

Responsibility in the Face of Oppression: Why Empathy Matters

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### **Abstract:**

In order to convince her readers to take action to address the structural injustices inherent to global age, Iris Young built what she calls a *social connection model of responsibility*, where responsibility is shared among agents, regardless of their social position and relations. This means that nowadays, being responsible means partaking in collective action in order to redress injustices that result from everyday accepted practices. This said, because structural injustice produces *active ignorance*, which is a moral, political and epistemic wrong, agents may often fail to understand what it means to be responsible in Young's model, especially the privileged, who happen to be the most affected by this type of ignorance. In order to solve this problem, I suggest that empathy should be developed in order to be used as an epistemic tool against active ignorance, as well as a motivating force to undertake collective action with the common goal of achieving a more just society. This research paper explores thus the connection between structural injustice, the meaning of responsibility, and suggests ways to enhance our natural capabilities for empathy to make it a component of working model of responsibility, so the original social connection model of responsibility elaborated by Young can work even in a context where active ignorance may impede one to take collective action.

Acknowledging a situation as unjust means to acknowledge that its cause is human, and therefore, that someone must bear responsibility for it. How should we assess responsibility, then, when injustice is structural, and that its perpetuation is made possible by the participation in concert of the many privileged and oppressed, being thus the result of a large pattern involving a great number of agents? In her works, Iris Young elaborated a *social connection model* of responsibility, in which responsibility is shared, as an attempt to convince her readers to engage in collective action with others to struggle against structural injustice. Although this model provides a good starting point for thinking about this problem, Young fails to consider how oppression (which is one face of structural injustice) produces *active ignorance*, and how this kind of ignorance has pervasive effects on how an agent understands their social positionality and relationality. Such an ignorance can result in a failure to understand what it means to be morally and politically responsible in a context of structural injustice.

In order to strengthen Young's model, I must begin with an analysis of oppression that understands it as a structural phenomenon, as well as how it produces active ignorance. Following this discussion, I explain three different concepts of responsibility needed in order to fight it, and that these concepts must be able to encompass the need to change both structures and individual dispositions *together*, rather than prioritizing one over the other. Next, I will look to Young's social connection model as a way of thinking about responsibility and criticize some of the model's shortcomings. From there, I will elaborate a definition of *empathy*, a component I consider to be crucial to integrate to a model of responsibility that is adequately moral, political and epistemological and will delineate some of the key features of such a model of responsibility. Finally, I will discuss some shortcomings and criticisms that could be addressed against empathy and respond to them.

## *1. Structural Injustice and Active Ignorance*

Being oppressed means that one's possibilities to express experiences, thoughts, needs and feelings are circumscribed, and further, that one's capacity to develop and exercise their potential is limited. Oppression excludes large numbers of people from partaking in epistemic exchanges by ideologically denying them the capacity to reason, and their exclusion is sustained by mechanisms of active ignorance. Because oppression differently affects individuals according to their social position and relations, a working definition of oppression must necessarily be pluralistic. My aim in this section is to develop a thorough conception of oppression that explains how it produces active ignorance, a politically and morally wrong form of ignorance which contributes to the perpetuation of injustice. Although I can add only a little to what has already been written on this topic here, I think it is crucial to discuss the various ways in which oppression produces ignorance, so that the limits of our understanding of responsibility become clearer.

*1.1 Oppression as Structural Injustice:* Oppression consists in the systematic, structural and institutional processes preventing those who belong to unprivileged social groups from learning, developing and using skills in a satisfying and expansive way, as well as being socially recognized. It “refers to *structural* phenomena that immobilize or diminish *a group*”<sup>i</sup>, where institutionalized social processes inhibit the ability of the members of oppressed social groups (where one shares similar understandings of self and others with other members of the same group), to partake in creating meaning by depriving them of the opportunity to express their experiences and perspective on social life, where it can be recognized by others. Oppression affects individuals qua members of a given social group, which is intertwined with their identity (who one is, what role they play in society), where the oppressed are “systematically reduced, molded, immobilized”<sup>ii</sup>, relationally to privileged groups, by the structures in place. Domination consists in institutional conditions where people are prevented from participating in the determination of their actions or the conditions for

their actuality, while others “can determine without reciprocation the conditions of their action, either directly or by virtue of the structural consequences of their actions.”<sup>iii</sup> Although structural injustice consists in the social processes resulting in the institutional constraints on *both* self-development (as in the case of oppression) and self-determination (as in the case of domination), my focus will mostly consist on the case of oppression (which also often entails domination). The causes of structural injustice may be found in one’s social position, and how it systematically relates to other positions which either enable or constrain one’s possibilities for action. Those positions and relations impact one’s *identity power*, which is “an operation of power that depends in some significant degree upon ... shared imaginative conceptions of social identity”<sup>iv</sup>, where “social power is a capacity we have as social agents to influence how things go in the world.”<sup>v</sup>

Oppression is a structural phenomenon: it arises from the everyday actions of a multiplicity of agents working within socially accepted norms and rules. In a sense, structures are neutral, because they both enable and constrain, keeping society flowing. They are not directly coercive, but simply “appear as objective, given and constraining.”<sup>vi</sup> Also, they are not oppressive in themselves, although the indirect and cumulative effects of all the agents within them contribute to produce oppression. One simple definition of what a structure is would be difficult to provide, but I will use four parameters Young uses in order to better understand the phenomenon<sup>vii</sup>: (1) they consist in constraining and enabling objective social facts structuring the possibilities for action ; (2) they refer to the macro social space where individuals’ positions are systematically interrelated and condition expectations and possibilities of interaction ; (3) they can only exist through action, without being reduced to it ; (4) they involve both intended and unintended consequences of the combined actions of the masses of individuals pursuing their own objectives while working within the accepted norms and rules. Oppression, therefore, occurs when members of certain social groups end up systematically disadvantaged by social structures. Frye describes it as a situation where

one's "options are reduced to a very few, and all of them expose one to penalty, censure, or deprivation."<sup>viii</sup> Privilege and oppression are the two sides of the same coin, which implies *a relation between social groups*. Finally, one's position and relations intersect, which entails two facts: the first is that one belongs to more than one social group, and second, one can be privileged in certain respects and oppressed in others.

*1.2 Epistemology of Ignorance:* Privilege creates active ignorance, and some dispositions enable the privileged to remain ignorant about the world they create and participate in, which is, in fact, necessary for the maintenance of oppression. Such ignorance is characterized by a motivated resistance to know that can be unconscious, and that resists factual evidence and arguments. It is a social and structural phenomenon attached to positions of privilege and dominance and is maintained through different psychological and political mechanisms. One of those is information gate-keeping, where documents about our history suppress or distort some of its embarrassing facts, so that whoever learns from those documents will be unaware of their ignorance. There is also the maintenance of (mistaken) dominant beliefs and assumptions about the world, which are socially constructed. This second mechanism is about our tendency to confirm what we think we already know, rather than trying to challenge it, so that we will resist factual counterevidence. Finally, a third mechanism consists in the psychological energy that the privileged invest in order to see themselves as ethical agents, in spite of the undeserved privilege they obtain from unjust social structures.<sup>ix</sup>

Drawing from social contract theory, Mills depicts the "Racial Contract", whose signatories are only white people, the only ones "who count, the people who really are people"<sup>x</sup>. Technically, such a contract is a set of formal and informal agreements between whites, based on racial criteria to make themselves full persons, while making nonwhites "sub persons", whose moral status is considered inferior. The contract regulates norms and behaviors to systematically privilege the

former and disadvantage the latter. Despite documented historical evidence, this fact is not obvious to most whites, who either don't think about such a structure, or fail to see it as the moral and political outcome of racial oppression. For white people, the world we live in appears as given, so that we either fail to see, or minimize the impact of white supremacy.

*1.3 Epistemic Vices and Ignorance:* Ideologies that support systems of oppression make us all cognitively worse off. By instilling prejudice and distrust and affecting our evaluation of what we know and what we do not, social injustices impede our epistemic relations with each other, as well as the one we have with ourselves: what we ignore about others is also something that we ignore about ourselves. I will now describe three epistemic vices that Medina considers to be generally ingrained in the privileged, which are structural and systematic, and contribute to the perpetuation of active ignorance. These vices are flaws in one's epistemic character that affect the capacity of the privileged to assess evidence or learn from epistemic exchanges.

*a) Arrogance:* This epistemic vice prevents one from being able to acknowledge one's mistakes or limitations, so that one becomes self-indulgent, and comes to believe in their cognitive omnipotence. Arrogance results from belonging to a privileged social group, meaning that the collective hermeneutical resources are available for them to make sense of their particular experience. Privileged access to education and being construed as "knowing" contributes to arrogance. Finally, being privileged in an oppressive society means that one is "bathed" in prejudices and stereotypes, creating many blindspots easy to ignore, preventing the arrogant from learning or improving.

*b) Laziness:* Being privileged also means that there are areas of experience, and the world, about which *one does not need to know*, resulting in a lack of curiosity about them. It may be about aspects of domestic life, or about particular mechanisms of oppression.

c) *Closed-mindedness*: This epistemic vice stems from *the need to not know* and is a mechanism of self-defense to maintain privilege. It is a negative cognitive investment, where perspectives, experiences, or aspects of social life are systematically hidden and ignored. Closed-mindedness can lead the privileged to systematically deny truths that could threaten either their privilege or their self-image as good people, regardless the evidence at hand.

*1.4 The Faces of Oppression and Anti-Dialogics*: I will now depict some faces of oppression, their connection to ignorance and some “antidialogical” tactics (which prevents educative dialogue between different social groups) used for its perpetuation and demonstrate how they impede epistemic exchanges.

*1.4.1 Marginalization*: This is a discriminatory practice consisting in the exclusion of people in virtue to their belonging to different social groups from participation in important social practices, due to identity prejudice. Marginalization is oppressive in three ways: heavy material deprivation which results in a state of dependency, exclusion from full participation in social cooperation, as well as hermeneutical marginalization when it excludes the oppressed from certain practices of meaning creation.

The first way in which marginalization is oppressive is by making victims dependent on the welfare state, separating them off from certain rights and freedoms that others enjoy. Their status as dependents (where one is not part of the working force and often associated with a subordinate status that is implicitly associated with being nonwhite and/or female)<sup>xi</sup> forces them to submit to bureaucratic rules and to often invasive and arbitrary authority. The practice of helping produces the need for help, by taking away autonomy and assumption of knowledge the dependent might have about their own experience. As a result, the welfare state ends up producing vulnerability, helplessness and dependency. Such a practice becomes a way to maintain the marginalized in their oppression by making them believe they are being helped, while, they are kept excluded. The

problem here resides in the *belief* that full moral agency and citizenship require independence *and* that it is seen as specifically lacking in the marginalized. This conception of independence is inappropriately individualistic (as the meaning of the term shifted from describing social relations of subordination to stereotypical inherent character traits). As such, independence transforms a social problem into an individual one, where the dependent is generally held responsible for their situation, as they are expected to be “self-supporting”<sup>xii</sup>. Also, autonomy is (unconsciously) linked to rationality, meaning that because marginalized people predominantly belong to groups assumed to be cognitively inferior, the privileged deny them the assumptions of responsible moral and political agency. This, in turn, allows privileged people to take control over the affairs of the unprivileged. The second way in which marginalization is oppressive is that even in a condition of relative material comfort, the marginalized remain oppressed through idleness, uselessness, and lack of self-respect, due to the barriers they face regarding processes of social organization and participation.

The third form of marginalization is hermeneutical and is due to identity prejudice. Such exclusion deprives the marginalized from opportunities to epistemically exchange with and be recognized by others, thus preventing the marginalized from sharing experiences and meaning. This results in gaps in the shared hermeneutical resources one has access to, which are heavily influenced by social power, so that the privileged can easily draw from them, while the oppressed can only access ill-fitting meanings, rendering their expression about their experiences unintelligible (especially to the former). Although in cases of hermeneutical injustice all are affected by the gaps in the hermeneutical resources, the oppressed are those who suffer the most from it, due to their detrimental position.<sup>xiii</sup>

*1.4.2 Powerlessness:* Powerlessness is best described negatively, as an absence of possibility for the progressive development of one’s capacities, resulting in a lack of authority, status or sense of

self, and thus precludes positive social recognition: this is because the powerless tend to occupy low status occupations, where they have no chance to develop and exercise their skills, creativity or judgement, and where they are prevented from exercising autonomy. Given their perceived or real lack of expertise and authority, they happen to lack proper communicative skills in certain social areas, and thus command little to no respect. The division between the powerless and higher status workers goes deeper, being present in all other aspects of social life: they live segregated in different towns or neighborhoods, have distinct cultures so that their preferences for food, leisure or education, etc. are completely distinct. Therefore, members of a certain status group will most likely socialize only with other members of the same status group.

The differences in lifestyle and the resulting privileges of the professional class compose one's "respectability". One's degree of respectability is the degree to which one commands respect, and how much one is listened to due to perceived authority or influence. Racism and sexism are also impediments in one's respectability: whereas a white man may appear as respectable regardless of his social class, nonwhites and non-males must put extra effort to prove their respectability before their input in an exchange may be considered. Powerlessness and respectability can be thus linked to systematic testimonial injustice where "someone is *wronged specifically in [their] capacity as a knower*"<sup>xiv</sup> based on identity prejudice. Those injustices are caused by prejudice against some (oppressed) social groups, so that the sufferer does not experience them in a localized way, but rather experiences them in different aspects of their social interactions. "For in such a case, the influence of identity prejudice is a matter of one party or parties effectively controlling what another party does – preventing them, for instance, from conveying knowledge – in a way that depends upon collective conceptions of the social identities in play."<sup>xv</sup>

*1.4.3 Cultural Imperialism:* "To experience cultural imperialism means to experience how the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of one's own group invisible at

the same time as they stereotype it and mark it out as the Other.”<sup>xvi</sup> In Freire’s words, it means that a dominant social group “penetrate[s] the cultural context of another group, in disrespect of the latter’s potentialities; they impose their own view of the world upon those they invade and inhibit the creativity of the invaded by curbing their expression.”<sup>xvii</sup> Cultural imperialism makes it possible for the privileged to have direct or primary access to collective hermeneutical resources, making it easier for them to universalize their understanding of the world and make their experience appear as the norm. Any differing experience or understanding poses a threat to the privileged perspective and is thus treated as deviant and marked as a sign of inferiority. Through cultural imperialism, the privileged objectify the oppressed, and strip their agency away to mold them according to their objectives.

It is a paradoxically double-faced form of oppression where one experiences “invisibilization” paired with stereotyping, where the members of the oppressed groups are confined to a nature, an essence attached to their bodies. The oppressed see their identity defined from the outside and are required to comply with the particular image that is imposed upon them. As a result, the oppressed participate in the erasure of their own perspective. Any kind of disobedience may be costly, either in terms of livelihood, or in becoming prey to violence. In order to make oppression appear as consensual, even for the oppressed, ideological conditioning (where one sees their capacity for reason and for morality being considered as inferior by the dominant group) is crucial. The process happens on both ends. The privileged learn to see the oppressed as subpersons, who also learn to see *themselves* as such. Through this depersonalizing process, the oppressed end up believing that society is just, and that the reasons behind their oppression contain no inconsistency. Through cultural assimilation, the privileged kill the oppressed from inside, by effectively taking away their languages, their cultural heritages, their histories, and thus, their belief in their unity and in themselves.

*1.4.4 Violence:* Part of experiencing oppression means knowing that one lives under the potential threat of (systematic) violence, “which [has] no motive but to damage, humiliate or destroy [them].”<sup>xviii</sup> Instances of violence against the oppressed are not limited to severe physical attacks, but also include incidents of intimidation, harassment or ridicule. The social context that surrounds violence and its role in oppression makes it become part of normality: it systematically targets its victims in respect to their social identity. Such a form of violence consists in *both* direct victimization, *and* in the *knowledge of liable violation* of their being, solely based upon group identity. It is thus a social practice in two senses: 1- as part of the collective knowledge and imagination, 2- as legitimately tolerated (i.e. even when there is punishment, the sanction is never severe enough to dissuade against it). It is a tool to maintain social hierarchical order. Therefore, the police, the army and the penal system are not only coercive tools to prevent crimes and preserve peace, but also for maintaining the social hierarchical order. Police brutality against nonwhites, for instance, must be recognized as an *organic* part of the enterprise of maintaining the racial order: it is the norm rather than the exception.

*1.4.5 Divide and Rule:* This tactic is important to maintain oppression, given that the privileged compose an outnumbered minority. Different techniques are used to maintain division between social groups, whether physically, by means of segregation or planned urbanization, or through bureaucratic rule, manipulation, or by prioritizing focalized interventions and ways of living, so that the oppressed do not get in touch with one another. When the privileged intervene to maintain harmony or when they offer help to an oppressed group, it is both to maintain their privilege and their self-image as good persons (and thus, their ignorance about how they constitute an oppressive social group), while at the same time, working to prevent the oppressed from understanding their oppression. It also sets boundaries for the state’s full obligations, presuming that the oppressed are

intrinsically prone to social problems such as high criminality, welfare dependency or underclass status.

Considering how oppression is a self-sustaining social system structurally constructed, and given its pernicious and lasting effects on identity and epistemic agency, I believe that we need to think justice from *both* an individual (where one's actions, beliefs and personal dispositions must be considered as contributing to the perpetuation of oppression), *and* a structural perspective (where social structures we inherited still contribute to the perpetuation of the oppression of many people, even though work has been done in order to reduce the barriers the oppressed face on a daily basis). Therefore, building a working notion of justice in cases of oppression requires to consider the input of those who suffer injustice, rather than simply imagining what a just world should look like.

## 2. Responsibility

Considering that oppression is a multi-faceted structural phenomenon resulting from the concerted action of countless agents, and that "social structures exist only in the action and interaction of persons; they do not exist as states, but as processes"<sup>xix</sup>, the commitment to fight against it will require a pluralistic approach. Given the complexity of the human mind, and that of social relations, we need to consider an approach that has the potential to work *both* on individual agents and the structures within which they act. Several reasons led me to this conclusion: a) in order to be successful, structural changes require the cooperation of an increasing number of agents acting within those structures, given that we are all part of these processes and contribute to them; b) agents are required to be *active* in bringing about change; c) thus, there is a need to create a *motivation to act*; d) so that individuals must change their personal dispositions or attitudes in concert with structural change<sup>xx</sup>, especially in a context where, as demonstrated, some agents develop personal epistemic dispositions to maintain their privilege. This said, in order to bring about change, responsibility must be understood in three different, but interrelated ways, namely: moral,

political, and epistemic. In this section, I intend to briefly define each one of the proposed notions of responsibility.

*2.1 Moral Responsibility:* The first way to consider an agent responsible is morally. This way of understanding responsibility relates to one's relationship to self, as well as to one's own moral understanding of a situation. It is about how moral agents are expected to respect each other and can reasonably expect to be respected in return. This said, the wrongs moral responsibility concerns itself with are those that fall under the category of an agent's action and its direct outcome, the intention or motivation for acting in a certain way, as well as with one's inactions, so that one can be held as morally responsible or culpable of negligence. Complicity is also encompassed by moral responsibility in the same way: one can be complicit in participating in a wrong action (even without initiating it but working toward a shared intention) or through one's inaction when they knowingly could have prevented a harm but did not. Moral responsibility is not limited to individual agents but can also apply to collective agents.

An agent can also be held morally responsible for their biases, even in cases where they consciously deny them (i.e. one is openly against racism but will act in a certain way when encountering nonwhites, such as in cases of microaggression). Even when these biases appear as unconscious, one should be held morally responsible for them, as they do not absolve one from acting immorally, in the same way one should not be absolved for rudeness while being in a bad mood.<sup>xxi</sup>

This said, oppression is wrong not only because of the systematic disadvantages faced by the oppressed, or the harms caused to them, but also because oppression causes *further* harms such as vulnerability, or higher criminality. The complexity of the phenomenon, and the interrelatedness of the concerted action of all agents within structures make moral responsibility inadequate to efficiently fight the phenomenon, hence the need a concept of political responsibility.

*2.2 Political Responsibility:* We bear political responsibility in the sense that first, we can recognize right from wrong, and second, that we are interconnected with others within structures, implying that our acts within those structures have impacts on others. Therefore, we live under the imperative of being in relationship with others, be it actively or passively. Given that we are constantly in relationship with others, political responsibility must be embraced through political action, which means that it must be public to bring about collective action. Unlike moral responsibility that can be discharged by a single agent, political responsibility can only be discharged through collective action, implying thus that one is not only responsible and expected to act together with others, but that one can expect others to be responsible and to join in collective action as well.

*2.3 Epistemic Responsibility:* Because social injustices and epistemic injustices are two sides of the same coin, responsibility must also be epistemic: to be a responsible moral and political agent, one must understand one's own social positionality and relationality, as well as how these affect our understanding of the world, and thus, our understanding of injustices and the way they must be addressed. As demonstrated previously, although socio-politically privileged people happen to have some epistemic advantages, they also have blind spots that epistemically disadvantage them in their understanding of the world, whereas the oppressed may have the epistemic advantages of better understanding their situation, because they know what it means to be oppressed, while understanding dominant views as well.

Epistemic responsibility is both individual and collective, meaning that it requires that both individuals and groups or communities partake in it, and that they share responsibility for the epistemic environment they contribute to. Thus, Medina calls for what he calls an epistemology of resistance (resistance against ignorance). In order to see the interrelation in this matter between the social and the individual, Medina proposes two principles: the principle of acknowledgement and engagement, consisting in acknowledging and engaging with all the cognitive forces as much as

possible; and the principle of epistemic equilibrium, which means that one must search for balance between epistemic forces, in order to prevent some cognitive forces becoming on the one hand overpowering, or on other, neglected. Therefore, “knowing is mainly a matter of doing, that is, of engaging in epistemic actions and participating in epistemic practices [...]: the responsibility of subjects qua knowers or epistemic agents is, first and foremost, the responsibility to confront internal or external resistances.”<sup>xxii</sup> Individual epistemic responsibility cannot be dissociated from shared epistemic responsibility, considering how knowledge is social and common. Discharging epistemic responsibility is thus a transactional activity between individual epistemic agents, in social groups within which agents are formed. It is through processes of acculturation and habituation that we can develop our epistemic sensibilities, which means that they are heavily influenced by our social positionality and relationality. In this sense, we may not be held responsible (or only to a minimal extent) for those epistemic sensibilities, but we ultimately hold responsibility for their impact on our actions, beliefs and relation to our understanding of the world. Being responsible thus involves being aware of our position and relations, as well as of our epistemic character, and then, understanding oneself as situated within a social position, and within social relations. It also means being aware of, and understanding, the situation of others as also being socially as well as relationally positioned.

In cases of epistemic injustice, ignorance is not merely an epistemic failure, but a moral and political failure as well. Therefore, “responsibility and epistemic competence are bound up with each other: there is no responsibility, unless there is minimal knowledge about self, others and the world”<sup>xxiii</sup>, where a lack of knowledge about others and the world is intimately bound to a lack of knowledge about self. Knowledge, indeed, is highly socially contextualized: self-knowledge is possible only with and through others, as our interrelatedness with others is that through which we build our knowledge of self and the world.

### *3. Young's Social Connection Model of Responsibility*

The social connection model of responsibility against structural injustice is built around five features Young considers helpful to better understand one's responsibility in our social context, where being responsible has something to do with carrying out certain activities in a morally accepted way to obtain some desired outcomes. In this section, I will sketch Young's model<sup>xxiv</sup> and mention some of the shortcomings I perceive in it.

*3.1 Not isolating:* Considering how society is structurally organized through practices and institutions in which countless numbers of people participate, an isolating concept of responsibility such as moral responsibility would be inadequate. Indeed, even when some agents can be found morally responsible for their wrong actions, in a context of oppression, other actors may also be responsible for the phenomenon, in a different way. Agents may merely be "minding their own businesses" within these accepted norms, but still be partaking in the reproduction of structural injustice. In such cases, agents are not at fault, but their implication in social processes makes them politically responsible.

*3.2 Judging background conditions:* Because our actions take place within a morally accepted frame, we contribute to processes producing structural injustice. Sometimes, our actions are even constrained by the very structures we contribute to, thus unintentionally perpetuating injustice. When we identify an injustice, therefore, we assume that there must be something wrong within social structures, or that there must be something within the background conditions that enables the perpetuation of injustice.

Young does not consider that one should be judged as morally responsible for their acting within social structures because most people act without intention to cause harm, and generally by habit and without reflection about the harm their acts could cause. I am ambivalent about this claim, because I doubt that ignorance or lack of reflection should mitigate moral responsibility. I do not

mean that agents within a social connection model are morally responsible for their acts within structures, but they should be held morally responsible for their lack of reflection. I also suggest that questioning background conditions should be further developed, to include even moral standards, as they have the potential to contribute to the perpetuation of injustice. For instance, if we only take into consideration principles of “freedom”, “equality” and “justice”, our theories about these concepts are only abstract at best<sup>xxv</sup>, and start from unattainable ideals rather than from the world in which we find ourselves. If I refer to the example of racial oppression to illustrate my point, nonwhites have become theoretically equal to whites, but the society in which we live is still permeated with racist values and thus, nonwhites are still often victims of prejudice and violence, and face barriers that whites do not. In other words, such abstract principles are ideologically applied to only some subset of people or social group, while the conditions in which structural injustice occurs are maintained.<sup>xxvi</sup> My problem here is not against those principles strictly speaking, but against their unjust and idealistic application that might be problematic if not reviewed under the light of historical facts about oppression.

*3.3 Forward-looking, more than backward-looking:* Thinking about responsibility carries plural temporalities. Although the social connection model of responsibility can be backward-looking as well, its aim is mostly forward looking. In this sense, it attempts to redress ongoing injustices, as well as those that will likely persist over time if not addressed.

*3.4 Shared responsibility:* We all personally bear responsibility for injustices perpetrated in a systemic manner, as we are all participating, more or less directly in the perpetration (and perpetuation) of structural injustices. However, no agent is alone in bearing responsibility, as it is shared between all agents. Acknowledgement of one’s responsibility is thus an acknowledgement of others’ responsibility as well. As it is impossible to identify the harm perpetrated individually,

belonging to a structure is sufficient in a social connection model to be held politically responsible for the harms it causes.

Young criticizes May's model (to whom she's indebted) for being too backward looking, and its focus on attitudes, rather than on actions. Although I tend to agree with the importance of action, I think it is noteworthy to mention that one's attitude (some of it that is defined by one's social positions and relations) will affect one's actions or inaction, as well as one's willingness to undertake collective action, so that it should be taken into account in an account of responsibility.

*3.5 Discharged through collective action:* Changing ongoing structurally caused injustices cannot be done on one's own, given the number of people involved in the perpetuation of systemic injustices. The social connection model of responsibility therefore requires that one must join and organize with others, so that we can, through communicative engagement and collective action, reform the structures within which injustices occur. Therefore, victims share responsibility for their situation, as do the privileged, who benefit from these structures. One can critique others and expect to be critiqued in cases of inaction, or for insufficient or counterproductive action.

Because of their social positionality and relationality, however, agents from different social groups often fail to understand the experience of agents in other social groups. This is especially true of the privileged, who are often not only indifferent to others' reality, but further, to their own indifference to it, making dialogue difficult between different social groups. Also, as previously demonstrated, even when trying to help, the privileged, due to their ignorance, the ideologies they work within, their desire to maintain their privilege, or all of these, happen to fail to actually enter communicative engagement with the oppressed, so that collective efforts may end up fruitless.

#### *4. Empathy: What is it? How should one use it to think responsibility differently?*

In this section, and this is where most of my contribution to the question of responsibility is situated, I intend to discuss how empathy should be used as a force of social change. Empathy helps one to relate to those who are different and can be used to enhance our desire to act to improve our community. As I have previously written, oppression dehumanizes us all, because it denies the oppressed an equal status as knower, and thus, the privileged lose also their humanity by losing an important source of knowledge. It also dehumanizes in the sense that it creates boundaries between people, by preventing dialogue between those who are different, so that the possibilities for successful joint action are limited. Therefore, I want empathy, as a capacity, to be developed as a skill, with a view to restoring the humanity of the oppressed, so that their equality becomes actual; that they will be taken seriously in an epistemic exchange, they will not live with the liability of violence against them, and their opinion and preferences will be taken into account when discussing ways about how we should achieve a more just society. If I use racism as an example, although nonwhites are now considered to be equals on paper, the system of racial oppression that denies them equal treatment is still in place: they still live in segregated neighborhoods, they have fewer opportunities to develop their potential because of lower access to education, they are more likely to suffer harsher punishments for similar crimes and are still disproportionately represented as victims of police brutality. Also, given that we live in a society that is still permeated with racist biases, even when those biases are consciously rejected, many white people still hold them (more or less) unconsciously, hence the phenomenon of microaggressions or the lesser credibility or respectability given to a nonwhite person. Empathy for the oppressed would thus be a cornerstone for entering into a dialogue with them by making their perspective visible, to recognize them as credible knowers, to recognize the oppression they still face daily, as well as the different forms it may take.

Empathy can (and therefore must) be used and developed to make individuals more altruist in a way that will motivate action.<sup>xxvii</sup> We must see empathy as it is, meaning that it is neutral (neither good, nor bad), and flexible (both automatic as being part of the innate nature of most humans and controlled so that it can be developed and limited through reason)<sup>xxviii</sup>. By empathy, I mean more than the mere cognitive process consisting in understanding someone's suffering or way of thinking, and I do not want it to be confused with sympathy or pity, which are associated with one's (uncritical) appropriation of another's sufferings, where one places themselves as morally superior to the sufferer, and where there is no attempt to understand the sufferer's perspective. Rather, I see empathy as a sincere attempt to understand how someone else's experiences, social position, and relations affect their understanding of the world, by imagining what it is like to walk in their shoes. Empathy is the recognition of others' experience as being as valid<sup>xxix</sup> as one's own. This means to acknowledge them as sources of knowledge that must be considered even in cases where they might need to be criticized (due to moral or factual errors). For example, a case of validation would take the testimony of a rape victim seriously despite some inaccuracies (after all, they went through a traumatizing experience), or would acknowledge their distrust of people from the same social group as their rapist as being normal, rather than being irrational or uncooperative.

The notion of empathy developed here contains the necessity to recognize that the emotions inherent to the suffering caused by structural injustice and their subsequent reactions or behaviors are valid and worthy of recognition, which implies that they will not discredit the testimony of an individual about their experience and thus, do not discredit the oppressed as rational beings, or as people of good will. In such a model, all experiences and perspectives can be considered equal in relevance, and even in cases when such views prove contradictory, all can be used as resources to create a new, non-contradictory understanding of a situation of injustice<sup>xxx</sup>, so that new realistic and (ideally) reachable ideals of justice could be developed. In this model, empathy requires that we

grant value to emotions to the same extent that we grant value to rationality. As an outcome of the deployment of empathy, an agent would not only recognize that there is injustice but would also feel compelled to cooperate with others regardless of their social groups in an attempt to correct those injustices and restore their humanity. In this respect, empathy is the expression of relational thinking. I believe that empathy is necessary to be in solidarity with others, even (or especially) in a context of deep diversity. Finally, empathy could help us to act against structural injustice by making us aware of the shortcomings in our understanding of the world, and by making us see that oppression is everyone's problem. It is therefore something one must develop and cultivate, to discover the other's difference and resemblance.

An empathic social connection model of responsibility is not only more important than ever in a global age, where one's acts and habits impose a burden to people in foreign countries, but it has the potential to make someone see the reach and complexity of human interconnectedness in a society that artificially insulates individuals with ideals of independence and self-sufficiency. The empathic model of responsibility requires empathy to be more than a mere emotional bond between humans; it requires it to become a force for political action and social change: empathy can and must therefore be not only personal, but also made collective<sup>xxxii</sup>, in order to render possible the acting together necessary to the creation of desired changes. I believe that empathy, once integrated to a social connection model of responsibility, is one personal disposition that we can develop and that has the potential to contribute to the goal of making the community better, or at least, to address the problem of oppression through the progressive diminution of active ignorance. Of course, I do not expect that it would be enough to convince all privileged members of society to undertake collective action, but developing one's empathic abilities can contribute to reduce one's epistemic vices that contribute to one's active ignorance. An empathic social connection model would come with several features to complement those suggested by Young, such as 1- focus away from self; 2-

challenge to common-sense morality; 3- challenge authority; 4- empathy with all, even the “enemies”<sup>xxxii</sup>; 5- roots in both action and discussion to achieve mutuality, self-transformation and validation. Finally, I will suggest some ways to make empathy part of an educative project.

*4.1 Focus away from self:* Considering how individuals are shaped by their social environment and by their position in different social groups, and considering how what we ignore about others is also something we ignore about ourselves<sup>xxxiii</sup>, an empathic social connection model requires one to discover epistemic agency by going outward, rather than inward. The idea is that in order to become responsible in the three senses I have explored in this paper, one needs to recognize their interconnectedness with other people, even those who are far away, either in terms of distance, psychologically, or even temporally.

Acting empathetically requires one to explore both common and different points between self and others, to see them more *qua* individuals (and knowers, I must add), rather than *qua* social type, by belonging to a different social group. By focusing away from oneself to become more open to new and different perspectives, it becomes easier to develop one’s creativity, which is inevitably necessary to face the challenge of transforming the structures we have inherited, internalized and that perpetuate oppression.

This said, I must emphasize how important it is to retain the ability to differentiate oneself from the other. It is a common mistake to confuse empathy with identification, with the result that one may forget their own shoes, while walking in someone else’s. To avoid such a predicament, one must keep in mind that there is a common goal while empathizing with the other, and this goal, in our specific case, is to overcome active ignorance and build a more just society. Therefore, to be a responsible agent in an empathic social connection model, one must enter a process of perpetual self-transformation, where one learns to adapt to new realities and to reassess their beliefs, and the facts as they are presented.

*4.2 Challenge to common-sense morality:* As observed in the first section of this paper, oppression dehumanizes in different respects. Such dehumanization of the oppressed is deeply ingrained in Western moral and political ideals, where the oppressed are thought to be inferior in some way or another (cognitively, morally, politically, etc.), due to their (imagined) nature. This has often been used to justify unequal treatment, as well as unjust laws, and from this stem some of our enduring biases. Thus, common sense should be seen as the embodiment of social structures, which means that they are, to a certain extent, the reflection of our historical and social context, making it, in a certain way, contingent. For example, one might be first puzzled by the fact that the Nazis used Kant's categorical imperative to justify their racial purge and mistreatment of large groups of people, but considering that the principle of humanity is enshrined in the very concept of subhumanity, one may be right to revisit the concepts of equality, freedom and brotherhood under a different light.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Therefore, one must first suspend their "knowledge" about right and wrong (as moral standards are often arbitrary), especially when dealing with individuals who belong to oppressed groups<sup>xxxv</sup>, re-evaluate the moral standards they have grown up with, and finally, seek alternative ways of looking at a given experience. Although I am not comfortable discussing how we should determine the correct standards without passing for a moral relativist, I think that while determining moral standards, we should remain open to the possibility that they will inevitably be revisited, questioned and changed, as human society evolves and that beings that were neglected, at another moment in history, can potentially be included or excluded from our moral and political considerations, while our epistemic considerations become better enlarged through empathy<sup>xxxvi</sup>.

It is normal for one to invest cognitive resources in believing in one's goodness, and more often than we would like to admit, we prefer acting in an apparently moral way, rather than actually being moral<sup>xxxvii</sup>. Further, we all suffer from various degrees of confirmation bias. However, in a context of oppression, where the privileged grew in a culture of denial, it is morally unacceptable

to invest our cognitive energies in maintaining our ignorance, to maintain privilege and one's ignorance about it. Therefore, being empathic would help one to recognize their unearned privilege (or at least, make it more difficult to ignore it), and the more one improves their empathy, the more they will be tempted to work to improve the condition of those who do not have the same chance and privilege.

Challenging common-sense morality also means to integrate a more “contextual, holistic and synthetic”<sup>xxxviii</sup> thinking that is better suited to the actual world in which we live, to our reliance on abstract, analytic and contractual thinking inherited from the European Enlightenment. This means that our moral standards should be revised in order to build a vision of the moral agent that would make them as both ego-centric and socio-centric, rather than being merely one over the other.

*4.3 Challenge authority:* In many cases, involvement with human rights violations, genocides and massacres has been justified by their perpetrators with the claim of simply following orders (think of Adolf Eichmann who excused his role in the deportation of Jews to extermination camps by just wanting to do his job and being recognized by his superiors)<sup>xxxix</sup>, while it could be argued that morality would have required disobedience in such cases (returning to Eichmann's case, what struck Arendt was not his inherent evilness, but rather, an astonishing inability to see a situation from someone else's perspective, paired with his general banality). Justifying one's actions or inaction by minding one's own business and following orders is insufficient. When authorities treat fellow humans as if they were endowed with lower moral status (and here, not only in the extreme cases such as genocide, but also in the cases of unequal treatments or in cases of police brutality against nonwhites), one has not only the moral, but also a political responsibility to challenge authority, and uncover injustice for which they are accountable. The members of oppressed groups are especially vulnerable people, partly since the violation of their rights is being neglected by the dominant view, so that their voice is more often unheard. In an empathic social connection model

of responsibility, one is required to show solidarity with the oppressed, and to enter dialogue in order to act together to relieve injustice and suffering.

Empathy has the power to restore the human status of the oppressed, while oppression (and domination) rest on their lower or subhuman status. And when one starts to empathize with those who are unprivileged, validating an experience different from the one we have can help us see some acts as unjust or morally unacceptable, especially when those acts are committed by political elites against groups of people. When one starts to empathize with those who suffer injustice and see them as fellow humans although different in some respects, remaining indifferent to their suffering becomes more and more difficult. Empathy makes us more altruist and would thus create a motivation to change the situation, to not remain idle when injustice is perpetrated in one's name, or when one's passivity contributes to the perpetuation of oppression.

*4.4 Empathy with all, even the "enemies":* It is naturally easier to empathize with those who are close to us (i.e. friends and family) or those similar to us (those in the same social group or from the same cultural background) than it is to empathize with strangers, or worse, those with whom we are in deep disagreement. This said, in an empathic social connection model of responsibility, in order to overcome (or at least reduce) our biases (implicit or explicit), as well as our confirmation biases, one is responsible for trying to empathize even with those who are different, and to those who hold different opinions, worldviews, and values.

In the extreme cases of violent conflicts, or in the more general case of oppression, peace treaties and simple structural change are not enough in themselves to improve the situation, when dispositional changes are necessary in concert with such initiatives. Cultivating empathy for those who are different, and even with our antagonists, can therefore facilitate communication between parties, and bring about eventual reconciliation, and finally foster cooperation between people who would not have done so otherwise.

Here, there is a point that is absolutely important to understand in order to avoid an unfortunate conceptual mistake: empathizing with one who is so different from oneself that there are no shared values, or empathizing with one who committed a crime and goes against one's deeply held moral values (for example, a rapist or a murderer) does not mean that we have to agree with their acts or their beliefs. Nor does it mean that the person we empathize with should be absolved, or not held accountable for their acts, when necessary. Empathizing in such cases means that we have a responsibility to understand where another agent comes from, how they think and feel, as well as their shortcomings, limitations and failures<sup>x1</sup>, so that when confrontation becomes necessary or inevitable, it is easier to find a solution to the problem that we have to face, rather than ending up in a dead-end of disagreement. Also, in cases of insoluble conflicts, at least, better understanding is possible, which can be a considerable asset against active ignorance.

*4.5 Roots in both action and discussion:* This last feature of an empathic social connection model of responsibility occurs in three times: a) activism is necessary to make the uncomfortable truths about oppression impossible to ignore for the privileged; b) discussion between agents and between groups is necessary in order to develop mutual empathetic understanding (or at least, a beginning of it), and c) the undertaking of actions (both at the individual and collective levels) to change both personal dispositions and structures enabling the perpetuation of oppression.

*4.5.1 Activism:* I already have depicted a portrait of oppression, as well as some challenges the responsible agent must face when committed to justice. In order to meet goals of sensitizing others to harms faced by the oppressed, we must consider how simply abiding by the rules that determine society perpetuates injustice. As a result, those rules must be questioned and challenged. This said, considering the phenomenon of active ignorance that affects most privileged, in order to make oppressions impossible to ignore, one has to engage in activism, in order to shed light upon the dark sides of our inherited structures (or as Haslanger would say “transform the complaint into

critique”<sup>xli</sup>. The “dominant discourse”, which Young refers to as “a system of stories and expert knowledge diffused through the society, which convey the widely accepted generalizations about how society operates that are theorized in these terms, as well as the social norms and cultural values to which most of the people appeal when discussing their social and political problems and proposed solutions”<sup>xlii</sup> is the product of structural injustice, so that structured discussion as proposed in deliberative democracy will yet be inefficient at producing the desired outcome of changing the structures that perpetuate oppression in our present context.

Activism is consequent with two of the former features of the empathic social connection model, which are challenging authority and challenging common-sense morality. While challenging authority can be efficacious only when the action is taken politically, challenging morality must be undertaken on the moral, political and epistemological fronts. Activism creates the epistemic friction necessary to the renewal of knowledge, by bringing forward the perspective of those whose concerns and needs are generally ignored. The idea behind activism is to bring the privileged or the indifferent citizen (think of the neutral agent who has neither to win nor to lose by supporting either side, and thus passively accepts the status quo) to think about social structures differently: first as producing unjust outcomes, second as something that can be acted upon and changed, rather than as given and immutable.

*4.5.2 Discussion:* Discussion here is necessary both at the individual and collective levels. At the individual level, one is responsible for entering dialogue with those who are different from themselves (by belonging to a different social group, sharing different cultural background, etc.). The idea behind doing so is to learn to counter oppression from within, so that one will learn to overcome their own individual biases<sup>xliii</sup>. Although difficult, it is necessary to provoke the individual dispositional change necessary to not only take one’s shared responsibility in Young’s

sense, but also to find new creative ways to address it, so that the solutions found are sensitive and efficient to solve the problems at hand.

Another reason why dialogue is necessary between oppressed and privileged is in order to develop a climate of trust between agents, in order to enter into a mode of cooperation that is necessary to bring about justice, especially considering that we live in a climate where the idea one holds about justice is highly contextual (i.e. their culture, their social position and relations, their life experience, their education and other preferences might have impact on their definition of what would constitute a just society). In order to develop a working definition of trust, I got inspired by Karen's Jones discussion on the topic<sup>xliv</sup> and I define it as such:

*Trust is an affective attitude predominantly characterized by optimism [as anticipation of a favorable outcome, rather than a tendency to look at the bright side] and confidence about someone else's good will to cooperate, as well as their competence to do it, and the subsequent expectation that that they will be directly and favorably moved by knowing that one is counting on them.*

Although trust can be used in several different ways, the trust needed in an empathic social connection model should be seen as both an interpersonal relation and a hope and confidence that those with whom one shares responsibility will enter into dialogue with some disposition towards open-mindedness, curiosity and diligence when discussing about what would make society or structures more just. Trust between agents is indispensable to make dialogue enriching and constructive. I highly doubt consensus or compromise would be obtainable without a climate of trust, and it is especially necessary that the privileged learn to trust the oppressed as being of good will *and* competency, given that stereotypes and biases have historically played a role in the oppression of the latter, by undermining their image as knowers and doers.

Dialogue is also necessary at a collective or political level to change oppressive structures. It is necessary to create the friction required for the creation of a better understanding of the world

we live in, as well as to the creation of the structural reforms necessary to it. Here, the creation of safe spaces is crucial to the success of dialogue, or else, the unprivileged may end up distrusting the good will of the privileged to cooperate in producing the structural reforms necessary to make society more just.

*4.6 Empathic education:* Although this part could not be developed here to my taste, I would like to make some suggestions about how education should be reformed in an empathic social connection model of responsibility. Education is a crucial part to understanding what it means to be a responsible moral, political and epistemic agent, and it would happen in school, but also some popular education is also necessary to an eventually working deliberative democracy. Here are some suggestions that I think would be interesting to consider while building an empathic education:

*4.6.1 De-hierarchization of education:* I think this might be my most controversial suggestion, and I would not want it to be confused with some anarchistic chaos. De-hierarchizing schools would mean several things such as that 1- students should be considered as potential knowers from whom it is possible to learn (especially in cases where the students come from generally marginalized social groups); 2- decisions about education should not be subjected to bureaucratic authority; and 3- students should thus have a say in the decisions made about the functioning of the school.<sup>xlv</sup>

Because the first suggestion is self-speaking, I will not spend too much on it, but will simply mention that sometimes, being assumed to know (either because one is the teacher, or because one is from a privileged group) may make some educators either unsensitive about the negative impacts of some of their interventions (when they are not blatantly arrogant)<sup>xlvi</sup>, hence the need to consider students as active knowers, rather than mere passive receivers of knowledge. Given the restriction of space, I will not be able to provide a complete and convincing argument in favor of de-hierarchizing education, but I base myself on the premise that responsibility and deliberation, among other things, should be taught as early as possible. Indeed, children are working up their

values through their development and hands on action can provide an invaluable apprenticeship. I would not like someone to confuse this statement with the suggestion that students of all ages should be the only decision-makers about education, but rather, that they, as well as their parents and those who are responsible for their education should have a say in decisions concerning the teaching and learning environment.

*4.6.2 Teaching about the various forms of oppression and domination as barriers the unprivileged must face in life<sup>xlvii</sup>:* Given how racism and sexism, to name just those two, affect students' confidence in their abilities, affecting thus their participation and perseverance in school, it would be a mistake to not talk about it, especially in milieus considered to be "difficult". By doing this, I aim at improving, on the one hand, students' self-confidence in their capacities, as well as creating a sensitivity (both in students and educators) about how oppression and domination can undermine an individual's engagement in sharing knowledge, as well as developing a desire to fight against structural injustice.

*4.6.3 Teaching philosophy as early as during childhood:* I think this proposition would be helpful in developing skills such as critical thinking and assessing values. This would also help students from a young age to start thinking about the meaning of some ethical, yet abstract concepts such as justice, and developing their own understanding about it. What I mean here is that we start using and talking about such concepts (let's stick with justice for a moment) before having developed a minimal or certain understanding of it, so that many people use such concepts, even in adulthood, without being clear about what they are talking about. Starting to discuss those topics at a young age may not contribute to elaborate a universal definition of justice (and I actually doubt that a universal definition of justice actually exists, but I believe in a transformable one) once and for all but may facilitate discussions about it when time comes for political action.

#### *4.6.4 Community work as being a part of the academic curriculum from elementary school:*

Community work would be an excellent opportunity to teach skills such as teamwork and empathy by creating opportunities to get to know those from different social groups through sharing a common goal. From an early age, volunteering should thus be strongly promoted, so that students would develop a sense of belonging and responsibility for their community. Further, through direct hands on action, students would get to know better about the conditions and experiences of those who are different from them, as well as contributing to develop some concern for others. Through volunteering, students would learn to stretch their empathy from an individual to groups, which has the potential to radically transform the way they experience the world, understand justice and their implication in both<sup>xlviii</sup>.

*4.6.5 Teaching empathic and listening skills:* There exists an international program called *Roots of Empathy*<sup>xlix</sup> that aims at helping children from age 5 to 13 to cultivate their empathy. They base their program upon research and evidence, with the aim of reducing violence among children, and developing a more caring class environment. In experiential classes, the students are visited by a parent and their baby every three weeks, and the baby is the instructor. Throughout the year, the students are accompanied by their instructor in observing the baby's development, as well as in learning about how to read the baby's feeling, through which they learn, at the same time, to identify and better understand their own feelings.

This said, learning how to develop one's empathic skills is essential, but so is developing one's listening skills. Indeed, "listening to someone with the goal of trying to understand what they mean, rather than listening with the goal of answering to them" are two distinctive skills, and the former is essential as an epistemic tool to gather information about the other, and thus challenge our assumptions of knowing (especially in cases where one has developed arrogance as an epistemic vice, due to their privilege). Communication between agents from different perspectives and

preferences would thus be facilitated, and agreement, concessions and consensus about justice could therefore be easier to obtain, simply because a larger number of voices could be heard, and the attitude in negotiation would be one about how to find the most just agreement, rather than the one that best advantages oneself.

*4.6.6 Popular education assemblies where all are treated as potential knowers:* Education should not happen only at school; it should also be part of political life and action. Therefore, part of either activism or in an ideal deliberative democracy, popular education about a given project should be mandatory in order to deliberate about it. This said, although some information should be granted by specialists, the voices of those it will affect must also be taken into consideration. We live in a world where those who have higher education often dominate those who do not,<sup>1</sup> which sometimes makes the former decide without consideration for the interests of the latter or the impact a given project would have on them.

## *5. Against Empathy*

I have met contradictory arguments about whether empathy was the cause of our moral understanding<sup>li</sup> or not<sup>lii</sup>. Paul Bloom, in his book *Against Empathy*, holds the position that in order to be better moral agents, one needs to get rid of their empathy, which he defines as “the feeling of what [one believes] other people feel – experiencing what they experience.”<sup>liii</sup> In other words, from a moral standpoint, he believes that sharing into the feelings of others is a poor guide. Instead, Bloom argues in favor of using our deliberative reasoning as our moral compass. I noticed several flaws with Bloom’s arguments (the first being that he refuses to clearly define the terms he uses)<sup>liv</sup>, meaning that I do not endorse Bloom’s definition, as I consider it does not make justice to the potential of empathy, but I’ll accept that maybe empathy may not be the best moral guide.

This said, I think that either empathy or rationality is in itself insufficient, and they should not be considered as mutually exclusive as is usually the case: given the complexity of human nature

and relations, and because it is possible to argue both for and against using empathy as a moral guide, I think that in order to develop the most accurate approach to justice, a pluralistic one is necessary. On the one hand, one problem with using reason alone is that it disqualifies some preferences, values or understandings as rational, in a context where historically, one way of thinking and understanding has been the norm, excluding thus large number of people as candidates for rationality. Although some progress has been done so far to recognize the ability to reason of members of oppressed groups, some of their preferences are often still perceived as irrational, because they simply do not fit with what would be considered as objective or reasonable, according to the standards set by the dominant group. On the other hand, a problem of using empathy only comes with certain shortcomings such as having certain biases and preferences for those who are close to us, especially in cases where one has not learned to develop their empathy to make it a tool<sup>lv</sup> to gather alternative sources of knowledge. Therefore, using both empathy and reason has the potential to overcome their respective shortcomings. I think that empathy (or emotions) need not be in dichotomy with reason, and that recognizing the connection between both could help us solve some of the criticisms against empathy. I think that our capacity for empathy and emotional resonance with others can be improved, and controlled through reason, by learning how to efficiently use it to gather information and better understand those different from us.

One of the strongest challenges to a notion of empathy regarding social change centers around how empathizing can sometimes cloud our judgements about fairness, so that when we empathize with someone, we risk acting unfairly (even Batson, a strong proponent of empathy faced this challenge)<sup>lvi</sup>. Paul Bloom considers that “the case for an objective and fair morality is self-evident”<sup>lvii</sup>, and that grounding our moral standards in empathy would result in a morality that is both subjective and unfair. He therefore believes that moral philosophy should be grounded in a narrower rationality. One problem here is that his arguments rely on an overly individualist

conception of moral reasoning, which means that he is only concerned with individual acts, rather than ways to bring about collective action, or with structural problems. In some cases, it might be pertinent to consider what is the moral thing to do as an individual in a given situation, but in cases of structural injustice, in order to bring about some desired changes, one has to partake in collective action, and empathy has this potential to bring about this desired outcome by facilitating exchange between agents from different backgrounds, and by creating altruistic motivation. This said, in this section, I intend to address two challenges to empathy: the first is that acting on empathy may sometimes make us act unjustly, and the second is that acting on empathy can harm those in need.

For the first challenge, Batson made two experiments in which empathy was induced in some of the participants, while some others were in a neutral state<sup>lviii</sup>. In both experiments, he found that principles of fairness were admittedly set aside to help the individuals for whom empathy had been induced. The first experiment consisted in sharing raffle tickets either for a group, or for one individual. The second consisted in hearing about a 10-year-old girl who suffered a slow progressive terminal illness and provided participants the opportunity to move her forward in the line for treatment. In both cases, the participants that were asked to empathize with the girl or one member of the group for the raffle ticket were more likely to privilege the person for whom they felt empathy over principles of fairness.

In some cases, it is hard to simply dismiss the shortcomings of empathy as making one act unjustly. This is due to one aspect (or limit) of empathy that makes it act like a spotlight, so that we are more likely to act in the interests of one individual for whom empathy is induced. Therefore, an empathic social connection model requires empathy to be both emotional *and* rational (in the sense of respecting principles of impartiality). In some cases, such as in the 10 year old girl, the fact that not all the participants empathizing with her put her name up in the list demonstrates how we are able to both empathize and make a moral judgement, so that we can harness our empathy in order

to act justly when presented with a dilemma between prioritizing one individual or the principle of fairness. The other example, with the raffle tickets, the dilemma appears not as unfair to me as it might be to someone else: in the experiment, the participants had to decide whether they would share 12 raffle tickets to a group of four, or give eight raffle tickets to one participant (either themselves or another one). Batson found out that in cases where empathy was induced for a third party in participants, those participants were more likely to give the eight tickets to the third party for whom they felt empathy, rather than sharing it with all the group. Although in the abstract, and all things considered equal, such a vision of empathy can lead to unfairness, I think things work a little more subtly in real life. What I mean here is that in a laboratory, all parameters are controlled so that the participant is limited in their choices, so that they cannot consult others or hear about what each participant has to say. Also, there are cases where the group might decide to prioritize some action that will be detrimental to the group as a whole, but that will contribute to the wellbeing of the more vulnerable of its members. In such cases, I guess that consultation with others or considering different courses of action while empathizing could contribute to reduce the undesirable effects of empathy. When empathy and fairness appear to conflict, sometimes deliberating about what is the fairest course of action might be the empathic one (i.e. leaving the raffle tickets to the person who is going through a difficult period in their life to cheer them up) when the decision is made in group (i.e. the majority of participants think it is the best thing to do to cheer the sad person), or when it requires impartiality, deliberating about the best course of action and considering different inputs might prevent some unfair acts that an individual feeling empathic could commit (i.e. the person being empathized with could state that they are happier with everyone having equal chances to get the gift certificate, rather than getting all the raffle tickets).

Paul Bloom makes a convincing case about how our empathy for those who suffer may cause more harm than help. For instance, he suggests that small donations to many causes, rather

than bigger donations to fewer causes may be costly (and thus harmful) for organizations, as well as how sometimes, sending short-term foreign aid might impede long-term development where it is sent. Another example he gives is how orphanages in Cambodia fuel on rich westerners' pity for money, so that they create the moral problem of coercing or paying poor parents for their children.<sup>lix</sup>

The failings of some humanitarian aid is not, properly speaking, a failing of empathy, but rather a failing on the behalf of the institutions within structures: institutions that aim at reducing poverty by industrializing or implementing capitalism in third world countries do not constitute helping from empathizing: they are either trying to export our failing structures elsewhere (at best) or what Freire would call false generosity (so that good conscience and privilege can be maintained). Corruption, and self-defeating help, therefore, are not empathic failings, but rather structural failings, as well as a consequence of the active ignorance that is ingrained in western psyche. There exist some humanitarian aid initiatives that are successful, and these are those that are context sensitive and that consider the interests of those in need. The problem I see with the aforementioned humanitarian aid failings is that they do not treat the ones they are trying to help as agents capable of contributing to the improvement of their conditions according to their preferences or cultures, and thus, are *insufficiently empathic* (if empathic at all) from the perspective of an empathic social connection model of responsibility.

*Conclusion:*

In this paper, I aimed to make a case for empathy in a context of structural injustice. Although I admit the limits of empathy (its focus, when undeveloped is very narrow and it may sometimes conflict with principles of fairness) when comes the time to make a moral judgement, I think it is also risky to try to make moral judgements based solely on rationality. I think that morality comes from the fact that we are both social and political animals, and thus, it is possible that our capacity to make moral judgements stems from it. Does it mean that we should use empathy only?

No. We are both capable of empathy and rationality, and I think that in order to evaluate that there is injustice, and to solve these injustices, both empathy and rationality should be used to their best extent. Each is in certain respects limited, so that rather than favoring one over the other, we should use both, to defeat the shortcomings of each. Thanks to our rationality, we are capable of learning from our mistakes, and improve what already exists, while thanks to empathy, we are capable of building connections with others, and understand the world from a perspective different from our own. Rationality could thus be used to help us analyze and criticize the information we gather from empathic encounters in order to at least improve the structures in which we live. Rationality could also help us to enlarge the natural focus of empathy to make it a collective phenomenon, rather than merely an individual one, so that one could start empathizing in the sense of “what is it like to belong to this social group, or having this kind of social experience?”

As seen in the first section of this paper, in a context of oppression, the concept of rationality has been a cornerstone in dehumanizing large numbers of people in virtue of their belonging to certain social groups, by ideologically depriving them of this capacity. This took away their status as rational agents, so that even when one rejects stereotypes against an oppressed group, there are chances that one remains with their biases, to a greater or lesser extent. I have argued that morality is somewhat arbitrary, and that sometimes, one’s judgements about right and wrong need to be suspended in order become open to a different view about justice, one that might be a little closer to justice. Finally, responsibility is about making individuals work together in order to change society in a way to make it more just. To make it possible, it is imperative to see humanity as a balance between individuality and collectivity, rather than being as either one, or the other.

## Notes:

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- <sup>i</sup> Iris Young, *Justice and the Politics of difference (2011 Edition)*, p.42, *emphasis added*
- <sup>ii</sup> Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality*, p.8
- <sup>iii</sup> Iris Young, *Justice and the Politics of difference (2011 Edition)*, p.38
- <sup>iv</sup> Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, p. 14
- <sup>v</sup> *Ibid*, p. 9
- <sup>vi</sup> Iris Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, p.55
- <sup>vii</sup> *Ibid*, p. 53-64
- <sup>viii</sup> Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality*, p.2
- <sup>ix</sup> Clarissa Hayward, “Responsibility and Ignorance: On Dismantling Structural Injustice”, p.404-405
- <sup>x</sup> Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract*, p.3
- <sup>xi</sup> Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, “Dependency Demystified: Inscriptions of Power in a Keyword of the Welfare State”, p.5, 11, 18
- <sup>xii</sup> *Ibid*. p.15, 19
- <sup>xiii</sup> Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, p.147-169
- <sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid*, p.20
- <sup>xv</sup> *Ibid*, p.28
- <sup>xvi</sup> Iris Young, *Justice and the Politics of difference (2011 Edition)*, p.58-9
- <sup>xvii</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed (30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition)*, p.152
- <sup>xviii</sup> Iris Young, *Justice and the Politics of difference (2011 Edition)*, p.61
- <sup>xix</sup> Iris Young, *Global Challenges: War, Self-Determination and Responsibility for Justice*, p.169

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<sup>xx</sup> In the article “A Plea for Anti-Anti-Individualism: How Oversimple Psychology Misleads Social Policy”, Alex Madva argues that individual changes are integrant to structural changes, and thus, that prioritizing changing structures may be problematic and misleading. As I am a fan of pluralistic approaches to a problem, I think that using responsibility to redress structural injustice has the potential to work on both aspects of changing the individuals and the structures.

<sup>xxi</sup> Alex Madva, “Implicit Bias, Moods, and Moral Responsibility”

<sup>xxii</sup> Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, p.52

<sup>xxiii</sup> *Ibid*, p.127

<sup>xxiv</sup> Iris Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, pp.105-113; Iris Young, *Global Challenges: War, Self-Determination and Responsibility for Justice*, pp.176-181

<sup>xxv</sup> Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract*, pp.15-17, 91-95

<sup>xxvi</sup> *Ibid*, p.75

<sup>xxvii</sup> C. Daniel Batson, *The Altruism Question*, p.2; C. Daniel Batson, *Altruism in Humans*, p.11; E. Ann Kaplan, “Empathy and Trauma Culture”

<sup>xxviii</sup> Jean Decety, “Empathy, Imitation, and the Social Brain”, p.27

<sup>xxix</sup> In “Validation and Psychotherapy”, Marsha M. Linehan discusses the importance of validation in psychotherapy, especially when dealing with suicidal patients. When I talk about validating an experience, I am interested in the act of making someone else’s frame of reference relevant and/or meaningful, so that it becomes possible to see the Other as a rational agent, even in cases where their frame of reference is alien to us.

<sup>xxx</sup> I am indebted to Dr Pablo Gilabert for the formulation.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Roman Krznaric, *Empathy: Why it Matters, and How to Get It*, p.163

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<sup>xxxii</sup> My suggestions one to four about how to build an empathic social connection model of responsibility were inspired by some habits of empathic people raised by Krznaric in his book *Empathy: Why It Matters, and How to Get It*. While Krznaric is mainly concerned with inspiring the reader to become more empathic, I adapted some of his suggestions to make them relevant to my topic.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Marco Iacoboni, “Within Each Other”, p.17; José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, p.133-134, 161-162

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract*, p. 70-72, 91-109

<sup>xxxv</sup> Adelbert H. Jenkins, “Psychotherapy With People of Color”, p.331

<sup>xxxvi</sup> I would like here to add a nuance about my reluctance on using abstract concepts when discussing about justice, as it will come back in the remaining of this paper. I am not rejecting them altogether, but I think that we should be mindful of how these concepts have been historically idealized and misapplied to justify unequal treatment of people belonging to oppressed groups.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Daniel C. Batson, “What’s Wrong with Morality?”. In this article, Batson shows through experiences how we generally lack genuine moral motivation, and how we mostly prefer to avoid the costs of being moral (when possible), while appearing moral, phenomenon which he calls *moral hypocrisy*.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Maureen O’Hara, “Relational Empathy: Beyond Modernist Egocentricism to Postmodern Holistic Contextualism”, p.303

<sup>xxxix</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*

<sup>xl</sup> Adam Morton, “Empathy for the Devil”, p.3-4

<sup>xli</sup> Sally Haslanger, *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*, p.29

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<sup>xlii</sup> Iris Young, “Activist Challenge to Deliberative Democracy”, p.685

<sup>xliii</sup> Julian De Freitas and Mina Cikara, “Deep down my enemy is good: Thinking about the true self reduces intergroup bias”: this article is not about empathy properly speaking, but shows promising results in research about how developing an individual favorable bias (the good true self) about someone from a different social group can be used to reduce intergroup bias.

<sup>xliv</sup> Karen Jones, “Trust as an Affective Attitude”

<sup>xlv</sup> I would need to deepen my knowledge about the topic, but Alexander S. Neill made surprising discoveries in his alternative school. Although he was not committed to empathy strictly speaking, I think that some of the ways his school was organized could be used for empathic education. For more details, see Alexander S. Neill, *Libres Enfants de Summerhill*.

<sup>xlvi</sup> For more details see Sally Haslanger, “Studying while Black: Trust, Opportunity and Disrespect”, *DuBois Review* (2014) Vol. 11, No.1 109-136

<sup>xlvii</sup> Ferroni, “We Teach Racism, Sexism and Discrimination in Schools”

<sup>xlviii</sup> This is what Kaplan would call an *ethics of witnessing*. “Empathy and Trauma Culture”, p.21

<sup>xlix</sup> <https://rootsofempathy.org/>; Krznaric, *Empathy, Why It Matters, How to Get It*, p. 30-31, 181, 193

<sup>l</sup> Iris Young, *Justice and the Politics of difference*, p. 80

<sup>li</sup> Martin L. Hoffman, “Empathy, Justice, and the Law”

<sup>lii</sup> Jesse J. Prinz, “Is Empathy Necessary for Morality?”

<sup>liii</sup> Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy*, p.3

<sup>liv</sup> In “Understanding Empathy”, Amy Coplan discusses the different meanings of empathy, and then argues for more precision in defining and using the term, instead of being more general. I think

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that one problem in Bloom's book is that he is so vague in his definition of empathy, that he needs to precise every once and then in his chapters what he is against and what he is not against.

<sup>lv</sup> I have been criticized for using an approach that uses empathy instrumentally, which takes away some of its inherent value. I am not sure whether empathy should hold such a value, as I define it as being neutral (and I don't believe that any human capacity should hold too much value, as I fear that we might end up marginalizing those who struggle with any of those capacities or do not have them, i.e. the autistic person who struggles to empathize but still wishes to establish connection with fellow humans, with the ironic outcome of our failing to empathize or sufficiently empathize with them). I however think that the *bonds* one creates with fellow humans through empathy (or other bond creating capacities that are not discussed in this paper) can be very meaningful and valuable. In other words, I do not grant value to the capacities in themselves, but I do grant value to what good and meaning we can achieve with these.

<sup>lvi</sup> C. Daniel Batson, *Altruism in Humans* p.196-197

<sup>lvii</sup> Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy*, p.215

<sup>lviii</sup> C. Daniel Batson, *Altruism in Humans*, pp. 200-204

<sup>lix</sup> Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy*, p.100

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