense of “force”.³³

³³For a detailed discussion about the necessary conditions for coercion see Nozick 1972.

When it comes to CSOs and social enforceability, we can think about it in two ways. The first way is relatively uncontroversial. It seems broadly accepted that CSOs can put pressure on national and international institutions to take certain actions and call them to accountability via means such as ‘naming and shaming’, protesting, interrupting the institutional events, etc. Based on what we have argued so far, the permissibility of such enforcement is justified by the moral status of CSOs, which is based on identifying valuable moral goals and taking actions to achieve them. Thus, it is relatively uncontroversial that CSOs can exercise some form of pressure on those that have greater power than them to take responsibility and act.

What about individuals? Earlier we argued that CSOs often define valuable moral goals and initiate actions to further them and that individuals have moral reasons to join their initiatives. In the previous section, we argued that this view entails that individuals do not have such wide discretion with regard to collective actions as it is usually thought. We suggested ways in which the individual discretion is limited when deciding which actions to take, and we also argued that the temporal dimension of discretion is the most restricted—we ought to join collective actions that address urgent matters. Consider the following example. Recently, the Extinction Rebellion blocked the roads around Heathrow airport in order to prevent the expansion of the airport. The protest aimed at making the UK government fulfill its promise to decrease carbon emissions by 2025 (Somerville 2019). Also, think about individuals preventing planes from taking off until they release potential asylum seekers that their governments planned to send back to their countries of origin (Crouch 2018). Such actions deal with urgent matters like slowing down climate change or preventing the extradition of asylum seekers to their home countries, where their lives would be in danger.

While actions like these are aimed at holding public institutions accountable, they also put pressure on individuals. When the protesters block roads or prevent planes from taking off, they impose costs on the citizens relying on them. Assuming that the CSOs meet the desiderata we defined earlier and also attempt to address urgent matters, we can think of this as an instance of permissible social enforceability — CSOs forcing people to bear costs of duties they independently hold (in these cases, to tackle climate change or to help those in need).

Note that CSOs are not the only ones being permitted to force compliance, but individuals sharing the obligation can do so, too. This social enforceability is justifiable because the individuals sharing obligation are accountable to one another for taking or not taking actions. After all, people willing to comply cannot take effective collective actions if a significant number of others refuse to join. Therefore, on our account of shared obligations, individuals are permitted to force one another to comply, if all conditions are satisfied. The notion of force includes actions such as calling for participation, imposing social pressure, criticizing non-compliance and sometimes, imposing unwanted costs, such as being late in the office due to road blockage or missing a flight.

If we indeed share the obligation to alleviate structural injustice, and if CSOs organize actions for this, then they can force us to do our share. Unlike perfect duties enforceable by coercive public institutions through legal means, the aforementioned semi-perfect duties instantiated by CSOs are socially enforceable —they are enforceable by individuals and groups.

This view will very likely attract numerous objections. First, one might worry that there are simply too many collective actions taking place; if CSOs start forcing people to join each of these, then this will simply impose too high costs on individuals. Given the number of CSOs as well as the actions they take worldwide, this is a well-founded worry. The demandingness,

however, can be mitigated by several factors. To begin with, we have identified the set of desiderata that CSOs have to meet if they are to be permitted to force our compliance and make us bear certain costs, and not all the existing CSOs meet them. In addition, there is a division of labor among these organizations—they operate in different parts of the world. Therefore, their actions impose costs on the individuals that find themselves in close proximity, such as the Londoners or the passengers on the plane in Sweden from the abovementioned examples.³⁴In other words, it is rarely the case that the same group of people is bearing multiple costs of different collective actions.

Another worry may be that the permissibility of social enforceability opens the door to “vigilante justice”—some groups could attempt to arbitrarily impose their subjective conception of justice on others. This raises the complex problem of the disagreement about what justice demands, which we cannot fully tackle here. It suffices to say that our argument applies only to those CSOs that meet the desiderata, and therefore, are sufficiently democratic and participatory. Thus, they provide the forum to debate what justice demands regarding particular issues. Furthermore, the global civil society is usually not focused on imposing a specific conception of justice, but it advocates structural and incremental changes in areas that are widely recognized as problematic mostly through raising public awareness and pressuring responsible institutions.³⁵ In this sense, CSOs are not those judging what justice demands, but they force public institutions to determine it.

³⁴ This raises the complex question of the fair distribution of burden among individuals, since it may happen that some people simply bear more costs than others by sheer bad luck. The problem of fair distribution of burden is too complex to be addressed here.

³⁵ Think for instance of the World Social Forum, which provides a platform for debating various instances of injustice rather than promoting full-fledged proposals. The closest to a substantive proposal it comes is the call for people worldwide to solidarity and support for one another’s diverse struggles.

Finally, one may worry that it is simply unfair to focus on individuals since so little depends on them and structural injustice is mostly about “big players”, such as corporations or unjust institutions. Asking individuals to bear costs to alleviate structural injustice is also problematic since it is unclear whether they can avoid actions that contribute to structural injustice at all. The objection questions the concept of structural injustice. As such, it cannot be applied to our view, as we have assumed that individuals are implicated in structural injustice by virtue of the accumulation of their individual actions, which can inadvertently lead to various injustices. Our argument holds only to the extent that individuals bear at least some responsibility for structural injustice. By focusing on individuals we do not imply that “big players” are off the hook; on the contrary, all we aim for is to ensure that there is enough collective force to pressure big players in order to change the existing unjust conditions.

Conclusion

In this paper, we developed an account of shared obligation to alleviate structural injustice as a semi-perfect duty, the content of which is partly determined by civil society organizations. Through their missions and actions, these organizations provide shared goals and usher us toward their realization. Thereby, they assume a special moral status which entails our duty to support them. While these considerations seem intuitive, the importance of civil society is continuously ignored. Liberals tend to focus either on institutions or on relations among individuals, while often neglecting what is in between—an autonomous and self-governed sphere of multiple associations. We tried to make a few steps towards remedying this gap by establishing how civil society can coordinate collective actions toward morally desirable goals. While not everyone is required to become an activist who dedicates the entire life to transforming structural injustices, one ought not

to limit one's own contribution to changing consumer habits either. Instead, one should be more responsive to the ongoing collective efforts to alleviate structural injustices and under certain conditions, even be forced to do one's own share.

Jelena Belić

The Institute of Political Science, Leiden University

belicsjelena@gmail.com

Zlata Božac

Philosophy Department, Central European University

zlibozac@gmail.com

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