POWER IN POWERLESSNESS

Moral Responsibility for Justice, from the Individual to the Institution

By

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ABSTRACT

The 2024 shooting of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson exposes a provocative moral impasse. The alleged perpetrator, Luigi Mangione, and his supporters frame the act as a form of corrective justice – retaliation against systemic injustices committed by UnitedHealthcare. Others regard the act as unequivocally wrong, asserting that murder is never morally permissible. This tension spotlights deeper philosophical questions: To what extent can individuals be held responsible for structural injustice? Can institutions bear moral responsibility? If so, under what conditions? This thesis draws on a wide range of normative theories of politics, philosophy, and international relations, such as Iris Marion Young, Martha Fineman, Alasdair MacIntyre, Toni Erskine, Judith Butler, and Joseph Hoover to explore these questions. Consequently, it contends that conventional, individualist moral reasoning fails to account for the complexity of structural injustice. Further, it examines the conditions for institutional moral agency to argue for the need to reshape the fundamental ways we think of the ontology of both individuals and institutions. Finally, it consults emerging literature on how to reshape our ideas of responsibility and justice in the democratic framework, institutional care, and global justice. As global crises mount and liberal institutions remain paralyzed or complicit, this inquiry is not merely theoretical. It underscores the urgent need to develop ethical and institutional frameworks capable of meeting the challenges of justice in an interconnected and structurally unequal world.

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The Problem: Individual versus Institutional Moral Responsibility

26-year-old UPenn graduate Luigi Mangione was arrested 5 days after UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson was shot and killed in New York City, on the 4th of December 2024. Mangione's 'manifesto', composed of just under 270 words, was obtained by authorities upon his arrest in Altoona, Pennsylvania. It was subsequently published by journalist Ken Klippenstein on his Substack on the 10th of December 2024. An excerpt reads: *"I do apologize for any strife of traumas but it had to be done. Frankly, these parasites simply had it coming."* But *who* 'had it coming'?

As Mangione writes, *"the US has the #1 most expensive healthcare system in the world, yet we rank roughly #42 in life expectancy. United is the [indecipherable] largest company in the US by market cap, behind only Apple, Google, Walmart."* It seems that UnitedHealthcare 'had it coming' – American health insurance companies 'had it coming'. The jury was divided. Many championed Mangione as a "folk hero" (Jocelyn, 2024), while some, including popular talk show host Stephen Colbert, felt the need to clarify that, regardless of the popular dissatisfaction with the American healthcare system, he believes that "murder is wrong".

The case leads us to a noteworthy impasse of moral intuition. Mangione has – allegedly – made the assessment that UnitedHealthcare had committed a wrong for which retribution, to the company's incumbent leader, Brian Thompson was due. He believed that his act was justified because Thompson has had a central role in enabling the wrongs UnitedHealth has committed. Others grappled with evaluating the event of the CEO's killing as a singular, independent action between two men. In the latter case, the majority's intuition was that the act was wrong, no matter the relative positions of the two parties in the broader structural framework of the

American healthcare system. The mismatch comes from a sense that individuals, on the one hand, and institutions, on the other, are not moral agents in the same way – and the lines are blurred as soon as we try to find what, or who is at fault. The impasse thus delineates and draws into contemplation, the metaphysical status of institutions, as opposed to individuals, as moral agents.

The puzzle leaves us wondering how we can conceive of the very notion of moral responsibility when it comes to allocating the blame for harm caused by a systemized collective when discussions of moral responsibility often assume the unified individual as its base unit.

Why This Matters

The case of the 2015 European refugee crisis is an effective example of why a clear understanding of institutional moral responsibility[2] is essential for establishing just systems. The case demonstrates three phases of institutional failure: 1) a failure to prevent injustice by adhering to established commitments, 2) a failure to hold responsible parties accountable for the wrongdoing, and 3) a failure to enact meaningful reform to prevent future injustices. These came to pass in the following way:

1. While all European countries are signatories of the Refugee Convention (1951) and are under obligation to comply with various other legal frameworks like the Common European Asylum System or the 2001/55/EC Council Directive of 20 July 2001 (Morsut & Kruke, 2017), many Member States had actively denied their collective obligations both during and after the climax of the crisis in favor of pursuing policies in their own

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[2] N. B. Most theorists who give accounts of structural responsibility distinguish between what Iris Marion Young (2006) terms forward-looking and backward-looking responsibility respectively (p. 121). This paper uses the notion of responsibility in a unified sense because, as made clear by the example of the 2015 European refugee crisis, punishability does not adequately account for justice. I adopt the broad view of the concept to mean the ability of institutions to productively *respond* to their own failures – which includes both liability and a duty to reform.

interests (Morsut & Kruke, 2017). The EU's failure to reel in Member States, ensure the lawful conduct of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency FRONTEX (Tondo, 2021), or develop its asylum policy in a way that doesn't actively prevent refugees from being able to enter European territory (Bahadir, 2004) were all factors for which the EU was responsible, and which contributed to the deaths of over 4000 people in 2015 alone (Consilium, 2025).

2. Neither the EU nor its member states faced substantial repercussions for their failure to prevent these deaths. Certain member states faced relatively minor legal and financial repercussions for their non-compliance (e.g., Case C-808/18, Commission v Hungary). FRONTEX faced legal action for their documented misconduct only in 2021, initiated not by EU authorities, but by front-LEX[3] on behalf of two asylum seekers. (Front-LEX, 2021) This, and a similar case in 2023, were both dismissed by the Court of Justice of the European Union – even though the crimes jointly committed by local authorities and Frontex were well documented (Front-LEX, 2021).

3. The structural causes of these failures have also not received corrective attention. EU Policy developments don't seem promising for the protection of future refugees (Joyner, 2024), in addition to the EU's continued partnerships to fund projects that will prevent people in need from ever reaching the territory (Benghellab-Augustová, 2022).

University of Glasgow lecturer and humanitarian volunteer Benghellab-Augustová (2022) writes, "EU governments and officials seek to absolve themselves of responsibility for refugee

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[3] Front-LEX is an activist organization which provides pro-bono legal representation for victims of EU migration policy.

children's deaths. But the blame very much lies with them." Is this blame conceivable to us, as citizens, or as academics, in a way that encourages a framework under which needless deaths become preventable?

As assaults on human rights and liberties continue to grow along the fault lines of global tensions, the mismatch that arises in the Mangione case, but can be traced through various international events, underpins substantial contemporary academic and public interest. Our governing institutions' unresponsiveness, inaction, denial, or even perpetuation of these violations essentializes not just a theoretical examination of their capacity for (moral) responsibility and, thus, justice, but the development of practical reforms to both our democratic systems and their underlying philosophies.

The Argument

This thesis argues that liberal democracies suffer a crisis of moral responsibility because both institutions and individuals are mistakenly imagined as unified, autonomous moral agents. By reconceiving both as fragmented, relational, and structurally embedded, I propose that we must reform the underlying philosophies of democratic systems to reflect a *systemic ethics* of democratic responsibility – one that enables us to hold institutions morally accountable without collapsing into either moral individualism or depersonalized structural critique.

Synthesizing the ideas of political philosophers and normative theorists, and drawing from the fields of social ontology, this thesis is constituted of sections as follows. In part one, I outline why the primary conception of moral responsibility as an individual trait is incomprehensible when we try to conceive of it within a structure. In part two, I go on to examine whether the emergence of structural agency and hence group-based moral responsibility, is satisfactory in resolving this tension. In part three, I offer a concept of moral responsibility that reshapes the ontology of both the individual and the system as fragmented, relational entities. Finally, in part

four, I engage with contemporary authors who have outlined recommendations for how we might rehabilitate our democratic systems for them to be able to be morally responsible for enacting the fundamental values of the democratic ethos – such as justice. I conclude with an assessment of where the analysis of the present project leaves us.

CHAPTER ONE: LIBERAL MORAL INDIVIDUALISM AND JUSTICE IN A STRUCTURE

"The only part of the conduct of anyone, for which he is amenable to society, is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute."

- John Stuart Mill, On Liberty (1859, p. 13)

The liberal tradition, which has provided the philosophical framework for modern democracy, takes the individual as the base unit of moral responsibility. This individualist conception of morality governs, almost pre-reflexively, our expectations of the principles and priorities of our institutions. We expect these structures to reflect values constructed in our separation from others, creating a contradiction between our simultaneous standards for the priority of the self and collective justice. This section argues that the liberal, individualist model of moral responsibility fails in democratic contexts, where injustice often emerges systemically rather than from individual wrongdoing. To build just democracies, we must move beyond moral individualism and understand responsibility as a structurally embedded condition for global justice.

The Basis of the Individualist Moral Framework

Mill's Harm Principle, proposed in his 1859 essay *On Liberty*, aims to ensure, above all, that no individual is ever a subject of unjust violence by her state or society (p. 13). Mill's liberalism defines the individual as the ontological center of the world – assuming its priority to society as a value-creating, independent moral agent. In turn, this conception reinforces an idea of justice that begins with, and is contained in, the rights of the sovereign individual. John Rawls'

A Theory of Justice (1971) echoes this base sentiment in a modern context, positing that no qualities of social welfare justify the violability of the individual in a *just* society (p. 3).

Unlike Rawls, Mill recognizes the tension between the interests of the individual and that of the collective. For example, he asserts that interpersonal interference warrants the involvement of the public for the reassessment of its welfare as a consequence of individual action (p. 69). He goes as far as to argue that the greatest driver of progress is utility "in the largest sense" (p. 14), meaning that individual conduct should aim at the maximization of the happiness of the most. Mill reconciles his conflicting intuitions about individual and collective interests by asserting that individuality is *bound* to lead to this greatest sense of happiness for the whole (p. 53). Rawls, by contrast, levels a decisive critique of classical utilitarianism, asserting that it mistakenly takes society to be a single organism not unlike one large person, disregarding the distinctness of individuals (p. 24). This fundamental departure illustrates how the concept of the sovereign person as a base unit of justice and fairness has been consolidated under liberalism – entrenching a framework that centers justice on the inviolability of the individual and shaping our collective ideals of the good in ways that may obscure relational or systemic dimensions of moral life.

Individualist Morality in a Structure

Even for those persuaded by Mill's reconciliation of private autonomy with public utility, the limits of individualist moral reasoning become apparent in institutional contexts. As Dennis Thompson argues in *The Problem of Many Hands* (1980), the diffuse and collective nature of decision-making in complex organizations raises serious challenges for assigning responsibility and, by extension, achieving justice (p. 905). Though attentive to the tensions between individual moral responsibility and institutional complexity, Thompson remains committed to their ultimate compatibility. He argues for a model of responsibility that (1) identifies

responsible public officials (i.e., those whose active or passive conduct was a necessary factor[4] in the wrongdoing) (pp. 909-911) and (2) assesses whether the individual's (moral) agency was restricted (e.g. through ignorance, coercion, etc.) (pp. 912-914).

Thompson's model of accountability may appear especially compelling – and even necessary – in cases like the aftermath of the tragic roof collapse at the Novi Sad train station in Serbia last November. When the University of Novi Sad released a statement condemning students for obstructing faculty from returning to normal academic activities in protest of the disaster, students and faculty united to demand the Rector's resignation (Stojanovic, 2024). According to Professor of Philosophy Mina Djikanovic, "(…) the rector's actions seriously violated the autonomy of UNS and did not react in accordance with the institution he heads (…)", asserting that the resignation of the rector was both a necessary and a sufficient condition for re-establishing the trust vested in the institution, therefore qualifying as an act of corrective justice.

The inadequacy of Thompson's framework, however, creeps through the cracks as soon as we step back to view the wider picture: the original injustice resulting in the accident that caused the deaths of 16 people. Could we say that the resignation of Construction Minister Goran Vesić was necessary and sufficient for genuine accountability? The students of Serbia would not think so – and neither would Vesić himself, who was swift to declare that neither he nor any of his colleagues were responsible for the design flaw (Ahmatović, 2024). The arrest of 11 people, and the indictment of 13 (Vasovic, 2024) suggests that the issue of accountability and, subsequently, justice, is more complicated. Thompson's model, despite recognizing the worries

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[4] N.B. Thompson's analysis is explicitly aware of the different processes of causation that could arise within complex institutional frameworks. He describes the *extents* to which each official may cause an outcome. Under this section, he distinguishes between claims of non-responsibility from *alternative cause*, (i.e., 'if I didn't do it, someone else would have') (909) and *null cause* (i.e., 'it wasn't my job') (911). He argues that each excuse may be more or less plausible depending on the case, but that the officials cannot be entirely absolved in most cases, maintaining that the notion of *personal* responsibility is central to the project of understanding accountability for justice in democratic structures.

of the structural element, remains rooted in an inadequate framework of discrete individual responsibility.

Structural Injustice

Iris Marion Young (2006) defines structural injustice as

> "a kind of moral wrong distinct from the wrongful action of an individual agent (…) [It] occurs as a consequence of many individuals and institutions acting in pursuit of their particular goals and interests, within given institutional rules and accepted norms." (p. 114)

Even if leading officials have been removed from their positions in light of the tragedy in Serbia, the *structural injustices* that allowed it to pass remain. For example, the ongoing corruption within the Serbian Ministry of Construction that directed funds away from the building of the Novi Sad train station constitutes as such an injustice. Among other concerns, the incumbent government prioritized the establishment of foreign political relations when contracting companies for the reconstruction efforts with a history of fraud and malpractice (World Bank, 2011), while ignoring the consistent reports detailing the inadequacies of the canopy structure by local engineers (Vujović, 2025). The multitude of individuals who were involved in the series of failures that eventually resulted in the tragedy is not limited to those in the offices of the Serbian government – it extends to the contracting companies, the oversight committees that didn't adequately report on the integrity of the project, and the Serbian Railways Infrastructure company which should have ensured that the project is completed with integrity (Vujović, 2025) – at the very least.

The sanctioning of individual actors, in response to such injustice, is inadequate. Let's briefly return to the initial example of Luigi Mangione and Brian Thompson. Although UnitedHealth has faced several challenges in the past 6 months, both related and unrelated to the murder of

former executive Thompson, the company did not go under. Most recently, CNBC reported that insiders have bought up shares of enormous value to try and improve the company's diminished stock market performance (Li, 2025). This demonstrates an underlying system of incentives that will uphold the company, or similar companies regardless of the particular people that occupy certain positions within them, rendering individual sanctions ineffective to address the root cause of these injustices that must be amended to prevent future wrongdoing.

Liberal political thought, grounded in the autonomous, rational individual, fails to account for how complex institutional actions, such as corruption or exploitation, are produced and therefore collapses in the face of dispersed, collective wrongdoing. The crucial inability to effectively assign blame in the absence of a single culprit prevents the ability to rectify wrongdoing. This creates a moral paralysis in democratic systems. How can we claim justice for harm that stems not from individual failure, but from systemic design?

The Prospects of Systemic Reform

Martha Fineman (2021) addresses precisely this gap. She uses the case of COVID-19 and the resulting shift in U.S. public attitudes toward social welfare to challenge the traditional liberal ideal of the sovereign individual and its legal, moral, and ontological implications. She suggests the reframing of the legal notion of the "imagined ordinary subject of law" as inherently vulnerable (p. 2), therefore providing a framework for holding governments accountable when they fail to honor this quality in public policy considerations.[5] Fineman argues that once we recognize vulnerability as fundamental to personhood, it becomes clear that the failure to

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[5] She contends that embodied vulnerability is a universal and enduring condition of the human experience, and that this reality should inform the legal and institutional frameworks that structure governance (3). While vulnerability theory shares philosophical affinities with feminist ethics of care – particularly in its emphasis on interdependence – it distinguishes itself through its institutional focus, centering not on interpersonal relationships but on how systems structure and distribute resilience and risk (7).

address social discord, injustice, or inequality constitutes harm – one that demands governmental action and redress (p. 7).

This reconceptualization offers a critical departure from Mill's harm principle, which primarily seeks to prevent unwarranted state interference unless direct interpersonal harm can be shown. While Mill is concerned with limiting excessive paternalism, Fineman exposes the opposite danger: that of institutional neglect. In her framework, harm does not arise only from coercive overreach, but also from the absence of care – from systemic failures to protect, support, and empower the vulnerable. Where Mill envisions a good state as one that protects negative liberty, Fineman calls for a state that enables positive liberty by embedding care and responsiveness into its very institutions. Her argument is integral to the present one to the extent that it moves us from an inherently individual concept of moral responsibility to one that can reside in institutional design, creating a potential for structures to be just regardless of individual action.

Fineman's vulnerability theory thus reorients the liberal emphasis on autonomy toward a more interdependent conception of the human subject; however, it remains embedded in a normative framework that presumes the existence – and reformability – of Western institutions, particularly the welfare state. In this sense, the call for a "responsive state" risks re-inscribing the very structures that have been built on the concept of the individual as an independent unit and have historically failed the most vulnerable.

The Need for Global Justice

Justice is not about punishment or state-specific legal reforms alone – it is about mobilizing moral responsibility toward the active reconstruction of social arrangements. In *Responsibility and Global Justice* (2006), Iris Marion Young develops the social connection model to reframe structural injustice not as a failure of care (as in Fineman's state-centered model), but as the

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result of dispersed, relational processes that implicate all participants in social systems. As she writes, *"(…) all agents who contribute by their actions to the structural processes that produce injustice have responsibilities to work to remedy these injustices."* (Young, 2006, p. 102) While Fineman locates responsibility in the state's duty to protect the vulnerable, Young shifts the moral question from what institutions owe us to what we owe one another through our shared structural entanglements.

Young critiques conventional theories of responsibility – such as those found in Mill and Rawls – for assuming bounded political communities and formal institutional ties as the primary sites of justice. In contrast, she argues that individuals are first and foremost connected through webs of social interaction and interdependence. Institutions, rather than being the origin of these connections, are shaped by them (p. 105).

This ontological shift has practical consequences. Young illustrates structural injustice through the example of global sweatshops, where exploitation is sustained not by individual bad actors alone, but by transnational systems of production, consumption, and economic norms. In *Responsibility for Justice* (2011), she builds on this analysis to argue for a forward-looking political responsibility. Rather than assigning blame, Young calls for collective action to transform the unjust structures we participate in and benefit from – therefore indicating the need for the parts to become wholes.

CHAPTER TWO: FROM PARTS TO WHOLES:
THE EMERGENCE OF INSTITUTIONAL AGENCY

"Every state is a community of some kind, and every community is established with a view to some good; for mankind always act in order to obtain what which they think good."

- Aristotle, *Politics* (1999, p. 3)

Young (2006) points toward collective political action as the necessary vehicle for fulfilling our mutual responsibility to dismantle unjust structures and create just ones. She recommends instrumentalizing our responsibility through civil society organizing, solidarity movements, NGOs, and other grassroots democratic formations (p. 129). The sustained danger that arises from this proposition, one initially echoed here through Dennis Thompson's paper, is that structures disperse individual agency, making it difficult to keep track of responsibility. Thus, powerful structures can hijack this agency for their own sustenance – such as, perhaps, in the case of some of the individuals involved in the enabling of the tragedy in Serbia. It is likely that no one implicated individual intended for the roof collapse to occur, however, the structure they were in provided them with only a constrained set of choices, some with better incentives than others. Still, the possibility of organizing for justice seems incoherent without an organization. Therefore, the question becomes whether institutions can emerge as legitimate bearers of moral responsibility and thus be effectively accountable for justice. This section takes states as an example to examine whether they can acquire distinct decision-making capacities, intentions, and responsibilities despite their structurality.

John M. Parrish begins his paper 'Collective Responsibility and the State' (2009) by citing a poll reporting that *"39% of American citizens agree that the US 'has a moral obligation to help*

pay for the reconstruction of Iraq', while 55% disagree" (Los Angeles Times, 2009, via Parrish, p. 120). Parrish uses this statistic to make the point that the intuition for collective public responsibility for state action is not popular amongst the American public[6]. However, the intuition is not uncommon, either, despite the United States' status as one of the most individualistic cultures in the world. This is especially relevant to the present project, as it provides a compelling basis for treating the state as a legitimate bearer of collective moral responsibility. Parrish goes on to confront the tension set up by the statistic by offering a state-centered model of agency, where citizens bear their moral responsibility not only through participation in social networks but also through their authorization relationships with the state. Parrish seeks to reconcile democratic legitimacy with moral accountability – arguing that political responsibility, however diffuse in origin, ultimately requires institutional traction to become justice in practice, and that one of those particularly relevant institutional forms is the state (p. 128).

For citizens to meaningfully authorize their states' actions – such that this authorization generates a morally responsible state – their moral integrity must remain intact, even while embedded in institutional structures. Alasdair MacIntyre (1999) challenges this possibility through the example of "J", a railway officer in Nazi Germany tasked with coordinating train schedules. When asked in postwar proceedings whether he knew he was facilitating the transportation of Jews to extermination camps, J replies: *"I did not know. It was not for someone in my position to know. I did my duty. I did not fail in my responsibilities. You cannot charge me with moral failure."* (p. 312)

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[6] It is, of course, a consideration that those who filled out the poll understood 'the US' to mean 'the US government', and not its constituents. However, Parrish assumes that the responders understood 'the US' to mean the collective of US citizens.

MacIntyre's analysis reveals two important truths. First, structural compartmentalization – where individuals occupy roles across fragmented spheres of life – erodes their coherent sense of moral identity. (p. 315) This means that individuals fail to possess characteristics that they bring to each of their fragmented roles "*qua* individual and not *qua* role-player" (p. 315). Second, the moral codes guiding those roles are themselves shaped and distorted by the institutional frameworks they serve. For example, an individual may be encouraged to adopt a competitive, self-interested ethic at work (e.g., in a neoliberal corporate environment), yet be expected to perform selfless care at home. These conflicting moral imperatives are not grounded in coherent normative theory but in the logics of institutional reward and punishment. What is "good" behavior, under these conditions, is defined by what sustains the system. This undermines the moral premise of Parrish's theory of democratic authorization. If citizens' moral reasoning is forcibly shaped by structures that inhibit reflection and reward compliance, then their consent does not meaningfully confer moral legitimacy. Authorization becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: the system validates itself through the moral fragmentation it induces. In such a context, genuine personal responsibility – and the possibility of morally meaningful political action – can only emerge through withdrawal from, or active resistance against, institutions that have already rendered moral agency ineffective.

A possible way to circumvent the moral black hole this analysis threatens to toss us into is to argue that institutions and systems can possess an emergent form of moral agency – one that is distinct from and irreducible to the agency of their individual members. This would allow us to allocate moral responsibility to institutions as emergent entities, making them particular sorts of beings with properties not attributable to their fragments. Christian List and Philip Pettit (2011) contend that groups can exhibit a kind of rational agency that is not simply the aggregation of individual judgments. Specifically, they argue that a group qualifies as a rational agent if it: (1) forms intentional beliefs, desires, or plans, (2) follows theoretically coherent

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decision-making procedures, (3) is capable of acting to realize its goals, and (4) does so robustly and consistently (p. 3). Through an extensive analysis of how group judgment can supervene on, yet diverge from, the individual judgments of its members, List and Pettit conclude that group agency is conceptually possible – in case their conditions are met. This creates an ontological foundation for treating institutions as morally responsible, independent subjects– a stable subject of agency that is absent in both Parrish's authorization-based model and Young's structurally diffused responsibility.

Explicitly building on List and Pettit's notion of "collectivized reason" (2011), Avia Pasternak (2020) analyzes various case studies and their underlying legal and political frameworks to examine whether the state itself can be the stable moral agent we are searching for. She proposes that because states have intentions (i.e., plans) and integrated decision-making structures, they may become an entity of their own that can then be morally responsible for their own wrongdoing (pp. 8-9). Crucially, Pasternak points out that neither our current legal, nor our moral, frameworks are sufficient to make sense of this conception of state behavior (p. 9), before turning to an exploration of what this implies for a state's citizens.

Even if some possibility of a morally responsible state as an emergent entity can be established theoretically, as Pasternak and List and Pettit argue, what ultimately matters is whether and how we can hold states responsible in practice, especially in global contexts where responsibility is most easily evaded. Toni Erskine develops her framework to this end.

Based on the assumption of the aforementioned possibility for states to be able to be rational agents, Erskine (2001) offers a particular basis for determining the particular instances where collectives can bear responsibility for justice. According to her account, *institutional moral agents* must possess

1. "*an identity that is more than the sum of the identities of its constitutive parts and, therefore, does not rely on a determinate membership (…)*

2. *a decision-making structure (…)*

3. *an identity over time (…)*

4. *a conception of [themselves] as a unit*" (p. 72).

This model marks the starting point of Erskine's broader project to develop a detailed and defensible ontology of states and institutions as entities in their own right. Her first criterion – the capacity to exist independently of a fixed membership – is particularly useful in interpreting the case of Luigi Mangione. UnitedHealth, as a self-perpetuating structure, requires someone to occupy the role of CEO, but it does not require *any particular person* to do so. The institution's continuity after the events of last December illustrates this clearly: its core operations have remained functionally unimpeded, demonstrating that its agency does not depend on the identity of individual officeholders. While Erskine's other criteria are important, this first element – the *emergent identity* of the institution – is the most fundamental. It points to a form of structural resilience common to many collectives. Mangione's words – in light of this evidence – insinuate a misunderstanding of this feature[7], which runs the risk of rendering his act meaningless, and leaves the present project with residual trouble in the form of questions about where and how to direct a call for justice. Finally, it also legitimizes MacIntyre's worries about the system's ability to hijack individual agency for its own sustenance – thus raising further questions about whether genuine moral agency is at all possible.

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[7] To be charitable to Mangione, we must acknowledge the possibility that his act was purely and intentionally symbolic. This poses a problem because it indicates that the power structures we are dealing with are so resistant to reform that they have provoked an otherwise well-positioned, educated young man to take a life for the sake of demonstrating this reality. This gives all the more weight to the question of how to direct calls to justice when institutional moral responsibility seems inadequate to encourage reform.

Toni Erskine argues that institutions can be moral agents by making them out to be as much like the liberal autonomous idea of a person as possible. She does this by granting them an identity, agency, and self-concept. Her theory is convincing precisely because our core notion of moral responsibility is inexplicably tied to this same idea of the individual, as established in Section 1. Subsequently, we have many ideas about how to hold individuals accountable for wrongdoing through different systems: probation, imprisonment or corrective actions are a few generally accepted methods. However, we have difficulty applying these same methods to institutions. Only individual leaders could be imprisoned, for example, which we have established as an ineffective means of accountability for structural injustice through the Mangione example. We can make them financially liable – but this method only ever punishes individuals who are implicated and often doesn't result in reform to the system. We can initiate legal action against them in contexts that often consider institutions to be legal persons – but this also does not guarantee reform and is often defeated due to legal frameworks that are designed to enable beneficial institutional wrongdoings. Further, this conception introduces a subsequent worry: if institutions are entities of their own right, are they not morally constrained in the same way by other institutions as individuals are under MacIntyre's framework?

These problems might be an indication that our base concepts are lacking – and keeping us grounded in assumptions that lead this inquiry no further. This might invite a reversal in perspective to reassess how we think about the core notion of accountability. If institutions can be treated as agents – structured, enduring, and norm-generating beyond the will of any single person – then perhaps individuals, too, should be understood not as isolated moral units, but as institutionalized selves. That is, as subjects composed through intersecting roles, expectations, and normative systems – systems which they neither author nor fully control. The next section explores this ontological inversion: the individual not as the foundation of moral responsibility, but as its most intimate and unstable institutional site.

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CHAPTER THREE: INDIVIDUALS AS INSTITUTIONS MIRRORED

"[Theodor W. Adorno] is clear that there is no morality without an ''I,'' but pressing questions remain: In what does that ''I'' consist?"

- Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2009, p. 7)

This section argues that the crisis of institutional (moral) non-responsibility stems from a concept of responsibility that presupposes the existence of the autonomous, 'liberal' individual. The notion of individual moral responsibility and institutional moral responsibility seem incompatible. Despite repeated efforts to bridge them, the practical outcomes for justice as opposed to an inert theory of accountability remain unsatisfying. The latest and most ambitious theoretical turn has been to personify institutions, attributing to them agency, intention, and moral standing. Yet this move, while conceptually daring, is difficult to operationalize. Perhaps, then, it is time to pull the rug. This section argues that liberal democratic institutions fail to enact meaningful justice because they are ontologically structured around the fiction of the autonomous individual. By rethinking individuals as institutionalized, we expose the limits of justice as currently institutionalized. True justice would require an ethic of radical interdependence and reflexivity, which democratic systems, bound to procedural and individualistic logic, struggle to sustain due to their dependence on the individual as united and autonomous.

One possible source for an ethic of radical interdependence may be based on Judith Butler's work in 'Giving an Account of Oneself' (2009). Exploring the moral implications of notions that are familiar to any continental philosophy enthusiast, such as Sartre's "the look" or

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Foucault's "subjectification", Butler studies the post-structuralist edifice of the moral "I". Butler deconstructs the liberal view of the sovereign, autonomous moral agent to argue that the self, especially in ethical contexts, is always created through relationality (p. 8). Crucially, Butler specifies that this does not imply the complete dissolution of the moral agent: rather, an interpretation of ethics as a dialogue as opposed to a deontology (p. 8). This theory is an alternative resolution to MacIntyre's (1999) previously outlined worry – that the modern compartmentalization of the self makes it impossible for people to construct a virtuous, transcendental moral identity (p. 322). While Butler might assess MacIntyre's proposition of a need for such an identity as an act of "moral narcissism" (p. 105), the two thinkers ultimately converge in their observations about how situatedness influences morality to a much greater extent than what is presumed by traditional normative ethical theories. They also agree that the primary way of engaging in an ethical life is what Butler, after Foucault, calls "critique" (p. 109), and what MacIntyre describes as a non-refusal to be compliant in a divided self (p. 327). Identity becomes a practice as opposed to a prescription: a self "actualized" only through an active engagement with its surroundings.

The underlying principles of this practice are also important. As mentioned above, moral engagement based on self-assertion or self-preservation runs the risk of becoming a sort of moral narcissism, where the agent commits the crucial flaw of assuming its own infallibility (Butler, 2009, p. 104). This is what liberal individualism and deontology do (p. 108). Butler, not unlike Martha Fineman, continues their own analysis of Adorno to assert that an inherent sense of vulnerability is essential to 'becoming human' (p. 102), and thus approaching morality as a human. Another important aspect seems to be a sense of empathy, of recognizing oneself in another to understand that the judgment of the other has inevitable implications on the self (p. 45). This is a sentiment echoed by Martha Nussbaum's 'capabilities approach', which seeks to assess how compassion can be institutionalized – thinning the false dichotomy of institutional

and individual ontologies.[8] So, then, a (moral) identity may be sketched as a practice governed by certain principles of relationality – a fundamental sense of sameness to other people.

Provided we accept the underlying assumptions of these theorists, the post-structuralist view of the moral self may be constructed as a fragmented system, implying a decision-making structure as its backbone to deliberate moral action. This structure is different from the one assumed by frameworks involving the autonomous individual because it merely carries out a procedural function, as opposed to implying some inherent rationality that is unaffected by structural dispositions. This self is necessarily temporal, and changing over time, as its participation in the ethical is essentially a sustained practice. Still, the patterns of this practice form some sort of consistency (Butler, 2009, p. 62). This consistency is organized into a narrative by the self – one through which it addresses others and is addressed by others relationally. Crucially, the act of addressing is not part of the narrative – it's the interruption of it, contributing to the dialogue of identity creation (Butler, 2009, p. 62).

For how these concepts might apply in real life, consider the case of my friend, Fred. After knowing him for some time, Fred's decisions at any one instance scarcely surprise me. See, Fred was born to a generationally middle-class, Western German family in the early 2000s. Because of this, Fred's governing principles are staunchly liberal: for example, Fred believes individual liberty to be the utmost good, he values freedom of speech, and he also believes that a social market economy will enable and encourage these values in society. When Fred passes judgment on a subject, he applies an order of priority to his values – he weighs the pros and cons and deliberates within himself. Sure enough, Fred sometimes has conflicting opinions, that he then reconciles in this way. Fred is also informed by processes external to him: he engages in academics, the news, and cultural events, talks to people he both agrees and disagrees with,

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[8] Nussbaum's theory is referred to here because it gains importance further on.

and considers these accounts. Fred is also accountable to those he has a relationship with and takes this accountability seriously. His judgments and actions are somewhat bound by these accountabilities. Fred also has functions that pertain to his material reality: the ability to execute actions based on his judgments, to control his finances, and the potential to coerce through his (physical) power.

It is largely obvious that how I outline Fred's life is akin to how institutions operate. Fred is, as psychologists would say, a product of his nature and nurture, similar to institutions, which emerge from and are shaped by a combination of their origins (history) and outside circumstances (other institutional structures, political context, etc.). Fred's history, just like regional history, for example, shapes the foundational principles an institution is built on. These principles are translated into actions based on the context and function of the institution. These actions are deliberated through a centralized decision-making structure. The institution is in constant communication with its context and distributes areas of operation within itself. It has a particular relationship to material reality (control of capital, force, etc.) – and so on.

Butler describes the ethical self as created and practiced through and in response to a variety of external factors which then shape the identity of a person. In the same vein, contemporary political theorists assign person-like properties to institutions by arguing that their identity is created and shaped through similar processes. Recall Toni Erskine's criteria for institutional moral responsibility: "*an identity that is more than the sum of the identities of its constitutive parts (...), a decision-making structure; an identity over time; and a conception of itself as a unit*" (Erskine, 2001, p. 72). It seems that individuals bear these same characteristics, through which we can conceive of their moral accountability. As demonstrated by Fred, the ontological distinction between the two types of entities collapses.

The ontological primacy of either individuals or institutions is not of central concern. What matters is that both emerge as fragmented, contextually constructed entities – shaped by histories, norms, and structures they neither fully author nor control. The democratic failure, then, lies in the fact that its foundational ideals – justice, fairness, liberty – are predicated on an artificial conception of the person as a unified, autonomous agent. Rather than recognizing individuals as relational beings constituted through interdependence and sustained through ongoing dialogue with others, democratic structures institutionalize the fiction of the individual as unified, sovereign, and autonomous. They uphold liberal individualism as a normative foundation while simultaneously promising a form of justice that such a model cannot sustain. The result is a structural contradiction: a system built on the sovereign self, committed to values that only make sense in a relational world. The massive contemporary disillusionment with democratic governments comes, then, as no surprise – the citizenry is bound to become frustrated with a high moral ideal that, in the end, is constituted largely in the procedural implementation of these values (to varyingly successful extents).

The broader implications of reconceiving individual moral responsibility are likely too extensive to explore fully here. It is worth noting, however, that others have drawn similar conclusions within our specific context. Joseph Hoover (2012), for instance, considers the individual political actor – particularly as held accountable by supranational institutions like the International Criminal Court – not as a sovereign agent, but as a socially constructed subject. Drawing on John Dewey's theory of responsibility, Hoover critiques the assumption that the autonomous individual is the primary bearer of moral responsibility. He argues that this liberal presupposition undermines our collective efforts to develop meaningful concepts and practices of justice in an era defined by structural complexity and interdependence. The practical implications of the analysis carried out in this chapter threaten to be explored in the next section.

CHAPTER FOUR: TOWARD A SYSTEMIC ETHICS OF DEMOCRATIC RESPONSIBILITY

"The truth is, no one of us can be free until everybody is free."

- Maya Angelou, CNN Interview (2013)

In this section, I make a very modest attempt at describing the emerging aspects of a framework that (1) reconceptualizes responsibility as primarily relational, (2) upon the first condition, reconstructs what we mean by justice as a foundational, collective value, (3) reassesses our understanding of the value and meaning of the liberal democratic tradition and examines how it can be reformed according to a collectivist ethic, (4) gives an account of institutionalizing care and (5) approaches transnational relations with responsibility for global justice.

Moral Responsibility as the Relation between Fragments

During a diving accident in her twenties, another friend of mine, Shwetha, was carried out to sea by a current. When the weather conditions suddenly became rather dire, she stopped being able to see the light that would have indicated the direction towards the surface. In the few moments before she was rescued, she was unable to see anything but a deep, inky blue all around her. At that moment, she felt as if she was almost nothing - a lone consciousness wiped completely blank without the ability to observe, without being observed.

Our responsibility to be moral, and to be good, stems inherently from our relationship to others. To address Mill's harm principle directly: there is no part of our conduct that does not concern and influence other people. This influence carries a responsibility to act in ways that further Young's notion of relationality for our collective well-being. The fundamental notion of *what*

we owe one another is intentionally corroded by contemporary economic incentives that enjoy the utmost benefit of our division. The 'individual' agent torn away from its sustaining collective will act in egoistic ways that seem to benefit himself momentarily but undermine himself in the long run by undermining one's community. We are nothing without each other: without the influences that create, interrupt, and rewrite the narrative of ourselves, without the social ties that sustain us both practically and conceptually.

Individuals and institutions must be understood as fragmented, socially embedded agents. Traditional liberal models of moral responsibility are inadequate because they fail to capture the recursive, collective, and constructed nature of personhood, institutional design, and responsibility (Hoover 2012; Dewey, via Hoover). A practice-based, situated account offers more democratic and transformative potential.

Justice as Concurrent Capabilities rather than Preferences

Onora O'Neill (1995) critiques the liberal economic conception of justice for grounding itself in subjective, individual preferences. Within this framework, justice is defined as the enabling of actions based on either real or revealed preferences of rational, autonomous agents. If individuals can pursue their preferences without interference, the system is deemed just (p. 143). Accordingly, justice becomes little more than a "set of constraints on preference satisfaction," where constraints are derived primarily from conflicts between liberties and equalities (p. 143). This view is problematic, O'Neill argues, because individuals – especially those from marginalized or oppressed groups – often adapt their preferences to prevailing conditions. For example, a woman living under patriarchal norms may not express a preference for employment rights – not because she lacks the capacity to value autonomy or economic independence, but because she has internalized a social script that confines her role to caregiving and subordination. A preference-based model of justice risks interpreting such

adaptation as consent, thereby reinforcing unjust structures rather than exposing or correcting them.

Drawing on Amartya Sen, O'Neill proposes that justice should be grounded in capabilities rather than preferences (pp. 143–144). Capabilities reflect the real freedoms people have to pursue lives they have reason to value and are not as easily distorted by adaptation to oppression. While O'Neill rightly observes that capabilities are interdependent, she continues to frame this interdependence in terms of conflict – worrying, for example, about the difficulty of choosing between distinct sets of individuated capabilities (p. 144). This need not be the case. As Maya Angelou reminds us, freedom is not a zero-sum condition but a shared good: "None of us are free until all of us are free." Structural injustices are interconnected, and thus the realization of one group's capabilities often enables, rather than constrains, the capabilities of others. A relational approach to justice, then, recognizes that the expansion of one person's dignity and freedom reinforces the conditions for everyone.

Democracy of the People, by the People, for the People

While numerous democratic ideals exist – as do even more practical theories of democracy – a new model may not be necessary. What is needed, however, is a critical re-examination of the prevailing liberal-democratic paradigm. Osterberg-Kaufmann et al. (2023) argue that this dominant model remains fundamentally Eurocentric and overly procedural, thereby undermining its presumed capacity genuinely to guarantee human rights (p. 73). In response, they call for a global theory of democracy grounded in the principle of political self-efficacy (p. 74). Such a theory would move beyond fixed institutional forms to embrace a plurality of democratic configurations, capable of adapting to diverse cultural and political contexts. Drawing on John Dewey, this reorientation would reconceive democracy not merely as a formal system of governance, but as a lived, participatory way of life.

As Osterberg-Kaufmann et al. (2023) put it, "In terms of the history of ideas, representation, which appears to us today in the liberal tradition as such a valuable good, is nothing other than a principle for excluding the people from any exercise of power." (p. 80) The limited influence that constituencies currently have over the powers and actions of democratic leadership is evident across a range of cases. This disempowerment undermines not only the kind of distributed, forward-looking responsibility envisioned by Iris Marion Young but also the very integrity of the democratic ethos itself. Liberal democracy faces not just a legitimacy crisis, but a structural one. When mass protests in Serbia fail to produce meaningful change, when Hungary's ban on protest is met with little more than a symbolic diplomatic tweet, and when civil societies are unable to reverse or even slow democratic backsliding, one must ask: what remains of democracy beyond its formal procedures? Without mechanisms for real responsiveness, liberal democracy risks becoming a blank canvas – waiting for the next autocrat to paint over its fading outlines.

Therefore, it seems, that institutionalizing self-efficacy into democracies is of central concern. It potentially offers a solution to what democracy is – or should be – good for, namely the ability of a people to determine themselves. However, it is crucial not to lose sight of structural influences that shape democratic decision-making that may override even such a substantial reconceptualization. Marxist theorists might argue, for example, that the underlying capitalist economic reality will always distort incentives in a way that enables exploitation and oppression for profit, no matter the procedural or ethical reforms to political practice.

Institutions as People: Vulnerability and Compassion

Building on the work of Martha Fineman and Martha Nussbaum, I argue for embedding not only political self-efficacy but also care, vulnerability, and ethical interdependence into global institutions. As discussed in Section One, Fineman's vulnerability framework highlights the

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limitations of centering an abstract, autonomous individual in legal and political systems. While her approach risks reinforcing liberal institutional logic, it may offer a necessary transitional framework – one that is practically remedial even if not yet fully transformative. Though space constraints prevent a full elaboration of her contributions here, it is worth emphasizing that her call to reimagine the legal subject as inherently vulnerable marks a significant step toward institutionalizing care ethics within existing structures.

In contrast, I expand here on the work of Martha Nussbaum, previously introduced in Section Three, particularly through Maciej Sławiński's interpretation (2018). Nussbaum conceptualizes compassion not as a passive feeling, but as a cognitive emotion rooted in three evaluative judgments: (1) that serious harm has occurred; (2) that the suffering is undeserved; and (3) that one is vulnerable in relation to the sufferer (p. 205). This framing allows compassion to be rationalized and, crucially, institutionalized. Like Amartya Sen and Onora O'Neill, Nussbaum shifts the moral terrain from rights or liberties to *capabilities* – arguing that human flourishing depends on the real availability of opportunities to function in meaningful ways. Capabilities, in turn, inform how we assess harm, suffering, and structural injustice (p. 208).

Drawing on these concepts, Nussbaum (via Sławiński) illustrates how compassion can be embedded across legal, economic, and educational domains. Such integration, she argues, is not merely a moral aspiration but a necessary condition for cultivating the dispositions and institutional cultures that support human development. Embedding compassion as a fundamental value – across both formal institutions and socialization processes – thus becomes critical in fostering relational, just, and resilient democratic orders.

Toward Transnational Integration and Global Justice

Onora O'Neill (1995) notes that communitarian conceptions of justice often fail to extend beyond the bounds of locality, rendering them insufficient for addressing global injustice (p. 140). In response, what is needed is an integrated, not exclusively Western, and globalized theory of international relations – one capable of sustaining a structurally embedded, Youngian conception of responsibility for justice on a transnational scale.

Donald J. Puchala (1997) begins this necessary deconstruction by offering a meta-analysis of Western international relations theory, critiquing its epistemological imperialism and its consequences for understanding transnational structures of connection. He highlights, for example, how the modern Western concept of the state is a colonial artifact – one that fails to account for how non-Western polities have historically organized around "forces, movements, parties, peoples, cultures, and civilizations" instead (p. 130). These alternative reference points may prove useful when rethinking collective responsibility, particularly given democracy's historically weak capacity to bind individuals together in the way nationalism, religion, or even extremist ideologies have managed to do – perhaps explaining its compatibility with liberal individualism. Crucially, Puchala's critique moves beyond colonial histories to spotlight the ongoing structural realities of neo-colonialism. Breaking with Western theoretical orthodoxy cannot become a static or self-referential gesture. Rather, it must prompt fundamental, critical reflection on how Western economic and political institutions continue to function as contemporary accumulators of global power, enabling systems of exploitation, subversion, and epistemic closure.

Yong-Soo Eun (2020) builds on Puchala's criticism by deepening the analysis of Western hegemony within international relations theory itself. He argues that the discipline remains epistemically captive to a narrow, Eurocentric intellectual tradition that continues to privilege

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Western concepts, categories, and historical experiences (p. 2). To confront this, Eun calls for a shift toward "pluralistic universalism" and "theoretical pluralism" (p. 5) – a vision of global IR that actively engages with "geo-epistemic diversity of truth claims and the empiric-historical existence of multiple modernities" (p. 5). Such a paradigm would require more than adding non-Western examples to existing theoretical models. It would mean rethinking foundational concepts like 'the state' or 'power' from within different ontologies, while genuinely engaging with alternative knowledge systems, political traditions, and lived experiences – beyond the reductive binary of 'the West and the rest.'

Together, the contributions of O'Neill, Puchala, and Eun suggest that the demand for global responsibility and justice cannot be met by Western liberal frameworks alone. A truly relational and democratic theory of global ethics must be willing to confront the epistemic architecture of the institutions and disciplines that claim to serve justice. This requires not only recognizing the interdependence of all actors across national and structural boundaries – as Young's model urges – but also committing to an epistemological humility that welcomes multiplicity without flattening difference. Only then can we begin to articulate global responsibility in a way that is both structurally adequate and ethically inclusive.

LOOKING AHEAD

We risk missing the point of the case of Luigi Mangione if we approach it with a genuine attempt at assigning moral responsibility. What his alleged act ultimately establishes is not just the incoherence of our moral frameworks and their political implications, but the troubling state of our waning democratic ethos. We must understand this act not as an attempt at retribution, but as a grave indication that the institutions that are supposed to protect, care for, and heal people are inflicting violence upon them.

Subsequently, this thesis began with a question that resists easy answers: how can institutions be held morally responsible for injustice? What emerged in pursuit of this question was an entire conceptual architecture in crisis. My friend Fred recently brought a quote to my attention, often attributed to Winston Churchill, but originating from an unknown ancestor: *"Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others."* Whether or not this is true, we must not rest on the assumption that the democratic framework has culminated in all it can become. We must be attentive to the injustices democracy perpetuates, and the rise of authoritarianism that indicates its failures. Liberal democracies, built on the image of the sovereign individual, have reached their limits ethically and structurally. Their promises of justice falter not just because institutions evade responsibility, but because the very terms by which we assign it are grounded in a metaphysics of isolation. If we are to live in a world where justice is not only possible but thinkable, we must build institutions that can be held to account not despite their complexity, but because of it.

I have argued that we must invert the gaze. Institutions are not merely collections of individuals; nor are individuals merely free-floating agents. Both are fragmented, recursive, and relationally constituted. Both personal and collective agencies are structured through roles and histories and

are governed by norms and incentives. Our ethical obligations do not arise solely from autonomy, but from embeddedness, from shared participation in structures that determine who suffers and who survives.

This reframing of moral responsibility as fundamentally relational demands a concurrent rethinking of justice, democracy, and global interrelatedness. Justice must be grounded in capabilities, not preferences. Democracy must shift from procedural formalism to lived political self-efficacy. Institutions must be reconstructed to embed care, vulnerability, and compassion as active principles. And global justice must confront the epistemic imperialism that has long confined our political imaginaries.

The path forward is not linear. There will be resistance – from within institutions, from the logic of capital, from within us. But responsibility, once understood as the relation between fragments, is not a burden we carry alone. It is a shared commitment to believing justice is possible and honoring the urge to do something about it.

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