DOI: 10.1111/phc3.12770

ARTICLE

WILEY

The agents of justice

Colin Hickey¹ | Tim Meijers² | Ingrid Robeyns³ | Dick Timmer³

¹University Center for Human Values and the High Meadows Environmental Institute, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey, USA

²Institute for Philosophy, Leiden University, Leiden, the Netherlands

³Ethics Institute, Utrecht University, Utrecht, the Netherlands

Correspondence

Ingrid Robeyns, Ethics Institute, Utrecht University, Utrecht, the Netherlands. Email: I.A.M.Robeyns@uu.nl

Funding information

The European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme, Grant/Award Number: 726153

Abstract

The complexities of how justice comes to be realized, and by which agents, is a relatively neglected element in contemporary theories of justice. This has left several crucial questions about agency and justice undertheorized, such as why some particular agents are responsible for realizing justice, how their contribution towards realizing justice should be understood, and what role agents such as activists and community leaders play in realizing justice. We aim to contribute towards a better understanding of the landscape of these kinds of questions. First, we argue that theorists should distinguish between (i) agents who are responsible for realizing justice, but not committed to it, (ii) agents who are not responsible for realizing justice, but who are committed to it, and (iii) agents who are both responsible for and committed to realizing justice. Second, we discuss how to incorporate agents of justice more robustly into theorizing about justice.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary literature on theories of justice, it is common to distinguish between different elements that make up those theories. Theories of justice need an account of which goods justice is concerned with, a task that has produced vigorous debate about the so-called metric or currency of justice (Arneson, 1989; Brighouse & Robeyns, 2010; Daniels, 1990; Dworkin, 1981; Rawls, 1971; Sen, 1980). They also need an account of the pattern or principle according to which those goods should be distributed, such as a principle of equality, sufficiency, priority, or desert (Casal, 2007; O'Neill, 2008; Parfit, 1997). Moreover, they must specify the scope of application for their principles in order to see who is owed consideration regarding such goods, for instance co-nationals, all of humanity,

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited and is not used for commercial purposes.

© 2021 The Authors. Philosophy Compass published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

future generations (Abizadeh, 2007; Blake, 2001; Caney, 2008; Cohen & Sabel, 2006; Gosseries & Meyer, 2009; Nagel, 2005; Rawls, 1999; Sangiovanni, 2007). Further, they need to address the site of justice, that is, which types of entities and interactions are appropriately governed by principles of justice, such as the institutions of the basic structure, the family, individual conduct, and so on (Abizadeh, 2007, p. 323; Cohen, 1997; Okin, 1989; Rawls, 1971; Tan, 2012).¹

However, an equally important element of theories of justice has been relatively neglected in the literature. This element concerns who *realizes* justice. Call this the 'agents of justice' question.² This issue of agency raises important and distinctive questions for any theory of justice, and cannot be settled by specifying its metric, pattern, site, or scope. For example, how is responsibility for realizing justice distributed among various (kinds of) agents, and why?³ Which agents are to blame if justice is not realized? How are we to understand the contributions of moving towards justice from agents that do not bear moral responsibility for realizing it, but nevertheless struggle on its behalf? How should we understand the relation between different kinds of agents of justice, both in general and within specific contexts of injustice?

In this paper, we hope to contribute towards a better understanding of the landscape of these kinds of questions. We have two aims. The first is to argue that in thinking about matters of agency and justice, two different dimensions must be considered; namely, 'responsibility' and 'commitment'. In particular, theorists should distinguish between (i) agents of justice who are responsible for realizing justice but not committed to doing so, (ii) agents of justice who are not responsible for realizing justice but are committed to doing so, and (iii) agents of justice who are both responsible for and committed to realizing justice. For example, a government might be responsible for reducing the nation's greenhouse gas emissions, but refuse to take sufficiently ambitious actions to decarbonize. On the other hand, someone like Greta Thunberg might not be responsible for reducing global emissions, but is certainly committed to the effort.

Our second, more general aim is to discuss how to incorporate agents of justice more robustly into theorizing about justice. Instead of defending a particular account of how to understand who the agents of justice are, in general or in a given context, we aim to scrutinize some of the central and relevant parameters specific accounts of agents of justice should detail and justify.

By distinguishing between responsibility and commitment, and attending to the wide range of differences within each category, we hope to equip theories of justice to recognize and respect a wide array of different kinds of agents and actions that are relevant to realizing justice. Some agents might have 'primary' responsibility to organize institutions of justice, or for a specific task, while others have 'secondary' responsibility to comply with institutions, or to ensure others comply, or to pick up the slack when others don't comply (Caney, 2014; Miller, 2011, 2012; O'Neill, 2001, p. 181; Stemplowska, 2016). As we will discuss below, agents may have different grounds for their responsibilities, which carry different weight or suggest different actions in order to fulfill them. Similarly, commitment comes in many flavors, from many different sources, and to varying degrees—from the concerned voter to the die-hard activist.

Advancing the cause of justice involves many differently situated agents, doing many kinds of things. For some it might be working within current feasibility constraints to enact policies that would reduce injustice, while others work to weaken or eliminate feasibility constraints that stand in the way of justice. For some it might be the direct provision of scarce goods to those in need, others might march in the streets, write protest songs, go on hunger strike, and so on (Sharp, 1973). Our hope is to encourage theorists to consistently engage with this wide assemblage of considerations as an essential part of their theorizing.⁵

This paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, we discuss the role and nature of *responsibility* in theorizing about agents of justice. In Section 3, we move to the importance and relevance of *commitment* in theorizing about agents of justice. And finally, in Section 4, we outline which questions should be addressed to incorporate an account of agents of justice in a theory of justice.

2 | RESPONSIBILITY FOR REALIZING JUSTICE

When agency is brought up in theorizing about justice, it almost exclusively concerns where the *responsibility* to realize justice resides. Sometimes this is treated as thinly as invoking undifferentiated language about 'duties being triggered', leaving the readers to infer or assume who the duty bearers are exactly. More often it is implicitly assumed that the duties fall on the government. Or the discussion unfolds with generalized collective forms such as that 'we' or 'they' are responsible for realizing justice. There are, of course, some laudable exceptions to this characterization of the current state of the debate, which include more extensive discussions of agency and responsibility (Caney, 2014; Miller, 2011, 2012; O'Neill, 2001; Stemplowska, 2016). However, even these exceptions rarely provide a well-worked out account and justification for the implicitly proposed agents of justice.⁶ Our call for attention points to a similar concern as Onora O'Neill (2005) develops in her paper "The Dark Side of Human Rights", where she argues that more work should be done on the 'supply side' of human rights, that is, the duty bearers. Similarly, philosophers must address which agents are responsible for fulfilling the demands of justice more generally in their theories.

Specifying which particular agents are responsible for realizing justice is a complex task. It involves clarifying both the forward- and backward-looking senses of responsibility for any given agent (Young, 2011). Understanding the backward-looking dimension of responsibility is especially important as we consider what failures of responsibility might mean for the responsibilities of *other* agents to realize justice (Caney, 2014; Miller, 2011; Murphy, 2003; Stemplowska, 2016). For example, in the area of climate justice, one might argue that the lack of adequate action by the governments of countries who have historically caused most emissions may require other agents in that country to pick up the slack. Moreover, specifying which agents should realize justice may require distinguishing between agents with perfect duties and agents with imperfect duties. Furthermore, some theories of justice may distinguish between identifying 'responsibilities' from other concepts like 'duties' or 'obligations' in their account of agents of justice.

Aside from these various distinctions, a theory of justice should also determine the substantive grounds for its favored allocation of responsibility for realizing justice between different agents. There are many different ways to ground ascriptions of responsibility to agents. Some responsibilities for realizing justice might be grounded as *general* responsibilities, such as duties that are owed to all human agents in virtue of their humanity (Barry, 1982). But most responsibilities for realizing justice are *special* responsibilities, such as responsibilities that flow from a particular status, standing, or voluntary or involuntary relationship an agent has relative to the recipients of justice.⁸

Crucially, the philosophical literature on responsibility has, with some exceptions, not been brought together with the political philosophical literature about theories of justice. This is important because in the responsibility literature there is significant convergence about how responsibilities can be grounded. Yet in political philosophy, there is much less of an agreement, or even discussion, about how responsibility of realizing justice is grounded in general or even in more specific contexts. If we bring those two areas of philosophical theorizing together, however, we can distinguish several ways in which special responsibilities for realizing justice can be grounded. A theory of justice need not, of course, endorse each of them as grounding responsibility of realizing justice, yet most theories of justice implicitly or explicitly endorse at least one or even more of those grounds.

We can draw on the influential, multi-dimensional accounts of David Miller (2007, pp. 81–110) and Iris Marion Young (2011, pp. 142–151) to illustrate this and distinguish at least five grounds for allocating special responsibilities.

Role responsibilities: an agent might bear special responsibility for realizing justice in virtue of the authority vested in their role, position or office. Such responsibility might be formally specified, as in a governmental official. Alternatively, it may be informal, role-specific responsibility, such as with parents, community leaders, etc.

Remedial responsibilities: an agent might bear special responsibility for realizing justice in virtue of its contribution to some past injustice (e.g., being complicit or participating in some act of wrongdoing). In particular, an agent might be responsible for repairing or remedying the wrongdoing. ¹⁰

Beneficiary responsibilities: an agent might bear special responsibility for realizing justice in virtue of benefitting from historical or ongoing injustice, regardless of past wrong-doing. ¹¹

Capacity responsibilities: an agent might bear special responsibility for realizing justice in virtue of their power, capacity, or ability to realize justice.¹²

Membership responsibilities: an agent might bear special responsibility for realizing justice in virtue of membership of some group, such as out of solidarity or because they follow as a matter of self-respect from one's self-conception as a group member.¹³

These grounds for special responsibilities for realizing justice are not mutually exclusive. And although it covers the most common ways of ascribing special responsibilities which a theory of justice might deploy in filling in an account of agency and responsibility, this list is not exhaustive. Moreover, determinations about what kind of content these various grounds might generate for agents' responsibilities (which sources are relevant, for which agents, and how they interact at the all-things-considered level) is a largely contextual matter. For example, two agents that both have capacity responsibilities for realizing justice might still be to a different degree responsible for realizing justice. In many countries, charities donate cooked food or food supplies to poor persons, but on most accounts of justice this is a responsibility for the government, not for volunteers and philanthropists. As with any multi-dimensional account with diverse sets of inputs, across a diverse set of agents, in a diverse range of real-world cases, determining the content attached to responsibility ascriptions is a complicated endeavor.

With this, we can see that agents can be agents of justice if they bear general or special responsibility for realizing justice. The extent to which they bear such responsibility is a contextual matter which a theory of justice should specify in sufficient detail, particularly if it aims to be complete and informative in specifying how justice should be or is in fact realized.

3 | COMMITMENT TO REALIZING JUSTICE

Philosophers who do incorporate matters of agency when theorizing about justice focus almost uniformly on the conceptual space regarding the relation between responsibility and justice, which was articulated in the previous section. That is, they focus on the question who is responsible for realizing justice, what grounds such responsibility, and to which degree specific agents are responsible.

There is, however, another important consideration to highlight about the relationship between agency and justice that matters for a theory of justice. This concerns the *commitment* of agents to realize justice. The degree to which agents are motivated to pursue justice determines, at least in part, how and to what extent justice can be realized. As we mentioned in the introduction, a nation that is responsible for reducing its greenhouse gas emissions but not committed to taking the necessary steps to do so serves as a roadblock to the realization of justice. Perhaps sub-state actors (e.g., cities or industry) can compensate by picking up some of the slack, but the lack of commitment on behalf of the agent with primary responsibility is particularly important to understand in our theorizing about justice; especially if we want to think about how to address their lack of commitment.

But bringing the idea of commitment to the fore when thinking about issues of agency and justice is important for another reason as well. There seems to be a wide range of different kinds of agents that are extremely relevant to the process of how justice is realized, but which don't necessarily bear responsibility for it. In the introduction, we gave the example of Greta Thunberg's commitment to reducing global greenhouse gas emissions, but she is just one of the many activists, organizers, community leaders, and everyday folks who don't seem to be responsible for realizing justice, but who nevertheless are committed and struggle on its behalf, in matters both big and small. The

same could be said for countless groups, organizations, and collective agents, from NGOs and non-profits to lobbying groups and even corporations.¹⁴

Recognizing and respecting the various roles that agents who are *committed* to realizing justice, even if they are not *responsible* for it, play in advancing the cause of justice is important. Such agents are often crucial components of any significant progress. This is a point Monique Deveaux (2015) has made regarding the importance of the agency of the global poor in poverty-reduction efforts, even though they aren't responsible for their dire condition. And it can be seen throughout history by any close analysis of social movements (Anderson, 2014; Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011).

These kinds of committed agents often play a different role than agents responsible for realizing justice, such as the government, its agencies or institutions, or the individuals populating and acting for them. They may, for instance, play particular roles in agenda setting, or in building sufficient support to pressure policy-makers into action. They may help to shift the 'Overton window', or awaken our moral imaginations to previously uncredited possibilities; or serve as a voice of conscience to signal when societal developments are moving in the wrong direction. The ways in which such agents might be less bound by requirements of transparency or democratic accountability than government actors, opens up different possibilities and flexibility for their conduct. And of course, such agents may also serve important roles directly by providing various goods to those in need (e.g., through food banks, after-school tutoring, or distributing essential medications, etc.).

As with responsibility, commitment comes in many varieties and to varying degrees. The reasons why agents are (or might come to be) committed to certain causes are complicated and diverse, and the ways in which agents act (or could act) on their commitments are many. Some may arrive at their commitment through close personal connection to an injustice, others may join in solidarity (Scholz, 2008; Shelby, 2002; Taylor, 2015). Some may feel forced into action as a matter of circumstance, others may have deliberately chosen to commit to some struggle. Alongside such variation in how agents come to their commitments, there is wide variation in what that commitment, for them, consists in. Some of these agents may be committed in the sense that they would vote for certain measures, others that they may occasionally protest or donate to relevant causes, while others may devote their lives to the pursuit of justice (and like Martin Luther King or Honduran environmental activist Berta Cáceres, even risk and lose their lives fighting for justice). ¹⁵

Understanding the landscape of such agents, and their relation to agents with official forms of power and responsibility, is crucial for theories of justice. Doing so is necessary for figuring out ways in which theorists might engage with such agents and seek their input in developing our moral judgments and in coming to or justifying any action-guiding recommendations. It may even be that political philosophers should at times *defer* to such agents on account of, for instance, their local epistemic expertise or the ways in which their agency is or will be implicated in protest action (Kolers, 2005). Moreover, understanding the dynamics of such agents is crucial for thinking about how to help coordinate their efforts, activate their resources, or marshal their attention. It is essential for the purposes of moral education and trying to figure out how to get more agents committed and actively doing their part to help realize justice, as well as to support and prevent burn-out among those already deeply involved.

One implication of embracing the importance of such agents for theories of justice is an acceptance that they have the capacity to exercise their agency in *justice-relevant* ways. Not everyone will be willing to follow us in this assumption. On some accounts of justice, principles of justice simply do not apply to individuals but only to, for example, institutions. On these views, such agents might be able to make the world *better* in various ways through their actions, yet no matter how consequential, they cannot make the world more or less *just*. This ultimately comes down to a question of about what principles of justice are for, including theoretical choices about the metric, pattern, scope and site of justice (Meckled-Garcia, 2008). Some theorists, such as many luck egalitarians, consider deviations from a particular distributive pattern as unjust. That means that actions which bring the distribution closer to that ideal distribution constitute justice-relevant improvements. Others, however, consider principles of justice as setting rules and consider violations of those rules as unjust and compliance with those rules as just. The first view allows any agent with the relevant capacity to help realize justice. However, the second view is more restrictive and holds

that not all agents have the capacity to bring about justice-relevant changes. For that to be the case, it has to be their *obligation* to conform to those rules to begin with.¹⁶ We cannot settle this debate here, but want to maintain the intuitive sense in which these kinds of committed agents are essential elements in the pursuit of justice without being required to do what they do on the basis of being responsible in some relevant sense. As such, we believe there are good reasons to distinguish between two types of agents committed to realizing justice, namely those that are (i) responsible for realizing justice and committed to realizing justice and those that are (ii) not responsible for realizing justice but still committed to realizing justice.

There are some interesting things to consider regarding the relation between commitment and responsibility. For instance, it may be that certain kinds of sustained commitments could lead to a particular kind of responsibility; perhaps because one accrues certain power or status that serves as a trigger to ground a responsibility or because one's initially supererogatory acts generate legitimate expectations on behalf of the beneficiaries that in turn become wrong to violate. In any event, commitment seems to come with its own kind of practical normativity. ¹⁷ Being committed to a person, or project, or pursuit of justice may entail being willing to act in particular ways, or form particular kinds of intentions, or make certain judgments, or have certain affective responses consistent with the commitment. This may even make appropriate certain kinds of praise or blame, conditional on one's having the commitment. There are better and worse ways of pursuing or living up to one's commitments. But in thinking through this possibility, it is important to distinguish the normative requirements and reactive attitudes that attach to the commitment from the requirements that are demanded of one as a matter of justice.

Before we close our discussion on the role of commitment and responsibility in theorizing about agents of justice, we should note that there are other considerations that need to be accounted for when theorizing about agents of justice. In particular, the agents of justice as we have described them so far, may not always be effective. Thunberg clearly made an impact, but commitment is not a guarantee for success. Someone may be committed to rectifying an injustice and act on this commitment, however, they *do not need* to succeed in order to count as an agent of justice; being committed (and acting in ways that fit this commitment) is enough. While we cannot give a deeper analysis of the role that efficacy might play in theorizing about the agents of justice, the above example illustrates that the conceptual space provides for multiple options.

4 | TOWARDS AN ACCOUNT OF AGENTS OF JUSTICE IN A THEORY OF JUSTICE

In this paper, we have started analyzing how theories of justice should attend to considerations about the agents involved in realizing justice. Instead of trying to spell out or defend a specific conceptualization of what such consideration would ultimately deliver, we have aimed to analyze some of the central and relevant parameters specific conceptualizations will need to detail and justify. From this, we can distill something of a research agenda for theories of justice to pursue in order to better incorporate questions about the agents of justice. Specifically, whether concerned with a particular context of injustice or thinking more generally, theorists should at a minimum characterize:

- [1] which agents are responsible for realizing justice; and
- [2] which agents are committed to realizing justice.

In addition, theorists should develop an understanding of:

- [3] the relational dynamics between responsible but non-committed agents, committed but non-responsible agents, and responsible and committed agents; and
- [4] any agential and non-agential dynamics facilitating or hindering the realization of justice by the various agents of justice (e.g., feasibility constraints, malign actors, environmental risks); and
- [5] how considerations of efficacy bear on different agents' roles in the pursuit of justice.

We want to end with some brief comments on the kinds of considerations that might be relevant for assessing whether a given theory of justice has adequately incorporated concern for the agents of justice in their efforts.

One important consideration is whether the theory's treatment of the relevant agents of justice is complete and extensionally adequate. If a theory overlooks, underemphasizes, or misconstrues an important agent of justice, or if it casts the net too broadly and includes too many irrelevant agents, that will have implications for its efforts to provide appropriate action-guiding recommendations. Capturing all the relevant agents of justice is important for understanding the roles, relations, and dynamics between them, in order to know what each agent should or shouldn't do.

Another consideration is whether the theory distinguishes between agents acting in *mere compliance* with the demands of justice and those more active, progressive, reformers who actively fight against injustices. For example, if one group of citizens comply with their duty to pay their taxes by not engaging in tax avoidance and evasion, they seem to be differently situated than a group of citizens who also stage protests demanding that the government eliminate possibilities of unfair tax avoidance and effectively combat tax evasion. On matters of fiscal justice, this second group of citizens is clearly much more active in their pursuit of justice.

A further consideration is whether the theory acknowledges that some important agents of justice may also be *perpetuators of injustice*. The world is complicated and messy, and few, if any, agents of justice have perfectly clean hands. If an account of the agents of justice fails to recognize and sufficiently grapple with this fundamental truth in trying to understand the dynamics of how to realize justice, this would be a serious mark against that account.

Relatedly, another consideration is whether a theory's approach acknowledges that some important agents of justice may also be *victims of injustice*. Many of the fiercest advocates for justice are also victims of injustice. This might serve both as their commitment to realizing justice and can generate privileged epistemic access essential to the struggle for justice. Inadequately attending to this fact, such as by overly focusing on the government to the exclusion of grassroots activists, would also be a serious mark against that account of the agents of justice.

A final consideration worth mentioning, which is relevant for assessing how a theory might attempt to better incorporate issues of agency and justice, is whether it is capacious enough in its understanding of what realizing justice consists in. Aside from actions by big, powerful, institutional, effective change makers, it is relevant whether the theory is able to capture actions by everyday heroes, small acts of resistance, the effective power of collective action of individual persons, and subtle exercises of agency towards justice. There can be temptation to underemphasize these dynamics. Yet affording them proper place accords with the intuition that the project of justice takes all types and it resonates with the self-understanding of less powerful actors contributing in small part to realizing justice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For comments, we thank Fergus Green, Matthias Kramm and the referees. This project has received funding from the European Research Council under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant Agreement No. 726153).

ORCID

Colin Hickey https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2275-8130

Tim Meijers https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0457-2044

Ingrid Robeyns https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2893-1814

Dick Timmer https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0337-3369

ENDNOTES

Debates about the site of justice have implications for issues regarding justice and agency that we aim to highlight in this paper, but are distinct. Debates about the site of justice concern what the appropriate regulatory object of principles of justice is, that is, basic structure (Rawls, 1971) and/or individual behavior (Cohen, 1997), and debates about which institutions fall under the basic structure. But whatever the proper site of justice is, we still need to determine which actual agents do, could, and should advance the cause of justice. Establishing that principles of justice govern the basic structure,

for example, does not settle what roles various agents play in making the basic structure more just. In fact, because most views which take the basic structure as the site endorse a 'natural duty of justice' for individuals, they do not even settle all questions regarding individual and institutional agents, much less specify their respective roles.

- The question who the agent of justice is, has been ignored in several recent introductions or overviews on social and distributive justice, such as Arneson (2012), Olsaretti (2018), and Von Platz (2020). For the main references in the literature in philosophical theories of justice that do discuss agents of justice, see Caney (2014), Deveaux (2015), Dryzek (2015), O'Neill (2001), and Weinberg (2009). Laurence (2020) has recently highlighted the importance of identifying 'a plausible agent of change who might bring about the proposed remedies' (p. 355).
- ³ In this paper, we assume a general concept of an agent as an entity capable of acting intentionally, on the basis of reasons, via at least some mechanisms of deliberation. We want this concept to be broad and inclusive, so as to include many kinds of agents (both individual and collective) with many different kinds of abilities.
- ⁴ A fourth group of agents are agents who are neither responsible for realizing justice nor committed to realizing justice. Though they are agents, they are not agents of justice.
- ⁵ For an account of the relation between theorizing and activism, see Ypi (2011).
- ⁶ Frequently, the most explicit discussions come from areas outside core debates on theories of justice, like the ethics of philanthropy (Reich, 2018; Reich et al., 2016), questions about the role of NGOs in development (Kuper, 2004; Fuller, 2005), or climate justice (Caney, 2014).
- ⁷ Where the former is meant to capture something more nebulous and ongoing, as in the sense of your 'the responsibility for your children.' See Calhoun (2019) and Feinberg (1988).
- ⁸ An example being Miller's principles of fair play in cooperative ventures. See Miller (1999, Ch. 2, 2007, pp. 12-18).
- ⁹ For an exception, see Collins (2019).
- ¹⁰ This kind of justification is commonly indicated in the responsibility literature by the 'polluter pays principle'. For discussion of this principle in the context of climate justice, see Moellendorf (2012, pp. 135–136) and Shue (2014, pp. 182–186).
- 11 This is related to what Young (2011, p. 145) discusses when invoking the term 'privilege'. It is also commonly raised under the banner of the 'beneficiary pays principle' (Page, 2012).
- Young (2011, pp. 144-145) discusses the idea in terms of 'power', Miller (2007, pp. 103-104) uses the term 'capacity', others have used 'ability'. This is commonly referenced as the 'ability to pay principle' (Moellendorf, 2012, p. 136). But they all indicate the same general idea about a possible justification or parameter of responsibility.
- Miller (2007, p. 104) speaks of 'community membership'. Young's (2011, pp. 145–147) discussion of 'collective ability' and an agent's 'interest' in the cessation or continuation of an injustice similarly speaks to this possible locus for generating responsibilities.
- Such agents might, of course, feel responsible. Indeed, one aspect of being committed is the experience of its being required as a matter of one's self-conception, see Fleming (2009) and Fruh (2014). And this is not to deny that such agents might indeed have some duties of justice. We mean only to isolate the idea that some agents, who are committed but not morally responsible, could permissibly walk away from some efforts without violating their duties of justice (even if doing so might be difficult or impossible psychologically). We discuss some of the complicated ways in which responsibility and commitment might interact below.
- What it takes to count as being relevantly 'committed' is not something we will attempt to settle here, except to say that it will involve a network of cognitive, behavioral, and affective dispositions.
- ¹⁶ Some theorists might want to endorse the claim that only those with responsibilities for realizing justice can act in justice-relevant ways, but nevertheless want to acknowledge the role for these kinds of agents in realizing justice by extending and justifying some sense of responsibility to them. However, this theoretical possibility comes at a price. For instance, if justice fails to be realized, this move may counterintuitively or inappropriately open such agents up to blame for the failure when such blame should sit asymmetrically with other agents of justice, such as the state.
- ¹⁷ As mentioned in endnote. ¹⁴ See particularly Fleming (2009, Ch. 1).

REFERENCES

Abizadeh, A. (2007). Cooperation, pervasive impact, and coercion: on the scope (not site) of distributive justice. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 35(4), 318–358. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1088-4963.2007.00116.x

Anderson, E. (2014). Social movements, experiments in living, and moral progress: Case studies from Britain's Abolition of Slavery [The Lindley Lecture].

Arneson, R. J. (1989). Equality and equal opportunity for welfare. *Philosophical Studies*, 56(1), 77–93. https://doi.org/10.1007/bf00646210

Arneson, R. J. (2012). Justice. In D. M. Estlund (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of political philosophy* (pp. 58–75). Oxford University Press.

Barry, B. (1982). Humanity and justice in global perspective. Nomos, 24, 219-252.

Blake, M. (2001). Distributive justice, state coercion, and autonomy. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 30(3), 257–296. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1088-4963.2001.00257.x

Brighouse, H., & Robeyns, I. (Eds.). (2010). Measuring justice: Primary goods and capabilities. Cambridge University Press.

Calhoun, C. (2019). Responsibilities and taking on responsibility. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 119(3), 231–251. https://doi.org/10.1093/arisoc/aoz017

Caney, S. (2008). Global distributive justice and the state. *Political Studies*, 56(3), 487–518. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2008.00748.x

Caney, S. (2014). Two kinds of climate justice: Avoiding harm and sharing burdens: Two kinds of climate justice. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 22(2), 125–149. https://doi.org/10.1111/jopp.12030

Casal, P. (2007). Why sufficiency is not enough. Ethics, 117(2), 296-326. https://doi.org/10.1086/510692

Chenoweth, E., & Stephan, M. J. (2011). Why civil resistance works: The strategic logic of nonviolent conflict. Columbia University Press.

Cohen, G. A. (1997). Where the action is: On the site of distributive justice. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 26(1), 3–30. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1088-4963.1997.tb00048.x

Cohen, J., & Sabel, C. (2006). Extra rempublicam nulla justitia? *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 34(2), 147–175. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1088-4963.2006.00060.x

Collins, S. (2019). Group duties: Their existence and their implications for individuals. Oxford University Press.

Daniels, N. (1990). Equality of what: Welfare, resources, or capabilities? *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 50, 273–296. https://doi.org/10.2307/2108044

Deveaux, M. (2015). The global poor as agents of justice. *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, 12(2), 125–150. https://doi.org/10.1163/17455243-4681029

Dryzek, J. S. (2015). Democratic agents of justice. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 23(4), 361–384. https://doi.org/10.1111/jopp.12053

Dworkin, R. M. (1981). What is equality? Part 2: Equality of resources. Philosophy & Public Affairs, 10(4), 283-345. JSTOR.

Feinberg, J. (1988). Responsibility for the future. *Philosophy Research Archives*, 14, 93-113. https://doi.org/10.5840/pra1988/19891427

Fleming, L. (2009). The normativity of commitment. Georgetown University. PhD dissertation.

Fruh, K. (2014). Moral heroism and the requirement claim. Southwest Philosophy Review, 30(1), 93–104. https://doi.org/10.5840/swphilreview20143019

Fuller, L. (2005). Poverty relief, global institutions, and the problem of compliance. *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, 2(3), 285–297. https://doi.org/10.1177/1740468105058156

Gosseries, A., & Meyer, L. (2009). Intergenerational justice. Oxford University Press.

Kolers, A. (2005). Justice and the politics of deference. Journal of Political Philosophy, 13(2), 153–173. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9760.2005.00218.x

Kuper, A. (2004). Harnessing corporate power: Lessons from the UN Global Compact. Development, 47(3), 9–19. https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.development.1100062

Laurence, B. (2020). The question of the agent of change. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 28(4), 355–377. https://doi.org/10.1111/jopp.12204

Meckled-Garcia, S. (2008). On the very idea of cosmopolitan justice: Constructivism and international agency. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 16(3), 245–271. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9760.2007.00281.x

Miller, D. (1999). Principles of social justice. Harvard University Press.

Miller, D. (2007). National responsibility and global justice. Oxford University Press.

Miller, D. (2011). Taking up the slack? Responsibility and justice in situations of partial compliance. In C. Knight & Z. Stemplowska (Eds.), Responsibility and distributive justice (pp. 230–245). Oxford University Press.

Miller, D. (2012). Justice for earthlings: Essays in political philosophy. Cambridge University Press.

Moellendorf, D. (2012). Climate change and global justice. Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change, 3(2), 131–143. https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.158

Murphy, L. B. (2003). Moral demands in nonideal theory. Oxford University Press.

Nagel, T. (2005). The problem of global justice. Philosophy & Public Affairs, 33(2), 113-147. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1088-4963.2005.00027.x

Okin, S. M. (1989). Justice, gender and the family. Basic Books.

Olsaretti, S. (Ed.). (2018). The Oxford handbook of distributive justice. Oxford University Press.

O'Neill, M. (2008). What should egalitarians believe? *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 36(2), 119-156. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1088-4963.2008.00130.x

O'Neill, O. (2001). Agents of justice. Metaphilosophy, 32(1-2), 180-195. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9973.00181

O'Neill, O. (2005). The dark side of human rights. *International Affairs*, 81(2), 427-439. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2005.00459.x

Page, E. A. (2012). Give it up for climate change: A defence of the beneficiary pays principle. *International Theory*, 4(2), 300–330. https://doi.org/10.1017/S175297191200005X

Parfit, D. (1997). Equality or priority. Ratio, 10(3), 202-221. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9329.00041

Rawls, J. (1971). A theory of justice (Original ed). Belknap Press.

Rawls, J. (1999). The law of peoples. Harvard University Press.

Reich, R. (2018). Just giving: Why philanthropy is failing democracy and how it can do better. Princeton University Press.

Reich, R., Bernholz, L., & Cordelli, C. (Eds.). (2016). Philanthropy in democratic societies: History, institutions, values. The University of Chicago Press.

Sangiovanni, A. (2007). Global justice, reciprocity, and the state. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 35(1), 3–39. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1088-4963.2007.00097.x

Scholz, S. J. (2008). Political solidarity. Pennsylvania State University Press.

Sen, A. (1980). Equality of what? In S. M. McMurrin (Ed.), Tanner lectures on human values. Cambridge University Press.

Sharp, G. (1973). The politics of nonviolent action. Porter Sargent Publisher.

Shelby, T. (2002). Foundations of black solidarity: Collective identity or common oppression? *Ethics*, 112(2), 231–266. https://doi.org/10.1086/340276

Shue, H. (2014). Climate justice: Vulnerability and protection. Oxford University Press.

Stemplowska, Z. (2016). Doing more than one's fair share. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 19(5), 591–608. https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2016.1183753

Tan, K.-C. (2012). Justice, institutions, and luck: The site, ground, and scope of equality. Oxford University Press.

Taylor, A. E. (2015). Solidarity: Obligations and expressions. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 23(2), 128–145. https://doi.org/10.1111/jopp.12035

Von Platz, J. (2020). Theories of distributive justice: Who gets what and why. Routledge.

Weinberg, J. (2009). Norms and the agency of justice. Analyse & Kritik, 31(2), 319–338. https://doi.org/10.1515/auk-2009-0207

Young, I. M. (2011). Responsibility for justice. Oxford University Press.

Ypi, L. (2011). Global justice and avant-garde political agency. Oxford University Press.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Colin Hickey is a postdoctoral researcher at Utrecht University. As of September 2021, he will be a Postdoctoral Research Associate at Princeton University in the High Meadows Environmental Institute and the University Center for Human Values. He received his Ph.D. from Georgetown University and works on broad issues in moral and political philosophy, with particular focus on climate ethics, global justice, and bioethics.

Tim Meijers is assistant professor of moral and political philosophy at Leiden University. Before that, he was a postdoctoral researcher at Utrecht University. His research is on theories of justice, global and intergenerational in particular. His work has appeared in journals like *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, *Economics & Philosophy*, *Ethics & International Affairs* and *Journal of Value Inquiry*.

Ingrid Robeyns holds the chair in Ethics of Institutions at Utrecht University. She has published widely on the capability approach and various aspects of social justice, as well as applied ethics more broadly. She is currently writing a book on limitarianism, the view that it is morally wrong to be excessively rich.

Dick Timmer is a PhD researcher at Utrecht University. His research interests include theories of justice, climate ethics, and the moral limits of the market. He has published in journals such as the *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, *Journal of Political Philosophy*, and *Utilitas*.

How to cite this article: Hickey, C., Meijers, T., Robeyns, I., & Timmer, D. (2021). The agents of justice. *Philosophy Compass*, e12770. https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12770