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Theories of whistleblowing

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Abstract

“Whistleblowing” has entered the scholarly and the public debate as a way of describing the exposure by the member of an organization of episodes of corruption, fraud, or general abuses of power within the organization. We offer a critical survey of the main normative theories of whistleblowing in the current debate in political philosophy, with the illustrative aid of one of the epitomic figures of a whistleblower of our time: Edward Snowden. After conceptually separating whistleblowing from other forms of wrongdoing disclosures, we introduce and discuss two families of normative views of this practice: the “Extrema Ratio” and the “Deontic” views. We show how the two views can be usefully considered in tandem to offer an all-round assessment of the moral justification of whistleblowing either as an extraordinary individual conscientious act of indictment or as an ordinary dutiful organizational practice of answerability that enables the capacity of self-correction of an organization.

1 | INTRODUCTION

While working for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and, then, as a subcontractee for the National Security Agency (NSA), Edward Snowden discovered a global surveillance network through which the American and the British Secret Services monitored telecommunication systems around the world. After sharing with his coworkers to no avail his preoccupations about the rights violations implicated in that program, Snowden disclosed a number of classified documents (edited to minimize the impact on the parties involved) to journalists of *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post*, thus exposing the mass violation of privacy rights perpetrated by the United States and

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allied governments. Snowden was charged with violating the 1917 Espionage Act and theft of government property. To escape the possibility of lifetime imprisonment, he asked temporary asylum to Russia where he still lives.

Snowden's disclosures have gradually become the main reference in the scholarly and public debate around the practice of "whistleblowing," the report of some organizational wrongdoing by the member of an organization. The study of this practice has been prominent in the fields of business ethics and legal theory. More recently, political philosophers have also been drawn to this discussion with a special focus on the moral justification of whistleblowing and its normative status as a duty. This essay offers a critical discussion of current normative theories of whistleblowing in political philosophy, while it canvasses a justification of this practice as a component of the ordinary initiatives morally required of organizations to ensure their answerability.

After a general characterization of whistleblowing (Section 2), two families of normative views of this practice are identified in the current philosophical debate: the "Extrema Ratio" and the "Deontic" views. The Extrema Ratio view frames the justification of whistleblowing as an individual act of dissent and indictment, akin to civil disobedience, aimed primarily either to prevent some serious harm or to avoid someone's complicity in organizational wrongdoing (Section 3). As the limited purchase of this view emerges, the Deontic view is introduced. This view ponders the moral justification of whistleblowing in more general terms, as one of the ordinary practices necessary to the self-correction of an organization vis-à-vis forms of wrongdoing that constitute a threat to the well-functioning of an organization (Section 4). The two views complement each other for an all-round normative assessment of whistleblowing both in circumstances of emergency and as a part of the ordinary efforts to keep an organization on the right track through the interrelated action of its members (Section 5).

2 | THE PRACTICE OF WHISTLEBLOWING

While such resonant cases of whistleblowing as Snowden's have only recently ignited the philosophical discussion of the moral justification of this practice, the interest in discussing reports of wrongdoings within an organization is not unprecedented. The term "whistleblowing" was introduced in the domain of business ethics to describe the action of those professionals who voiced their concerns about weaknesses and errors in an artifact's design posing serious threats to customers' safety (Vanderkerkeove 2006, Chapter 1). The term has gradually made its way into the scholarly and public debate to indicate the exposure of episodes of corruption, frauds, or general abuses of power. With a good degree of abstraction, we can retrace the following characterization of whistleblowing across such an array of usages.

Whistleblowing is the practice through which the member of a legitimate organization voluntarily reports some wrongdoing, allegedly occurring within that organization, with a view to initiating some corrective action to address it (Ceva & Bocchiola, 2018a, p. 21).

So characterized, whistleblowing is defined by six elements:

- i. The *action*. Whistleblowing is a specific kind of action: a report. Reports could be either open—typically, a form of public accusation (Jubb, 1999)—or confidential—disclosures through dedicated channels. Reports may also be either authorized or unauthorized, depending on the object of the report under a country's specific legislation (Delmas, 2015; Sagar, 2013, Chapter 6).
- ii. The *object*. Whistleblowers report wrongdoings that allegedly occur within an organization. Relevant wrongdoings are wide-ranging as they may include misuses of power associated with an organizational role that are either systematic (e.g., nepotism) or occasional (e.g., embezzlement). Organizational wrongdoings may stem from either unlawful (e.g., bribery) or illicit activities (e.g., the violation of some organizational standards), or also morally impermissible actions—such as unwelcome sexual advances by a senior colleague (Ceva & Bocchiola, 2018a, p. 30).

- iii. The *agent*. Not anyone who raises the alert on some organizational wrongdoing is a whistleblower. Whistleblowers' reports come from within the organization where the reported facts occur (Miceli, Dreyfus, & Near, 2014; Miceli & Near, 1992). Organizational membership could be either permanent (e.g., an employee) or temporary (e.g., a subcontractee), and it is defined by the roles and functions people perform for the organization. Whistleblowing is thus different from "bell-ringing," which is the act of conscientious citizens reporting crimes and misdemeanors (Miceli et al., 2014).
- iv. The *locus*. From (i)–(iii), it follows that organizations are the locus where the reported wrongdoing allegedly occurs. Organizations are understood in the broad terms of institutions, that is, as systems of embodied interrelated rule-governed roles (Miller, 2014). They may be public or private (a hospital or a school may fall in either category), governmental (state offices), or nongovernmental (civil society associations). It is customary in the debate to qualify relevant organizations as "legitimate" to separate the discussion of whistleblowing from that of the actions against such criminal organizations as the mafia (Davis, 1996—in that context one speaks rather of informants).
- v. The *addressee*. Whistleblowing could be directed to either internal or external interlocutors (Davis, 2003; De George, 2010). It is internal when it is addressed to the whistleblower's direct superior, higher levels of management, or to a dedicated office (e.g., Ombudsperson), and external when it is addressed to such entities as a national authority, the police, or the media.
- vi. The *aim*. Whistleblowing is a purposeful action, which aims at initiating corrective action of an organizational wrongdoing. While any specific whistleblower's actual subjective intentions may be either selfish (to undermine an obnoxious boss) or altruistic (to protect a harassed colleague), whistleblowers' actions are generally taken to express a commitment to bringing about a positive change of the *status quo* (Miceli & Near, 1992, pp. 28–30).

The six key elements are individually necessary and jointly sufficient to identify cases of whistleblowing and isolate false positives. In this light, we can appreciate the relevance of Snowden's disclosures as an instance of whistleblowing:

- i. Snowden's *action* consists in the open but unauthorized report of classified information on mass surveillance programs.
- ii. The *object* of Snowden's report is an organizational wrongdoing consisting in the Secret Services' use of their powers of office in ways allegedly abusive of citizens' fundamental rights to privacy.
- iii. Snowden was a temporary member of the NSA but he also gained access to the specificities of the global surveillance program as a permanent member of the CIA. Therefore, he is an internal *agent*.
- iv. The reported wrongdoing had its *locus* within the boundaries of the public legitimate organization (U.S. government agencies) of which Snowden was a member. His report was based on classified documents to which he had access in virtue of his position as a member of the CIA and the NSA.
- v. Snowden's report was initially internal, but when it became clear that his colleagues were not willing to take action, he found an external *addressee* by disclosing his report to the press.
- vi. The decision to go public can be understood in light of Snowden's *aim* to initiate the corrective action of a morally problematic status quo, by which the rights of many citizens worldwide were being violated.

While Snowden's case thus provides an apt illustration of whistleblowing, an interesting false positive is the case of Julian Assange, the founder of *WikiLeaks*. *WikiLeaks* is a multinational media organization specialized in "the analysis and publication of large datasets of censored or otherwise restricted official materials involving war, spying and corruption" (<https://wikileaks.org/What-is-WikiLeaks.html>). Assange's name is often associated with cases of whistleblowing (e.g., that of Chelsea Manning, the former US Marine leaking documents concerning human rights violations by US military troops in Iraq and Afghanistan; see Leigh, Ball, Cobain, & Burke, 2011). However, our analysis suggests that he cannot be rightly considered a whistleblower since some of the key

descriptive elements—(iii) and (iv)—are not met. Assange has always acted from the outside of the organizations where the reported wrongs had occurred, his role being that of collecting pieces of information from the members of some defective organization that he then exposed. Assange has thus been the addressee of whistleblowing, but not a whistleblower himself.

The capacity of telling apart cases of whistleblowing proper from false positives is an important analytical milestone to avoid conceptual inflation and circumscribe the range of actions whose normative status the current philosophical discussion has been trying to assess. In particular, political philosophers have recently engaged in probing the moral justification of whistleblowing against radical criticisms of this practice as a violation of a promissory and role obligation (Sagar, 2013). In so doing, they have sided with what we call the “Extrema Ratio” and the “Deontic” view of whistleblowing.

3 | THE EXTREMA RATIO VIEW

The received interpretation of whistleblowing in the philosophical discussion is what we call the Extrema Ratio view. The proponents of this view conceive whistleblowing as an exceptional individual response to some serious organizational wrongdoing; whistleblowing thus exceeds the standard duties of organizational membership. It is as an act of individual dissent motivated either by circumstances of emergency or as a last resort, once ordinary organizational reporting mechanisms have proved unviable, unavailable, or inefficient. As such, whistleblowing is viewed as an instance of civil disobedience (Brownlee, 2016; Sheurman, 2014). Snowden's vicissitudes, as presented in the previous section, seem to illustrate this view quite nicely.

Supporters of the Extrema Ratio view see whistleblowing as always presumptively wrong (Boot, 2017; Davis, 1996). It may be morally justified only when all other ordinary organizational reporting mechanisms have been tried and failed and, consequently, no corrective action against a *serious* organizational wrongdoing can otherwise be taken. To say that whistleblowing is an individual Extrema Ratio against *serious* organizational wrongdoing establishes a threshold condition, which discriminates between reports that identify concrete and sizable damages to individuals and society and mere complaints (e.g., those deriving from trivial quarrels between coworkers).

In the Extrema Ratio view, the occurrence of a serious organizational wrongdoing is a necessary condition to make whistleblowing morally permissible. However, it is not sufficient to justify it as a matter of duty. Only if there is some substantive evidence in support of the (actual or foreseeable) occurrence of such wrongdoing, and reporting it entails minimal costs for the whistleblower and the other parties involved (De George, 2010, Delmas, 2015; Boot 2019a, 2019b), the champions of the Extrema Ratio view think that there are sufficient grounds for deeming whistleblowing morally obligatory. Substantive evidence is any piece of information that might withstand impartial scrutiny. De George (2010, p. 302), for example, sets this standard of evidence as having proofs that could convince an impartial observer. Davis (1996, p. 11), more radically, requires that the beliefs about the occurrence of an organizational wrongdoing are justified and true. But, in the view we are presenting, substantive evidence might not justify whistleblowing as a matter of duty if discharging this duty comes at more than minimal costs for the whistleblower or the other parties involved. Costs are minimal if, measured against the consequences that may result from the whistleblower's disclosure (e.g., risks of retaliation at work or isolation in society or harm to third parties), they do not outweigh the expected gains of the disclosures in bringing about some significantly positive change to the status quo.

The three conditions are individually necessary and jointly sufficient to justify whistleblowing as a moral duty on the Extrema Ratio view. Seen in this light, the assessment of Snowden's whistleblowing is that of a morally permissible disclosure (facing the serious wrongdoing implicated in the mass violation of individual rights to privacy), whose normative status as a duty is difficult to ascertain. While the evidence Snowden possessed was substantive (as the documents he leaked to the press show), the costs and benefits balance of his disclosure is uncertain. Snowden is paying high personal costs (he lost his job and, as of this writing, he lives in exile), but whether these costs are

outweighed by the gains in terms of protecting individual rights is a matter of controversy (e.g., because some have also pointed out the threats to public security that Snowden's report has entailed).

We will revisit this uncertainty. But, to complete the account of the *Extrema Ratio* view, we present below the two standard justificatory strategies the defenders of the view have used to substantiate their justification of whistleblowing. The former refers to whistleblowing's contribution to stop or prevent some serious sizeable harm (Bowie 1982; De George, 2010), including the violation of the public interest (Bok 1982; Kumar & Santoro, 2017, 2018). The latter ties the moral assessment of whistleblowing to the need of avoiding someone's complicity in some serious organizational wrongdoing (Boot, 2017, 2018; Davis, 1996, 2003), thus protecting someone's moral integrity (Brenkert, 2010) and complying with general duties of justice (Delmas, 2015).

3.1 | Harm-based justifications

Harm-based justifications of whistleblowing insist that the member of an organization ought to blow the whistle when doing so may prevent or stop a serious harm stemming from some individual behavior or practice within an organization, about which the whistleblower has substantive evidence, at a reasonable cost to herself (see Bowie 1982; De George, 2010). Serious harms are those behaviors or practices that cause some sizeable damage, for example, to people's health and welfare—including psychological discomfort and physical impairment—possible environmental hazards, but also contrary to the public interest as frauds and corruption (Kumar & Santoro, 2017). From this perspective, Snowden's whistleblowing can easily be seen as the outcome of an individualized reasoning that moved him to action as an *Extrema Ratio* to avoid some serious and sizeable harm (as that deriving from the violation of the individual rights of many citizens worldwide) despite the implication of personal costs for himself.

While the harm-based justification of whistleblowing is the mainstream in the current philosophical debate, it has attracted a number of criticisms too (Davis, 1996, pp. 8–10; Hoffman & Schwartz, 2015; Ceva & Bocchiola, 2018b, 2019). Many have noticed that harm-based justifications of whistleblowing are limited in scope, as they characterize the object of whistleblowing in very narrow consequentialist terms. Quite clearly, there are organizational actions that may be morally problematic although they do not produce any obvious measurable harmful consequence. Consider, for example, forms of organizational misconduct or minor professional malpractice—for example, nepotistic hiring practices, failed scams, or corrupt but petty *quid pro quo* whose harmful consequences are trivial. Moreover, the views that refer to the negative consequences for the public interest are subject to the many uncertainties concerning what the public interest is and how to strike a balance between its safeguard (whatever it means and implies) and the costs it imposes on the whistleblower (as suggested in Snowden's case). Of course these preoccupations are insufficient to undermine the overall plausibility of the harm-based justification of whistleblowing. But they show how this view is insufficient on its own to provide an all-round normative analysis of this practice.

3.2 | Complicity-based justifications

The second variant of the *Extrema Ratio* view recasts the justification of whistleblowing by drawing attention to the moral protection of the agent of the report, her integrity and her moral commitments, rather than the nature and consequences of its object. So, from this perspective, the member of an organization ought to blow the whistle when she believes that doing so could avoid her complicity with the occurrence of some wrongful individual behavior or practice within her organization (Boot, 2018; Boot, 2019a; Brenkert, 2010; Davis, 1996, 2003).

From this complicity-based perspective, what triggers the duty to blow the whistle is independent of the kind of wrong that has occurred (and its actual or expected harmful consequences). Insofar as the member of an organization is somehow related to the occurrence of an organizational wrongdoing of sort, whistleblowing is morally justified. For some, this justification depends on the potential whistleblower's fundamental moral

commitment to respecting his integrity, which complicity with an organizational wrongdoing would jeopardize (Boot, 2017; Brenkert, 2010). For others, stronger epistemic standards must be met such that the potential whistleblowers' belief that their integrity is at risk must be justified and true (Davis, 1996, 2003). This moral predicament can be usefully illustrated once again through Snowden's situation and his commitment to avoiding his implication with mass individual rights violations.

However, while complicity-based justifications of whistleblowing add an important piece to the puzzle concerning the justification of this practice, they have some limitations too. The idea of complicity is itself quite indeterminate and controversial (see Lepora & Goodin, 2013); it is unclear, for example, if to be an accomplice in a wrongdoing, somebody must take an active part in it, or whether his encouragement or assistance are sufficient to determine his involvement. Think, for example, of a colleague of Snowden's, who was not himself involved in the mass surveillance program, say someone who had just started working for the NSA, but simply becomes aware of the program because Snowden tells her so. While this person can hardly be considered as implicated in the occurrence of the alleged wrongdoing, her failure to report might nevertheless condone the occurrence of a morally questionable practice. Complicity-based justifications of whistleblowing struggle to offer a definite answer to this kind of questions and, therefore, they seem insufficient to develop an all-round normative account of this practice that could guide the action of the members of an organization through the many dilemmas they may face in the performance of their everyday role-based functions (see Ceva & Radoilska, 2018).

3.3 | The Extrema Ratio view: A brief stocktaking

Through the discussion of the Extrema Ratio view of whistleblowing, articulated along the two justificatory strategies based in the normative ideas of harm and complicity, we have pinpointed some important aspects of the phenomenology and normative status of this practice. However, our discussion has also suggested that this view is not sufficient to offer an all-round normative assessment of whistleblowing, capable of guiding the action of the members of an organization vis-à-vis organizational wrongdoing on principled grounds.

By its very connotation, the Extrema Ratio view is only capable of making normative sense of the tip of the iceberg of what whistleblowing is and entails from the moral point of view. Notably, that view is fit for discussing the justification of whistleblowing in situations of emergency, and when the normative status of either the object of the report (the actual or expected harm generated by an organizational practice or individual behavior) or its agent (the degree of implication in the alleged occurrence of an organizational wrongdoing) is clear. More work can be done to appreciate also the importance of whistleblowing as an ordinary practice to ensure the well-functioning of an organization in less than ideal conditions.

4 | THE DEONTIC VIEW

We have seen that the Extrema Ratio view of whistleblowing is successful to make sense of this practice as an extraordinary individual act in exceptional circumstances, which can be justified as a matter of duty only when certain strict but ultimately inconclusive conditions hold. This conclusion is not fully satisfactory for two main reasons. First, it fails to offer on its own clear principled guidance for the members of an organization who are informed about an organizational wrongdoing, whose consequences are not apparent, and in whose occurrence the potential whistleblower is not obviously implicated. Second, it offers one partial normative account of whistleblowing as an act that exceeds ordinary morality, thus missing to account also for the potential of this practice in the day-to-day life of an organization. These limitations are important because, if we succeed to address them, interesting implications follow for understanding what it means to have well-functioning organizations in non-ideal conditions and what duties of office can thus be derived for the occupants of an organizational role. Addressing the limited reach and

scope of considering only the *Extrema Ratio* view of whistleblowing is crucial to the Deontic view, which we present as offering an important complementary (but not alternative) contribution to the philosophical discussion of this practice.

In the Deontic view, whistleblowing is a dutiful practice (not just an individual conscientious act) pertaining to the ordinary set of answerability measures that any legitimate organization should implement to monitor its overall performance and the contribution that its members give towards—or against—it (Ceva & Bocchiola, 2018a). To see the plausibility of this view, reconsider the particularity of whistleblowing with respect to other forms of reporting (see Section 2). Whistleblowing is particular in three main respects: (a) the source of the disclosed information is internal to an organization; (b) the kind of wrongdoing reported concerns some failures that originate from within an organization; and (c) the aim of the disclosure is to initiate corrective action of failing organizational practices or behaviors. So, as the example of Snowden illustrates, whistleblowers disclose information to which they have access in their capacity as the holders of a role within an organization concerning some organizational wrongdoing typically related to the uses of power entrusted to organizational roles.

In virtue of these three distinguishing features, we can start to appreciate how whistleblowing is also intimately related to the internal functioning of an organization and to the ordinary duties of membership of those who occupy a role within it. To understand the role of whistleblowing within this context, we must start to develop a clear understanding of what an organization is, what makes it well-functioning, and what duties organizational membership entails for those who occupy a role within it, in general as well as facing organizational wrongdoing.

Recall from Section 2 (iv) that organizations, as institutions, are systems of embodied interrelated rule-governed roles (Emmett 1966, Miller, 2014). Each organizational role is embodied in the sense that it is occupied by a human person who, by the very fact of entering into an organizational role, acquires a special set of normative powers—rights and duties—that people do not normally have in other capacities. So not anyone has the right to demand to see my identity papers, and I have no duty to show them to other people in our daily interactions. But someone acquires that right and I bear the corresponding duty if the former is a state official, and we interact in the context of a judicial procedure.

Organizational roles are also special because they are structurally interrelated in a way that makes the functioning of the organization dependent on every role-occupant's performing his or her functions in keeping with the terms of their power mandate (Bovens 1998, pp. 9–20; Ceva & Ferretti, 2017). Power mandates are established with a view to ensuring that the interrelated work of organizational role-occupants can make the organization perform its functions (Applbaum, 1999; Ceva & Ferretti, 2018; Guala, 2016). Because organizational roles are thus interrelated, the failure of one role-occupant to act in keeping with her power mandate constitutes a threat in its own right to the entire normative order established with the establishment of an organization; it becomes the failure of an organization as whole (Ferretti, 2019). We can thus see how the members of an organization owe it to one another to comply with their role obligations as determined by the corresponding mandates. This is the idea of “office accountability,” the normative property of a well-functioning organization (Ceva, 2019). The idea of office accountability qualifies a well-functioning organization as one in which a certain normative pattern holds such that all role-occupants perform their role-specific obligations out of their fundamental duty of office accountability, their primary duty of organizational membership.

What we have seen so far comes quite neatly from the perspective of an ideal theory of organizational ethics. However, we should expect that in the daily life of an organization, non-ideal conditions materialize too whenever one or more occupants of an organizational role fail to comply with their duty of office accountability. In these circumstances, the possible range of organizational wrongdoing is quite ample, as it may include the uses of power implicated in cases of corruption, illegality, mismanagement, negligence, or waste of resources. Interestingly, what makes such forms of organizational wrongdoing relevant is not a function of the actual or expected negative consequences of (i.e., the harm caused by) a certain use of a power of office. It is the very rationale of that use of power that constitutes an organizational dysfunction, a deficit of office accountability, which is inherently wrong because it *constitutes* (does not cause) an alteration of the normative order established by the establishment of an organization.

In these circumstances, it is essential to the well-functioning of an organization that answerability practices are in place through which the corrective action of deficits of office accountability can be initiated. These practices are essential to enable the self-correction capacity of an organization by making its members call on each other to respond for the alleged failures in their uses of their powers of office. In other words, next to a primary duty to use their powers of office in keeping with the terms of their mandates, organizational role-occupants have also a derivative duty to engage in practices of reciprocal control of their action within the boundaries of their organization to prevent their joint work to go off track or take corrective action against it when a failure nevertheless occurs.

Notably, for our purposes in this essay, the members of an organization who come to know or just suspect an organizational wrongdoing ought to hold the failing fellow members answerable for their conduct. This duty of answerability is generally justified regardless of the consequences of an organizational wrongdoing (unlike in the harm-based justifications reviewed in Section 3.1) and the level of someone's implication in it (unlike in the complicity-based justifications reviewed in Section 3.2), since it derives from the structural relations of office accountability that obtain between the members of an organization. This line of reasoning leads to the core of the Deontic view of whistleblowing as a duty of answerability essential to the well-functioning of organizations.

From the vantage point of this view, Snowden's report to his colleagues within the NSA can rightfully be seen—in the first instance—as grounded in a duty of this kind, which falls on Snowden just like on any other of his colleagues independently of their level of personal involvement in the realization of the mass surveillance program (wrong insofar as it implies the use of governmental power beyond the boundaries of its mandate). From the perspective of the Deontic view, there is nothing extraordinary in Snowden's report to his colleagues. His call to action towards them can be morally justified by virtue of an ordinary duty of membership aimed to enable his organization's resources of self-correction. But there is more that we can see from this perspective.

To view whistleblowing also from the perspective of the Deontic view means to justify it first and foremost as a fundamental organizational duty. Discharging this duty, generally binding on all legitimate organizations, requires the establishment of safe and effective internal (e.g., a secure website for filing a report) and external (e.g., some dedicated authority responsible for providing legal advice to whistleblowers' initiatives) reporting mechanisms through which relevant organizational wrongdoings can be brought to light and, consequently, corrective action may be initiated. Looking at Snowden's vicissitudes from this perspective pinpoints a morally problematic feature of this case at the structural level of his organization: a deficit of office accountability within the CIA and the NSA emerges together with the failure of these organizations to discharge their duty of answerability by initiating corrective action of that deficit from within, through internal safe and effective reporting mechanisms. This feature is easily overlooked if we only concentrate on Snowden's individual action, as per the *Extrema Ratio* view.

When internal answerability mechanisms are available, the members of an organization have a duty to disclose their knowledge of or their suspects about an organizational wrongdoing through those channels. When organizational answerability measures are either unavailable, unviable, or when they proved to be insufficient (as in the case of Snowden), the members of an organization may be still be justified to go outside and seek the support of other agencies in order to attract attention towards the organizational wrongdoing of which they know or that they suspect. While the Deontic view generally guides the action of the members of an organization in the ordinary performance of their functions in non-ideal conditions, in these extraordinary circumstances, the *Extrema Ratio* view can provide important insights (within the limits discussed above). In this sense, the two views we have laid out importantly complement each other to offer an all-round normative assessment of whistleblowing.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

In this essay, we have offered a critical survey of current theories of the moral justification of whistleblowing within the debate in political philosophy. Our critical survey has identified two main families of normative theories of whistleblowing, the *Extrema Ratio* and the Deontic views. These views, we submit, can usefully be seen in

combination to offer an all-round moral assessment of this practice. We have seen that the Extrema Ratio view can successfully account for the moral reasoning that ought to inform the decision of the individual members of an organization to report an organizational wrongdoing in situations of emergency, failing ordinary institutional mechanisms of self-correction.

We have also shown how the Deontic view can offer a more structural normative account of whistleblowing that can usefully complement what the Extrema Ratio view may accomplish on its own. From the perspective of the Deontic view, whistleblowing is an instance of the organizational duty of answerability, which requires the establishment of safe and effective reporting mechanisms through which corrective action may be initiated whenever a deficit of office accountability occurs from within an organization, thus threatening its well-functioning.

The combination of these views offers a multifaceted outlook on whistleblowing within a broader ethics of office, which maximizes the potential of this practice while it minimizes the potential risks for the parties involved.

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