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POLITICS OF DIGNITY

Structural Justice for Collective Healing and Global Flourishing

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Humanity today is confronted with crises across multiple domains, not least political instability, violent international conflicts, ecological degradation, mass migration, social divisiveness, racialized inequality, and a sense of despair and ill-being among youth. For some, these crises can be explained by a Hobbesian diagnosis of human nature as being solitary and selfish, leading to power-thirsty politics and a perpetual war of all against all. For others, however, these crises are rooted in a complex, interconnected web of causes, including the structural and temporal accumulation of harms through continued legacies of inhumanity, the social and cultural adaptation to unexamined narratives, and the compounding of unmediated or unresolved grievances. Hence, the result is massive alienation under systemic decline.

This chapter draws on the latter analysis. In particular, it explores the structural, temporal, and cultural interwovenness of our global systems. In doing so, it offers an understanding of the ethical framework necessary for designing a just system that advocates for the dignity of life, enriches the relational nature of our well-being, and advances the temporal continuity of flourishing.

Understanding Structural Injustice

We live in an unjust world. We can clearly observe unfairness in the plight of some and the privilege of others, yet we cannot always identify precisely what has produced these disparate situations. These patterns of disadvantage and deprivation persist across entire societies, and indeed globally, irrespective of individual attitudes or actions. Unlike *overt* forms

of discrimination that hinge upon explicit personal biases, systemic and entrenched inequalities are maintained through structural injustice.

Structural injustice can be a contentious concept. For thinkers such as Iris Marion Young, structural injustice is effectively a set of “collective unintended consequences” that directly affects the opportunities available to different groups. More specifically, Young argues that structural injustice exists:

[A]s a consequence of many individuals and institutions acting to pursue their particular goals and interests, for the most part within the limits of accepted rules and norms ... when social processes put large groups under systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities, at the same time that these processes enable others to dominate or to have a wide range of opportunities for developing and exercising capacities available to them.

(Young, 2011, p. 52)

For others, the injustice is not “unintended consequences”, but the historically accumulated forms of discrimination, enduring harms, embedded prejudices, institutionalized oppression, and systematically reproduced inequalities that are embedded within institutions and practices (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Nuti, 2019; Wilkerson, 2020). Even for Young herself, despite her framing structural justice around “unintended consequences”, she acknowledges injustice to be deeply embedded within historical and institutional practices. She argues that structural injustice persists precisely because institutions, norms, and cultural assumptions systematically reproduce disparities over time, even without explicit malicious intent.

In Western philosophy, understandings of lives within structural injustice tend to hinge on how structure is defined and expressed. For instance, for Félix Guattari (1972), *structure* refers to the contingent and historically specific arrangements that arise from the productive force of “machines”. He differentiates structure from machine, stating that “a machine is inseparable from its structural articulations and, conversely, that each contingent structure is dominated ... by a system of machines” (Guattari, 2015, p. 318). Structures are characterized by the relationships and exchanges between elements within a given system, whereas machines are the repetitive and productive forces that generate these structures. The machine metaphor is employed to show how institutions, rather than remaining static or purely top-down, dynamically embed a broader structural logic, in particular, the “axiomatic” of unfettered capital

accumulation. In these machinic processes (sometimes called “desiring-machines”), human work, creativity, and activism are channelled into capitalism’s fluid cycles of production.

Guattari sees structures as the organized and relational outcomes of underlying machinic processes, which are historically contingent. This intersection between the economy of desire and the economy of politics underscores that systematic inequalities do not result solely from intentional oppression but from the continual re-coding of social, cultural, and economic spheres by capitalist imperatives. Gilles Deleuze joins Guattari to expand on this in a postmodern context by describing how deterritorialization and reterritorialization enable the capitalist “machine” to permeate every barrier, encoding our desires, perceptions, and social relations (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980). No longer a clearly centralized or hierarchical apparatus, the machine takes shape as an enmeshed and distributed network in which transnational corporations, global finance, and international labour forces perpetuate exploitation and stratification, often with little overt coordination. Through this lens, structural injustice endures because the machine flexibly integrates or reterritorializes attempts at resistance, ultimately harnessing personal aspirations and institutional reforms back into its endless pursuit of capital accumulation.

The integration of structure and machine effectively demonstrates how structural arrangements preconfigure relationships and interactions across multiple levels: among systems, institutions, organizations, groups, individuals, and even between humans and other beings in nature. Within this interconnected “machine”, interlocking rules, norms, resource flows, and distributions, as well as cultural assumptions, narratives, and identities, mutually reinforce each other to sustain the structure itself. For instance, at the macro level, the legal apparatus – such as laws and tax codes – is translated into institutional norms and policies at the meso level (e.g., HR guidelines, administrative protocols), ultimately shaping experiences at the micro level, where individuals (e.g., a single mother of colour), families (e.g., migrant families), and groups (e.g., Indigenous peoples) encounter these systemic forces in everyday life. Through these mutually reinforcing interactions, structural injustice systematically privileges certain groups while oppressing and marginalizing others.

There are other metaphors to describe structural injustice. For example, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Isabel Wilkerson employs the metaphor of an *old house* to conceptualize the global systems within which we exist, by which our lives are shaped, according to which our relationships are defined, and through which our flourishing is determined. She describes our experiences living in an old house as follows:

When people live in an old house, they come to adjust to the idiosyncrasies and outright dangers skulking in an old structure. They put buckets under a wet ceiling, prop up groaning floors, learn to step over that rotting wood tread in the staircase. The awkward becomes acceptable, and the unacceptable becomes merely inconvenient. Live with it long enough, and the unthinkable becomes normal. Exposed over the generations, we learn to believe that the incomprehensible is the way that life is supposed to be.

(Wilkerson, 2020, p. 16)

Together, these metaphors can vividly capture how structural injustice operates and becomes entrenched through several constituting characteristics, which I shall elaborate below.

Structural Injustice Is Historical

Much of today's inequality has emerged from structural injustice in the past, not least slavery, colonial exploitation, gender oppression, land dispossession, violent conflicts, and wars. These dehumanizing legacies have been carried forward through institutions established during those periods (e.g., racial capitalism, property laws, geopolitical borders) and continue to shape contemporary systems at local, national, and global levels. Alasia Nuti's 2019 book, *Injustice and the Reproduction of History*, highlights that slavery and colonialism should not be treated as mere events of the past; rather, they continue to affect present-day institutions and social relations, with contemporary racism rooted in slavery and gender-based inequalities rooted in colonialism. These legacies are "reproduced over time through different means" (Nuti, 2019, p. 4), such as ongoing norms, policies, social attitudes, and everyday practices.

The historical structural injustice of transatlantic slavery has left enduring legacies. Despite globally pronounced abolition, slavery's institutional frameworks, cultural norms, and legal precedents have become embedded in subsequent systems, thereby extending oppressive effects across generations. For instance, in the United States, after the formal end of slavery (e.g., with the Thirteenth Amendment), laws and policies often replicated or rebranded forced labour conditions. Over decades, explicitly racist policies in housing (e.g., redlining,¹), education (segregated schools), and employment (de facto discrimination) reproduced key inequalities reminiscent of enslavement, such as lack of property rights, poor wages, and restricted mobility. Slavery depended on ideologies that dehumanized enslaved persons, with traces of these attitudes woven into cultural norms (stereotypes, biases), shaping how formerly enslaved populations and their descendants have been perceived, policed, and governed. Such demonizing

stereotypes did not suddenly vanish with emancipation; they carried over into educational systems, popular culture, and law enforcement practices, sustaining structural inequalities through implicit bias, school segregation, or selective policing.

Slavery thus epitomizes how historical wrongdoing can become baked into subsequent institutions. Once these institutions are in place, whether in housing, labour, or law enforcement, they create feedback loops that reinforce disadvantage for historically oppressed groups, as we will explore later. In short, the example of slavery demonstrates how structural injustice can persist long after the original legal institution has ended. The systems, norms, and economic structures that evolved around slavery adapt and reappear in new guises, maintaining inequalities that reflect the original injustice but are more difficult to identify and uproot, hence illustrating the ongoing nature of structural injustice.

In a similar pattern, colonialism's relics are visible in many parts of the world. In South Africa, building on earlier colonial laws, the apartheid regime (1948–1994) enforced a caste-like social structure. Despite the formal end of apartheid, stark inequalities have endured: Black South Africans often reside in underdeveloped townships, experience disproportionately high unemployment, and have limited access to quality education, healthcare, and decent housing. The lingering concentration of land and business ownership among the white minority underscores how historical policies create persistent structural barriers. Likewise, in South America, Spanish and Portuguese colonial governance distributed enormous tracts of land to conquistadors, the church, and other favoured elites, establishing the foundation for lasting inequalities in land ownership. Today, rural poverty and deep-seated power disparities persist, with small-scale farmers struggling against agribusiness giants. Such inequitable distribution of land undermines local food security and fuels rural-urban migration, slum expansion, and continued economic inequality.

Structural injustice has also resulted in gender inequality. Nuti (2019) shows that laws, workplace norms, and caregiving roles established historically have continued to impose systematic obstacles for women, even in societies that appear formally egalitarian. Under structural injustice, when gender intersects with race, class, and other axes of identity, there are further compounding historically produced disadvantages. By focusing on gender, Nuti clarifies how seemingly “neutral” contemporary institutions can preserve entrenched power differentials that originated in earlier eras.

Indeed, as Wilkerson emphasizes, the past is not merely what has passed; history remains deeply present, shaping systemic features that privilege certain groups while disadvantaging others. Historical structural

injustice leaves decaying systems, which time does not heal but instead conceals. Thus, Wilkerson poignantly observes, “here we are, the current occupants of a property with stress cracks and bowed walls and fissures built into the foundation. We are the heirs to whatever is right or wrong with it” (Wilkerson, 2020, p. 16).

Structural Injustice Evades Blame and Responsibility

Often invisible to those who inhabit an unjust society, individuals are seldom aware of how their lives have been defined by structural forces. For example, an African American is likely to frequently encounter intersecting educational, economic, health, employment, and political disadvantages. Similarly, Black Americans are incarcerated at more than five times the rate of white Americans (Prison Policy Initiative). At an individual level, injustice is rarely directly traceable to the discrimination carried out by specific persons. Nonetheless, Black Americans, alongside people of Indigenous descent and other people of colour, continuously experience racialized prejudices. Many might acknowledge that some societies are fundamentally racist, yet few can clearly pinpoint specific culprits of structural racism, let alone racism’s historical roots, e.g., slavery and colonialism. As Wilkerson highlights, structural injustice leads to society regarding it as “normal” or even “acceptable” for some parts of society to struggle, ignoring the historical root of racism.

Within everyday rationality, those born into social advantage may not recognize or acknowledge their privileges and may easily dismiss responsibility for structural inequalities: “It is not my fault these people are poor and live in desolation. I did not create the situation. I have already donated some money to help the homeless. What else can I possibly do?” Those who suffer under unjust systems may internalize their fate, believing that thriving like others is not possible. Thus, structural conditions serve as a breeding ground for ignorance, if not complicity, through which people can unconsciously perpetuate structural injustice.

At the same time, the apparent lack of individual blameworthiness clashes with a collective need for moral indignation aimed at naming wrongdoing explicitly. Indeed, moral anger is necessarily directed at identifiable individuals, groups, or institutions deemed culpable. David Estlund (2024), in his article, *What’s Unjust About Structural Injustice?*, captures this tension compellingly.

Other theorists diverge. For instance, according to critical race theory, systems and institutions may exhibit racism without requiring explicit racist intent from participants. By contrast, Iris Marion Young argues that people collectively share responsibility for addressing structural injustice, even if no one is individually blameworthy. Young (2011)

further maintains that certain agents, such as corporations or states, bear heightened accountability and moral responsibilities, as evidenced in sweatshop labour practice where workers are made vulnerable by structural injustice.

Maeve McKeown (2024) applies a typology of three kinds of structural injustice to clarify who should be held accountable and have moral responsibility: 1) pure structural injustice obscures the identifiable perpetrator owing to the compounded actions resulting in seemingly non-blameworthiness; 2) avoidable structural injustice can be traced to agents in positions of power who are culpable for unjust structures, such as large global fashion brands that could end child labour. By evading responsibility, such actors commit 3) deliberate structural injustice for the sake of self-interest and profits.

These tensions highlight the complexity of showing that structural justice is “unjust”, as it is omnipresent yet absent of specific culprits.

Structural Injustice Is Self-Reinforcing

Structural injustice is perpetuated through interlocking social, economic, and political processes and institutional practices. Take education as an example. In the United Kingdom, councils draw catchment boundaries where desirable schools and affluent neighbourhoods mutually reinforce one another. High-performing schools typically select students based on test scores, which correlate strongly with family income and social status. Because they admit more socioeconomically advantaged students, these selective schools achieve better test results than inclusive schools, and thus climb to higher positions in national league tables. Families with resources have the means to relocate to catchment areas known for stronger schools, providing the relevant councils with additional property tax revenue and philanthropic contributions. In turn, these flows raise the schools’ performances and prestige. Conversely, students in poorer catchment areas often find themselves in schools with fewer educational resources, limited extracurricular support, higher teacher turnover, and lower expectations for achievement. Such schools tend to disproportionately enrol students from low-income families, racial and ethnic minorities, and those facing social instability, such as refugees or migrants.

In this manner, educational reinforcement is achieved through neo-liberal economic values, property laws, discriminatory social policies, cultural imperialism, etc., all of which marginalize, alienate, and exploit those already sabotaged by structural injustice (Young, 1990). In a similar vein, institutional practices create cyclical patterns of injustice. For instance, in the poor catchment areas, limited access to loans means fewer

businesses, which leads to fewer jobs and lower tax revenues, thereby perpetuating inadequate public services and further entrenching poverty.

Institutions also reinforce structural injustice by imposing narratives and ideologies that normalize biases, discrimination, and oppression. Artefacts such as language, discourse, symbolism – e.g., qualification, diploma – and other material components form an integral part of the structural reinforcement. Sally Haslanger terms these material elements “cultural technē”, further distinguishing between two broad types: 1) concepts, attitudes, and dispositions by which individuals coordinate information and action; and 2) tangible resources of value such as arable land, clean water, and implicit knowledge or know-how, all essential for social interaction (Haslanger, 2016).

Cultural technē, as material elements within societal structures, can either sustain injustice or become tools of resistance. Consider a recent example: *The New York Times* identified certain words deliberately excluded from the discourse of the 2025 US administration, such as LGBTQ, non-binary, Black, Latinx, Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), and transgender (Yourish et al., 2025). These omitted concepts would otherwise have directed our attention to diverse identities, shed light on implicit and unconscious biases, emphasized societal goods (clean energy, community, and diversity), and suggested paths towards achieving these ideals (activism, anti-racism, cultural sensitivity, and equal opportunity). The presence or absence of these words profoundly influences society’s ability to resist structural injustice and advance a more equitable social order, a dimension explored further in the next section of this chapter.

Structural Injustice Defines Relationships in the Society

In shaping the relationships among systems, institutions, communities, and groups, structural injustice determines power dynamics and relational patterns within a society. These dynamics and patterns emerge in the fundamental ways societies are organized, through laws, policies, cultural norms, and resource allocations, which establish where individuals and groups are situated within existing social hierarchies. Such structural organization profoundly influences how institutions relate to one another, how people relate to institutions, and how individuals interact with one another.

Institutions, reinforced by their own designs, processes, and practices, perpetuate relational imbalance by reproducing uneven social relations. These institutions range in scale from intimate entities such as marriages, families, schools, and refugee detention centres to expansive structures such as national employment bureaus, states, international organizations, and transnational corporations. Institutional practices, embodied and

enacted by societal actors, thus become integrated into the mechanisms for reproducing social inequalities.

In these myriad ways, structural injustice arranges people into social groups, each placed advantageously or disadvantageously relative to one another. Such social positions shape human interactions, even across generations. Individuals born into specific social strata often internalize messages about their own value, trustworthiness, knowledge, and credibility, especially when compared to more privileged groups. Put differently, structural conditions dictate what and who is deemed valuable and regulate how and by whom the valued outcomes are pursued. Wilkerson's metaphor of navigating around structural cracks and idiosyncrasies poignantly captures this lived experience.

A more subtle aspect of structural relational imbalance is captured by Miranda Fricker's concept of epistemic injustice, defined as a distinctive type of injustice where a wrong is done to people in their capacity as knowers (Fricker, 2009). Individuals occupying certain social positions may find their voices dismissed or disregarded due to entrenched credibility biases. Fricker also describes *testimonial* injustice, whereby the accounts of certain groups, such as persons of colour, women, or non-citizens, are systematically deemed less credible as sources of knowledge. This is often observed in courts or public forums. Parallel to testimonial injustice is what Fricker refers to as *hermeneutical* injustice, in which the relative powerlessness of social groups leads to gaps in collective understanding. Fricker illustrates this with the discrimination against homosexuality, which prevented many from recognizing homosexual desire as a legitimate orientation. In such cases, marginalized groups cannot fully contribute to shared social meanings, resulting in a distorted or incomplete collective knowledge. Thus, epistemic injustice emerges from structurally defined relational imbalances, where certain voices – e.g., those of white, middle-class men – are prioritized as inherently more credible, while those of others – especially ethnic minorities or working-class women speaking about exploitation through sweatshop labour – are silenced. Epistemic injustice, therefore, constitutes an ethical dimension of structural injustice that has profound implications for societal relationships and power dynamics.

Recognizing the relational dimension of structural injustice requires understanding how every layer of social life, from macro-level policies to daily customs, interacts to produce (and often conceal) power imbalances in each encounter. Institutions do not simply allocate resources; they structure interactions among individuals and groups, setting conditions and shaping assumptions about authority, belonging, and legitimacy (Haslanger, 2012). Consequently, relational dynamics, from who trusts

or fears the police to who can change schools or jobs, are inseparable from structural factors. By recognizing and naming these institutionalized pathways, we gain deeper insight into why inequalities persist and how re-imagining these structures can foster more equitable social relations.

Structural Injustice Generates Compound Harm

Harms of structural injustice affect all members of society. As already noted, the harm of structural justice cannot be traced to a set of wrongs caused directly by individual actions or the specific unfair policies or practices of a particular institution. This understanding highlights that structural damage is diffuse. As Wolff (2024) summarizes, the harms of structural injustice lie in the fact that they systematically threaten or deprive certain groups, often those already disadvantaged, of important opportunities or critical resources. This goes beyond accidental or unfortunate events or outcomes, constituting a moral harm precisely because it entrenches and exacerbates vulnerabilities (e.g., racist housing markets, inequitable labour conditions).

The harm caused by structural injustice is necessarily multidimensional, damaging people materially, psycho-emotionally, and socially and relationally, and impacting on identity. It can even cause profound damage in the spiritual realm. The harm is experienced transgenerationally. It equally impacts the ecological integrity of our entire planet. Yet, harm can be an elusive notion in the context of structural injustice, because contemporary conceptions of harm tend to orient solely towards what is quantifiable or measurable, e.g., loss of earnings or property damage (Thomson, 2025), or clinically diagnosable, e.g., damage to bodies or mental health issues. Such conceptions overlook deeper forms of the harm, such as the traumatizing experience of separation, alienation, or cultural rupture, and intergenerational disruption, which are impossible to quantify. When harms are not countable, they are not counted and they are ignored (Bailey et al., 2017).

Harm at the spiritual level offers a telling illustration. While rarely acknowledged in Western philosophical discourse, many non-European traditions treat life as inherently spiritual. Spirituality implies that historical inhumanity can produce lingering wounds across generations, thereby constraining both collective and personal futures (Gill, 2025). In a moving article by Afua Hirsch (2020) for the *Guardian* newspaper, “The Injustice of Slavery Is Not Over: The Graves of the Enslaved Are Still Being Desecrated”, she shows how the violent deaths and utter disrespect for enslaved Africans’ remains constitute enduring harm. Hirsch notes:

These discoveries are particularly egregious from an African perspective. In so many cultures across the continent, the only thing worse than being abused in life is being abused in death – without proper burial rites or the dignity befitting of ancestors.

(Hirsch, 2020)

This underscores how the harm of structural injustice has indeed multiple dimensions, including spiritual and temporal dimensions, as spiritual and historical wounds and trauma can echo across generations.

Those who benefit from structural arrangements may see themselves as powerful beneficiaries, while those deprived by these structures experience vulnerability and victimization. But can the experiences of the privileged also be considered harmful? One useful approach to considering this is through the lens of well-being. In earlier work that I have undertaken with Garrett Thomson and Ivor Goodson, we maintain that well-being is relational, involving the richness of living a good life, such as the joy and delight of being together in community and society (Thomson et al., 2021). Where some parts of the society are made vulnerable, being oppressed, or alienated by structural injustice, it comprises a harm to everyone's well-being. As already suggested, well-being is inherently relational; no individual or group can genuinely thrive by perpetuating or ignoring the suffering and hardship of others. Indeed, beyond imposing barriers to relational flourishing, structural injustice contradicts the essence of living in a society that requires equal respect and caring for all. In other words, the good life demands relational equity and inclusive well-being. Deep social divisiveness undermines the prerequisites for mutual flourishing, vividly illustrating how structural injustice generates *compound harm* that touches every layer of communal existence.

In sum, the above analysis effectively weaves together several key dimensions of structural injustice, historical continuity, diffuse culpability, self-reinforcing cycles, relational patterns, and compound harm. Although each section is discussed as if distinct, these are in effect overlapping aspects of systemic inequality, penetrating into the very fabric of social life. Disparities become normalized, almost as if inevitable. Furthermore, institutions historically shaped by discriminatory policies (e.g., colonial administrations, racially segregated housing) often continue operating along similar lines, with so-called “race-neutral” or “class-neutral” updates that fail to truly dismantle underlying biases.

Structural injustice is based on interlocking social *architectural tectonics*, and it can feel impossible to know where to start with the reform. For example, policing and prison practices cannot be changed without also tackling other complementary structural components, such as gun laws, employment laws, neighbourhood policy, public health, education, and gender-based policies. Even though incremental tweaks are introduced, without addressing the root causes of inequality, systemic transformation remains out of reach. Moreover, entrenched interests often have the power to resist or dilute reforms. Such interlocking systems are dynamic rather than static. This means that while institutions may shift or adapt to new conditions, they reconfigure (but still uphold) inequality, indicating that partial *fixes* cannot easily uproot injustice.

Resisting and Responding to Structural Injustice

Having identified the key dimensions through which structural injustice perpetuates historical harms and reproduces inequalities, this chapter now considers possibilities for resisting and responding effectively. While traditional frameworks of accountability, centred on direct culpability and individual responsibility, may seem inadequate given the diffuse and systemic nature of structural injustice, it remains crucial to explore how institutions and individuals can nonetheless challenge and mitigate such pervasive harms. This section examines two interrelated pathways for resistance and response: institutional accountability, which interrogates how institutions can recognize their complicity in perpetuating injustice and transform accordingly; and personal and collective responsibility, emphasizing the ethical duties borne by individuals and communities to critique, challenge, and actively seek the transformation of unjust structures. Together, these pathways offer the potential to resist ongoing injustices and lay the groundwork for deeper, systemic change.

Accountability

Typically, accounts of moral wrongdoing involve two parties: a *perpetrator* who commits an identifiable harm against a *victim*. The standard approach is that the victim seeks an apology, compensation, and redress, and the legal system punishes the perpetrator once deemed culpable or held accountable for the wrongdoing. However, as shown in the previous section, within structural injustice, this model of accountability for the harmful effects of the current systems has its limits.

As already discussed, a recurring theme of structural injustice is that there are no easily identifiable institutions or agents who can be solely blamed for structural injustice. Rather, injustice is at a systemic level,

involving historical legacies, the present reproduction of structures, and the self-reinforcing mechanisms. When harm isn't directly traceable to agents, traditional models of accountability (e.g., victim–perpetrator frameworks, legal punishment/redress for identifiable wrongdoing) often fail to address institutional culpability. In this case, accountability becomes murky because the system's rules themselves might be biased or exploitative, yet appear “legitimate” from within. This requires a different conception of institutional accountability that is not confined within the victim–perpetrator model. Instead, institutions should bear heightened moral accountability due to their power to enact large-scale changes.

Institutional accountability tends to be framed as corporate moral accountability (CMA). However, Rönnegard (2024) questions the notion of CMA and claims that it is built upon false assumptions and is therefore a fallacy. He analyzes that CMA implies that a corporation should be morally responsible for its actions and that such responsibility is distinct from that of its human members. Although set apart from human responsibility, in this context, the corporation is conceived of as if a person who has intention, is aware of its action, and is therefore a moral agent. According to Rönnegard:

[A] corporation cannot be said to have intentions by virtue of the intentions of its members. A corporation must be able to form its own intentions to satisfy the autonomy condition. Only then can the corporation be morally responsible in a manner that is distinct from its members.

(Rönnegard, 2024, p. 33)

This requirement is impossible to fulfil purely because any given decision that a corporation makes will involve one or more human beings who are corporate members. A corporation thus cannot be a moral agent independent of humans as moral agents. That corporations can hold themselves to be morally accountable is seemingly, therefore, an illusion. So the next question is: can a corporation be considered legally accountable through frameworks involving laws, procedures of checks and balances, and the reinforcement of such frameworks? Rönnegard is moderately optimistic about this prospect, and confirms that when elected representatives legislate the norms of acceptable corporate behaviour, “we can hold corporate legal entities legally accountable” (Rönnegard, 2024, p. 35).

To take this argument further, under an overarching unjust global architecture, i.e., one with a competitive environment designed to pursue wealth and material profit, for a corporation to be legally accountable

for resisting the moral wrongs of inequalities and injustice is overly ambitious, if not totally naïve. So long as a corporation seeks to serve its shareholders' interests, premised to be minimizing costs and maximizing gains, anticipating its capacity to act as if an agent with moral conscience will not be realistic. Nevertheless, the attributability remains valid for some corporations, institutions, and agencies to be held accountable for their role in perpetuating injustice, such as climate change (e.g., large fossil fuel producers) and sweatshop labour (e.g., fast fashion chains), despite the limited scope for corporation accountability.

This limitation might be overcome through Young's alternative approach, where accountability is reframed not in terms of blame but of reflective ethical engagement. Young (2011) suggests moving away from "who is at fault?" towards an ethical duty of institutions to examine, critique, and modify how their established policies, resource allocations, discourses, and practices systematically produce harm. This ethical accountability acknowledges institutions' embeddedness within unjust structures and thus emphasizes ongoing reflection, inclusive participation, and proactive responsibility for systemic change.

Institutional accountability thus conceived involves internal approaches, such as collaborative self-reflection, inclusive listening, participatory innovation, ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and learning, and a willingness to identify symptoms of structural injustice. Such a participatory process-driven approach may catalyze internal accountability mechanisms (e.g., creating ethics boards with real power to question decisions, implementing transparency protocols, ensuring that often marginalized voices are included, and tracking outcomes) and invite collective commitments to non-discrimination and communal well-being.

While corporations might resist ethical accountability due to shareholder imperatives, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or governmental agencies potentially offer more adaptable accountability models because their missions can explicitly foreground ethical commitments. Let's look at an example. Institutions and nations built upon past profits accumulated over time tend to be in a position of power to further benefit from the structurally designated advantages. For such institutions and government agencies, moral accountability must involve acknowledging past wounds and enduring harm, recognizing the traumatic effects that have been lived by successive generations of victims, rectifying demonizing narratives, and actively creating conditions for equal access to resources and opportunities. To these ends, global initiatives such as the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Reparations Commission, the Māori community's Grounded Accountability, and the Canadian government's agreement to heal the wounds inflicted upon communities of First Nations all

point to the important understanding that past, present, and future sit on a continuum, and moral accountability is beyond merely paying back the debt owed. Instead, moral accountability engages institutions, government agencies, and corporations in futures-forming approaches. Examples can be found in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Independent Assessment Process, equitable public health, collective healing, inclusive education, and many other forms of proactive engagement in improving institutional and societal conditions towards equality and fairness.

In undertaking accountability in this way, institutions and agencies may leverage reform to existing systemic norms, thus bearing truly *heightened* accountability not only to self-evaluate but also to engage with external demands for justice. For instance, mandatory reporting (e.g., gender/racial pay gap disclosures, environmental impact statements) can foster an external check on how institutional decisions perpetuate or alleviate structural injustice. Accordingly, corporations and public bodies must collaborate on solutions that ameliorate the symptoms of structural injustice by introducing living wages, robust safety nets, and equitable funding formulas. This could involve joining in wider concerted efforts towards shared accountability. For example, institutions and agencies can invite civil society organizations, think tanks, or citizen committees to evaluate institutional impacts, expose systematic harm or racism, and propose remedial measures to mitigate some harm.

Incremental reforms have provided partial progress, including immediate accountability paths (public scrutiny, corporate responsibilities, legislative reforms), and have helped reduce harm, shining a light on institutional complicity in structural injustice. In the long term, the goal is to forge institutions that align with a just society's moral imagination, thereby reducing the need for reactive accountability by preventing oppressive dynamics from arising in the first place. As exemplified in Scandinavian countries, social policies, including restorative justice, renewable energy, inclusive education, incorporating immigrants, and validating ethnic and racial diversity, can shift a society towards being more just and more egalitarian (Lakey, 2016). However, institutional accountability is inevitably constrained by entrenched power dynamics and profit-driven interests. This means that powerful institutions will always have excuses, manipulate accountability measures, or dilute reforms that threaten profits or disrupt established hierarchies.

This inertia demonstrates why institutional accountability can be slow or stifled, further necessitating external pressure and oversight, and ultimately a deeper structural redesign that aligns institutional practices with just principles and equitable societal ends.

Responsibilities

One insight drawn from the previous discussion is that meaningful accountability requires consistent personal responsibility and sustained collective action. Indeed, people have a moral duty to fellow human beings and other beings, and, therefore, we all have the ethical responsibility to critique, challenge, and right the wrongs. According to Simone Weil, our duty and obligation to each other can sustain the vibrancy of a political community, rather than the claim to, demand for, and defence against rights. For Weil, an “indispensable” human need involves taking initiative and exercising responsibility for each other’s well-being and for the greater good in the world. This is, in part, our eternal unconditional duty of care that can serve as the foundation for shared common life. The good at which the caring is directed is “unique, unchanging and identical with itself for every man, from the cradle to the grave” (Weil, 1952/2002, p. 10). It is therefore applicable to all, but without the paternalistic tone. The responsibility for each other arises in the “depths of our being”, and no one should suffer from hunger as long as there is someone who can help. Singer (2009) echoes this view and highlights that no child should be left unsaved when one can help.

Young’s (2011) *social connection model* is rooted in the belief that everyone entwined in structural processes has the responsibility to remedy them. This is a shift from accountability to *political responsibility*, which is a forward-looking conception of responsibility that entails collective action. This perspective is echoed by Sardo (2022), who builds upon Nietzsche’s concept of agency and ethical responsibility as inherently non-sovereign, suggesting that our agency and our responsibility do not reside in autonomous, isolated individuals but are normatively conceived, socially distributed, and historically conditioned. Responsibility, accordingly, cannot rely solely on personal choices or decisions. Instead, it must reflect awareness of the broader social and historical conditions that shape agency and responsibility. The interconnectedness of all actors within societal structures determines that responsibility cannot be reduced to personal accountability alone but must encompass collective responsibility for preserving and transforming the social conditions conducive to human flourishing.

Personal responsibility should not be viewed as isolated moral acts but as essential contributions to broader collective efforts. Such efforts thrive only when the ethical duty of care informs collective commitment to justice. These conceptions point to the integration of personal and collective responsibility.

Typically, those who benefit from privileges, such as wealthier groups in affluent communities or the global elite who gain economically,

socially, and politically from unequal resource distributions, carry greater personal responsibility. Such responsibility involves not only recognizing their advantageous positions in society, acknowledging their (implicit or unconscious) complicity in the unequal processes and practices, but also actively challenging unjust systems. Ethical responsibility for the elite moves beyond mere guilt or blameworthiness, which is predominantly moralistic. Instead, it serves as a call to action, urging each participant to reflect on their role within the wider social reproduction of power imbalance and inequality, and to contribute towards transformative change.

There is a question, however, in terms of whether those who are oppressed and discriminated against within an unjust system should also be called upon to take ethical responsibility for addressing systemic inequality. Young's response to this question is clear: victims who suffer due to structural injustice also bear the ethical responsibility of "naming" the system and its ills because it "is they who know the most about the harms they suffer, and thus it is up to them, though not them alone, to broadcast their situation and call it injustice" (Young, 2011, p. 146). For Jugov and Ypi (2019), the political responsibility of the oppressed is essential to challenging structural injustice. They believe that people who are most impacted by systems of oppression are more "epistemically aware" of the unjust conditions, their structural and historical nature, and how institutions are designed to disempower them as a social group. Therefore, both the elite and the oppressed bear personal responsibility for resisting the tendencies of structural injustice.

For the elite, there are many ways to act on their ethical responsibility, such as advocating for the fair redistribution of resources, investing in historically marginalized communities, sharing personal wealth, and providing funding for community programmes. Those who are in positions of power can publicly speak against discriminatory policies, amplify silenced voices, and draw attention to stories of systemic injustice. Ethical responsibility for the elite also lies in how they consciously divest from industries or companies implicated in perpetuating structural harm. This may mean divesting from fossil fuels, militarization, private prisons, or companies reliant on exploitative sweatshop labour practices.

For the oppressed, they can speak up about experiences of living under structural injustice, critically challenge discriminative narratives, actively reject stereotypes, and affirm inherent dignity. Within the communities of the oppressed, intergenerational dialogue is key to enabling younger generations to recognize historical structural injustice and patterns of oppression and inequality. In doing so, there can be renewed awareness

and appreciation of intergenerational strengths in resisting structural injustice, which will enhance resilience in rejecting complicity.

However, to foster ethical responsibility from all stakeholders, personal efforts are important but not enough – collective political action is also needed. According to Young (2011, p. 153),

Such collective action is difficult. It requires organization, the will to cooperate on the part of many diverse actors, significant knowledge of how the actions of individuals and the rules and purposes of institutions conspire to produce injustice, and the ability to foresee the likely consequences of proposed remedies. One or more of these conditions is often absent.

To fulfil collective responsibility, Paulo Freire's notion of "naming the world" proves particularly powerful. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he writes:

To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming. Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection.

(Freire, 1970, p. 88)

By "naming" structural injustice explicitly, people can begin the crucial step towards transformative self-awareness and active ethical responsibility. Accordingly, when people can come together to name the world's problem, i.e., structural injustice, and recognize its myriad historical woundedness and enduring harm, they will also question the fundamental logic (e.g., unlimited capital accumulation, entrenched property laws) upon which institutions are built. Naming can also be connected to "creating conceptual and practical connections that generate new options (and new constraints) for agency" (Haslanger, 2023, p. 58).

Through naming the world, collective action, while demanding, is not impossible to engender transformative change. Grassroots movements such as the Civil Rights Movement, Indigenous land rights activism (e.g., Standing Rock protests), global climate strikes, and the Wellbeing Economy Alliance exemplify how people from all backgrounds and all positions in society can come together and take shared responsibility through organized collective socio-political action. Inspirational stories that have long-lasting impact include the Singing Revolution in the Balkans to resist repression and colonization (1987–1991), the "Sorry Day" march in Australia to promote Indigenous people's rights and

solidarity (inaugurated on 26 May 1998), the Hope in the Cities initiative across the United States to build trust, heal history, and resist racialized discrimination, and the UNESCO Collective Healing Initiative involving communities in 14 countries across four continents.

Naming, in the contexts of Indigenous communities' efforts towards epistemic emancipation, is the first step for many marginalized people to co-create platforms for sharing knowledge, promoting intergenerational and cultural wisdom that challenge harmful stereotypes and biases, and educating self and elite allies about structural injustices. Community centre activities, new narratives through social media and podcasts, or public forums are public spaces for naming systemic equality and fostering a new consciousness of the interconnections between structures, systems, institutions, groups, communities, and people. Dialogues and collaborative projects can bring the privileged and the marginalized into coordinated collective action to confront difficult histories and legacies of oppression.

While accountability and responsibility can, at best, *repair* or *improve* existing social conditions and institutional practices, the limitations of “fixing” inherently flawed systems highlight the need for a more radical restructuring. These strategies to resist and respond do not reach the core of structural injustice because they are intended to address the ills of existing structural design. While remedying the systemic malaise, we must set aside time and space for transformative initiatives beyond mere reform, resistance, and resilience. This requires reshaping the underlying ethical pillars for the architecture of a new *house*, aiming towards a just society where the dignity in the well-being of all persons in harmony with ecological integrity must be the primary focus of politics.

Politics of Dignity

To co-create a just society, institutions, organizations, and communities must collaboratively reimagine political structures, institutional processes, policies, and practices. As established earlier in this chapter, a structure comprises “the ways in which relevant institutions are systematically organized in relation to each other, as defined by a set of principles” (Thomson & Gill, 2024, p. 22). Given the five dimensions of structural injustice explored previously, envisioning a political project capable of transcending current impasses demands nothing less than a comprehensive *reset* that clearly articulates foundational principles for structural justice and a truly just society. These principles are of paramount importance

because they can define what our society ought to value, clarify the shared goals it should strive towards, and guide institutions and communities in working harmoniously to achieve collective flourishing.

In other words, the next step is to envision a “new house” founded upon ethical pillars to redefine the desirable societal architecture. This move from *mere reform* towards a deeper systemic redefinition signals the transition from a focus on patching structural injustices to creating systems designed to align with justice at every level. As argued elsewhere (Thomson & Gill, 2024), to imagine systemic transformation, we must start from evaluative claims about what is better and in what ways. Such a project requires a clear and thorough understanding of the normative basis of structural justice, which will serve as the design principles for a new form of society. These principles further provide insights into new approaches, processes, and practices of institutions, as well as the responsibilities of organizations, communities, groups, and individuals.

Dignity at the Heart of Justice

Justice is a perennial concern among thinkers and philosophers, reflected in the myriad conceptions developed within both Western and non-Western philosophical traditions. The diversity in interpretations only highlights the complexity inherent in proposing a universal understanding of the term. Justice emerges as a multifaceted notion, encompassing legal frameworks, virtues, individual freedom and autonomy, modes of distribution and representation, effects of policies or political decisions, and characteristics of social structures and institutional practices.

Central to contemporary debates are contentions between two primary perspectives: one rooted in Western political philosophy that emphasizes the equality of rights-bearing individuals before the law, and the other emerging from non-Western communities, including peoples of African and Indigenous descent, that is grounded in recognizing mutual belongingness and interconnectedness among persons and groups. Despite these differences, what unites these divergent views is the fundamental notion of dignity as the ethical core of justice.

Under the rights-based conception, dignity is prominently enshrined in international charters, declarations, and national constitutions. Despite this prominence, according to Hauke (2023), dignity only becomes evident through its absence, particularly in contexts marked by inequality and violation (Kaufmann et al., 2010). When groups such as sweatshop labourers, people of colour, and people who self-identify as intersectional in their identities are oppressed by structural injustice, they tend to experience emotions such as shame, resentment, indignation, and even outrage.

These are typically prompted by a sense of justice and dignity, at the recognition that justice or dignity has been infringed and disregarded.

In contrast, non-Western conceptions tend to regard human dignity as a relational concept, such as the traditional African Ubuntu ontology. From an Ubuntu perspective, a person is a person through other persons and in communing with others. South African philosopher Thaddeus Metz asked, “who are the others?” The answer he found was that others are those “who in principle are the most capable of communing” (Metz, 2014, p. 315). Being and becoming more fully human through mutual communing is the essence of dignity under Ubuntu. Dignity hinges upon our relational being through mutual identification/recognition and solidarity. Metz explains further that Ubuntu inspires that a person self-identifies as a “we”, or part of a group who does “we” things together, in the example of joint projects of living a common life. Solidarity is our expression of this we-ness, or interrelatedness, through caring for our collective well-being. Ubuntu suggests that no one can thrive alone, and that personal well-being involves relational flourishing.

Bringing these two different vistas of dignity together, despite the conceptual variability, shows that dignity retains a consistent core – the recognition of the equal intrinsic value and inherent worth of every human being, which does not need to be earned and which all humans share. Thus, it is established that human “beings with dignity have the highest non-instrumental value such that they must be treated as having that kind of value” (Metz, 2014, p. 311). As bearers of intrinsic non-instrumental value, in no circumstances should a person be treated as less human (Thomson et al., 2021). Applying this imperative to examine structural injustice, we can see that systems thus denoted fail to uphold the equal respect for all persons and are hence deemed inhumane. Systems of inhumanity egregiously violate and degrade human dignity by commodifying, enslaving, colonizing, dispossessing, discriminating, or demonizing human beings.

Be it a normative conception or a relational understanding, human dignity stands as an essential ethical foundation for a just society. It evokes that human dignity must be constituted in forms of life shared by the communities (Pritchard, 1972). The notion of “forms of life” originates in Wittgenstein’s (1953) *Philosophical Investigations*, in which he proposes that language consists in a multiplicity of “language games” *played* in agreement with people in the context of a linguistic community who are engaging in various non-linguistic activities and practices. Speaking a language and engaging in activities and practices comprise a *form of life*.

Human dignity connotes that forms of life within a just society cannot be conceived as politically naïve nor deployed within the political

apparatus of nation-states under a neoliberal or contractual and legalistic view of justice. Rather, as expounded by Hannah Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, “the world found nothing sacred in the abstract nakedness of being human” (Arendt, 1958, p. 295). Hence, a form of life, as conceived by Wittgenstein, is always located and grounded within a political realm, a community where equal respect for human dignity recognizes that we are *all* members of the ‘political’ community, and we are *all* co-creators of a common world. In other words, human dignity is not granted by authority; it is lived, enacted, and realized in our living an active life together through co-participation in a political community.

Positioning dignity at the core of justice, therefore, requires moving beyond transactional, individualistic, and legalistic conceptions of rights, towards an ethical and relational vision anchored in mutual respect and collective flourishing. This reorientation frames a just society as an inclusive community, whose members collaborate in the political project of pursuing a meaningful life together. Within this context, dignity functions both as a foundational ethical principle and as a transformative practice. Justice is thus not merely an abstract ideal but rather becomes embodied and expressed through collective actions that permeate and shape our shared existence. Institutions, agencies, and organizations play a crucial role in nurturing and sustaining such a vibrant, interconnected political community, actively enabling all persons to live, act, and flourish together.

An Ethical Framework for a Just Society

Pablo Gilabert (2023) proposes a three-dimensional framework essential for articulating a renewed vision to guide political practice. This comprehensive tripartite structure offers useful design principles for establishing the normative ethical foundations necessary for a just society. Gilabert’s three dimensions include: 1) core principles, encompassing both evaluative and prescriptive elements; 2) institutions and social practices that embody these principles; and 3) processes of transformation that enable the actualization of these principles within society.

Below, I will apply this tripartite framework to explore the ethical pillars that underpin a global just society, the design blueprints for the relevant institutions and their practices, and the envisaged processes of engaging the whole society in pursuing common futures together.

In defining the core values foundational to our envisioned just society, two critical evaluative principles rooted in human dignity emerge clearly and may serve as the ethical pillars upon which a just society stands. Firstly, there must be respect for the equal intrinsic worth of all persons. This principle explicitly rejects treating individuals solely as a means

to an end, thus safeguarding against any forms of dehumanization, such as degradation, objectification, discrimination, and exploitation. Integrating intrinsic worth and non-instrumental value in human beings, equal respect for all provides the normative foundation for the common good, which should be central to the processes and practices of social institutions and political communities. Other societal ends, e.g., economic growth, and goods, e.g., social cohesion, are thus derivative, dependent upon recognizing and upholding this fundamental principle of dignity.

Secondly, society must firmly commit to a political objective aimed explicitly at enhancing and enriching human well-being in concert with ecological integrity. This political objective is located in the mutual constitutive-ness of human flourishing and well-being of other beings in nature (also see Chapter 7 of Gill & Thomson, 2019). This dual commitment ensures that the flourishing of individuals and communities aligns harmoniously with environmental sustainability and intergenerational continuity. Human dignity implies that well-being is always primarily normative. It raises essential questions such as “What matters most?” and “How should we live our lives?” (Thomson et al., 2021). Human well-being matters fundamentally because people matter as beings with inherent and non-instrumental value. Hence, both human lives and human well-being become central political objectives for a just society (Thomson & Gill, 2024).

Dignity emphasizes that well-being cannot be static or individualistic; instead, it is holistic, dynamic, and relational. It is holistic because life is multidimensional, and involves (a) the meaningful experiences in our activities and processes; (b) the quality of our awareness and recognition of the non-instrumental values in these experiences; (c) the congenial relationships inherent in our experiences; (e) our self-conscious awareness of our lives as being non-instrumentally valuable, overtime. Finally, our well-being involves (f) a synergy that all is going well at the same time, and along these dimensions (Thomson et al., 2021). Well-being is dynamic because life is continuously lived and realized through diverse personal and shared experiences and communal practices. It is relational because our own flourishing is inherently intertwined with that of others within the broader ecological environment. Seen in this way, nature and ecological systems are never merely instrumental to human interests but are integral to human well-being, reinforcing the imperative to preserve and nurture ecological integrity as part of a dignified collective existence.

These principles are evaluative because they provide the normative criteria for ethical commitments of institutions, policies, and practices within society. By highlighting human dignity as foundational, and the well-being of all as the common good, these evaluative principles serve as

benchmarks against which we gauge how effectively societal structures uphold the intrinsic worth of all individuals and promote shared flourishing. They serve as constant reminders regarding what is right, good, and just in a society, ensuring institutions and policies do not instrumentalize, exploit, or oppress persons but rather respect and nurture their inherent value and flourishing lives in harmony with the thriving of other beings in nature. Thus, these evaluative principles critically inform the ethical direction and objectives that a just society ought to pursue.

With these ethical pillars firmly established, institutions within the envisioned just society must uphold the principle of dignity and advocate for the common good of co-flourishing. This means that they first ought to intentionally foster conditions conducive to the well-being of all, proactively ensuring fair access to resources and equitable opportunities necessary for people to lead a dignified life. Secondly, institutions should cultivate our collective awareness of human dignity and nurture our capacities to pursue personal and communal well-being. By supporting aspirations and practical steps to lead rich and fulfilling lives, institutions can enable all to contribute meaningfully to a just society.

Concerning processes of transformation, it is important that for society to be just, institutions and communities must actively create and sustain spaces that facilitate congenial relational processes fundamental to vibrant public (political) engagement. These processes should build trust, foster respectful dialogue (intercultural, interreligious, intergenerational), deepen mutual understanding, and strengthen collective decision-making. Additionally, transformative processes should ensure the genuine and meaningful participation of all members in the active life of the political community. Such participatory and collaborative involvement can serve ethical, political, and practical purposes, enhancing democratic responsiveness and sustaining collective commitment to a just society.

Conclusion: Towards Global Flourishing

This chapter has analyzed the nature of structural injustice, illuminating how it perpetuates systemic racism, inequalities, and enduring unfairness. By identifying five interlocking dimensions through which injustice becomes embedded in society, it has been shown why institutional accountability and individual or collective responsibility alone cannot effectively address or dismantle these systemic challenges. In response, the chapter proposed a conceptual framework, outlining design principles for a renewed political architecture firmly rooted in ethical pillars: the inherent dignity of every person, ecological harmony, institutional accountability, and inclusive participatory processes.

While such a framework offers a robust foundation for collective flourishing, achieving a genuinely just society cannot occur without confronting historical inhumanity and the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Healing these profound wounds necessitates strengthening relational bonds within political communities, establishing public forums for intergenerational dialogue to acknowledge past sabotages, and openly recognizing ongoing harm. Through such collective processes, communities can reclaim dignity, drawing on intergenerational wisdom and cultural resilience to co-create better futures.

Ultimately, this chapter affirms that although the histories of many communities have been profoundly shaped by structural injustice, racial capitalism, and power-driven institutions, adopting a dignity-inspired and well-being-centred political design can foster a transformative politics of dignity. By constructing equitable and respectful social conditions and embracing an architecture of collective healing, we can cultivate societies that are capable of sustained global flourishing for generations to come.

Note

- 1 Redlining refers to the discriminatory practice, prevalent in the mid-20th century, where financial institutions and government agencies systematically denied mortgages, insurance, and other financial services to residents in predominantly minority neighbourhoods, effectively segregating communities and limiting wealth accumulation and socioeconomic mobility.

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