Structural Evil: Rising Up to the Challenge

Posted February 1, 2022 | By Carlo Calleja | ● Malta

Three big issues

Corruption. Environmental exploitation. Black labour. I shall call these the "three big issues" that hit the headlines in Malta over the past few years. I believe that they are common even to other southern European countries because of our geographical position (lying along the Mediterranean coast and similar history) and because our communities tend to be very closely knit.

I contend that these three big issues are of great moral importance because despite appearing so different at first blush, they have much in common. First, all contain implicit violence; second, they are exacerbated globalization; third, and most importantly, they are facilitated and precipitated by the action and non-action of (non)intending individuals and entire communities.

Microagression and implicit violence

For starters, all three issues lead to loss of lives. In 2017 the Maltese investigative journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia was assassinated for exposing corruption and other malpractices in the highest echelons of the Government.[1]

In 2020, Miriam Pace, a 54-year-old woman was killed in her own home after neighbouring excavation works led to the collapse of her family's house.[2]

Last December 22, a black man was admitted to hospital after falling from a height. Hospital staff initially referred to him as "Mr X" for days until his identity was discovered after he succumbed to his injuries. The victim was identified as Ahmed Adawe Diriye, a 39-year-old Somali migrant who had been residing in Malta for the past four years and who fell one and a half stories while installing air conditioners and solar panels at a factory without the official documents.[3]

Due to the systemic way in which they occur, corruption, environmental exploitation, and the abuse of migrants at their workplace entail acts of microaggression that occur on a daily basis. These would include for example, "online trolling," lack of accountability, minor bribes and threats, closing an eye to irregularities, clientelism, cajoling and coaxing. In other words, the three big issues depend on attitudes that are not overtly or immediately recognizable as violent. Instead, they tend to become part of culture and become identifiable as violent only in the long term due to the cumulative effect of such attitudes.

Globalization as a threat… and an opportunity

For better or for worse, globalization has led, *inter alia*, to more efficient economic transactions across the globe, the rapid transfer of data (including the spread of eco-chambers on social media and the radicalization of ideologies), and cheaper travel.

In 2005 Padua Conference, Enrico Chiavacci had already noted that, as a structural reality, globalization is liable to "complete domination or control by very small public or private groups with economic or political interests," lending itself also to corruption at the hands of political powers.[4] Chiavacci has been proven right.

Moreover, since "everything is interconnected,"[5] we can no longer speak of a moral act as if it begins and ends with the agent, as the moral manuals taught. Farther-reaching causes and effects now need to be factored into our moral reasoning.

The scale of the three big issues mentioned above necessarily implies dependence on entire structures of sin. Although legal fault can be pinned only on a handful individuals when it is already too late, morally-speaking, many more are responsible, over a longer period of time even if the final evil outcome is not directly intended by those involved.[6] A unskilled worker who risks losing his job, for example, cannot easily refuse to work on a construction project, even if that project does irreparable damage to the environment and perhaps threatens the livelihood of others (e.g. farmers).

A shift in moral reasoning: from personal sin and cooperation with evil, to social sin and structural evil

Seen in this isolated perspective described above (i.e. where an action begins and ends with the agent), the action can either be seen as morally neutral or at most as negligibly evil. Yet, when seen in the context of a structure or system it leads to a very

The moral manuals proposed applying the principle of cooperation with evil to determine the moral culpability of an agent's participation in an evil act. In her insightful discussion on cooperation and social sin, Julie H. Rubio states: "Due to globalization, the world today is much smaller than the world of the manuals. We can no longer limit our discussion of justice to direct relationships with shopkeepers, neighbors, and employers. Almost everything we use or buy connects us with people around the globe."[7]

Rubio drives home the point that we can no longer follow the manualists, who were concerned with relieving the scrupulous consciences of the pre-Vatican II faithful, but were "silent on sinful social structures such as racism, poverty, or militarism."[8]

In other words, in the case of the three big issues above, and in similar ones, the question of whether one is culpable of the evil outcome, or the extent of such culpability is close to irrelevant. What is of prime importance, instead, is whether the individual *is actively doing something about it*. As in the case of complicity in the structural sin of racism, so too in the three big issues mentioned above, complicity carries grave moral import.[9]

Formerly, the question on cooperation with evil arose out of the need to enlighten consciences in the confessional. Nowadays mass attendance and sacramental confession have decreased so drastically that this is no longer the case. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that external manifestations of religiosity are still very much part of culture in southern European countries. These include the rituals that mark a person's life (baptism, first holy communion, confirmation, weddings, and funerals), and a town (the village festivals and the blessing of new offices, monuments etc.). However, these expressions of religiosity are not always authentic reflections of popular piety. In fact, they are sometimes instrumentalized by those in power to exert even more influence over a particular family or town.[10]

Rubio reminds us that in cases of cooperation with evil, the moral manuals recommended restitution and extrication whenever possible. However, she adds that when it comes to social sin, "immediate restitution is not possible, nor is complete extrication from the sinful structures. Ongoing growth is the only option."[11]

Opportunities for "ongoing growth"

To help plot a way forward, it would be helpful to parse out human action into two dimensions. Following the critical realist Margaret Archer: the agent has at once a private life, which is at same time social. "Who we are," claims Archer, "is a matter of what we care about most. This is what makes us moral beings." In other words, while the view of the human person as atomistic is easier to conceptualize, it presents a very incomplete picture. A more comprehensive understanding of the human person would emphasize the emotional ties that go beyond instrumental reasoning, and which are expressed in the priority given to tasks that we value. There is, for Archer, "the existence of a dialectical relationship between *personal* and *social identity*."[12] Thus, conceiving of the agent as constitutive of a social reality will also enable "restitution" without "extrication" from the structures and thus enable "ongoing growth".

How so?

First, with Lisa S. Cahill we can find hope in the subsidiarity that occurs through globalization "from below" that is, the network of "actors, groups or individuals, who are engaged in forging a globalized civil society."[13] The nonpartisan, women-led #OccupyJustice local movement, and the #metoo global movement are practical examples of this.

Second, Dan Daly suggests that due to the "moral ambiguity of daily life…[v]irtuous people have, at times, limited opportunities to act virtuously."[14] We must therefore be careful to introduce, modify or eliminate "structural enablements and constraints" wherever possible that would help cultivate the desired virtues including respect for the rule of law, solidarity with countries riddled with migratory push factors, as well as a stronger sense of solidarity with migrants who land on our shores. Local parishes that form an extensive network in southern Europe can dedicate their energies to this in collaboration with the government and NGOs.

Third, the social dimension of liturgy needs to be retrieved. Local bishops can be vocal about the three big issues in their homilies that are broadcast daily on local media, in their pastoral letters and in op-eds on local newspapers.[15] Moreover, communal practices of solidarity during Advent and Lent, in church schools and in communities of faith, can also be explored to help cultivate the virtues that counter the vices of greed and individualism.

Bernard Häring is known to have said that we can hardly bring about the Kingdom of God without some cooperation with evil. But in the context of structural sin the converse is probably true. If we do not cooperate to remove evil from our social structures, the Kingdom of God will not be reached.

[1] Juliette Garside, "Malta Car Bomb Kills Panama Papers Journalist," *The Guardian*, October 16, 2017, sec. World news, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/16/malta-car-bomb-kills-panama-papers-journalist; Lorenzo Tondo and Reuters, "Malta Government Bears Responsibility for Journalist's Murder, Inquiry Finds," *The Guardian*, July 29, 2021, sec. World news, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/29/malta-government-journalist-inquiry-daphne-caruana-galizia.

[2] "'Liars and Murderers': Ħamrun Protest Demands End to Construction Impunity," accessed January 19, 2022, https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/protesters-in-hamrun-demand-end-to-developers-dictatorship.776291.

[3] Ivan Martin, "OHSA Inspectors Probe Fatal Accident of 'unidentified' Worker," Times of Malta, December 29, 2021, https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/ohsa-inspectors-probe-fatal-accident-of-unidentified-worker.924442.

[4] Enrico Chiavacci, "Globalization and Justice: New Horizons for Moral Theology," in *Catholic Theological* Ethics in the World Church: The Plenary Papers from the First Cross-Cultural Conference on Catholic *Theological Ethics*, ed. James F. Keenan, 1st edition (New York: Continuum, 2007), 239.

[5] Francis, "Encyclical on the Care of Our Common Home, *Laudato Si'*," May 24, 2015, paras. 70, 138, 240, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

[6] For a discussion on globalization social structures see Daniel K. Finn, *Consumer Ethics in a Global Economy: How Buying Here Causes Injustice There*, Moral Traditions (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019).

[7] Julie Hanlon Rubio, "Moral Cooperation with Evil and Social Ethics," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 2011, 115.

[8] Ibid., 105.

[9] For a sustained discussion on the enduring relevance of structures of sin in contemporary Christian ethics see James F. Keenan, "Raising Expectations on Sin," *Theological Studies* 77, no. 1 (March 2016): 165–80, https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563915620466.

[10] Mauro Cozzoli, "Mafia Struttura Di Peccato Quindi Risposta Strutturale," Avvenire, August 5, 2014, https://www.avvenire.it/opinioni/pagine/mafia-struttura-di-peccato; and Alessandro Puglia, "Stop Ai Padrini Nei Battesimi 'Ma La Mafia Non c'entra,'" la Repubblica, October 18, 2021, https://palermo.repubblica.it/cronaca/2021/10/18/news/stop_ai_padrini_nei_battesimi_ma_la_mafia_non_c_entra_la_diocesi_di_catania_pronta_a_querel 322744432/.

[11] Rubio, "Moral Cooperation with Evil and Social Ethics," 113.

[12] Margaret S. Archer, "The Private Life of the Social Agent: What Difference Does It Make?," in *Critical Realism: The Difference It Makes*, ed. Justin Cruickshank (New York: Routledge, 2007), 17; 23 (emphases added). For a deepr discussion on structures of sin and critical realism see Daniel K. Finn, "What Is a Sinful Social Structure?," *Theological Studies* 77, no. 1 (2016): 136–64.

[13] Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Globalization and the Common Good," in *Globalization and Catholic Social Thought: Present Crisis, Future Hope*, ed. John Aloysius Coleman and William F Ryan (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2005), 42–54; as cited in Kenneth R. Himes, "Globalization with a Human Face: Catholic Social Teaching and Globalization," *Theological Studies* 69 (2008): 270 and 285.

[14] Daniel J. Daly, "Critical Realism, Virtue Ethics, and Moral Agency," in *Moral Agency within Social Structures and Culture: A Primer on Critical Realism for Christian Ethics*, ed. Daniel K Finn (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2020), (e-book), http://public.eblib.com/choice/PublicFullRecord.aspx?p=6176640.

[15] For a discussion on the involvement of the local church in combatting environmental exploitation see Raymond Zammit and Carlo Calleja, "The Environmental Concerns of the Maltese Church," *Melita Theologica* 71, no. 2 (December 1, 2021): 141–