

# TCRS



Teoria e Critica della Regolazione Sociale

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## FROM WHAT WE ARE TO WHAT WE ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR

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FROM WHAT *WE* ARE TO WHAT *WE* ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR

The current issue of "Theory and Critics of Social Regulation" takes its cue from Margaret Gilbert's *Foundation and Consequences of Collective Moral Responsibility*, where the personal blameworthiness is at stake in dealing with the idea of a collective guilt. For Gilbert, even when we did something horrible not being forced to do it and knowing that what we did was horrible, even then, the personal and moral guilt for each member of a *we* is not necessarily implied. Main Gilbert's thesis is: "*Neither my moral guilt nor my moral innocence is implied by our moral guilt*" (p. 2). Indeed, the personal moral guilt would depend on the specific and concrete relationship between the individual and the wrong collective action, notwithstanding the personal awareness that *we* did something wrong.

Clearly, the key question that has to be solved, in order to deal with the personal guilt in case of condemnable collective actions, regards the exact meaning of doing something together as a body. Gilbert, taking benefit from previous analyses on the topic (see *On Social Fact* and *A Theory of Political Obligation*), gives a non-distributive reading of acting together. According to this view, neither personal intentions nor *we*-intentions explain the unity of an association (that is not a mere aggregation) where rights and obligations arise among participants. Indeed, for Gilbert, the association in a *we* is mainly based on an agreement, which "suggests that the members of a collective "we"---including those who act together---are unified *in the same way* that the formation of a contract or agreement unifies the parties to the contract" (p. 4). Therefore, the bond between people acting together would be of a contractual kind and, on these bases, those who act together have, by reason of this joint activity, "the standing to demand of the other parties action appropriate to the completion of the joint activity, and to rebuke any other party for not acting" (p. 5).

On this background, Gilbert states that, in order to have an adequate conception of acting together, we should refer to the *joint commitment* of the parties. A peculiar commitment that involves the interconnected exercise of more wills in view of doing something as a body; being committed, in particular, to espouse "*a certain goal as a body*" (p. 7). But – Gilbert points out – being

committed to espouse a goal as a body, to believe one or another proposition as a body (that p as a body) does not mean that any member of the association personally believes in that proposition (that p). Therefore, following Gilbert, there could be several circumstances that explain why a specific individual cannot be held culpable for a collective action. Just think of possible constraints to enter the joint commitment or of a joint commitment to accept as a body that a representative can set goals for the group. In these situations and in case of wrong and horrible actions – Gilbert concludes – personally we could have rather a sort of *feeling of guilt* that “*is simply a matter of my being one of 'us' – when we are guilty – something that does not speak directly to my personal guilt or innocence*” (p. 15). At the level of collective responses to our blameworthy actions, through this account we obtain the distinctiveness, from personal feelings, of a joint commitment *to feel remorse as a body*. At the same time, at the level of the responses of others against the members of a body that made a wrong action, Gilbert’s account leads to be particularly sensitive to the individual’s story, since “*though our story is one and the same – insofar as we did this terrible thing – your story and my story may be quite different*” (p. 18).

Considering Gilbert’s arguments, it is not accidental that in the other contributions to this issue of TCRS the real nature of acting together is at stake. For instance, Virginia Held critically points out the presence of an individualistic metaphysics in Gilbert’s account of a social group. According to Held, such an account would make disputable both Gilbert’s idea to deal with explanations of acting together based on subjective intentions or matched we-intentions, and her plan to deal with an idea of collective moral responsibility rooted in the real world.

On the other hand, Scott Shapiro, in his paper on *Massively Shared Agency*, underlines that an acceptable account of acting together, as long as it aims at grasping the existence of a large-scale cooperation within ubiquitous activities, should provide both an adequate understanding of authority and a plausible conception of cooperation among people not highly committed to the success of the activity.

More generally, Paolo Di Lucia, writing on a case-study in social ontology (Barbaricina revenge in Sardinia) offers a paradigmatic distinction between interpersonal and transpersonal societies, the latter being presumably

correspondent to Gilbert's account, since within this model a *we* is unified around the joint commitment to a common goal.

Besides, in a detailed analysis, Giuseppe Lorini, dealing with the levels of description of an institutional act, offers a useful pattern for framing both the collective act that could generate a collective moral responsibility, and the institutional responses that this act causes in different situations.

Finally, Giovanni Magri's reading of those legal activities of interpretation and application of constitutional norms able to express and reiterate the feeling of guilty and of remorse of a collectivity, points out an evident institutional outcome of the collective moral responsibility.

At the end of the day, we should maybe wonder if the historical scale of a specific wrong collective action is significant for the theoretical analysis on the collective moral responsibility. Is it still possible to distinguish between my story and your story when, like in the case of Nazism, the very idea of human being is at stake? Maybe, for such tragic epochal events the humanity as a body is morally responsible, and each of us, as a human being, has not only a *feeling of guilty* but rather something similar to an intimate moral guilty for what other human beings, like us, have been able to do.