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RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MORAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR ZOOBOTIC PANDEMICS OUTBREAKS AND INDUSTRIAL ANIMAL FARMS

ABSTRACT

The responsibility for the COVID-19 pandemic was first ascribed to persons associated with the Huanan Seafood Market. However, many scientists suggest that this pandemic is actually a consequence of human intrusion into nature. This opens up a whole new perspective for an examination of direct and indirect, individual and collective responsibility concerning this particular pandemic, but also zoonotic pandemics as such. In this context, one of the key issues are the consequences of factory-farming of animals, which contributes to circumstances in which zoonotic pandemics emerge. Moreover, it is part of a larger economic system, global capitalism, whose logic implies certain coercion toward its participants to keep it essentially unchanged and therefore to make sure that livestock health remains "the weakest link in our global health chain" (FAO). However, even though the precise answer to the issue of moral responsibility for zoonotic pandemics outbreaks in general and the COVID-19 pandemic in particular cannot be given, it is possible to list certain indicators and make a framework helpful in ascribing moral responsibility to certain persons. The paper intends to do so by examining the notion of responsibility and by applying it to the issues mentioned. The results of this analysis show that it is misleading to place moral blame on people involved in actions that directly caused the animal-to-human transmission of a certain virus or on humanity as a whole.

KEYWORDS

moral responsibility,
animals, pandemics,
COVID-19, industrial
farms, global capitalism

Introduction

"When we eat factory-farmed meat we live, literally, on tortured flesh. Increasingly, that tortured flesh is becoming our own" (Foer 2009: 143). The meaning of this sentence is quite clear to all and requires no extensive argumentation: industrial farming of nonhuman animals, guided by the notion of efficiency (less investment for more profit), results in a greater scale of animal abuse and, at the same time, in a greater scale of diseases in both human and nonhuman animals (compared to traditional farming).

At the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, it seems that this formula can easily be applied to our treatment of wild animals. A great majority of the scientific and non-scientific public denounced a wet market – the Huanan Seafood Market in Wuhan, China, i.e. the trading and slaughtering of wild animals that occurs there, as the major culprit of the ongoing pandemic. Hence the torturing of these animals, surely held in inadequate conditions, was replicated in the “torture of torturers themselves”. Moreover, it swamped the world, including those humans who do not count as torturers themselves.

However, responsibility (which is here ascribed to someone as a precondition of being a culprit – this is discussed later on in the paper) was not only ascribed to local communities associated with wet markets, but sometimes also to the entire humankind in the context of the anthropogenic destruction of nature as a contributing element to the COVID-19 outbreak. By disrupting wild ecosystems “we shake viruses loose from their natural hosts”, leaving them to seek new hosts (Quammen 2020; see also Vidal 2020). In other words, “exploitation, as well as anthropogenic activities that have caused losses in wildlife habitat quality, have increased opportunities for animal-human interactions and facilitated zoonotic disease transmission” (Johnson et al. 2020: 1). Therefore, by bringing causation and responsibility into close connection, one could say that the “flesh tortured by the whole of humanity ‘takes revenge’ on its collective torturer”.

There is also an implicit assumption among some scientists (and an explicit one among a number of journalists) that the SARS-CoV-2 virus (which causes the COVID-19 disease) may have first “jumped” on humans from domestic animals on industrial farms. If such an assumption were valid, a great deal of the public would surely transfer the responsibility from local communities involved in wet market trade to much more powerful “market players”, i.e. those associated with industrial farming. In this respect, I will proceed by addressing the possibility of direct transmission of SARS-CoV-2 from factory-farmed animals. However, this assumption, regardless of its appropriateness in the particular case of COVID-19, is interesting for examining the responsibility for pandemics in general. Even if this assumption turned out to be wrong, certain environmentally harmful consequences of factory farming would surely prove to play a role in some of the conditions responsible for the COVID-19 outbreak according to the “official scenario”. Therefore, it will be taken into consideration here in order to examine the different forms and levels of responsibility for the COVID-19 outbreak. Since causality and responsibility are not synonymous, I will especially address the notion of responsibility, in order to provide the philosophical basis for answering the question of responsibility for the COVID-19 and other viral pandemics outbreaks (especially with regard to our behavior toward nonhuman animals).

Here I am not discussing the issue of responsibility of individuals or communities for later human-to-human COVID-19 transmissions. In order to reflect on the responsibility for this pandemic, it is crucial to reflect on the sources and not (primarily) on the “treatment of symptoms”, even though the latter is

of crucial importance once disease in humans occurs. My approach can simply be described in following terms: “While individual mitigation measures like physical distancing are critical at this time, such tactics are last-resort measures that we should rarely, if ever, have to rely upon. As we do our best to cope with COVID-19 in the present, we should work to prevent other pandemics from arising in the future” (Sebo, Stubler 2020).¹

Finally, the goal of this paper is not to present statistics out of which the level of each agent’s contribution to a zoonotic pandemic can become visible, but to focus one of them – industrial animal farms. By examining the importance of this practice for zoonotic pandemics outbreaks, as well as the responsibility for these outbreaks concerning the industrial animal farms, I will show that there is no ground for placing moral blame on people involved in actions that directly caused the animal-to-human transmission of certain virus or on humanity as a whole for creating the conditions for transmission.

1. Industrial Farms Pandemics

“Most of the new diseases that have emerged in humans over recent decades are of animal origin and are related to the human quest for more animal-source food” (FAO 2013: 2). While this is surely true, one should also acknowledge that many zoonotic epidemics and pandemics originated from industrial farms. As Rob Wallace says, swine flu, H1N1, “appears by definition industrial in origin” (Wallace 2016: 59). Regardless of whether industrial farms are the source or major places of virus transmission, it is clear that they increase the risk of pandemics. Lisa Warden, referring to numerous scientific studies, also makes such a claim and aptly summarizes the extent of the problem:

Research shows that confined animal feeding operations amplify novel influenza strains and that large-scale commercial animal farms increase the risk of outbreaks and transmission of zoonotic disease, function to maintain and disperse highly virulent strains of influenza and increase the frequency and scale of highly pathogenic outbreaks. It also shows that factory farm-induced deforestation and rampant antibiotic use heighten risk of the emergence of novel diseases. Intensive animal farming unquestionably poses a grave, pandemic-level threat to human and animal health. (Warden 2020)

As Foer pointed out, not only that one of the greatest global health catastrophes ever – the Spanish flu – was, in fact, avian influenza (probably mutated within pigs), but “there is scientific consensus that new viruses, which move between farmed animals and humans, will be a major global threat into the foreseeable future”. Therefore, “any talk of pandemic influenza today cannot ignore the fact that the most devastating disease event the world has ever

¹ However, if I had to give a philosophically more profound reason for justifiability of this approach, I would refer to a duty to evade the conflicts of grounds of obligations, shortly presented in: Guć 2019: 369–370.

known, and one of the greatest health threats before us today, has everything to do with the health of the world's farmed animals" (Foer 2009: 126–127).

What makes bird flus especially interesting and relevant for any other influenza is the fact that populations of wild birds are, according to Wallace, "the ultimate source reservoir of nearly all influenza subtypes". However, these populations (as it is ascertained by Ilaria Capua and Dennis Alexander) contain no endemic highly pathogenic strains. For developing a more significant virulence it is necessary for low-pathogenic influenza subtypes to enter populations of domestic birds. The occurrence of pathogenic influenza outbursts is significantly more frequent from "industrial", than from "backyard" domestic bird populations, due to the fact that nonhuman animals at industrial farms make "ideal populations for supporting virulent pathogens". This is due not only to *high population density criteria*, but also to *growing genetic monocultures* at these farms, which removes immune firebreaks for virus transmission. Finally, the *high throughput* at these facilities "provides a continually renewed supply of susceptibles, the fuel for the evolution of virulence" (Wallace 2016: 56–57).

One should also take into account the indirect impact of industrial farming on the emergence of pandemics. Acquisition of land for nonhuman animal feed (and consequently deforestation), pollution and other *ecological consequences of factory farming* can alone be marked as a serious risk factor. The livestock sector causes 18 percent of greenhouse gas emissions, which is a higher share than that of the entire world's transport sector (LEAD 2006: xxi), and there are strong indications that climate change has impact on animal-to-human disease spillover (Dunne 2020).

The estimates mostly based on the 2012 FAO data show that factory-farmed animals make 72.52% of all farmed land animals (Anthis 2019). This percentage, as well as the future meat consumption, will surely grow due to the fact that many developing countries are embracing "the more economically efficient processes of developed countries in the form of Confined Animal Feeding Operations" either "to improve the competitiveness of local production or fueled by large corporations moving to countries with fewer regulations" (Fiala 2008: 412–413). Even if one does not count on the future meat consumption growth, these feedlot systems are still directly or indirectly emitting more greenhouse gases per kg of produced meat than pasture systems (see e.g. Subak 1999). Finally, globalization, i.e. global trade and travel does not only increase chances for human-to-human, but also for animals-to-human disease spillover. Ever-increasing international trade in live animals and animal products (LEAD 2006: 62–63) helps spreading new pathogens around the world (FAO 2013: 58–63). Needless to say that this is most often connected with the industrialization of the livestock sector (LEAD 2006: 60–61).

Deforestation obviously poses a great threat for zoonotic disease transmissions due to increased opportunities for animal-human interactions. However, comparison between factory farming and pasture systems regarding their effect on deforestation is very complex. The famous LEAD's study the *Livestock long shadow* from 2006 takes into account estimations made by Wassenaar and his

colleagues (Wassenaar et al. 2007, at the time in print) that “the expansion of pasture into forest is greater than that of cropland” (LEAD 2006: 66). A later study made by Barona and her colleagues brings out a somehow similar, but more insightful conclusion:

The proximate cause of deforestation in the Legal Amazon was predominantly the expansion of pasture, and not of soybeans. However, in Mato Grosso, an increase in soybeans occurred in regions previously used for pasture, which may have displaced pastures further north into the forested areas, causing indirect deforestation there. Therefore, soybean cultivation may still be one of the major underlying causes of deforestation in the Legal Amazon. (Barona et al. 2010: 10)

Soybean is mostly used for animal feed at factory farms. However, it should also be noted that “soy has become increasingly related to deforestation over time. In summary, even if the *proximate* cause of deforestation was mainly ranching, it is likely that soy cultivation is a major *underlying* cause” (Barona et al. 2010: 10).

Overall, industrial farming (including its context and consequences) cannot be taken out of the equation when reflecting on the sources of a particular zoonotic pandemic. This is not only true for viral, but also for bacterial pandemics, due to the overuse of antibiotics at factory farms and consequent development of antimicrobial resistance (cf. Foer 2009: 140–141; OECD & FAO 2018: 160–161; IACG 2019).

2. The COVID-19 Outbreak and Industrial Farms

Already a study in which Chinese scientists examined the first 41 recorded cases of COVID-19 patients in Wuhan implicitly casts doubt on the belief that the pandemic originated at the Huanan Seafood Market. Namely, only 66% (27 out of 41) cases had direct contact with the market. The first case (“the symptom onset date of the first patient”) was identified on December 1, 2019. However, “[n]o epidemiological link was found between the first patient and later cases” (Huang et al. 2020: 500). Referring to these and some other data, Daniel Lucey emphasizes that the numbers in this study cannot easily be ignored (especially because 13 of these patients had no connection to the Huanan Seafood Market what so ever): “The virus came into that marketplace before it came out of that marketplace.”² One of the authors of the study, Bin Cao, also

2 “Lucey says if the new data are accurate, the first human infections must have occurred in November 2019 – if not earlier – because there is an incubation time between infection and symptoms surfacing. If so, the virus possibly spread silently between people in Wuhan – and perhaps elsewhere – before the cluster of cases from the city’s now-infamous Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market was discovered in late December” (Cohen 2020). Some sources claim that “we also now know, thanks to the leak of an official Chinese report to the South China Morning Post that the actual first known case of Covid-19 in Hubei was detected in mid-November, weeks before the cluster of cases connected to the Wuhan seafood market were reported” (GRAIN 2020). Even further,

expressed his doubts, claiming that we still do not know for sure where the source of this virus is: “Now it seems clear that [the] seafood market is not the only origin of the virus” (Cohen 2020). In one interview, Lucey again stresses that the first infected person in Wuhan did not get the virus at the Huanan Seafood Market, adding that animal-to-human transmission may have occurred in different places “in the supply chain of the infected animals e.g., in one or more multiple markets, or restaurants, or farms, or with wild animals, legal or illegal trade” (Lucey 2020). There are additional reasons for pointing the finger of doubt at industrial farms:

Another recently published study³ identifies the most likely intermediate animal hosts for SARS-CoV-2, based on their presence in Wuhan and their having a human-like ACE2 that enables the binding of SARS-CoV-2. These are the animals the study identified: civets, pigs, pangolins, cats, cows, buffalos, goats, sheep and pigeons.

Many of the animals on this list are industrially farmed in China, even wild animals like civets and pangolins are intensively farmed for their use in Chinese medicines. Suspicions that wild animal farms may have been behind the Covid-19 outbreak have already led the Chinese government to shut down 20,000 wild animal farms across the country.

But hardly any attention has been given to some other animals on this list, which more clearly meet the “high population density” criteria. Pigs would be one obvious candidate from this list, for several reasons. (GRAIN 2020)

One of the reasons for taking pigs into consideration as the “jumping point” of SARS-CoV-2 can be found in the profound change of their raising in the Hubei province, where Wuhan is located:

Over the past decade, small pig farms in the province have been replaced by large factory farms and medium-sized contract operations, where hundreds or thousands of genetically-uniform pigs are confined in high density barns. These industrial farms are the ideal breeding grounds for the evolution of new pathogens. (GRAIN 2020)

However, following the data presented by the World organization for animal health (last updated in September 2020), the transmission of the virus has not been proven in any concrete case between animals and humans, except in the case of American mink (*Neovison vison*). Other farmed animals that can be

a genetics team led by Shu-Miaw Chaw suggests that the bat-pangolin recombinant that was the progenitor for SARS-CoV-2 emerged around forty years before the COVID-19 outbreak (Wallace, Wallace 2020: 173).

3 Already in the abstract of the article referred to here, authors clearly claim: “SARS-CoV-2, the newly identified human coronavirus causing severe pneumonia pandemic, was probably originated from Chinese horseshoe bats. However, direct transmission of the virus from bats to humans is unlikely due to lack of direct contact, implying the existence of unknown intermediate hosts” (Qiu et al. 2020).

infected (with different levels of susceptibility) are ferrets, rabbits (New Zealand White rabbits), raccoon dogs, cattle, pigs (American Yorkshire crossbred pigs), and poultry (chicken, ducks, and turkeys) (OIE 2020). Therefore, at the present moment, one cannot prove that the SARS-CoV-2 originated in factory farms. However, such a conclusion would only add one additional reason for abandoning factory farming in order to prevent new pandemics. Without it, factory farming would still be one of the main reasons for these outbreaks, regarding above-mentioned consequences of this practice. Considering the COVID-19 outbreak, two additional indicators are most interesting, and should be seriously taken into consideration:

Deforestation (which provides space for livestock farms and our overcrowded cities), altered ecosystems (which provide shelter for wildlife), illegal trading with wildlife (Bushmeat), intensive domestic animal husbandry, and large-scale distribution of uncontrolled food of animal origin are all factors that may have contributed to the consequences of such spillover. (Contini et al. 2020: 259–260)

Starting in the 1990s, as part of its economic transformation, China ramped up its food production systems to industrial scale. One side effect of this, as anthropologists Lyle Fearnley and Christos Lynteris have documented, was that smallholding farmers were undercut and pushed out of the livestock industry. Searching for a new way to earn a living, some of them turned to farming “wild” species that had previously been eaten for subsistence only. Wild food was formalised as a sector, and was increasingly branded as a luxury product. But the smallholders weren’t only pushed out economically. As industrial farming concerns took up more and more land, these small-scale farmers were pushed out geographically too – closer to uncultivable zones. Closer to the edge of the forest, that is, where bats and the viruses that infect them lurk. The density and frequency of contacts at that first interface increased, and hence, so did the risk of a spillover. (Spinney 2020)

As Wallace pointed out, by common focus on each separate emergency one overlooks their most common structural causes. The increased occurrence of viruses cannot be adequately scrutinized without understanding its link with the industrial model of livestock production. The capital-led agriculture is, as he says, the best possible system to breed deadly diseases, removing immune firebreaks in crowded conditions of industrial farms (Wallace 2020: 33–34). In the case of the COVID-19, one could ask following question:

But how far back and how widely should we investigate? When exactly did the emergency really begin? The focus on the market misses the origins of wild agriculture out in the hinterlands and its increasing capitalization. [...] As industrial production – hog, poultry, and the like – expand into primary forest, it places pressure on wild food operators to dredge further into the forest for source populations, increasing the interface with, and spillover of, new pathogens, including Covid-19. (Wallace 2020: 35)

If one looks a little bit closer at circumstances and possibilities of SARS-CoV-2 or COVID-19 origins, one cannot locate the exact Chinese province

where the transmission of the virus happened. Wallace writes that phylogenetic analyses show that the virus' proximate origins can be placed as far south as Guandong (where both SARS-CoV-1 and H5N1 were originally identified). Following the conclusion that the SARS-CoV-2 jumped from bats to pangolins, one can say that "wild food trade in all likelihood played a foundational role in the emergence of the COVID-19 outbreak". However, this trade "shares with industrial agriculture sources of capital and economic geographies encroaching on Central China's hinterlands". Bat strains are circulating not only across Hubei province, „splattering wildlife and domesticated livestock along the way". And it would not be surprising if various SARS started to circulate among industrialized food animals. Therefore, instead of searching for the exact spot of the virus transmission, one should take broader, structural insight into this matter, here especially by noticing "the *processes* by which increasingly capitalized landscapes turn living organisms into commodities and entire production chains – animal, producer, processor, and retailer – into disease vectors" (Wallace 2020: 84–87).

3. What It Means to Be Responsible?

In the introduction two most frequently mentioned bearers of guilt or responsibility for the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak were recognized: people associated with trade on wet markets and humanity as a whole. However, the complexity of connections which gave rise to the pandemic is, as I presented it, much greater. In order to examine all the levels of responsibility it is not enough to pinpoint the exact moment in which SARS CoV-2 jumped from nonhuman animals on humans. The same can be said for every zoonotic pandemic. Before that, it is necessary to consider the concept of responsibility.

There are many different meanings in which the term 'responsibility' is used. The one I am referring to here is *moral responsibility*. However, the way in which this concept is understood varies with different ethical theories. As I cannot enter a discussion on this matter here, I am going to briefly explain what I presume a plausible account of responsibility must include.

Primarily, I examine something that may be referred to as "personal responsibility". As stated in Michael J. Zimmerman's entry in the *Encyclopedia of Ethics*, there are two main types of this kind of responsibility: prospective and retrospective. The first means that one has a responsibility (a duty or obligation) "to see to it that thing occurs or obtains". Retrospective responsibility concerns either (negatively) having failed to fulfill a duty, or (positively) being praiseworthy for fulfilling a duty. Besides, it can be said that, in one sense, certain individuals are "responsible persons (period), rather than responsible for something", i.e. that they are morally mature, having a certain capacity: "the capacity to make a reasonable assessment of one's prospective responsibilities (duties, obligations) and thereby to incur retrospective responsibility for one's actions". If one lacks such a capacity, one is called "nonresponsible". There is also another sense in which a person is called responsible, when one takes an

endeavor to fulfill prospective responsibilities. If this is not the case, one is called “irresponsible” (Zimmerman 2001: 1486–1487). The first sense can be marked as ‘responsibility in the sense of moral *capacity*’, and the latter as ‘responsibility in the sense of moral *validity* or *virtue*’. Being a morally responsible person according to the first meaning is a precondition for being morally responsible (or culprit in the moral sense) according to the second meaning. Here, for the sake of clarity, I use only the first sense of being a responsible person (or a nonresponsible being), while the latter differentiation can rather be marked as being morally right or wrong (and not responsible or irresponsible).

Besides personal responsibility, there is also the way of using of the term ‘responsibility’ in the sense of *causal responsibility*, simply to denote that something causes something else, e.g. “the short circuit was responsible for the fire” (Zimmerman 2001: 1486). Even though personal responsibility implies causal responsibility (at least in the sense of *endeavor* – even the lack of action can be seen as causation, as allowing for a certain causality to happen), they are not equivalents, because this would imply that nonresponsible entities can be personally responsible. However, this implication means that a person cannot be held morally responsible if he/she was in no respect the cause of a certain action.

Therefore, due to the lack of adequate capacities, nonhuman animals or even SARS-CoV-2 certainly cannot be held morally responsible for COVID-19, and no one could be held responsible in this way if purely natural causality was at work. However, this causal chain is largely “navigated” by responsible persons (moral agents). In order to be a morally responsible person, one has to be not only *capable of understanding* the moral implications of her own actions, but also to have *power* over them. However, these characteristics are not absolute (in the sense that a person either has them or not) but are rather most often present in different levels. Therefore, moral responsibility is also not an absolute concept. A person is morally responsible for a certain action in which he/she causally participates to the extent he/she has these characteristics. In this sense one should also examine another meaning of responsibility, which Otfried Höffe refers to as *task-responsibility* (*Aufgaben-Verantwortung*), i.e. “responsibility for particular roles, functions and appointments” (Höffe 1997: 315).⁴ However, moral responsibility surely cannot be reduced to this meaning. In the context of moral responsibility, if someone has a specific social role, it only means that he/she has a greater power to cause certain actions if this role was freely chosen (otherwise it is not necessarily the case, which will become clear in the following), and not that his/her responsibility is limited to this role.

4. Direct/Indirect and Individual/Collective Responsibility

The distinction between direct and indirect responsibility can be helpful in making further reflections on the levels of responsibilities of certain agent(s),

⁴ This concept is similar to Hart’s concept of ‘role-responsibility’ (Hart 2008: 212–214).

but might also be misleading if we put emphasis on direct responsibility at the cost of indirect one. For example, if a soldier commits a war crime under the command of his superior, the greater accusation (responsibility) will fall on the commanding officer, even though the soldier directly executed the action, while his superior can be said to have indirectly executed the action. Even though this accusation is mostly founded on legal or commanding responsibility, a similar result can be expected from moral judgment – the soldier, even though he cannot be released of his responsibility, was not independent to the same degree toward the action he executed directly as his superior who executed it indirectly.

The distinction, however, might be helpful to recognize the whole range of agents responsible for a certain action, where it intertwines with the distinction between individual and collective responsibility. Industrial farms make a good example here. Who is to be blamed for the horrifying treatment of non-human animals locked up there and consequently for the diseases that strike those animals and outbursts of diseases from viruses mediated through them to humans? Here those who lock up the animals, torture them, kill them etc., those who are *directly* responsible for these actions are the *last to blame* because they have the smallest degree of power in the entire chain of agents involved in making decisions concerning these activities. Their highest superiors are, obviously, way more responsible. But not only them – all those agents that (and are free not to) participate in the production and consumption of animal products (in this case, originating from industrial farms) bear their burden of responsibility – to the extent they are responsible agents. However, thwarting of this responsibility (i.e. power over actions and capability to understand the moral implications of actions) should also be accounted for here: the production in general producing consumption (see e.g. Marx 1973: 90–94), cultural industry producing “artificial needs” (see e.g. Horkheimer & Adorno 2002: 96), certain traditions reproducing prejudices, and even the whole existing socio-economic system that does not allow a more sensible way of organizing production only in order to endlessly increase productivity and fight competition on the free market. Under these conditions “agricultural markets have become so competitive that animal producers are usually not free to choose any method other than the one that is most efficient” (McMullen 2015: 128). Of course, abstract entities as capitalism cannot be morally responsible, but only individuals, especially those who have more power to thwart this system (e.g. a big shareholder in a multinational company can sell his shares in order not to be existentially threatened while opposing the system – a common worker does not have that privilege). In other words: “When we say ‘capital does this’ or that, we mean that certain human actions are carried out according to the logic of capital” (Kovel 2007: 51). Due to the unavoidable destruction of nature (see e.g. Burkett 2003; Kovel 2007; Foster & Clark 2020) and unavoidable maltreatment of nonhuman animals (see e.g. Gunderson 2011) generated by this logic, an agent is responsible for his/her strivings in preserving or

overthrowing it, according to the level of his/her power to do so and capability to understand what needs to be done.⁵

In order to gain a more comprehensive insight into personal responsibility, actions which people are forced to commit due to certain rules in which the capitalist mechanism functions should not be observed independently of this system. Not only that agribusinesses “externalize the costs of their epidemiologically dangerous operations on everyone else” (Wallace 2020: 34), but also the “responsibility” for them. Therefore, it happens that responsibility for the emergence of certain virus, which can easily be ascribed to e.g. capital-led deforestation (made for acquiring the land for factory-farmed animal feed), is publicly ascribed to those who trade on the spot where the virus spillover was first detected, i.e. on the virus’ alleged hotspot.⁶ Quite the contrary: “capital centers, places such as London, New York, and Hong Kong, should be considered our primary disease hotspots” (Wallace 2020: 33). In this sense, the “*absolute geographies* miss a critical part of the problem” (Wallace 2020: 89), whereas

[...] the *relational geographies* connecting different parts of the world that are driving disease emergence at a much more foundational level of causality. On the global stage, circuits of capital originating out of such centers as New York, London, and Hong Kong finance the deforestation and development driving the emergence of these new diseases at the coordinates that ecohealth investigates.

One can see how an ecohealth or One Health that blames locals for the problem of a disease spillover can serve as a next generation in greenwashing corporate land grabbing. Indeed, EcoHealth Alliance has attracted funding from some of the very multinationals driving deforestation, including Colgate-Palmolive and Johnson & Johnson, two companies dependent upon plantation palm oil. Even now in post-COVID 2020, blaming locals remains a veritable brand for the Alliance. (Wallace 2020: 90)⁷

5 It should be clear by now that here used term ‘personal responsibility’ does not exclude structural causation. In that sense, this concept does not follow the one which is rightly criticized by Iris Marion Young. She points out that the discourse of personal responsibility “assumes a misleading ideal that each person can be independent of others and internalize the costs of their own actions. It ignores how the institutional relations in which we act render us deeply interdependent. The discourse fails to ask what personal responsibility individuals have for the conditions of the lives of others in these independent relationships, as well as for their own lives” (Young 2011: 4–5). There is not enough room in this paper to go into Young’s theory of personal responsibility concerning structural relations, which one should consult (primarily in: Young 2011) in order to find incentives for rethinking a wider range of issues than those addressed in the paper.

6 “Focusing on outbreak zones ignores the relations shared by global economic actors that shape epidemiologies. The capitalist interests backing development- and production-induced changes in land use and disease emergence in underdeveloped parts of the globe reward efforts that pin responsibility for outbreaks on indigenous populations and their so-deemed ‘dirty’ cultural practices” (Wallace et al. 2020a: 49).

7 Wallace and his colleagues also add that “the disease control strategies enacted to protect food animals and plants provide nominal defense, acting more as a

Therefore, people associated with the Wuhan wet market are significantly less the cause and have less power over the COVID-19 outbreak, and are therefore significantly less responsible for it. Considering the ecological situation, it is almost a coincidence that the virus appeared in this market. Responsibility cannot be ascribed due to coincidence, but it can for raising the risk of making coincidences (pandemic outbreaks in general) more likely to happen anywhere.⁸

In view of the above, it is pointless to ascribe collective moral responsibility in order to level out the responsibility for certain actions between members of particular groups, nations, races, etc. However, the same goes for the whole of humanity, as it is done by the *Anthropocene narrative*. Here, as Andreas Malm explains, humanity is understood as a geological factor, which is a false conclusion given the great variations of human actions through space and time. In fact, the need for constant economic growth, as one of the main causes of climate change (and, one could add, environment destruction in general) is often described as a transhistorical fact, i.e. inherent to human nature. However, it is nothing more than the ideological product of bourgeois classical economy, the legitimization of capitalist social and production relations. On the other hand, all contemporary human beings cannot be a geological factor due to the great diversity among environmentally relevant actions that people undertake in different parts of the world (and also, one could add, people acting differently in those parts of the world). Therefore, the Anthropocene narrative often “naturalizes” the disastrous human impact on nature (as an unavoidable result of human nature), and this unhistorical and overly simplistic conclusion helps not only to thwart any possibilities for change in our collective behavior, but also blurs the insight into the responsibility of different people for environmental issues (Malm 2018: 326–343). On the other hand, it should be kept in mind that all human beings participating in the capitalist logic do not participate in it with the same amount of power, independence, and possibility to understand it. To the extent they have these characteristics, they can be held morally (personally) responsible for noxious behavior concerning environmental degradation, factory-farmed animal abuse and consequently the emergence of pandemics. This reflection is helpful in order to recognize the main culprits for the mentioned actions, while under the idea

self-exculpating scientism wielded against alternate food systems. That is, *biosecurity* is an imposition in *biogovernance*, how capital and its allies in the public sector rule societies by intervening into human populations from individual bodies to broader demographics. We argue that biosecurity is deployed first and foremost to protect the most lucrative markets in invasive agriculture” (Wallace et al. 2020b: 103).

8 “[...] the emergence of a disease is impossible to predict. It is an accidental process, i.e., the occurrence of an extremely low probability event resulting from a stochastic combination of low probability independent events. If the exact time and nature of the emergence of a disease cannot be predicted, the increased probability of encounter and occurrence of an emergence-leading chain of events yielded by anthropized environments must be considered seriously” (Afelt et al. 2018: 2).

of anthropocenic leveling out of moral (personal) responsibility, accusing others can only be hypocritical.

However, collective moral responsibility can be sound only if it is reflected under the concept of personal responsibility, namely in recognizing the contribution of each individual to a collective endeavor. In this sense the concept of collective responsibility is important for recognizing the consequences of our actions, which could not be done if they were to be examined separately. Here as well, not all participants can be equally blamed: those with more power over their participation in a collective action and greater capability to understand its moral implications are clearly more responsible for this action than those having less. However, collective engagement in a certain action can also obscure individual responsibility, especially in societies where technology is highly developed and work very fragmented, where, as Jacques Ellul puts it, no one is responsible, but “no one is free either” (Ellul 1992). One can also detect a turning point in which our collective power becomes so great that we cannot perceive and control its consequences, thereby being incapable of having responsibility (Jonas 1984), a good example of which are direct and intimate (genetic) interventions in nature. Therefore, one can finally detect another, especially profound mode of responsibility – the responsibility for creating social conditions which will not turn responsible individuals into nonresponsible beings.

5. Responsibility toward Nonhuman Animals Concerning Zoonotic Pandemics

It has already been said that there is no sense in ascribing personal responsibility to nonhuman animals, since they are nonresponsible beings. However, in the case of COVID-19 (and not of this pandemic only) they are causally responsible, but surely not alone. As Wallace says in the case of the H1N1 epidemic:

[...] pigs have very little to do with how influenza emerges. They didn't organize themselves into cities of thousands of immuno-compromised pigs. They didn't artificially select out the genetic variation that could have helped reduce the transmission rates at which the most virulent influenza strains spread. They weren't organized into livestock ghettos alongside thousands of industrial poultry. They don't ship themselves thousands of miles by truck, train, or air. Pigs do not naturally fly. (Wallace 2016: 34)

Even though nonhuman animals play a certain (even indispensable) role in the causal chain of the COVID-19 outbreak, the starting point of this chain should be sought in human actions:

Pandemics have their origins in diverse microbes carried by animal reservoirs, but their emergence is entirely driven by human activities. The underlying causes of pandemics are the same global environmental changes that drive biodiversity loss and climate change. These include land-use change, agricultural expansion and intensification, and wildlife trade and consumption. (IPBES 2020: 2)

Therefore, in terms of transmission from a nonhuman animal (whichever it may be) to human beings, it is clear that the latter created the conditions for the outbreak of at least the current pandemic (and, as it has been shown, surely not it alone). Thus, the main causal role of pandemic outbreaks belongs to us, i.e. to “the decisions we humans made to organize them [animals] this way. And when we say ‘we’, let’s be clear, we’re talking how agribusinesses have organized pigs and poultry” (Wallace 2016: 34).

Being personally and morally *responsible for something* (for an action, or, in Kantian terms, origins of an action in the determination of one’s will) makes no sense without being *responsible toward someone or something* (a being toward which one has a moral obligation). Given the limits of this kind of writing form, I have so far taken for granted that we are morally obligated (at least) toward sentient living beings. However, I will only mention a thesis that was elaborated elsewhere (Guć 2019), not in order to make my case for taking animals into moral consideration stronger, but rather to shortly depict another aspect of the concept of responsibility. My claim was that the *self-realization* should be the central concept of ethics, and that our duty toward other self-realizing beings should rely on their “articulated” or “silent demands” for self-realization. *Responsible* beings are, therefore, obligated to *respond* to these demands.

It is more than obvious that intensive human interventions in wild animal habitats and factory farming of domestic (and even wild) animals are included in the sphere of human moral responsibility, as clear examples of one’s morally wrong behavior not only toward other human beings (in the sense of environmental degradation and diseases), but also and primarily toward those animals. They are not only directly tortured and banished from their habitats, but also suffer from similar consequences of these practices as humans do. Even though they usually do not get sick in the same way as humans (e.g., there is only a few exceptions in which bird flus are harmful to birds⁹), factory farming leads both to human and nonhuman animal diseases. As it was mentioned, some animals have shown susceptibility to the SARS-CoV-2 virus. However, in some cases the transmission (which resulted in the COVID-19 disease) most probably happened due to their contact with humans, e.g. to dogs and cats from their “guardians”, to minks from the factory-farm workers, or to tigers and gorillas from the workers in zoos (Van Beusekom 2020; CDC 2021). Therefore, it seems that humans can even transmit the disease originated from their wrongdoings toward nonhuman animals to nonhuman animals themselves, both to particular companion animals and to particular farmed or otherwise captivated animals.

It is clear that the capital did not “do” anything to strengthen the agroecological and social resilience in order to prevent the outbreak or to “control regional disease systems before public health or medical intervention”, quite the

9 “With a few chilling exceptions, bird flus are harmless to birds, a state of host/pathogen equilibrium that suggests the virus has perfectly adapted to its host over the years, and that even the slightest nucleotide change offers no selective advantage” (Drexler 2002: 171).

contrary (Wallace et al. 2020b: 126). Capital cannot really “do” that, it is an abstraction with its inexorable logic. However, capitalist can do something, being a responsible being. If being a capitalist means to blindly follow this logic, then their duty is, simply, to stop being capitalists, or at least to advocate and to take measures for significant limitation of this system. That should at least happen when consequences of the outbreak occur. On the contrary, when the measures to limit the undesirable consequences of this outbreak are introduced, industrialized animal agricultural business try to maintain “business as usual”, exposing workers to greater possibility of getting infected and cruelly destroying animals that cannot be placed on the market (cf. Scott-Reid 2020a, 2020b; Marchant-Forde, Boyle 2020).

As it has been demonstrated, it is misleading and even noxious to ascribe responsibility for this state of affairs to every human being. In order to give a more complete account of the animal ethics issue regarding COVID-19, further reflection on the different sorts and levels of moral responsibility should not be overlooked. Our responsibility toward nonhuman animals does not only rest on the duties not to eat them or not to harm them (which both are duties as long as we are not forced to do the opposite, e.g. out of health issues). Our responsibility toward other human beings in the sense of animal-to-human transmission of SARS-CoV-2 shares the same elements with our responsibility toward nonhuman animals. And when I say “our”, I mean that the responsibility lies primarily on empowered participants in global neoliberal capitalism, out of which intensive animal farming and intrusions into intact nature follow as a necessity. This means that we can ascribe responsibility to those who run contemporary agriculture business and to consumers of their products who are not forced to be what they are, but not to workers in the industry who have no alternative sources of income to rely on or to people who cannot satisfy their nutritional needs otherwise than by eating meat.¹⁰

Conclusion

In this paper, I argued that those who are responsible for harming factory-farmed animals are to a large extent responsible for harming other human beings. I also implicitly tried to show that the ethical issue of factory-farmed animals should not be observed by being reduced to direct harm performed on them, but also in respect to the harm done by this practice to many other

¹⁰ These elements, as I said, are shared, but not completely overlapping. As far as this case is concerned, there are ways in which one can be responsible toward other human beings and not toward nonhuman animals (e.g. a drastic reduction of animal farming can be environmentally friendly and thus not problematic in the sense of animal-human virus transmissions, but it is still in most cases morally wrong toward farmed animals) and vice versa (it is less common, but one could find some extravagant possibilities for this, e.g. if certain people often make way very deep into intact forests and in this way come into contact with nonhuman animals carrying certain viruses without harming these animals in any way).

human and non-human beings. This has been done by explicit examination of responsibility for the COVID-19 outbreak. Those who are truly responsible for “torturing flesh” are not those who are forced to do it, but those who have power to do it (without coercion) or not (among which there are different levels of responsibility). As for the latter, this paper primarily recognizes those who are independently involved in large-scale agricultural business, overconsumption and eating animal products. Regarding zoonotic pandemics, the case against factory farming (out of responsibility toward nonhuman animals) and the case for prevention of animal-to-human disease transmissions (out of responsibility toward humans) are intertwined. The analysis presented here highly suggests that a profound examination of moral responsibility leads to the conclusion that the moral duty of preventing new zoonotic pandemics must include advocacy for abolishing factory farms and even the whole socio-economic system (global neoliberal capitalism) under which any change in the direction of reducing the intensity of industrial farming and intrusions in nature is thwarted.

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Josip Guć

Odnos između moralne odgovornosti za izbijanje zoonotskih pandemija i industrijskih životinjskih farmi

Apstrakt

Odgovornost za pandemiju COVID-19 prvo je bila pripisana osobama vezanima uz tržišnicu morske hrane Huanan. Međutim, mnogi naučnici sugeriraju da je ova pandemija rezultat čovekovih upada u netaknutu prirodu. Ovo otvara čitavu novu perspektivu za sagledavanje izravne i posredne te individualne i kolektivne odgovornosti za ovu pandemiju, no i za zoonotske pandemije uopšte. U ovom kontekstu, među ključne probleme spadaju posledice industrijskog uzgoja životinja, koji uveliko pridonosi okolnostima u kojima zoonotske pandemije izbijaju. Štaviše, on je dio šireg konteksta globalnog kapitalizma, ekonomskog sistema čija logika implicira izvesnu prisilu nametnutu onima koji u njoj participiraju, naime, da ovu vrstu uzgoja ostave bitno nepromenjenu, pa da tako osiguraju da zdravlje stoke ostane „najslabija karika u našem globalnom zdravstvenom lancu“ (FAO). Međutim, premda precizan odgovor na pitanje moralne odgovornosti za izbijanje pandemija, posebno one aktuelne, ne može biti dan, moguće je navesti izvesne indikatore i izgraditi okvir koji bi mogli pomoći u zadatku pripisivanja moralne odgovornosti određenim osobama. Ovaj rad to namerava izvesti sagledavanjem samog pojma odgovornosti i primenom te refleksije na spomenute probleme. Rezultati ove analize pokazuju varljivost pripisivanja moralne krivice ljudima uključenima u aktivnosti koje su izravno uzrokovale prenos izvesnog virusa sa životinje na čoveka, kao i čovečanstvu u celini za stvaranje uslova za prenos.

Ključne reči: moralna odgovornost, životinje, pandemija, COVID-19, industrijske farme, globalni kapitalizam