Universidade do Minho
Escola de Economia, Gestão e Ciência Política

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Essays on Corporate Moral Subjectivity and Accountability

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Essays on Corporate Moral Subjectivity and Accountability

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ABSTRACT

The expanding power of corporations (matching or even exceeding state authority) has created significant moral and political effects from their business activities. Despite their ever-growing influence, there is still disagreement about their capability to endure moral assessment, without signs of a compromise being reached. Moreover, the debate tends to be narrowed to the nature of corporate action, instead of reflecting upon the conditions for (as well as on the mechanics behind) the emergence of corporate moral agency.

This thesis addresses these concerns. Its purpose is to explore how corporations can *become* moral subjects, concentrating on ontological and ethical issues related to questions about corporate capability to act, accountability, and performativity. To achieve this aim, a series of three essays were performed, each with its goals and methodological approaches.

Adopting a normative and interpretative philosophical approach, a theoretical framework is developed in the first essay in order to explore how can corporate moral subjectivity be recognised. The political and ethical character of corporations gains depth by studying the passive nature of their recognition as moral subjects.

The second essay follows a similar methodological approach to the first. But the purpose is to analyse the role of accountability in the process of recognising the moral subjecthood of corporations. To that effect, another theoretical framework is built, and accountability is revealed as the medium through which corporations achieve ongoing recognition, becoming subject to moral assessment as a result.

Following an interpretative and hermeneutical approach, the third essay presents a case study of the leading corporation of the Portuguese water sector to study accounting as an ethical practice sustaining the recognition of corporate moral subjectivity. The performative power behind recognition is disclosed by the accounts the corporate subject gives of itself, illustrating accounting's ethical nature.

By addressing its moral foundations, new insights about corporate moral subjectivity and related accountability are expected to be achieved, contributing to extant literature.

Keywords: accountability, corporation, ethics, recognition, subjectivity

RESUMO

O poder em crescendo das corporações (igual ou superior ao da autoridade do Estado) tem gerado impactos políticos e morais significativos em resultado da sua atividade económica. Apesar da sua influência crescente, subsistem divergências quanto à sua capacidade de serem sujeitas a escrutínio moral, sem que haja compromisso. Além disso, o debate tende a restringir-se à natureza da acção das corporações, em vez de se refletir sobre as condições para o (e os mecanismos por detrás do) surgimento da sua agência moral.

Esta tese trata sobre estas matérias. O seu intuito é o de explorar como é que as corporações se podem tornar em sujeitos morais, concentrando-se em problemas ontológicos e éticos relacionados com questões sobre a capacidade de actuar das corporações, de *accountability*, e de *performatividade*. De modo a atingir este objectivo, é desenvolvido um conjunto de três ensaios, cada um com os seus propósitos e abordagens metodológicas.

Através de uma abordagem interpretativa e normativa, é desenvolvido no primeiro ensaio um quadro teórico para explorar como é que a subjetividade moral das corporações é reconhecida. O carácter político e ético destas organizações ganha consistência ao estudar-se a natureza passiva do seu reconhecimento enquanto sujeitos morais.

O segundo ensaio segue uma abordagem metodológica similar à do primeiro. Mas o propósito é o de analisar-se o papel da *accountability* no processo do reconhecimento da subjetividade moral das corporações. Para tal, é construído um outro quadro teórico, em que a accountability é revelada como sendo o meio pelo qual as corporações atingem reconhecimento contínuo, tornando-se assim sujeitas a escrutínio moral.

No âmbito de uma abordagem interpretativa e hermenêutica, o terceiro ensaio apresenta um estudo de caso da empresa líder do sector da distribuição da água em Portugal, de modo a estudar-se a contabilidade como prática ética que sustenta o reconhecimento da subjetividade moral das corporações. O poder *performativo* por detrás do reconhecimento é expresso pelas contas que a corporação presta, mostrando a natureza ética da contabilidade.

Ao abordar as suas fundações morais, espera-se atingir novas perspetivas sobre a subjetividade moral e a respetiva *accountability*, contribuindo dessa forma para a literatura.

Palavras-chave: *accountability*, corporação, ética, reconhecimento, subjetividade

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Relevance of the Research Topic and Motivations

> Ours is a time of moral turmoil and ethical strife. (...) Our public life is in constant confusion about how we should live while the problems calling for answers continue to mount and to press upon us. Despite this confusion, the need for economic accountability in our world situation cannot be doubted. If it is impossible to render economic forces morally accountable, then human beings have becomes (sic) slaves to their own financial and corporate creations and the earth is subjected to unending exploitation under the aegis of "efficiency" (Schweiker, 1993, p. 231).

Whilst written more than thirty years ago, these words carry weight even today. In contemporary society, corporations are seen as leading collective entities determining ethical standards, social norms and environmental conditions for human existence (Jansen, 2025; Matten & Crane, 2005; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). The influence of corporations reaches beyond market and financial operations. They impinge on the articulation of social values, the production of public discourse, and the legitimacy of actions as morally and politically acceptable (Jansen, 2025; Rendtorff, 2020). Yet, despite their importance, the question around the understanding of corporations as moral subjects – to wit, entities capable of being subject to moral assessment, given their capacities for ethical reasoning and accountable actions – is still actively debated in philosophical, accounting, accountability or business ethics scholarship (see Hess, 2025; Pagan et al., 2023; Rönnegard, 2024; Shearer, 2002).

However, these debates address the question of corporate moral agency either in a piecemeal way or without exploring in depth the ontological and ethical aspects linked to the emergence of their intelligible existence, i.e., their membership in community as meaningful subjects (see, e.g., Hess, 2025; Néron & Norman, 2008). Rather than asking whether corporations possess moral agency, this thesis sets the question regarding corporate moral subjectivity in another tone, changing the emphasis of the discussion from metaphysical assumptions about the nature of corporations to hermeneutical and ethical considerations about the relationships and discourses enabling the emergence of corporations as capable moral subjects, accountable for their actions. As a result, the general research question underlying this thesis is: How, and under what conditions does the recognition of the corporation as a capable moral subject, accountable for its actions, take place? Placed in this way, it directs the attention to recognition, a process that is set in a passive verbal stance, where the corporation is recognised as a moral subject

(see Ricoeur, 2005). Furthermore, the emphasis is also placed on the conditions of recognition, to wit, the social, linguistic, and ethical relations that enable corporations to be seen, addressed and held accountable as moral subjects.

The motivation around this topic emerges from two interrelated issues. The first concerns the current gap between advanced accounting systems and impoverished ethical standards in corporate accountability. The development of reporting standards and assurance mechanisms during the last few decades has not led to meaningful changes in corporate discourse about questions of dialogic ethical reflection or moral dialogue (Dillard & Vinnari, 2019; Kuruppu et al., 2019; Merkl-Davies & Brennan, 2017; Shearer, 2002). The second relates to philosophical concerns. It is related to the discussion about the perspectives on corporate moral agency, regarding the possibility of reifying corporations not as autonomous moral persons, like individuals, but as relational subjects whose moral character arises out of its recognition by others. With digitalisation, sustainability discourses and global networks creating new challenges for defining individual, organisational and systemic responsibility, the issues around corporate moral subjectivity become even more pressing (Argento et al., 2025; Dinh & O'Leary, 2025; Hess, 2025; Pagan et al., 2023; Turunen & Lundgren-Henriksson, 2025).

This research adds value to critical accounting and organisational studies by providing a new angle on the importance of corporate ethics in accounting, accountability and corporate social responsibility literature. Yet, this issue is approached through an extensive philosophical tradition that understands moral existence not as abstract norms of conduct, but as a relational practice of living together. According to Aristotle (1934, 1944), ethics and politics form an unbreakable bond since to perform well requires working for and with others in a community of citizens. Drawing on this perspective, corporations are seen as political and ethical subjects rather than mere economic entities (Matten & Crane, 2005). Like a citizen, corporate moral existence unfolds within a social network where recognition and accountability are intertwined (see Dillard & Vinnari, 2019; Ferry et al., 2024; Messner, 2009; Pagan et al., 2023).

The core argument is then established through Ricoeur's (1992, 2005) ethics and its import upon the hermeneutics of the self, the phenomenology of the capable human being and the course of recognition. Ricoeur's (1992, p.172) sense of ethics as "aiming at the good life, with and for others, in just institutions" is paramount to all his arguments about subjectivity. As a relational concept founded on attestation, moral agency emerges at first from the capability to act, speak, narrate oneself, and be imputed with action (Ricoeur, 2005). Adding the capabilities to promise and to remember furthers the role of the other in the concept of recognition (Ricoeur, 2005). For Ricoeur (2005), that role becomes

enlarged when considering the exercise of capabilities as sustained by mutual recognition, where others, by acknowledging the self's capability to act ethically, are simultaneously acknowledged as other selves, with the same ethical importance. Accordingly, recognition exists as both a received benefit and an ongoing responsibility: it needs the response of others, and requires continuous self-assessment (Ricoeur, 2005).

Finally, Butler's (2005) philosophical work on recognition, dispossession and the ethics of giving an account guides moral philosophy into the performative dimension of subjectivity. For Butler (2005), the act of giving an account of oneself reveals how much we depend on others for our existence. A person cannot achieve complete self-knowledge because subjectivity emerges from entering into the linguistic and normative scene of address where recognition takes place. By employing Butler's (2005) insights analogically to corporations, this thesis highlights the vulnerability and ethical potential of corporate accountability when sustaining recognition: like individuals, the corporation also becomes recognisable through the accounts it gives about itself to others within the scene of address. The act of giving reveals the dispossession the subject must endure about the sovereign authorship of the account given for the sake of his recognition as a meaningful moral existence (Butler, 2005).

Together, Aristotle (1934, 1944) and Ricoeur (1992, 2005) provide the philosophical approaches for building a theoretical framework regarding the extent to which corporations can be recognised as moral subjects, as well as the way accountability contributes to sustaining recognition. With Butler (2005), the performative and linguistic conditions of recognition are brought to the fore when studying the role of accounting in that process. For the purpose of recognition, accounting is reified as a practice of giving an account of oneself, where ethics becomes fundamental. The premise sustaining this thesis is that the recognition of corporations as moral entities depends on multiple ethical, communicative and institutional relations that both support and limit the ability to act morally.

1.2. Purpose and Research Questions

The main purpose of this thesis is to explore the conditions under which corporations are recognised as moral subjects. Through an integrated theoretical and interpretive framework, the arguments put forward unfold across three essays in order to answer the general research question: How, and under what conditions does the recognition of the corporation as a capable moral subject, accountable for its actions, take place? To explore this question, three essays are developed, each addressing a specific research question. Collectively, they form a coherent and philosophically integrated study.

The research question framing the first essay is: to what extent are corporations capable of moral agency? Drawing on Aristotle (1934, 1944) and Ricoeur's (1992, 2005) philosophical approaches regarding ethics and subjectivity, a theoretical framework is built where corporate moral agency is understood as dependent on the verbal stance of being recognised within the community as someone that counts (Ricoeur, 2005). Agency makes the moral nature of corporations dependent on the actualisation of their capabilities to act through action. The concept of capability in this context draws from Ricoeur's (2005) phenomenology of the capable human being, which describes a being who possesses the capability to act, speak, narrate himself, and be subject to imputability of his actions. The theoretical framework situates the moral agency of corporations in their organisational practices of action, narrative, and accountability; these, in an interrelated fashion, enable corporate subjects to participate in the ethical domain of the polis, for the sake of the common good.

The second essay expands the analysis carried out in the first essay by studying how accountability sustains the recognition of corporate moral subjectivity. The research question behind this essay (namely: What is accountability's role in the process of recognition of the moral agency of corporations?) focuses on the importance of the capabilities to promise and to remember inherent to the recognition of individual subjects, following Ricoeur (2005). Again, a theoretical framework is built from Ricoeur's (2005) philosophical approaches, but now focusing on the capability of promise and memory inherent to subjects who can act and be recognised through their actions, becoming exposed to moral assessment. These capabilities warrant the ethical nature of accountability as relational responsiveness, working as a communicative link that enables the recognition of corporations as moral subjects. More importantly, introducing promise and memory into the discussion brings to the fore the temporal structure of recognition, where accountability becomes a continuous process of attestation of corporations' agency, for the sake of their meaningful existence. Through accountability, the corporation establishes a mutual relationship that sustains the ongoing recognition of its moral subjectivity.

The third essay extends these theoretical insights into the realm of discourse and performativity through the question: How does accounting, reified as an ethical practice sustained upon the act of giving an account of oneself, sustain the recognition of a corporate subject? Drawing on Butler's (2005) performativity and ethics, the essay explores how corporate communication, embodied in the ethical act of giving an account of oneself, discloses the performative and discursive conditions structuring accountability, and consequently recognition. A case study centred on Águas de Portugal (AdP), the leading enterprise in the Portuguese water sector, shows how corporate narrative shifts from confident statements to disclosures expressing vulnerability. Recognition of corporate subjectivity emerges when

the corporate subject is dispossessed of control of its own account, since they are given within a scene of address that opens the account to the interpretation of others. The essay illustrates how accounting functions as a moral practice of exposure sustaining accountability and recognition, instead of operating in its traditional role as a verification system.

The three essays share a common philosophical goal that seeks to explore the conditions that enable recognition to occur. These conditions comprise ethical concepts drawn from Aristotle (*phronēsis* and *eudaimonia*), ethical and hermeneutical concepts from Ricoeur (recognition itself and capacity to act) and performative aspects from Butler (scene of address and dispossession). This thesis advances a new perspective on corporate moral subjectivity, viewing it as dependent on recognition rather than on control.

1.3. Research Methodology

The methodological approach adopted in this thesis follows from its theoretical base, an inherently philosophical one. The general research question – to wit, under what conditions does the recognition of the corporation as a capable moral subject, accountable for its actions, take place? requires assuming a hermeneutical and interpretive approach because it explores both the meaningfulness and possibilities of recognition (see Gadamer, 1975; Ricoeur, 1992, 2005; Scapens, 1990). Instead of measuring empirical correlations, this study seeks to delve into the conditions of the emergence of moral subjectivity through ethical and discursive structures sustaining the process of its recognition.

The research methodology is grounded in philosophical hermeneutics, since it views understanding as an interpretive process that unites the interpreter with the text (Gadamer, 1975; Ricoeur, 1992). This approach is considered to be especially appropriate for this study, because recognition exists as an interpretive dialogical process where understanding arises through interpretation of shared meaning: it involves both visual perception and acknowledgment, based on common structures of intelligibility. Ricoeur's (1992) hermeneutics of the self, together with his phenomenology of the capable human being (2005), link interpretation with the performativity of language and self-awareness, working together as foundations for recognition: we understand ourselves through what we tell about ourselves and give to others in that telling. Grounded on interpretation, recognition becomes an epistemological and ethical event (Ricoeur, 2005).

This thesis consists of three separate essays, which operate independently, yet maintain continuous interrelations among them. These essays correspond to the three subsequent chapters. The research design follows hermeneutical principles, in which a deeper understanding of moral phenomena is achieved through multiple perspectives of different sources. The second and third chapters of this

thesis are conceptual, building theoretical frameworks by critically reading philosophical texts of Aristotle (1934, 1944) and Ricoeur (1992, 2005), while the fourth chapter consists of an interpretative and hermeneutical case study in which Butler's (2005) theory is analogically applied to corporations.

The first essay is conceptual. It combines Aristotle's (1934, 1944) philosophical stance about ethics and politics with Ricoeur's (1992, 2005) ethics and the concept of recognition, the latter sustained by his hermeneutics of the self and the phenomenology of the capable human being. Informed by these authors' philosophical approaches, and under a critical-interpretative and hermeneutic methodology, a theoretical framework is built to explore the emergence of corporate moral agency via recognition, with its tone set on the passivity of the verbal stance of *being recognised*.

The second essay, again conceptual, builds upon Ricoeur's The Course of Recognition (2005). Specifically, it focuses on the capabilities of promise and memory inherent to the moral agent so as to enable an innovative theoretical framework around the understanding of accountability as a recognition-mediating process. It again draws on a critical-interpretative and hermeneutical methodology.

The third essay, whilst maintaining an interpretive and hermeneutical approach, adds qualitative empirical elements through its case study of Águas de Portugal (AdP). This corporation was chosen because it controls Portugal's water sector and had to handle complex public issues during the economic crisis from 2007 to 2013. In line with its hermeneutical and interpretative approach, the research uses close-reading analysis (Amernic & Craig, 2001, 2017; Merkl-Davies & Brennan, 2017) to study data sources such as corporate reports and public statements. The textual sources are seen as discursive performances, through which the corporation gives an account of itself. This perspective set on performativity draws on Butler's (2005) theory of recognition and its *sine qua non* condition of dispossession. The research examines how accounting, substantiated in corporate communication practices by the act of giving an account of oneself, buttresses the process of recognition as constitutive of a corporation's moral identity.

Data analysis involves iterative interpretation to identify discursive patterns and themes, as well as the use of metaphor and irony (see Amernic et al., 2010; Peshkin, 2001), to explore how AdP handles recognition and vulnerability. The research aims to understand how accounting, as an ethical practice based on the act of giving an account of oneself, sustains the operation of the linguistic and ethical mechanisms inherent to the recognition of corporations as accountable moral subjects.

1.4. Expected Contributions

Several contributions are expected to ensue from this thesis, particularly in the field of accounting, accountability, and business ethics.

A new theoretical framework is built through the integration of Aristotle's (1934, 1944) ethics and politics with Ricoeur's (1992, 2005) views on the phenomenology of the capable human being and the ethical course of recognition. Butler's performative theory of recognition – and its associated notion of dispossession subjects must endure so as to have their subjecthood recognised – provides additional substance regarding the mechanisms operating behind the recognition of corporate moral subjects.

The eclectic character of this thesis is anticipated to provide per se new interpretations regarding corporate moral subjectivity. However, the development of a new theoretical framework about corporate moral subjectivity also has the potential of adding substantial depth to critical accounting studies because it develops a new philosophical framework for ethical analysis. Additionally, extant debates around whether and to what extent corporations can act politically in society, and the problems of moral assessment related thereto, can be enriched by the arguments and theoretical framework of this thesis. Perspectives such as corporate citizenship (Crane et al., 2008) or political Corporate Social Responsibility (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011) can be enhanced by referring to the concept of recognition: it changes the perspective followed in extant literature, of which the premise is that corporations are active agents, with the questions placed about the nature and import of their actions. With recognition, corporations are reified as agents being recognised through their actions, and the tone, set upon ontological and ethical concerns, becomes eminently passive.

It is expected that the theoretical framework built in the first two essays of this thesis (with its main arguments set upon Ricoeur's (1992, 2005) work about ethics and recognition) will show the overriding importance of the latter in the analysis of the emergence of meaningful corporate moral subjectivity. Through the verbal stance of *being recognised*, the corporation's ontology becomes dependent on narrative and ethical constructs. As a result, moral agency and meaningfulness are achieved through recognition sustained on its interpretive relationship with others.

Additionally, the arguments put forward regarding the role of accountability in enabling the recognition of corporate moral subjectivity are expected to add depth to existing critical views about accountability, addressing its moral foundations. Corporate accountability is reified as the actualisation of the original promise corporations enact in the act of their foundation, to wit, to perform well. Such an ethical stance directs moral agency towards Aristotelian Supreme Good achievement. The theoretical framework developed around Aristotle (1934, 1944) and Ricoeur (1992, 2005) provides a moral

foundation to analyse current accountability practices, ranging from digital transparency to algorithmic governance. Therefore, there are sound perspectives on how accountability can be enhanced, specifically about its ethical import vis-à-vis today's digital world.

Incorporating Butler's dimensions of performativity and vulnerability in order to enhance the analysis of corporate moral subjectivity is expected to contribute to calls for further studies around performativity, particularly regarding corporations (see, e.g., McKinlay, 2010; Tyler, 2019). According to Butler (2005), people give accounts of themselves to others, becoming meaningfully recognised in the process. Giving an account of oneself is an inherently ethical act as it takes place under conditions of exposure and partial opacity to others. Through analogical reasoning, corporations need others to be legitimately recognised from the accounts they give. Adopting Butler's (2005) performative approach creates opportunities to enhance the understanding of accounting beyond a procedural and control technique, reinforcing its stance of a practice dependent on an ethical scene of address where corporate subjectivity is built through recognition. These theoretical contributions are seen as fostering a more advanced understanding of corporate moral agency, where moral subjectivity derives from ethical actions, narrative accounts and, ultimately, performative recognition.

1.5. Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is organised into five chapters. It is structured around three separate but interrelated essays, preceded by this introduction and concluding with a general conclusion. Each essay focuses on a specific research question, whose formulation addresses a distinct or complementary dimension of the general research question, thus supporting the complete argument about the recognition of corporate moral subjectivity through ethical, hermeneutical and performative conditions.

The first essay, entitled "Changing the "Course of Recognition" of Corporations – Being Recognised as a Capable Moral Subject", launches the foundations of the theoretical framework developed in the first two essays and complemented in the third. By articulating Aristotle (1934, 1944) and Ricoeur's (1992, 2005) theoretical approaches about ethics and subjectivity, corporate moral subjectivity is explored through the ethical and political stance of action, the actualisation through action of corporate capabilities to act, and the ensuing recognition of the corporate agent as morally assessable. The study defines the capable corporation through its three essential elements of action, narrative, and the imputation of actions.

The second essay, titled "Promise Keeping and Corporate Ontology: Accountability as Recognition and Renewal of Corporate Moral Subjectivity", investigates how corporate accountability enables and

sustains the recognition of corporations as capable moral agents. It bears on Ricoeur's (2005) hermeneutics of the self and the phenomenology of the capable human being to develop a theoretical framework around the role of accountability in recognition. It is complementary to the one built in the first essay. Through the capabilities of promising and remembering (Ricoeur, 2005), accountability, as a responsive relationship on which mutual recognition depends, enables the opening of recognition to time through ongoing attestation of corporate moral subjectivity.

The third essay draws on Butler's (2005) ethics of performativity and dispossession to analyse *Águas de Portugal* as a case study. Entitled "Recognition Through Dispossession: Reorientating Accountability Towards Subjectivity", this essay uses hermeneutic and interpretative discourse analysis to show how accounting practices uphold recognition through the process of converting corporate self-representations into vulnerable moral disclosures.

The three essays present a philosophical progression that starts with the relationship action and capability for the sake of the recognition of corporations as moral subjects, building upon Aristotle (1934, 1944) and Ricoeur's (1992, 2005) theoretical approaches, before moving to the reification of accountability as a medium towards recognition, drawing on Ricoeur's (2005) hermeneutics and ethics, and finally reaching recognition as a performative event through Butler's (2005) perspective.

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2. CHANGING THE "COURSE OF RECOGNITION" OF CORPORATIONS – BEING RECOGNISED AS A CAPABLE MORAL SUBJECT

2.1. Introduction

> To recognize as an act expresses a pretension, a claim, to exercise an intellectual mastery of this field of meanings, of signifying assertions. At the opposite end of this trajectory, the demand for *recognition expresses an expectation that can be satisfied only by mutual recognition*, where this mutual recognition either remains an unfulfilled dream or requires procedures and institutions that elevate *recognition to the political plane*. (Ricoeur, 2005, p. 19, emphasis added).

The basic inquiry about corporate moral agency presents a complex philosophical dilemma because it demands evaluation of corporate entities beyond their legal and economic roles. A corporation gains moral agent status when people can hold it responsible for its actions through praise or blame within ethical and political systems (French, 1979; Pettit, 2007). A tentative solution to this inquiry is explored in this essay through a systematic exploration of two distinct philosophical systems. The work of Aristotle (1934, 1944) unites ethics with politics through the teleological concept of eudaimonia which represents the good life that results from virtuous conduct. The hermeneutics of recognition developed by Paul Ricoeur (1992, 2005) examines agent capabilities, recognition processes and responsibility assignment. The combination of Aristotelian and Ricoeurian approaches enables us to develop a more complete theory of corporate moral subjectivity that prevents us from dismissing corporate entities from ethical consideration or treating them as complete human beings.

The guiding research question of this essay is: to what extent are corporations capable of moral agency? Under its guideline, the aim of this essay is to construct an interpretive framework, based on the philosophical approaches of Aristotle (1934, 1944) and Paul Ricoeur (1992, 2005), that explores how corporations can be recognised as moral agents, making them capable of becoming subject to moral assessment. The principle supporting this essay's aim reifies recognition as a moment of subjection to ethics, since it does not concern merely an epistemic act of knowing *what* something is. Rather, it represents an ethical act of acknowledging *who* someone is (even if that someone is a fictional actor such as a corporation). Recognition becomes the gateway to moral subjectivity.

The research question and this essay's aim gain importance because corporations now operate as worldwide entities which surpass state authority to influence areas that used to belong to national

governments. According to Matten (2009) and Palazzo and Scherer (2008), corporations now perform public good delivery, human rights protection, and supply chain governance functions. Their decisions create effects on people that match or surpass the impact of public institutions. The transformation of corporate activities into public-like responsibilities has led to different approaches, including Andrew Crane & Dirk Matten's corporate citizenship model (Crane et al., 2008; Matten et al., 2003; Matten & Crane, 2005) and Scherer et al.'s (2014) political Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) framework, which enables corporations to perform quasi-political duties and participate in discussions about shared resources. The increased corporate responsibilities in the public domain create new demands for market efficiency while requiring corporations to demonstrate public accountability which challenges democratic oversight mechanisms (Crane et al., 2008; Matten & Crane, 2005; Moon et al., 2005). The question of whether corporations should receive moral agency status remains a subject of ongoing academic disagreement. Arguing against corporate moral agency, Rönnegard (2024), Jones and Haigh (2007) and van Oosterhout (2005, 2008) stress that the lack of consciousness, intentionality and phenomenological experience needed for moral deliberation makes corporations unable to function as moral agents. On the other hand, de Pedro (2024), French (1979), Hindriks (2024), Pettit (2007) and Tollefsen (2002) support the view that corporations function as group agents bearing intentional states because they use decision-making systems to achieve corporate goals, which results in unified action for their objectives. The existing accounts of agency focus on metaphysical and epistemic requirements, but fail to develop sufficient understanding of moral subjectivity (see Caulfield & Laufer, 2019).

The legal status of corporate personhood differs from corporate moral agency because corporate personhood allows businesses to own property and enter contracts but does not provide moral standing (Sepinwall, 2024). The concept of corporate moral agency functions as a practical framework which acknowledges business entities as decision-making centres and responsible entities, yet it does not establish their status as natural persons (see De George, 1981). The main question centres on whether corporations demonstrate the capability to function as subjects, according to Ricoeur's (1992, 2005) definition, which requires them to be capable of having actions attributed to them and thus establish their agent status through the ethical need to acknowledge the suffering of others. This essay supports the concept that corporations function as capable agents through its Aristotelian and Ricoeurian-based understanding that they are beings whose actions enable recognition of their moral subjectivity. This approach enables us to transcend the binary opposition between complete corporate responsibility denial and assigning corporations with an exaggerated metaphysical personhood status. The recognition process

determines corporate legitimacy and moral subjectivity because corporations exist as social entities that participate in networks of relationships (see Painter-Morland, 2007; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007).

Research about corporate recognition generally reifies recognition as a reputational or relational outcome, lacking investigation into the mechanisms through which corporate moral subjectivity is established and achieved (see, e.g., Hess, 2025; Vives-Gabriel et al., 2023 regarding corporate moral legitimacy or repair). Consequently, literature on corporate imputability and accountability vis-à-vis recognition remains incomplete, since it does not address their relevance and role within the constitutive process of corporate moral subjectivity (see, e.g., Bernaz, 2021; French, 1979; Pettit, 2007).

Recognition functions as an eminently passive process that Ricoeur (2005) describes as starting from what is visible in the world. The corporation achieves moral agency status through action imputation, which leads to its recognition as a moral subject based on the evaluation of its actions as good or bad. The recognition process occurs through passive acknowledgment manifested in the verbal stance of *being recognised* (Ricoeur, 2005).

The political aspect of corporate agency, which involves corporations operating within governance systems to create common good value, has become increasingly debated in CSR related literature (Sison & Fontrodona, 2012) because of globalisation (Scherer et al., 2014, 2016). This essay introduces a new framework which unites Aristotle's (1934) teleological approach to action with Ricoeur's (1992, 2005) recognition hermeneutics in order to establish corporate agency's connection to political membership and ethical responsibility through the recognition of corporate moral subjectivity. Corporations are understood as entities which participate in governance and create public value in addition to their economic functions (Scherer & Palazzo, 2007; Scherer et al., 2014). The concept of corporate moral agency stands essential for determining how businesses must conduct their operations while maintaining dialogue with stakeholders and fulfilling obligations that extend past financial performance. This essay establishes a connection between corporate agency and political belonging to redefine corporate subjectivity as arising out of the recognition of their moral substance vis-à-vis their active participation in societal, ethical and political systems.

The structure of this essay comprises six sections, the first corresponding to the introduction. The following section analyses Aristotle's (1934, 1944) teleological theories of ethics and politics, which place emphasis on action and virtue for achieving an ultimate, supreme Good which all things strive to reach, i.e., human flourishing or happiness (eudaimonia). Happiness is considered by Aristotle as an active and ongoing process of virtuous action buttressed on practical wisdom (*phronēsis*). The third section explores Ricoeur's recognition theory. It is divided into two parts, with the first analysing Ricoeur’s hermeneutics

of the self, where his sense of ethics as "aiming at the good life, with and for others, in just institutions" (1992, p. 172) is presented. The need for introducing this subsection lies in the ethical nature of recognition itself. Failing to articulate the main concepts upon which Ricoeur's ethics is built – to wit, the notions of solicitude, mutuality, conflict, conviction, and attestation – would deprive exploring the notion of recognition of its foundations and context (see Ricoeur, 1992). Anchored in the first part, the second part delves into the process of recognition per se, where the concepts of capability to act and imputability of action – which are drawn on what Ricoeur (2005) defines as the phenomenology of the capable human being – are essential. Recognition's mutual and ethical nature will derive from action, the departing point from where recognition acquires its eminently passive nature, in the sense of the verbal stance *being recognised* (Ricoeur, 2005), as stated before.

After these two sections, which explore the theoretical approaches behind the theoretical framework built in this essay, the fourth section presents the methodological approach adopted. The fifth section, whose content is directed to corporations, combines the two theoretical approaches to explore how corporations can be recognised as moral subject, a process that demands the mutual recognition of corporations as subjects capable of moral assessment, and of others affected by corporate actions as subjects that *count*. The ability of corporations to demonstrate moral agency through recognition requires them to engage in dialogical accountability processes for their actions, because such processes represent moral transformations of others (Arrington, 2007). The political environment affects ethical assessments, according to Sison and Fontrodona (2012), because politics represents the final stage of ethical development.

The essay concludes with a section that discusses contributions, limitations and suggestions for future research.

2.2. Aristotle: Ethics, Politics and *Eudaimonia*

2.2.1. Action, Virtue, and Practical Wisdom

Whenever the work of Aristotle is employed in extant literature on management and business ethics, it either revolves about issues of *either* ethics *or* politics, generally failing to embrace ethics *and* politics simultaneously (see Kristjánsson, 2022; Sison & Fontrodona, 2012). Whilst stating that the pivotal concept of happiness (*eudaimonia* in ancient Greek)[1] is deeply related both to ethics and to politics,

[1] Whilst *eudaimonia* is generally translated as *happiness*, this term is used in the title of this section in order to mark the moral sense that was usually ascribed to *eudaimonia*, as happiness achieved through moral perfection out of how one acted. It serves to mark a difference between happiness as arising out of

literature tends to leave one of the two fields unaddressed in practical terms (see Melé, 2009). Consequently, their interdependent nature remains largely untouched (see Albareda & Sison, 2020; Kristjánsson, 2022). Yet, Aristotle himself pairs these two themes as mutually dependent throughout his surviving writings, particularly in those categorised as practical, namely the Politics and the works devoted to ethics. Already at book I of the Nicomachean Ethics (considered the most important of his works regarding ethics) Aristotle states that the study undertaken therein is "in a sense the study of Politics" (Aristotle, 1934, 1094b11). The link between ethics and politics is centred upon the teleological notion of the good, to wit, that every action aims at some good when carried out. The words that open Book I clearly reflect the primacy of the good concerning human activity:

> Every art and every investigation, and likewise every *practical* pursuit (*praxis*) or undertaking (*proairesis*), seems to aim at some good: hence it has been well said that the Good is that at which all things aim (Aristotle, 1934, 1094a1-3, emphasis added).

This sentence not only depicts the teleological imprint that Aristotle renders to human good, but it also marks the relationship between the good and action by leading the notion of the good to what is practicable by man, that is, embodied in action (Aristotle, 1934). Therefore, the idea of the good irrelevant to ethics is the metaphysical or absolute Good, not attainable by human beings when acting, owing to its separate existence in the realm of ideas (Aristotle, 1934). For Aristotle (1934), practicable or attainable good must be perceivable good, reflected on what one does when acting. As it is a practical science (since its object is action), Aristotle's Ethics is characterised by its teleological nature, for action is always performed with a view to an end recognised as good.

By establishing a relationship of subordination amongst the various goals realised by our numerous actions, with some goals pursued for the sake of some other end(s), Aristotle (1934) posits that there will be one end which is desired only for its own sake, which does not go beyond itself, and that must the ultimate End guiding human action; in other words, it will be the Supreme Good towards which every action is performed. Aristotle renders the Supreme Good as happiness, "being happy" conceived as "the good life", i.e., "doing well" (1934, 1095a18-21). It is the active notion of *doing* or *acting* that constitutes happiness as a kind of activity (and not as a state of mind or feeling) translated into a way of life, the good life. Knowing what the Supreme Good is enables one to attain what is fitting,

mere good fortune (which in ancient Greek is typically *eutukhēs*) or even material happiness, based on the amount of goods or riches one possesses (the ancient Greek word being *olbios*). But throughout this essay, *happiness* will always refer to *eudaimonia*, except when stated otherwise.

being of "great *practical* importance for the conduct of life" (Aristotle, 1934, 1094a22-25, emphasis added).

Aristotle deems happiness as something perfect (or final) and complete, the characteristics behind the Supreme Good (1934). Perfect, in that it is chosen only as an end in itself, and not as a means to something else. Every end that may be desired as a goal for its own sake and concomitantly as a means to achieve another goal cannot be absolutely final. Aristotle gives the examples of honour or pleasure as ends chosen not only for themselves, but also for the sake of being happy, as they enable our securing it. Happiness is also complete or self-sufficient since alone it is the most desirable of the goods and therefore lacks in nothing (1934). Happiness as complete and final becomes an activity supreme regarding all others.

As practice for Aristotle means rational conduct (trans. note by Rackham, 1934), happiness is something exclusive to man when compared to animals and non-sentient existence. It is a function unique to the human being, materialised in "the active exercise of the soul's faculties in conformity with rational principle", as a form of life (Aristotle, 1934, 1098a7). Since every function, as action, is well performed when fulfilled in line with its own excellence, happiness as the supreme good of man is defined by Aristotle as "the active exercise of his soul's faculties in conformity with excellence or virtue, or if there are several human excellences or virtues, in conformity with the best and most perfect among them" (Aristotle, 1934, 1098a15-18). The definition of happiness presented by Aristotle is complemented by Ricoeur (2005), who states that the source of happiness lies then in what we as humans do, what actions we perform. For Aristotle (1934), the mere possession of the faculty to act is thereby set aside from the definition of the good, as it represents inoperative potentiality. For one to be happy, one must necessarily act, and act well, since virtue is key to happiness (Aristotle, 1934). The same idea is reflected by Aristotle in the Politics, regarding what the life of virtue should be:

> [I]t is impossible for the man who does nothing to do well, and doing well and happiness are the same thing (...). But to praise inaction more highly than action is an error, for happiness is an activity, and further the actions of the just and temperate have in them the realization of much that is noble. (1944, 1325a16-34).

Additionally, and being dependent on the virtue attained, happiness as an activity must last a whole lifetime, since virtuous action is pivotal to what man qua Man does (Aristotle, 1934). Compared to the array of functions performed by an individual, the activities in conformity with virtue bear a permanent

nature, as the worthiest actions are those that last longer, and happiness is a constant activity of performing well (Aristotle, 1934). Therefore, we are the result of our actions.

Aristotle (1934) establishes the relationship between virtue and action when determining that the study of virtue, like that of the good, must be practical rather than theoretical: it is not to be undertaken so as to know what virtue is, but in order to enable us to become good. Consequently, we have "to carry out our enquiry into the region of conduct, and to ask how we are to act rightly; since our actions, as we have said, determine the quality of our dispositions" (Aristotle, 1934, 1103b28-30). As the exercise of the faculty of action, virtue is acquired through acting, and matured when becoming a habit. But how we act can either foster virtue or destroy it, our actions being subsequently vicious. Virtue is then the product of habit, through repeated practice (with the quality of our moral dispositions being a result of the activities performed), and reason, deriving from rational principle that enables man to deliberately choose how to act, and necessarily choose to act well (Aristotle, 1944). However, the concept of habit is more refined in the Nicomachean Ethics by dividing virtues into two kinds: moral virtues, which are the direct product of habit by regulating desires and emotions (and are therefore also called virtues of character), and intellectual virtues, related to knowledge and deliberation, and increased by instruction (Aristotle, 1934). This classification enables Aristotle to devise the concept of the just mean associated with the moral virtues[2], something unrelated to the intellectual virtues (trans. note by Rackham, 1934); these impinge upon deliberate choice where there is neither excess nor deficiency regarding actions or emotions. As Bragues (2006, p. 346) remarks, "the moral virtues are in accord with reason, not evoked by it", like the intellectual virtues are.

The importance of the just mean as pivotal to (moral) virtue, preventing actions or emotions from falling into either excess or deficiency, is evident in the definition that Aristotle provides of virtue as

> [A] settled disposition of the mind determining the choice of our actions and emotions, consisting essentially in the observance of the mean relative to us, this being determined by principle, that is, as the prudent man would determine it. And it is a mean state between two vices, one of excess and one of defect. Furthermore, it is a mean state in that whereas the vices either fall short of or exceed what is right in feelings and actions, virtue ascertains and adopts the mean. Hence while in respect of its substance and the definition that states

[2] To present the whole array of the moral virtues discussed by Aristotle in the Nicomachean Ethics is out of the scope of this essay. What is relevant here is to emphasise the importance Aristotle (1934) gives to the mean lying between excess and deficiency, fundamental to the characterisation of an action as virtuous. Besides, what these virtues are and their importance for business ethics has been properly discussed by Bragues (2006).

> what it really is in essence virtue is the observance of the mean, in point of excellence and rightness it is an extreme. (Aristotle, 1934, 1107a1-9).

As observance of the mean guided by excellence, virtue has then a twofold effect on the individual[3]: it makes him good, but also causes him to act well (Aristotle, 1934). Hitting the mean is a mark of virtue, as it is what is praised in action, constituting success; vices, on the contrary, are reproached as errors (Aristotle, 1934). Praiseworthiness comes from the righteous character of the mean, which demands effort in its attainment. As Aristotle states, "it is a hard task to be good, for it is hard to find the middle point in anything" (1934, 1109a25).

Ricoeur (2005) sees the definition of virtue as comprising the entire structure of action, since it builds the bridge between habit, preferential choice, and practical wisdom[4]. The relationship between moral and intellectual virtues is thereby established particularly regarding the capability of choice, unique to the human being as it is set upon reason. Aristotle (1934) posits that choice is intimately linked to action by the former affecting what can be the object of the latter. And choice is to be preceded by deliberation, as it "involves reasoning and some process of thought" (Aristotle, 1934, 1112a16-17). Apposing deliberation to choice restricts virtue to what is in our power to do and is achievable by action. Aristotle reifies deliberation as impinging not only on what is possible to perform through our agency, either directly or indirectly (i.e., through others, as for example our friends), since the origin of the action is in us (Aristotle, 1934), or, as it will be relevant later in this essay, can be imputed to us. Deliberation is likened to an investigation about what actions are within our power to perform, and because "all our actions aim at ends other than themselves [apart from happiness], it follows that we do not deliberate about ends but about means" (Aristotle, 1934, 1112b32-33). In order to reinforce that the scope of deliberation is about means to achieve a desired end, Aristotle (1934) posits that ends derive from what we wish, which can be something impossible (like being invisible); on the other hand, means are related to action, thus representing something that must be possible to be performed by us. Therefore, and because we deliberate about what is within our capabilities to act[5], with virtuous action necessarily aiming

[3] Aristotle (1934) does not narrow virtue here only to human beings because what is stated in ancient Greek are the *things* to which virtue belongs, a remark that will enable us to speak later of virtue regarding corporations. Aristotle (1934) gives the example of a horse that is excellent when performing its functions well, that being good at galloping, carrying its rider or facing the enemy.

[4] Two caveats must be made here regarding issues of translation. Ricoeur translates *proairesis* (literally, *choosing beforehand*) as *decision* in "The Course of Recognition", whilst admitting that *preferential choice* is closer to the Greek. I have opted to follow the literal translation of *preferential choice* since not only is what Ricoeur (1992) employs in "Oneself as Another" but also owing to the importance of choice regarding action. Maintaining a continuous reference to choice will reinforce its importance regarding virtue and action, and consequently to the ethical nature of the subject *recognised* by acting, whether individual or corporate. Also, *phronēsis* is translated as *practical wisdom* instead of *prudence*, since I believe it reflects in a better way the practical nature of happiness. Whenever *prudence* is used, it will be in the sense of *practical wisdom*, and for the sake of clarification of wording.

[5] I am intentionally using the term *capabilities* here because, as discussed later in this essay, deliberation will fall upon what we can do. Drawing on Sen (1999), the magnitude of such capabilities will impinge upon the notion of moral agency and responsibility of a subject, regardless of its human or corporate nature.

at excellence, as it has a good as its end, choice comprises voluntary actions that were object of previous deliberation. Furthermore, choice will represent a middle point between deliberation and the desired end. As Aristotle mentions in the Eudemian Ethics,

> the End is the starting-point of the process of thought, but the conclusion of the process of thought is the starting-point of action. (...) The End is (...) the object for which the thing chosen is the mean, of which End goodness is the cause by its act of choice – though the choice is not of the End but of the means adopted for the sake of the End. (...) [G]oodness is the cause of the End aimed at by choice being right. (1935, 1127b34-1128a1).

For the process of thought to be complete, Ricoeur (2005), complementing Aristotle, adds that a place must be made for wishing (*boulēsis*)[6] as a component of preferential choice. As mentioned above, wishes are in charge of establishing the ends for action, but for those ends to reflect virtue, they must reflect a good attainable by man, since "a thing is defined by its end" (Aristotle, 1934, 1115b23). By linking wishing to the good, according to Ricoeur's (2005) additional insight, the judgment behind the process of decision or preferential choice, while evaluation of the just mean, sets the wise man (the *phronimos*) as the paradigm of the virtue of action, since for Aristotle (1934) he is the one who commonly deliberates well about the means to the good life in general). Such may be deducted by coupling the reference to the prudent man in the definition of virtue presented above to what Aristotle states in the Politics, that "to each man there falls just so large a measure of happiness as he achieves of virtue and wisdom and of virtuous and wise action" (1944, 1323b21-24). It is also this direction that Ricoeur (2005) tells us to follow, leading us to practical wisdom and simultaneously shifting our focus from the moral virtues to the intellectual virtues.

The importance of the intellectual virtues lies, amongst other things, in the fact that the moral virtues, as virtues of character, may vary from subject to subject according not only to their natural capacity to exert them but also to the degree those virtues are expressed by action; in other words, it is possible for someone to have shown through his conduct to be more courageous than generous, having achieved more of the virtue of courage than that of munificence (two of the moral virtues identified by Aristotle). That is possible because, as Aristotle (1934) emphasises, moral virtues can exist apart from each other. The same, however, is impossible regarding the intellectual virtues (of which *phronēsis* is the

[6] The entry for *boulēsis* in the Liddell-Scott depicts it mainly as wish linked to will or purpose, and that of the Grand Bailly to intention. Altogether, and in line with Ricoeur (2005), it may well imply that wish, deriving from will or intention, becomes subject to reason as "deliberated-upon desire", to borrow Ricoeur's words, in what concerns virtue.

one relevant to us) as they "entitle a man to be good without qualification[7]. For if a man have the one virtue of Prudence he will also have all the Moral Virtues together with it" (Aristotle, 1934, 1144b32-1145a2). The agglutinating nature of practical wisdom is expressed in the last sentence of the previous quote, revealing it as a *sine qua non* condition to act virtuously.

By tying the definition of practical wisdom to the wise man, Aristotle (1934) not only discloses the deliberative faculty constitutive of *phronēsis*, as it is concerned with conduct, but also submits the quality of the moral virtues expressed in action to the exercise of practical wisdom (as if catalysing them), from which results the recognition of ethical subjectivity. Practical wisdom is defined by Aristotle as "a truth-attaining rational quality, concerned with action in relation to the things that are good for the human beings" (1934, 1140b20). This expression's sense is clarified by Ricoeur (2005) when he states that truth possesses here a practical sense, unrelated to questions of falsehood. It is linked to the righteousness of desire, because for the end to be good, and consequently the choice about the means to its attainment, that end must result from thought being true, in that what it rationally affirms to be an end is truly an end, and desire upright, i.e., desire pursues exactly what thought set as an end. In the end, and for the purposes of practical wisdom, attaining truth concerns the means to achieving the rightly desired end (trans. note by Rackham, 1934). Additionally, and because it concerns action, practical wisdom discloses the operation of the moral virtues in performing well so as to attain truth as the good, since "it is not possible to be good *in the true sense* without Prudence, nor to be prudent without Moral Virtue. (...) [O]ur choice of actions will not be right without Prudence any more than without Moral Virtue, since, while Moral Virtue enables us to achieve the end, Prudence makes us adopt the right means to the end" (Aristotle, 1934, 1144b30-1145a5, emphasis added).

A final remark is necessary regarding practical wisdom, which is not directly observable from its definition. Aristotle (1934) makes practical wisdom more dependent of empirical knowledge, developed through experience of life and founded upon specific realities or facts, than of theoretical knowledge, which covers general principles. The reason is that the object of practical wisdom is action, and action concerns particular things (Aristotle, 1934,) since it results from deliberated choice about the means to perform well within given circumstances (Aristotle, 1934). We deliberate about matters of direct perception, meaning that deliberation ceases at the particular fact; otherwise, it would be an endless process (Aristotle, 1934).

[7] The Greek original has *haplōs agathos*, which literally means *simply [or absolutely] good*, and therefore without no restriction or qualification attached (in the sense of *good at*).

2.2.2. Citizenship and Eudaimonia

Right after specifying that practical wisdom demands greater knowledge of particular facts than of general principles, Aristotle (1934) extends the meaningfulness of practical wisdom to politics by considering the latter, as political wisdom[8], a special application of the former regarding the affairs of the *polis*. Both are of the same quality, as both regard action and deliberation, politics dealing with the particular facts of the *polis*.

The link between practical wisdom and politics described at book VI of the Nicomachean Ethics is but a consequence of the close relationship politics shares with ethics, something mentioned from the very beginning of that work and indicated at the start of this essay. By establishing politics as the science to which all others are subordinate, and inasmuch as it gives people their leeway regarding what they can(not) do, Aristotle (1934) posits that all the ends of the other sciences are condensed on the end of politics. As a consequence, the end of politics is the good of the human being (Aristotle, 1934), setting the good of the *polis* in a higher status than that of the mere individual:

> For even though it be the case that the Good is the same for the individual and for the state, the good of the state is manifestly a greater and more perfect good, both to attain and to preserve. To secure the good of one person only is better than nothing; but to secure the good of a nation or a state is a nobler and more divine achievement. (Aristotle, 1934, 1094b7-11).

Like ethics, the end of politics will not be knowledge, but action. Politics thus bears the same teleological imprint of the good pursued by action, and if action's ultimately end is happiness, so happiness becomes the aim of politics. As Aubonnet (Aristotle, 2018) remarks in his translator's note, individual ethics becomes subordinated to politics (a true social ethics), adding that only in the framework of the *polis* can the human being achieve the good life. The *polis* is seen by Aristotle as the ultimate partnership[9], and if every partnership is formed by individuals (whose actions aim at some good), all of them will pursue some good; consequently, the ultimate partnership is formed to achieve the Supreme Good, i.e., happiness (Aristotle, 1944). It is the ultimate partnership because, like happiness, it is complete and final, i.e., it is a partnership of the lower forms of association (families, clans, etc.) "in a

[8] W.D. Ross' translation is exceptionally followed here, as Rackham's translation as *political science* may introduce some confusion, owing to the modern sense given to this expression. Rackham himself uses the expression *political wisdom* in at least one of his commentaries with the same value as *political science*.

[9] Rackham (Aristotle, 1944) employs *partnership* for translating the Greek *koinōnia*, which literally means *community*, noticing that *koinōnia* did not possess a political connotation like *community* has in English. For the sake of clarity and consistence, the same word used by Rackham (Aristotle, 1944) is employed.

full and independent life, which in our view constitutes a happy and noble life". The object of the *polis* is therefore the good life, and "the political partnership[10] must therefore be deemed to exist for the sake of noble actions, not merely for living in common" (Aristotle, 1944, 1280b40-1281a5).

Considering the purpose of the *polis* the good life, and as a composite existence, it is not possible for the *polis* to possess happiness when its parts do not (Aristotle, 1944). With the elements of the *polis* being the citizens, Aristotle (1944) posits that to know the nature of the *polis* is to know first the nature of the citizen, as both are a matter of dispute, and it will be the citizen who will be most capable of the good life, i.e., acting virtuously. For Aristotle (1944), the citizen in an absolute sense is the one capable of participating in deliberative or judicial office – i.e., the powers that represent supreme authority, as Aubonnet (Aristotle, 2018) says in his translator's note – enjoying therefore the fullness of his rights. Amongst the whole population of the *polis*, the citizen is the only one who can act fully, with their group forming the body politic. The citizen was generally the head of the household, the *pater familias*[11]. Slaves, as living tools, acted as instruments of action for the sake of their master, helping him to act, when citizen. Consequently, slaves were unable to pursue happiness, as they were devoid of the capacities of leisure and choice, faculties needed for the development of virtue through voluntary action and participation in politics (Aristotle, 1944). Aristotle reinforces the lack of capability of slaves to pursue happiness because "the state was formed not for the sake of life only but rather for the good life" (Aristotle, 1944, 1280a32), excluding thereby slaves. As tools, they could not partake neither in happiness nor in a life of their choice (Aristotle, 1944). Women, according to Aristotle (1944), and contrary to slaves, were capable of deliberation, but lacked authority for decision, owing to what was believed was their different nature. Mossé (1993) describes the women in ancient Greece as generally excluded from taking part in the affairs of the *polis*, the essence of politics. They lived a life of straight subordination to their father (apart from some slight differences between city-states, particularly Sparta), and after marriage, to their husband. Their role was important, though, as providers of citizenship rights, since frequently their male offsprings could only become citizens if they were born from a citizen (the father) and a daughter of a citizen. And children (i.e., boys) had the authority lacking in women, but underdeveloped due to their young age, thereby incapable of acting virtuously (Aristotle, 1944). Finally, foreign residents, as the metics in Athens or the Perioeci in Sparta, whilst free men dealing with trade or other crafts (which were either forbidden

[10] Rackham (Aristotle, 1944) translates the Greek original *politikē koinōnia* as *political fellowship*, whereas *koinōnia* is elsewhere translated as *partnership*. In line with the translation of Aubonnet (Aristotle, 2018), who translates *koinōnia* always as *communauté*, and drawing on the justification given in footnote 9, the usage of *partnership* will be kept.

[11] The *pater familias* (Latin for *father of the family*) was, in Roman law, the male head of the household possessing *patria potestas* (paternal authority) over his descendants and dependents (Oxford Classical Dictionary, s.v. "Paterfamilias").

to citizens, as is the case of Sparta, or deemed as inferior, as in Athens), were denied the exercise of political rights (Mossé, 1993).

Possessing the nature of citizen, however, did not turn a citizen into a good citizen, as for Aristotle (1934) goodness is achieved through performing well. Aristotle (1944) then states that in order to know whether a good citizen is the same as a good man, it must be inquired what is the excellence of a citizen. Since the citizen's function is ultimately the preservation of his community, and his community is the form of its constitution, the virtue of a citizen will depend on what constitution the *polis* has, varying from constitution to constitution. Aristotle thus concludes that it is possible to be a good citizen without being necessarily a good man, since the virtue of the citizen is relative to the constitution of his community, but that of the good man is but a single one: perfect goodness, i.e., happiness (Aristotle, 1944). In his introduction to Book III of the Politics, Aubonnet (Aristotle, 2018) notes that the problem of the particular virtue of the citizen (relative to the constitution of his community) concerns, in the ethical plan, the relationship between social and individual moral. The study about the virtue of the good citizen (*bon citoyen*) and the good man (*homme de bien*) enables the classification of constitutions by order of merit, being better or worse according to how they are best fit to fulfil their ultimate end, happiness.

Aristotle (1944) sees the junction of the two natures (of the goodness of the citizen being the same as that of the good man) only in the form of the statesman, the one capable of exercising power by administering the affairs of the *polis*. Contrary to a master who rules over his slaves, the statesman has for subject free men who are his equals, as both are citizens of the same *polis*. Aristotle (1944) subordinates the power of government held by the statesman to the citizens, as subjects, making authority exercised for the sake of the ruled. A comparison is made with what happens in other arts such as medicine or athletics, which are practised upon those that benefit from them (Aristotle, 1944). More importantly, and because a good citizen must know and be capable of ruling and being ruled well, Aristotle (1944) states that a ruler learns by being rule if it is to act virtuously. Power must be based on virtue, "for the best thing is the most desired, and to do well is the best thing" (Aristotle, 1944, 1325a40-41). Consequently, the virtue of the citizen will be of two kinds, one for acting as a ruler and the other for acting as a subject, and as they deal with action, so too will the virtues of the good man be two (Aristotle, 1944). The exception, according to Aubonnet (Aristotle, 2018) in his translator's note, is practical wisdom, which is befitting to the ruler in that he is the one who acts upon the subjects. What the ruler, as the originator of the action, gives to the subjects is expressive of his virtue, since

> virtue is displayed in doing good rather than in having good done to one, and in performing noble acts rather than avoiding base ones; but manifestly doing good and acting nobly go with giving, while having good done to one and avoiding base actions go with getting. (Aristotle, 1934, 1120a11-15).

Restricted to the statesman, who embodies the locus where the nature of the good citizen can achieve the unique nature of the good man (the *phronimos*), practical wisdom becomes an ethicopolitical virtue (see Deslandes, 2012).

2.3. Ricoeur: The Recognition of Ethical Subjectivity

2.3.1. Ethics, Morality, and Productive Conflict

> If there is one point where modern thought has moved beyond the Greeks concerning self-recognition, it is not principally on the thematic plane, that of recognition of responsibility, but rather on the plane of the reflexive consciousness of oneself implied in this recognition. (...) For reasons having to do with the ontological and cosmological turn of their philosophy, they did not elaborate a theory of reflection where the emphasis would be shifted from action, its structures, and its virtues to its agent, as the theory of *phronēsis* might have led to... (Ricoeur, 2005, p. 89).

Whilst the work of Aristotle is paramount to the ideas advanced by Ricoeur, the previous quotation highlights what may be perceived as the most significant difference between the meaning of their works relevant for this essay: Aristotle, as considered in this essay, represents for Ricoeur the starting point for exploring the nature of the capabilities of the reflexive agent. As will be argued later, it will be possible to extend the *capabilities* of the reflexive agent, turned into a moral one, to non-human agents such as corporations, something not denied or restricted by Ricoeur in his analyses, whose tone is mainly set upon the (human) self. Amongst the vast work of Ricoeur, the books that deal closest to the possibility of granting moral agency to corporations are "Oneself as Another" (Ricoeur, 1992) and "The Course of Recognition" (Ricoeur, 2005), owing to their ethical tone.

The book "Oneself as Another" may be summarised through the following keywords, which will also serve as the guiding terms of this section: ethics, action, who, attestation, and ontology. The last represents a culmination point of the relationship between all the other keywords, a locus of their affection upon ontology's significance, owing to the way the relationship of these keywords ends up rendering the

ontology of the self not out of substance but out of action (Ricoeur, 1992). The primacy of action opens the way to consider non-human agents as moral actors, even if not persons (see De George, 1981). But one last keyword is missing here, by far the most important one, which belongs to the tittle of the next section: recognition. Not only is it the keyword for Ricoeur's second book dealt with here, "The Course of Recognition", but it is also the master keyword for this essay. The starting point of this section is the basic unit of analysis of the keywords mentioned above, action, since all the other arguments put forward will revolve about this term. The importance of action is summarised by Williams (1993) in his description of the theory of action, which links action to ethics, but having political ends in view as well. One must remember, as Sison and Fontrodona (2012, p. 221) remind us, that ethical judgement must consider the political backdrop, since "politics is the culmination of ethics", and citizenship is what allows individuals to achieve happiness, as stated by Aristotle (1944). And as seen in the previous section, *life*, or rather the *good life*, arises out of the ethicopolitical import of our actions (Aristotle, 1934, 1944). That is why Williams (1993) refers to "the basic conceptions of action *for human life* [as] the capacities to deliberate, to conclude[12], *to act*, to exert oneself, to make oneself do things, to endure" (p. 40, emphasis added). It must be referred that the last of these capacities was not yet subject to analysis, and it is where the locus for (moral) responsibility is to be found.

Regarding ethics, the purpose of Ricoeur (1992) is to expose its primacy over morality so as to draw an ontology of the reflexive self set upon action rather than substance, distancing himself from the Cartesian notions of the *cogito*. In turn, the ethical aim is enriched by its subjecting to the legitimacy of the moral norm. In other words, it represents the infusion of the teleological imprint of Aristotle within the universal tone of Kant, resulting into what Ricoeur labels as an "applied hermeneutics" (Ricoeur, 2005, p. 198). The reason is that the meaning of ethics is attached to "the *aim* of an accomplished life" and that of morality to "the articulation of this aim in *norms* characterized at once by the claim to universality and by an effect of constraint" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 170, emphasis in the original). Bearing thus a teleological imprint, ethics follows Ricoeur's formula of "aiming at the good life, with and for others, in just institutions", where "the "good life" (...) is the very object of the ethical aim. Whatever the image each of us has of a full life, this apex is the ultimate end of our action" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 172).

Ricoeur (1992) argues that "aiming at the good life" is deeply linked to the Socratic notion that an unexamined life is not worth living. Ricoeur sees the exercise of self-interpretation of what is in our power to do (i.e., effective and potential actions resulting from rationally deliberated choice towards an end) as self-esteem. It represents what he defines as a kind of hermeneutical circle, a circular process of

[12] Or, if keeping closer to the language employed in the previous section, to *choose*.

virtue where our particular actions are chosen for one specific end, in turn defining that end as good. For Ricoeur (1992), what differs in his insight from Aristotle is the reflexive imprint of interpretation, which opens practical wisdom to the constitution of selfhood *initially* through the appraisal of those actions considered as good as ours, of our authorship. Who we are departs *at first* from an estimation of our life, our existence, by ourselves regarding what we take our actions to be. Ricoeur (1992) defines such process as constituted essentially by narrative, relying on what MacIntyre[13] defines as the "narrative unity of a life", where the emphasis falls upon the connections performed by narrative between the estimation of actions and the evaluation of persons. That is why the reference to the hermeneutical circle was made above, and the reason behind the ethical nature of self-esteem, as it affects our identity throughout life. As Ricoeur (1992, p. 178) states, "the idea of the narrative unity of life therefore serves to assure us that the subject of ethics is none other than the one to whom the narrative assigns a narrative identity."

For Ricoeur (1992), and with self-esteem as the focus of "aiming at the good life", the expression "with and for others" enables the presence of the figure of the other in the ethical nature of selfhood; otherwise, self-esteem as a reflexive process could be carried away into solipsism by turning the self-appraising subject away from the horizon of the *good life*. The other will bring to the fore the notion of *solicitude*, vital to ethics, which shares a relation of interdependence with self-esteem. Indeed, "self-esteem and solicitude cannot be experienced or effected upon one without the other" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 180). Ricoeur (1992) opens the ethical perspective to otherness by setting the tone on the appraisal not of the accomplishments of the self, but of capacities, understood here not only as the capacity to act, translated into power-to-act, but also as the capacities to evaluate one's actions and to self-evaluate oneself as good. The purpose is to locate the mediation of the other along the way from the capacity to act to the realisation of action. Ricoeur (1992) draws on Aristotle's conception of friendship, the content of books VIII and IX of the Nicomachean Ethics (Aristotle, 1934), to clarify how the other affects the process of self-esteem. In turn, friendship will build a bridge between self-esteem and justice, the latter covering the political sphere.

The notion of friendship represents in ethics the introduction of the dialogic structure set upon the self and the other, a structure that is inherently constituted of mutuality[14]: "each loves the other *as being the man he is*" (Aristotle, 1934, 1156a-18-19, also quoted in Ricoeur, 1992, p. 183, emphasis in the quote). With a stroke, what is considered here is only one of the three kinds of friendship posited by Aristotle (1934), that based on virtue, where friends love each other out of their goodness; the other two

[13] MacIntyre, A. (1981). *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory.* University of Notre Dame Press.

[14] Whilst Ricoeur speaks of reciprocity and mutuality as if being the same in "Oneself as Another", their difference is pinpointed in "The Course of Recognition" as essential to the ideas put forward therein about the uninterested "mutual recognition" the self and the other carry out.

(based on utility and on pleasure, where friends are loved as useful or as agreeable in the pleasure they provide), with their egotistical penchant, are set aside as unable to be expressive of mutuality. What is appraised is the goodness of a friend, the object of wish for the good man. As Aristotle mentions,

> If the virtuous man feels towards his friend in the same way as he feels towards himself (for his friend is a second self) – then, just as a man's own existence is desirable for him, so, or nearly so, is his friend's existence also desirable. But (...) it is the consciousness of oneself as good that makes existence desirable (...). Therefore a man ought also to share his friend's consciousness of his existence (...) for this is the meaning of living together.... (1934, 1170b5-11).

For Ricoeur (1992), the mutual nature of appraisal will arise out of friendship based on virtue, as it represents an incomplete activity when without the presence of the other as friend; in other words, it is expressive of lack, of the need that desire, as the desire for one's own existence, naturally encompasses. It is the mediation that lack exerts upon self-esteem that enables the realisation of the capacities of self-evaluation out of mutuality: mutual esteem between friends who thereby can esteem themselves. Mutuality compensates lack by making a place for the other, linking activity with life. Consequently, "friendship (...) works towards establishing the conditions for the realization of life" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 186), as "living together."

As mutuality, Ricoeur (1992) reifies friendship as expressive of the dialectic of giving and receiving equally in terms of esteem. As argued by him, the meaningfulness of solicitude (even if incomplete in an ethics not enriched by the moral norm) arises out of the dissymmetry this dialectic initially possesses as action, in that the self and the other act one upon another. When the other, as the originator of initiative, acts upon the self by summoning the self to responsibility, the self is rendered in the passivity of the accusative mode, as the receiver, i.e. the object, of the injunction. Solicitude counterweighs the dissymmetry of the injunction through enabling an answer not out of a forceful duty to respond, but out of "benevolent spontaneity, intimately related to self-esteem within the framework of the aim of the "good" life." (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 190, emphasis in the original). The ethical import of solicitude is here disclosed by the spontaneity of the answer the self gives back, being for Ricoeur (1992) the moment where the other's superiority is recognised, i.e. estimated, as good because the injunction as action was performed out of regard for the self as an other. But when the other becomes the receptacle of the actions of the self, now the bearer of initiative, solicitude arises out of sympathy and compensates the imbalance when

> the self, whose power of acting is at the start greater than that of its other, finds itself affected by all that the suffering other offers to him in return. For from the suffering other there comes a giving that is no longer drawn from the power of acting and existing but precisely from weakness itself. This is perhaps the supreme test of solicitude. (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 191).

Either via the feelings of sympathy by the self regarding the other's suffering or through the injunction of the other to self to answer back, Ricoeur (1992) concludes that it is solicitude that enables the self to perceive itself as another amongst others through compensation of the initial dissymmetry. As a result, Ricoeur (1992) posits that equality between the self and the other is achieved with friendship, where the self and the other, as friends, give and receive mutual esteem. Therefore, as asserted by the author, solicitude makes friendship mutual in that both the self and the other care for each other for the sake of their virtuous existence. In turn, and owing to existence, it is solicitude that *prima facie* justifies the need for *living together*, a *sine qua non* condition for achieving the good life, an endeavour uncapable of ever being performed in solipsism (Ricoeur, 1992). The need for friends that solicitude adds to self-esteem for the sake of the good life reveals its ethical purpose.

With life "in just institutions", the third part of Ricoeur's (1992, p. 172) ethics, the dialectical relationship between the self and the other is extended to include the nature of the third person in the aim for the good life, thus going beyond solicitude. This is achieved by justice, which has as its point of application the institution, and by the equality that a sense of justice calls for. By "institution", Ricoeur (1992, p. 194) understands "the bond of common mores and not that of constraining rules", i.e., its meaning is merely set upon the ethical stance of *living together* as equals, and therefore on the sense of justice and not on the rule of justice, owing to the importance of common mores, i.e., *ēthos*, which gives ethics its name and sense. In other words, Ricoeur (1992) presents justice as twofold: justice set upon the good, which represents the sense of justice as rectitude or righteousness, and set upon the legal, where the law as a rule works as restraint. Consequently, the constraint of morality, as rules or norms, is left aside at this stage.

Ricoeur draws upon Arendt's[15] notion of power-in-common to depict the sense of power "as wanting to live and act together" (1992, p. 197). The desire of common life and action is widened to others who are not the object of direct face-to-face encounter, but still demand to be treated as equals, as each of them is another self (Ricoeur, 1992). In this constitutes the first component of power as power-

[15] Arendt, H. (1998). *The human condition* (2nd ed.). University of Chicago Press. Arendt refers to power-in-common by stating that "while strength is the natural quality of an individual seen in isolation, power springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse" (1998, p. 200).

in-common, *plurality*, as Ricoeur (1992) argues, which brings the political dimension of action to the fore under the ethical stance of equality. The second component is said to be related to *action in concert* and represents a task to be accomplished in the political arena where each human life becomes entangled with others. The ethical nature of justice arises when the equality required by the power-in-common leans towards domination, breaking the balance inherent in the desire to live and act together. Owing to this imbalance, Ricoeur (1992) states that justice is perceived as "sense of justice" out of its negative side, injustice, since we are more easily aware of what is negative to us, as it harms us, affects us, than what is positive. Injustice reveals what lacks us in the moment of crisis we fell into, thereby making us recall of the meaningfulness of the ethical sense of justice which solves the crisis brought about by injustice[16]. Injustice is for Ricoeur (1992) related to the distribute sense of justice, where goods and burdens are to be shared by all in a fair way, expressive of equality, with regard to how individuals take part in society through their roles and tasks, i.e., through (political) action. The institution will represent a system of regulation of distribution of just shares in proportion to how the individual acted in his role or performed his task. That is how Ricoeur (1991), drawing again on Aristotle (1934), turns the ethical stance of equality as meaning *proportional equality* for the sake of justice, where distributive justice rests upon "a proportional relation with four terms: two persons and two shares" (1992, p. 201). Through proportion, the connection between justice and equality is achieved, and these in turn are infused with solicitude (Ricoeur, 1992).

It is the sense of lack that brings justice and solicitude together by putting equality and solicitude in a parallel relationship. For Ricoeur, "*equality (...) is to life in institutions what solicitude is to interpersonal relations*" (1992, p. 202, emphasis in the original). He then concludes that solicitude refers to the face of the other in direct contact, as it occurs through friendship; equality, expressed through the sense of justice, sets its tone on the impersonal nature of the third person, owing to its distributive character where the other is *each* other[17] beyond *I* and *you*. Therefore, as Ricoeur says,

> The sense of justice takes nothing away from solicitude. The sense of justice presupposes it, to the extent that it holds persons to be irreplaceable. Justice in turn adds to solicitude, to the extent that the field of application of equality is all of humanity (1992, p. 202).

Turning to morality, Ricoeur (1992) introduces both the factor of prohibition and duty that turns self-esteem into self-respect. Whilst sharing a similar structure, with the good as their purpose, self-respect

[16] The idea of defining the positive sense of something out of its negative perspective is common throughout Ricoeur's work.

[17] That is for Ricoeur (1992) the reason why "each" keeps its unique otherness towards the self, maintaining its ethical import. The notion of humanity present in the universality of morality, where each person loses their particularity regarding others, removes "otherness" from the equation.

will appeal to the prohibitive nature of the moral, in the sense that morality answers back to evil as prohibiting the action, preventing it from being performed. The idea of constraint introduces the idea of duty, of the will to act not merely in accordance with the aim of the desire for the good life – which is set in the optative mode – but as moral Right stipulates, representing the imperative of the obligation. Ricoeur (1992) refers here to the Kantian[18] sense of the universality of morality, expressed by the universal application of a maxim that is a norm. The duty is one of becoming autonomous through obedience to the common maxim made universal, expressive of the Kantian categorical imperative: "act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" (quoted in Ricoeur, 1992, p. 208). Autonomy, Ricoeur (1992) states, is where the individual becomes free out of his capacity for acting through obedience to the universal law. For him, the expression "morally good" as set upon universality will not regard the internal conditions and external circumstances of action. The figure of respect emerges not yet as self-respect, but as respect for the moral law, passively affecting the self. In turn, it introduces doubt regarding the possibility of autonomy, and consequently doubt on the achievement of unquestionable universality by the moral norm (Ricoeur, 1992).

> Respect is self-esteem that has passed through the sieve of the universal and constraining norm – in short, self-esteem under the reign of the moral law. Having said this, the most formidable problem posed by respect as a motive is the introduction of a factor of *passivity* at the very heart of the principle of autonomy. This conjunction within respect between self-positing and self-affection authorizes us to question (...) the independence of the principle of autonomy (...) in relation to the teleological perspective, in other words, to doubt the autonomy of autonomy (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 215).

Returning to prohibition, Ricoeur (1992) renders its nature clearer when apposing solicitude to the moral norm. Prohibition here is related to another sense of power, power-over, a sense power may possess in addition to the sense of power-to-act and the above-mentioned power-in-common. Ricoeur (1992) argues that *power-over* inaugurates violence performed by the agent upon the other as sufferer, which can lead to the reduction or ultimately to the destruction of the other's power-to-act through humiliation. The destruction of the power-to-act is tantamount to the destruction of the capacity for self-esteem, itself a performative act, which consequently represents the destruction of self-respect. Morality

[18] Kant, I. (1998). *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals* (M. Gregor, Trans. & Ed.; with an introduction by C. Korsgaard). In K. Ameriks & D. Clarke (Series Eds.), *Cambridge texts in the history of philosophy*. Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1785). Kant's (1998, p. 31) sense of universality is related to his concept of *categorical imperative*: "There is, therefore, only a single categorical imperative and it is this: act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law." (1998, p. 31).

arises as the denial of violence upon the other, again embodied in maxims. "To all the figures of evil responds the *no* of morality" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 221, emphasis in the original).

Ricoeur (1992) establishes the parallel between solicitude and morality by disclosing what is hidden within the negativeness of prohibition: namely the positive idea of treating the person as an end in itself, i.e., respecting them as persons. That is so, for "on the level of the ethical aim (...), solicitude, as the mutual exchange of self-esteems, is affirmative through and through. This affirmation, which can well be termed original, is the hidden soul of the prohibition" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 221). In order to ensure the primacy of autonomy and the formalist tone of universality, the Kantian[19] notion of humanity is alluded to by Ricoeur (1992), which in turn enables his criticism of the idea. For him, with humanity emerges the person as worthy of respect, but with respect as a universal maxim, the diversity of persons which sprouts from the uniqueness of *otherness* withers away. Again, universality prevents the particular from taking place. And the particular, as stressed by Aristotle (1934), is what matters for ethics.

The role of justice in morality regards its deontological perspective, where the tone is set upon the rule of justice. Ricoeur (1992) draws on the idea of the social contract designed by John Rawls[20] for depicting the procedural nature of justice as formalisation. The idea of the Rawlsian social contract represents an attempt to remove the teleological aim out of justice. In the case of Rawls, Ricoeur (1992) says that teleological imprint that is criticised is very specific, as it refers to utilitarianism. The contract bears the same place regarding institutions that autonomy possesses regarding morality at its basics. Like autonomy, it provides individuals with freedom by replacing their primitive survival-based freedom for civil liberty through membership of a political partnership. Regarding the contract, the choices individuals perform are linked to the distribution of goods and burdens, the same object of the sense of justice discussed above concerning institutions. But deliberation here deals with global principles of justice, justice in its deontological vein. With persons taken as ends, "distribution requires a consensus about the procedures for arbitrating among competing demands" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 234) so as to achieve fairness and stability. But because there are several alternatives of sharing, consensus will always be open to challenge, since the system of distribution adopted for the sake of equality, the aim of justice, may in turn generate inequality. The possibility of inequality and the nature of conflict led Ricoeur (1992) to affirm that the procedural conception of justice cannot become free of the sense of justice it requires to ensue, since it draws on what is conceived as unjust and just, in that order. It is representative of what

[19] Kant, I. (1998). *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals* (M. Gregor, Trans. & Ed.; with an introduction by C. M. Korsgaard). In K. Ameriks & D. M. Clarke (Series Eds.), *Cambridge texts in the history of philosophy*. Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1785). Kant's sense of humanity presupposes that, when acting, "you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means." (1998, p. 38).

[20] Rawls, J. (1999). *A Theory of Justice* (rev. ed.). Harvard University Press.

Ricoeur (1992, p. 288) labels as "considered convictions", which will impact upon the meaningfulness of fair distribution and allow for argumentation to take place, even if here it aims at the rationalisation of conviction through adjustment to theories of justice.

Conviction is the keyword Ricoeur (1992) chooses for moving from universal norms of conduct to the particularity of situations. This is achieved, according to Ricoeur (1992, see esp. p. 240) through "moral judgment in situation", where practical wisdom answers back to the conflicts produced by moral formalism through recourse to its ethical origin. Indeed, "it is morality itself which, through the conflicts it generates on the basis of its own presuppositions, refers back to the most original ethical affirmation" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 273). In turn, ethics is enriched due to the sieve of moral norms, which prevent its diverting to *ad hoc* arbitrary reasoning (with the danger of bringing to the fore an egotistical penchant out of univocity) (Ricoeur, 1992).

The value of conviction for practical wisdom is gradually revealed by Ricoeur (1992) when exploring how the persistent conflicts that morality brings to the fore (whether with the autonomy of the universal self or with humanity or with the deontological nature of justice as rule in the institutional setting) are inseparable from their particular location in life. Regarding conflict in the institutional setting, Ricoeur (1992) brings the rule of justice into the political arena where the conflict brought by the distribution of political power occurs. With a stroke, he justifies the relevance of the political out of the incapacity of civil society, where opposition between interests occurs, to produce an organic bond between individuals which would settle the differences, and because the capacities for (human) action necessarily need a *particular* institutional setting. That is, following Williams, what politics delivers: "We need a politics, in the sense of a coherent set of opinions about the way in which power should be exercised in modern societies, with what limitations and to what ends" (Williams, 1993, p. 11).

Conflict is related to the indeterminate nature of the public good, which "cannot be decided in a scientific or dogmatic manner. There is no place from which this good can be viewed and determined in the manner so absolute that discussion can be held to be closed" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 258). Ricoeur (1992) sees the reason behind the fact that political practice is the place of conflict lying in the relationship of continuous subordination of domination to power-in-common, with the latter essential for the ethical meaningfulness of the sense of justice, as discussed above. It is power-in-common, owing to the plurality and the capacity for action in concert that are proper to its exertion, that keeps the productive power of indeterminacy afloat. Indeterminacy's productivity resides in the openness it enables to an (always provisional) answer to the crisis of legitimacy that indeterminacy itself provokes. Such an answer is termed by Ricoeur (1992, p. 288) as "good counsel", which keeps the purpose of goodness proper to ethics. It

is set upon *inner conviction*[21] out of deliberation, a "considered conviction" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 288), which he makes equivalent to a plural or public *phronēsis*.

Regarding humanity, the second feature constitutive of formalist morality, Ricoeur (1992) sees the possibility for conflict lying in the incapacity of universal norms of coping with the demand of *otherness* inherent to the uniqueness of persons, as each one being different, and thereby unique. As an effect,

> Respect then tends to split up into respect for the law and respect for persons. Under this conditions, practical wisdom may consist in giving priority to the respect for persons in the name of the solicitude that is addressed to persons in their irreplaceable singularity (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 262).

Ricoeur (1992) gives the example of false promises in order to show how the ascending route of the formation of a maxim for action, which is related to a person's integrity regarding the rule, needs a second descending route of application to particular situations, where the rule becomes subject to apparent exception and restores otherness by what he describes as the principle of fidelity turned into availability. In other words, personal integrity regarding others as *other selves*. Promising as a performative speech act encompasses two different duties: the promise *per se*, which is related to self-constancy, in the moral sense that "*I* keep my promise", and the obligation to keep the promise, which is related to reciprocity founded in solicitude. False promises involve a break into one of these duties, either through lack of constancy of what I feel that I am promising or lack of truthfulness at the moment of fulfilling the promise by the possibility of not keeping it, which leads to a lie and consequent disregard for the other. Ricoeur (1992) finds in commitment the expression of the principle of fidelity by recourse to Gabriel Marcel's[22] idea of availability (*disponibilité*) to the other. Availability restores mutuality by setting the other as a debtor, to whom an obligation is owed, and is thereby counting on me, who will in turn be able to keep self-constancy. As a result, formalism and ethics are brought together:

> It is to the other that I wish to be faithful. (...) "From you", says the other, "I expect that you will keep your word"; to you, I reply: "You can count on me". This *counting on* connects self-constancy, in its moral tenor, to the principle of reciprocity founded in solicitude" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 268).

[21] Conviction that will thereby not be *doxa*, but *attested* conviction owing to its formation, as will become clear later.
[22] Marcel, G. (1976). *Being and Having: An Existentialist Diary*. Peter Smith.

Finally, about autonomy and conflict (with autonomy reified as the pinnacle of morality), Ricoeur (1992) shows that autonomy is unable to keep its self-sufficiency due to its necessary link to both the rule of justice and mutuality. Considering the ascending route of the formation of a maxim for action a regressive path for justification[23] and the associated descending route a progressive one to actualisation of universal norms, Ricoeur (1992) concentrates his discussion on the dialectic between *conviction* and *argumentation*. Conviction is expressive of the locus from where conceptions regarding the multiple goods emerge, to wit, from where their meaning and evaluation result. As reflection, it is representative of deliberation. Ultimately, it respects the conception of a good life. Now, as a language game different from others due to the implicit universalisation in its presuppositions (which calls for a global consensus in the practical domain), argumentation in turn achieves actualisation when mediated by other language games (such as narratives) that also shape what is at stake in a debate made public – at issue are "things of life" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 288). For Ricoeur (1992), argumentation's goal is to achieve, *through deliberation,* what for everyone debating can become the best argument, which is where consensus plays its role. Consequently, and because it seeks an equilibrium between several wills, the importance of argumentation lies in its operation upon conviction, since it is able to raise singular convictions to the level of "considered convictions" for the sake of legitimacy. Ricoeur (1992, p. 288) sees in these "considered convictions" an analogy to Rawls' reflective equilibrium[24], posited as a reflective equilibrium between argumentation and considered convictions, the highest but most fragile expression of the confluence of deontology with teleology.

2.3.2. *"The Course of Recognition"[25] and the Ontology of the Subject*

> ...All things desire and love existence; but we exist in activity, since we exist by living and doing; and in a sense[26] one who has made something exists actively, and so he loves his handiwork because he loves existence. This is in fact a fundamental principle of nature: what a thing is potentially, that its work reveals in actuality. (Aristotle, 1934, 1168a5-9).

The great detour Ricoeur performs in "Oneself as Another" (1992) along the paths of ethics and morality has always action as its aim, to where the predicate *good* is first attributed. But the true purpose

[23] Justification regarding the question "can the maxim of my action really become a universal law of nature?", which is a quote Ricoeur makes of Kant's "Groundwork of the Metaphysical of Morals".

[24] Rawls' expression *reflective equilibrium* means achieving coherence between moral principles and considered judgments through mutual adjustment and reflection.

[25] The title from Ricoeur's book is borrowed for this subsection because it portraits exactly the thread to be followed here.

[26] Paraphrasing Rackham's note (Aristotle, 1934, p.546), "in a sense he exists 'actually' as long as his work lasts, though strictly speaking he exists as an actual maker only while the act of making is going on". Following Ricoeur (1992), *work* should be here read as *action*, since action is what enables the disclosure of the agent.

of the book was always set upon the ontology of the subject – as Ricoeur (1992) suggests – *who* is *capable* of acting and performing judgments of evaluation or appraisal, as possessor of the capacity to act out of reason. As stated earlier, a capacity is realised (or actualised) only through action. And every action is performed towards an end that can also be the means to achieve another end, with the ultimate end of action being happiness, i.e., doing well, in the sense of acting virtuously. Taking capacity as power, namely power-to-act (both capacity and power share the same Greek equivalent, *dyvamis*), the actualisation of a capacity through action will require, as previously mentioned, two opposite parties, to wit, an agent and a sufferer, the agent bearing not only power-to-act, but eventually power-over. However, and owing to the fact that an agent capable of self-esteem (i.e., who deliberately chooses how to act, and therefore acts knowledgeably, i.e., well, particularly upon others) is identified mainly in narrative form, what can be appraised as *our* actions also becomes dependent on the performative power of narrative, something Ricoeur (1992) shows when speaking of narrative identity. Not only are our experience and memory structured mainly in narrative form (Bruner, 1991), but when confronted with otherness, the performative power of narrative comes back to us by affecting our identity; consequently, the passive side of the narrative nature of identity is revealed, of being entangled in stories that are not merely of our making, that take place with the emergence of our subjectivity (Ricoeur, 1984). And as Ricoeur (2005) states, the interweaving of stories happens as much on the individual level as on the collective one, where *we* can identify the singularity of the agent.

A problem thus arises about ascribing the action to an agent capable of self-esteem, i.e., who deliberately chooses how to act, and therefore acts knowledgeably, i.e., well. Ricoeur (1992, 2005) sees the answer to this question *in fine* in the passivity of the operation of recognition, where *being-recognised* bears an utmost importance towards the constitution of selfhood[27], to wit, existence. In turn, recognition will be deeply tied by Ricoeur (1992) to attestation, which brings forth also an apparent active side of recognition as self-recognition. Yet, self-recognition is but ancillary towards recognition itself, as it represents a previous step towards achieving recognition: it depends on mutual recognition, and therefore on the forceful existence of the other as another self. For Ricoeur (1992), attestation, as testimony, is not exclusively related to self-recognition, because the presence of the other provokes a decentring of the world from the isolated singularity of the self.

Ricoeur (1992) posits that both recognition and attestation concern the truth about the subject being recognised, about its existence. Owing to the link subjectivity shares to action, truth is reified by

[27] Selfhood is not the same as personhood, which are taken here to be two different things, drawing on De George (1981), French (1979), Pettit (2007) and Schweiker (1993). That will justify the ascription of moral selfhood to corporations without implying that they are persons – they are *like* persons owing to their capability to act, with their subjectivity arising out of analogy regarding action.

Ricoeur (1992) in a practical certitude (as was discussed before regarding Aristotle's *phronēsis*), deriving from action and the inherent process of practical wisdom. Ricoeur (1992) credits Maine de Biran[28] for relating being to action, thus dissociating substance from existence. Action represents a new field from where the role of the capable agent emerges (Ricoeur, 1985). As a corollary, "self-apperception is taken as the apperception of an act and not as the deduction of a substance" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 321), as apperception does not concern introspection; it has no object, no substance to visualise, and becomes a "sort of nonobjectivizing apprehension of oneself" (p. 321). For Ricoeur (1992), substituting action for substance is a requirement set by the phenomenology of acting and suffering, which impinges on the ontology of selfhood both as agent and as sufferer. It is phenomenology, according to him, that makes action pivotal to the ontology of the self, to the detriment of substance, by bringing to the fore the passivity of the self in the dialectic relationship it shares with the other, *who* affects the understanding of self by itself, affections representing actions in a linguistic sense; they depend on the injunction launched by the other already mentioned regarding solicitude. Recognition becomes dependent on action for Ricoeur (1992) because self-recognition ensues from these very affections, with the paradoxical nature of becoming activity out of passivity. Otherness is said to be ambivalent, owing to solicitude and the mutuality it necessarily conceals, as it involves two senses: doing justice to both the primacy of self-esteem and to the primacy of the other's convocation to justice. Affection makes "each agent as the patient of the other" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 330), *attesting* that the other acts as counterpart of the self on an equal level regarding its *capability to act*. It is due to the reciprocity of their action that both the self and the other can *exist* as equals, as acting and suffering beings (Ricoeur, 1992), and because each acts towards an end taken as good (see Aristotle, 1934). Equality is achieved by the effect of the rule of justice upon what is truly mutuality (Ricoeur, 1992).

With recognition dependent on action, Ricoeur (1992) develops a process of knowledge of the agent that is essentially hermeneutical, since it depends on self-esteem. At the same level as ontology, what is also here at stake is the epistemic mode of conceiving selfhood through what actions are performed (Ricoeur, 1992). Ontology will arise out of the recognition of the self as a legitimate being to whom actions will be properly *imputed* (Ricoeur, 1992, 2005). But what actions? The problem of the recognition of the self as agent lies at the point that an action can be merged to a referent that can be considered as a *legitimate*[29] agent and consequently emerges as existing, as a self (see Ricoeur, 1992).

[28] Maine de Biran was a French philosopher who lived between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He emphasised inner experience, consciousness, and the will as foundations of self and knowledge.

[29] Whilst already emphasising here the adjective *legitimate* as relevant, legitimacy's role in recognition will become perceptible only when addressing mutual recognition later in this section. There, it will be linked to questions of conflict and property affecting recognition *in toto*.

For Ricoeur, attestation, as "the assurance – the credence and the trust – of *existing* in the mode of selfhood" (1992, p. 302) provides a tentative answer to the problem of recognition by focusing on the model verb "I can". With attestation, and in a single stroke, Ricoeur (1992) turns power-to-act into power-to-be (as it concerns existence) and reveals the power of belief behind attestation, preventing its alethic characterisation from becoming limited to ultimate and self-founding knowledge, like the Cartesian theories of the *cogito*. Belief shares a close relationship to capabilities, as attestation concerns assertions of those capacities that express what I believe that I am *truthfully* capable of, what "I can". Ricoeur (2005) sees such certitude as arising from the self, rendered as a "centre of agency" capable of "recognising responsibility" – two expressions borrowed from Bernard Williams' (1993) discussion in his book "Shame and Necessity". The value of truth regarding recognition and attestation is to be found in the reflexive activity of belief, in the sense of believing as *taking as true*. Recognition here refers to self-recognition, where reflexion as self-esteem concerns, more than actions, capabilities (Ricoeur, 2005). The semantic affinity between attestation and self-recognition derives from the fact that agents, "in recognising that they have done something, (...) implicitly attest that they were capable of doing it." (Ricoeur, 2005, p. 92). For Ricoeur (1992), the alethic characterisation of attestation is even confirmed by its contrary, suspicion. Suspicion arises not only due to the practical nature of truth as deriving from action and its end, but especially out of the kinship of attestation with testimony, introducing vulnerability into attestation in the same way testimony may be taken as true or false. But like the prohibition inherent to morality, suspicion affects attestation in a positive sense as well: it represents the path towards attestation by reassurance of the certitude of attestation as "reliable attestation", out of "trust greater than any suspicion" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 23). Ricoeur (2005) sets the crossing of attestation with self-recognition right at the assurance provided by the modal verb "I can", where capacities are simultaneously attested to and recognised out of a reflexive exercise of self-designation ("I designate myself as capable of..."). Action, for its part, will be characterised "in terms of those capacities which constitute its actualisation" (Ricoeur, 2005, p. 93), enabling its imputation to the agent.

Regarding the capacities related to the power-to-act and borne out of self-recognition, Ricoeur (2005) draws on Austin's (1975) work named "How to do Things with Words" to give priority to speech acts as expressive of the eminent capability of subjects to act, owing to the illocutionary force of a variety of utterances such as "I affirm that...". Not only does the capacity for speaking play a founding role regarding the subject by enabling the utterer, *who* is speaking, to designate himself in a referential manner (preventing him from being substitutable), but it also introduces otherness through interlocution, where

the utterance, usually as a response, reinforces the self-assurance of the subject as the one (capable of) speaking.

The relationship of the modal verb "I can" with action itself is restricted by Ricoeur (2005) to the capability of making something happen in the world, where self-recognition concerns the capability of the agent, through ascription of the action to himself, to self-designate as the cause of the action. Self-designation represents an avowal of the acting subject regarding his power to act, and therefore consists in attestation. Ricoeur (2005) considers it as an avowal because locating the subject as the begetter of the action is practically impossible if not for the configuring operation of narrative; otherwise, the cause would lose itself either as untraceable to a beginning or within the interweaving of actions people carry out with one another. Narrative becomes pivotal to recognition since the identity of the acting self as an agent derives ultimately from its capacity to narrate itself (Ricoeur, 2005). Furthermore, it introduces the temporal dimension both to the self and action, as it concerns the spectrum of life. As Ricoeur states, "the reference of the statement to the speaker, and that of the ability to act to the agent, can apparently be characterised without taking into account the fact that the speaker and the agent have a history, are their own history" (2005, p. 101). As telling, narrative is different from merely speaking, representing another level of capabilities. Ricoeur (1992) structures narrative identity as concerning two types of identity working in a dialectic relationship: that of *idem*, representing sameness as permanence in time out of physical traits and habits, and that of *ipse*, which is linked to selfhood (as ipseity) in a proper sense, and thereby representing self-constancy within a changeable historical stance. Difference, or rather the uniqueness of the identity of the self, is located within ipseity. What is relevant in this dialectic for our purposes is the capability to promise inherent to ipseity which will allow narrative identity to become ethical identity. However, the power of promise regarding recognition cannot be expressed *in toto* here, owing to the scope of this essay[30]. What is here pertinent for ethical purposes is that, with the identity of the acting subject lasting throughout time, narrative identity concerns the aim for the good life. For Ricoeur (1992, 2005), only by bringing together life as a result of the configurating process of narrative can the life of a subject of action be given an ethical qualification. It answers the Socratic question "how should one live" (see also Sen, 1987).

Ricoeur (2005) leaves for last place the notion of imputability and its dialectical relationship with responsibility in order to fully present what he reifies as those capacities intrinsic to the capable human

[30] The capacity to promise bears a direct link to accountability as the locus where the capability to promise is weighed against what action is imputed to the agent, which, it will be argued, is essential for the reification of corporations as moral agents; it concerns their existence, their membership in the community (see Schweiker, 1993). Since the role of accountability regarding recognition is explored in the second essay, only there can the role of promise *vis-à-vis* recognition be given its appropriate relevance.

being recognising himself in what he does. Imputability goes beyond the mere ascription of an action to an agent as it conceals the idea of the agent's capability to bear the consequences for those acts taken to be his own[31]. Imputability inaugurates a sense of property, not with the meaning of the agent as possessor of the act, but with the act rendering the properties of the acting subject as ultimately good or bad. Consequently, the subject becomes a subject of Right through its subjection to justice. Ricoeur (2005) shows that the capability of the subject as an agent to bear the consequences of the actions imputed to him derives from the ethicomoral predicates assigned to actions, which always precede the subject in appearing in the world, affecting others. These predicates are then reflected upon the agent owing to his capacity of self-esteem, i.e., of evaluating actions following rationally predeliberated choices. Through reflexion, the agent becomes capable of imputability, where "the notion of a capable subject reaches its highest meaning, and the form of self-designation it implies includes and in a way recapitulates the preceding forms of self-reference" (Ricoeur, 2005, p. 106). As ascription under the moral and juridical imprint, imputability concerns the obligation of the agent to suffer a penalty regarding the infraction committed in the form of an action that is imputed to the subject as its author. But in order to ease the problems of allocation of causality between several agents, owing to the entanglement of life stories already mentioned, imputability, as an effect of the capability to narrate oneself, is a capacity realised out of self-recognition of oneself as the author of one's actions, whether praiseworthy or blameable (Ricoeur, 2005). Additionally, in Ricoeur's (2005) view, responsibility reorientates the juridical facet of imputability towards the suffering of the victim, reinforcing the moral nature of imputability by putting the vulnerable other under the responsibility of the agent as author of his actions. In turn, imputability itself restricts responsibility from becoming infinite regarding the scope of the effects upon others by individualising the punishment endured by the agent. Were responsibility unlimited, imputability would not be possible, as "an unlimited responsibility would amount to indifference, by overthrowing the "mineness" of my action" (Ricoeur, 2005, p. 109, emphasis in the original).

A caveat is needed regarding both responsibility and imputability. Following Bernard Williams (1993), intentionality, in the sense of voluntary actions, represents an overemphasised requisite for a conception of responsibility out of self-recognition. The authorship pertaining to what one has done, whilst affecting the reification of the story of our life, as narrative, does not refer simply to action done out of intention. Imputability also refers to actions we acknowledge as ours, as belonging to ourselves, even

[31] As Ricoeur (2005) himself states, the idea of imputability is linked to accountability as a metaphor of an account where actions are assigned regarding their merits and faults and which, ultimately, will be given for appraisal in the sense of reporting. The role of imputability regarding accountability does not however belong to the scope of this essay, rather to the second one, since the relevance of accountability regarding recognition and the ontology of the (corporate) subject as morally responsible needs the link between recognition and happiness (as the supreme good behind action) to be established.

when done unintentionally. Williams (1993) provides several examples of responsibility unrelated to intentionality, of which two are mentioned here. First, he refers to the episode in Homer's Odyssey of the slaughter of Penelope's suitors, when they are seen by Ulisses equipping themselves with the armour and javelins he and Telemachus had deposited in the armoury whose door was left open at an angle. Telemachus recognises it was him who left the door open, even if unintentionally – he left it open, lest it shut tightly, as it was usual, preventing father and son from quickly fetching the armour; nevertheless, he brings responsibility upon himself by imputing to himself the action of leaving the door open, which enabled the goatherd Melanthius, who favoured the suitors, to enter therein and take with him both armour and weapons. As a second example, and one to which Ricoeur also makes recourse, Williams recalls Sophocles' Oedipus at Colonus, where Oedipus recognises himself as agent even when reversing action to suffering, in the sense of having underwent *his* acts instead of committing them (Ricoeur, 2005; Williams, 1993). The practical nature of truth is displayed by Ricoeur when affirming that "it remains true that it was *he who did that*" (2005, p. 79). For Williams (1993), and to a certain extent to Ricoeur (2005), the response given for offsetting the harm brought about by action is not necessarily adjustable to what was intended. As a result, "the responsibilities we have to *recognise* extend in many ways beyond our normal purposes and what we intentionally do" (Williams, 1993, p. 74).

In line with Ricoeur's (2005) claims about responsibility turning imputability towards the suffering other, the introduction of this caveat discloses the importance of the other in the ascription of responsibility, to the detriment of the emphasis on the intentionality of action. Notwithstanding its relevance, intentionality is not a *sine qua non* condition for recognising responsibility out of action (Williams, 1993). Consequently, the scope of responsibility is enlarged. As a centre of agency, the responsibility the agent recognises as his is rather related to the effect of those actions imputed to him, affecting the other (regardless of his status of victim, of suffering) (Ricoeur, 2005). The agent, as the bearer of the capacities for acting, of the power-to-act, becomes the bearer of responsibility, as action represents the actualisation of those capacities. Their actualisation renders their nature as good or bad, as the predicates of action are applied to them reflexively (Ricoeur, 2005). And as capacities, they are naturally present in the subject, as Aristotle (1934) states when addressing virtue in book II of the Nicomachean Ethics. The identity of the acting subject is thereby rendered as good (virtuous) or bad (vicious) regarding the way his capacities are actualised by the action that is imputed to him, as its author. Combining Ricoeur (2005) and Williams (1993) authorises the establishment of a relationship between responsibility and virtue, and consequently to happiness as the supreme good, achievable by performing well, which was always present regarding self-recognition. The link between recognition and happiness

was posited by Ricoeur (2005) right at the beginning of his study of self-recognition, drawing on Aristotle's notion of happiness:

> Human good will be an activity (...) according to virtue and, if there are several virtues, according to the best, the most complete one". With this, (...) happiness has its source in us, in our activities. Here lies the most primitive condition of what we call self-recognition. Its deepest-lying possibility is its anchorage in the goal of happiness in those activities that make up the human task as such, our task. (2005, p. 81, emphasis in the original).

The array of capabilities hitherto presented are bound together by Ricoeur (2005) to the power-to-act, with the notion of a capable subject reaching its apex with imputability. Yet, what he names as "recognition-attestation" is not merely dependent on the agent, with capacities being attested to through public evaluation and approval; these, with their ethical and juridical imprint, bring forth the idea of social justice. As part of recognition, social justice is tied by Ricoeur (2005) to capabilities, in the sense of social capacities – capacities of social rank – to which subjects have right so as to exercise their freedom to (deliberately) choose. In turn, ensuring liberty to choose leads to collective responsibility, as it depends on social capabilities for action in common. With the extension of the agent's individual capacities to social capacities, a bridge is built from self-recognition to mutual recognition, moving from an eminently active stance to a clearly passive perspective, in the sense of *being recognised* (Ricoeur, 2005). But this passivity, as Ricoeur (2005) argues, does not refer merely to identity, but more to a feeling of indebtedness lying below, inherent to ethics; as he mentions, it is a sense not so common to the word *recognition* in English as it is for languages that derive from Latin as French or Portuguese.

With recognition bearing a distinctive link to identity, Ricoeur (2005) widens the complexity of identity by referring to collective identities – i.e., related to the actor on the societal level. Identity here derives from the connection of "social practises, as components of action in common, [to] the sphere of those representations which human beings make of themselves and their place in society" (2005, p. 135). Consequently, identity becomes subject to agreement, rather compromise. Ricoeur (2005) posits that, as a social agent, the extension of the agent's individual capacities to social capacities is related to a capability to generate history that affects the world, a capability of reconstruction working on the level of collective representations that in turn affect the forms of social, public identity. It is a reconstructive capability in the sense that its actualisation introduces something new to the world.

Ricoeur (2005) praises Amartya Sen for associating the idea of freedom – as freedom to choose – to the idea of a life choice and simultaneously to collective and social responsibility, which are not

similar. Freedom is linked to capabilities in the sense of what the subject is capable or incapable of achieving, particularly regarding one's life, in a sense close to Aristotle's "living well" (see Sen, 1987). Owing to evaluation, Ricoeur (2005, p. 144) considers that "the actual exercise of the freedom to choose calls on collective responsibility" for ensuring that same exercise at the individual level. The evaluation of the capacity to act is classified as social owing to the broadness of the freedom the individual has for deliberated choice, and therefore to act towards an achievable end. For Sen (1999), the quality of a person's life is not related to what is *achieved* but rather to what is *achievable*, i.e., what options are available for someone to choose from, what capabilities the person *can* have. What a *good life* is refers to a (way of) life of one's choosing, and not a restricted form of life where one is forced into out of a reduced capability for action. For Sen (1987), how well someone is faring is related to the degree of success someone achieves in *doing* or *being*. However, Ricoeur (2005) points out that the individual liberty to achieve things brings forth competing policies, consequently turning individual freedom into social responsibility.

The relationship between collective responsibility and social responsibility, which is based on the capabilities to act, becomes linked to existence through the concept of the minimal capacity to act, the ability to survive. This minimal capacity to act, Ricoeur (2005) argues, bears both political and juridical imports, because "with the decrease of the power of *acting*, experienced as a decrease of the effort of *existing*, the reign of suffering, properly speaking, commences" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 320). When the minimal capacity to act is not warranted, the agent's *power-over* the other ceases to have restrictions, becoming abusive in its several possible forms (see Ricoeur, 2005). The capability to act ceases to be a capability to exist, owing to the destruction of the capability for self-esteem (Ricoeur, 1992). As a result, Ricoeur (2005) asserts that the capability to act becomes inseparable from the freedom to choose that political and juridical structures determine as the avowal of *rights*, rights to capabilities. Pairing rights with capabilities in the expression "rights to capabilities", Ricoeur (2005, p. 146) says, turns the capability for choice about life into a criterion evaluative of social justice, a criterion departing from self-evaluation as self-esteem.

With recognition's nature made dependent of an avowal of rights (of "rights to capacities"), attestation becomes equivalent to "a demand, a right to require, under the rubric of the idea of social justice" (Ricoeur, 2005, p. 148), shored up on the freedom of the subject to choose, and thereby on the power-to-act. Imputability once again returns to "recognition-attestation", but now enriched by the idea of freedom tied to the expression "rights to capabilities", something expressed in the following quote from Kant that Ricoeur employs (2005, p. 107, emphasis added): "An action is called a deed, insofar (...) as

the subject, in doing it, is considered in terms of *the freedom of his choice*". More importantly, and since the truth related to attestation is of a practical nature, a capacity becomes subject to appreciation and evaluation from its actualisation into action, which means that a capacity is attested to, not observed, as true. For Ricoeur (2005), attestation of capabilities as evaluation out of imputability bears consequently an ethical mark, which turns the idea of "right to capabilities" back to the Aristotelian aim of a *good life*, to virtue (the basis for ethics). The reason is posited by Ricoeur (2005) in the fact that self-evaluation as self-esteem operates at the level of our capacities through the imputability of action; and for action to be virtuous, it is to be performed having happiness as its ultimate aim.

With mutual recognition, Ricoeur (2005) brings back head-on the idea of conflict, already present in his discussions about conviction, and introduces the idea of a struggle for recognition in order to justify his claim that mutual recognition occurs in a hiatus of time, which he designates as "states of peace" (Ricoeur, 2005, see esp. p. 219). Two of Ricoeur's (2005) ideas are to be highlighted here so as to clarify the context of "mutual recognition": First, the idea of conflict and struggle reveals the problematic of being, of existence, as essentially a political one, since Ricoeur situates *prima facie* the question of (mutual) recognition in the demand expressed by "being-with" or "being-among" (2005, p. 162), which could be translated into a problem of membership (see Munro, 1996). The reason behind such demand is linked to the risk of a refusal of recognition, tantamount to the denial of participation within the political arena. In short, the refusal of recognition is something like non-existence as it corresponds to someone *who does not count* (Ricoeur, 2005). Second, with "states of peace", Ricoeur (2005) devises a framework that, whilst not solving the problems proper to recognition as struggle, allows for moments of truce where "an actual, albeit symbolic, experience of mutual recognition" (2005, p. 153) is achievable. As a consequence, recognition is rendered by Ricoeur (2005) as always provisional, owing to its subjection to time. "States of peace" will give full force to the capabilities of giving and receiving not in the sense of a transfer, whose commercial character prevents reciprocity from becoming the mutuality inherent to solicitude, but out of a genuine generosity that, as a gratuitous gift, asks for nothing in return, even if paradoxically leading thereinto. With generosity sustained upon the economy of the gift, Ricoeur (2005) not only brings forth the full force of ethics behind mutual recognition – something to which the reference to solicitude already gives a glimpse – but also tries to prevent that the dissymmetry between the self and the other (that is present in solicitude) is overcome by a reciprocity that could endanger their uniqueness as *one another*. Going back to the capability to speak proper of the capable human being, Ricoeur posits that dissymmetry is already found at our ability to communicate, which "encounters the strangeness of

strangers as a *challenge and an obstacle*, and that we can hope to understand them only at the price of *recognizing their irreducible otherness*" (1984, p. 96, emphasis added).

Ricoeur (2005) establishes as the foundations of the logic of mutual recognition Hegel's concept of *Anerkennung*[32] renewed by Axel Honneth's post-Hegelian ideas of intersubjective recognition that carry with it the risk of refusal of recognition sparking recognition as struggle. For Ricoeur (2005), Hegel's *Anerkennung*, as the desire to be recognised, opens self-reflection to intersubjectivity by the presence of the other. It also establishes a productive negativity in a similar sense to that of the relationship moral prohibition shares with violence or suspicion possesses regarding attestation. The reason behind productive negativity can be explained as follows (Ricoeur, 2005): first, the humiliation or sense of exclusion that arises out of a lack of a minimum capacity to act is tantamount to crime, as violence committed upon the subject aiming for recognition that prevents the participation either in sharing goods or in participating in the formation of public will. Next, the negativeness of crime (as refusal of recognition), by sparking indignation, enables the capacity to choose to participate in a struggle for recognition, which is a positive effect if following alongside responsibility, as discussed below. Additionally, the institutionalisation of recognition derives from Hegel's concept of *Sittlichkeit*, characterised by Ricoeur (1992) as actual and concrete morality, since *institution* is conceived as a bond of *common mores*, i.e., it is set upon the ethical stance of *living together*. Bound to ethics, recognition is not ahistorical but represents historical compromises within a struggle for recognition where the institutional structure of recognition is tied to the productive negativity arising out of crime, with "*each* institutional conquest responding to a *specific* negative threat" (Ricoeur, 2005, p. 173, emphasis added), *each* and *specific* expressive of the historical tone of recognition.

For Ricoeur (2005), the desire to be recognised discloses the passive nature of recognition and the relation to the other that makes self-recognition dependent on the dialectical relationship between negativity and institutionalisation; it allows the passage to a structure of mutual recognition where both the self and the other are interdependent. By focusing on the question of legitimation, Ricoeur (2005) posits Hegel's *Anerkennung* as set upon right, where right means reciprocal recognition. The break of the immediacy of the self is thereby achieved through the passivity of mutual recognition, owing to his existing by being recognised, i.e., by right to recognition (Ricoeur, 2005). And that is achieved because the *recognised* self *counts* as existing (see Ricoeur, 1992). Ricoeur quotes Hegel when affirming that "man is necessarily recognized and necessarily gives recognition" (2005, p. 182). As a consequence, the other

[32] Hegel, G. (1977). *Phenomenology of spirit* (A. Miller, Trans.). Oxford University Press. *(Original work published 1807). Anerkennung*'s translation into English would be *recognition*. But in line with Ricoeur, the Hegelian term will be kept in this essay, not only due to traditional nomenclature, but also owing to the idea of actualisation of freedom behind *Anerkennung* that gives rise to forms of struggle for recognition as a demand for being recognised.

cannot be excluded, as both the self and the other exist for one another. They cannot thereby be subject to the violence of exclusion through refusal of recognition (Ricoeur, 2005). When Ricoeur refers to right, it is exactly because "recognition equalizes what offense had made unequal. It proceeds from the overcoming of the exclusion" (2005, p. 183). With equality as the aim of justice, the mutuality inherent to mutual recognition reveals the sense of justice behind right.

The negativeness of crime that turns recognition into a struggle for recognition is linked to the juridical sense of right, which Ricoeur (2005), following Honneth's[33] juridical model of intersubjective recognition, links to the idea of recognition in access to possession of (social) goods, i.e., in being recognised regarding one's property, which represents the contractual form of exchange. The breaking of the contract as crime – which represents the threat of nonrecognition – and the response to which such break leads are the source of the dynamics of conflict behind recognition (Ricoeur, 2005). With possession of goods, Ricoeur (2005) sees recognition as implying two things: persons – necessarily recognised as free and equal to one another – and the norm – warranting validity. Ricoeur (2005) draws on Hegel when stating that it is through negative productivity of crime that (moral) norms emerge, in the same sense already discussed regarding the exertion of violence and the prohibition of morality. Hence, the conjunction of the validity provided by the norm with the uniqueness of persons impinges on recognition through "the enlarging of the sphere of rights recognized as belonging to persons and enriching of the capacities that these subjects recognize in themselves" (Ricoeur, 2005, p. 198). But it is owing to contemporariness, i.e., to the specificity of situations where normative constraints mix with the exertion of capacities by agents that struggles for recognition can take place, since they relate to the distribution of (social) goods and attribution of rights (Ricoeur, 2005). Their unequal sharing or the denial of access to them is tantamount to a loss of recognition which affects the subject desiring for recognition in the form of a loss of self-respect (see Ricoeur, 1992, 2005). Humiliation in this sense works as the spark for indignation which gives rise to a moral rejoinder inaugurating the struggle for recognition. Ricoeur (2005) sees responsibility as the capacity enabling the riposte (out of indignation) in the political arena where the sphere of one's rights is discussed. Responsibility as a capacity linked to mutual recognition respects the capacity to hold oneself responsible when participating politically in the discussions around the enlarging of the sphere of rights. As such, responsibility "covers self-assertion and the recognition of the equal rights of others to contribute to advances in the rule of law and of rights" (Ricoeur, 2005, p. 200). In turn, responsibility as a capacity inherent in mutual recognition will relate recognition to right, in the sense that "right is reciprocal recognition" (Ricoeur, 2005, p. 182).

[33] Honneth, A. (1995). *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (J. Anderson, Trans.). Polity Press.

The nature of conflict and the consequent struggle recognition possesses lead Ricoeur (2005) to acknowledge a certain uneasiness regarding mutual recognition. As he puts it, either the negative affections behind a refusal of recognition or the capabilities acquired regarding the enlargement of rights turn recognition into an insatiable quest, with the negative effect of giving rise to a kind of *unhappy consciousness*, either in the form of permanent victimisation or incessant postulation of unachievable ideals. As a consequence, struggles for recognition are to become interminable. Ricoeur (2005) reifies the notion of "states of peace" as an alternative set upon a positive experience of mutual recognition. It represents an exceptional moment where recognition arises out of a practice of mutual gift giving that transcends reciprocity by expecting nothing in return. The mutuality of the gift turns recognition within "states of peace" into symbolic recognition within an "ethics of gratitude" (Ricoeur, 2005, p. 244). Symbolic, in the sense that the mutuality of recognition will regard not so much the gift directly as the gesture, the action of giving itself; the gesture, in its turn, is itself symbolised in the gift given. The problem of the mutuality of the gift resides, for Ricoeur (2005), in the giving of a reciprocal gift out of obligation, which would annul the nature of gift of both the first and the second gift, and thereby the disinterest inherent to the act of giving. The answer for Ricoeur (2005) lies in the gratitude felt by the receiver of the first gift, a feeling of recognition that is not usual in English, in the sense of bearing witness to gratitude, but common in French as *reconnaissance*. The feeling of indebtedness characteristic to receiving the gift is linked to recognition as an act of giving towards existence, in the sense that Ricoeur presents in the following quote of Marcel Mauss[34]: "one gives oneself in giving, and if one gives oneself, it is that one owes oneself to others, oneself and one's property" (Ricoeur, 2005, p. 242). Property should be taken in the sense of what one achieves to possess out of the act of giving symbolised in the gift, that is, recognisable identity. It is how the affective nature of the gift affects recognition, as Ricoeur (2005) suggests. With the practice of gift giving, the capacities concurring to recognition become subsumed into a capacity for giving as an active capacity to act bound up to a capacity for receiving as a passive capacity to be recognised through the reception of the gift, *suffering* a positive affection of gratitude that inaugurates an act of giving in return not felt as an obligation, since no restitution was asked, but out of generosity, modelled on the first gift (Ricoeur, 2005). Giving in return becomes an active capacity to give out of passivity. The capacity of giving and receiving, actualised by the act of recognition, keeps the ethical character of mutual recognition by maintaining the uniqueness of both the giver and the receiver, who mutually recognise each other as counting, as someone that cares (see Ricoeur, 1992, 2005). If we

[34] Marcel Mauss was a French sociologist and anthropologist that lived between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. He is often regarded as the founding figure of French ethnology.

return to the Aristotelian notion of solicitude (Aristotle, 1934), proper to friendship and to which mutuality is inherent, giving out of disinterest recognises the other as counting for the self, as the agent that gives. The act of giving, as action where the capability to act is actualised, is expressive of virtue since what the virtuous man gives is for the sake of the other's existence as being who he is (Aristotle, 1934).

2.4. Methodological Approach

This essay uses a philosophical–conceptual methodology to elaborate a theoretical framework. Normative and interpretive approaches are combined, aiming to elucidate and integrate key ideas concerning corporate moral subjectivity. The goal is to develop a coherent set of interrelated conceptual dimensions that advance a renewed understanding of the moral agency of corporations.

The selection of authors and philosophical traditions was guided by their ability to articulate fundamental aspects of agency, responsibility, and recognition. Nevertheless, the methodological orientation is grounded mainly in Aristotle (1934, 1944) – who provides the conceptual grounding for understanding how potentiality, but especially action and virtue, are dependent on and culminate in the pursuit of happiness – and in Ricoeur (1992, 2005), who offers a robust theory of recognition shored up on his hermeneutic of the (capable) self, where his definition of ethics[35] is pivotal.

Additionally, Amartya Sen (1987, 1999) contributes through his work on the relationship of freedom and social capabilities to reinforce Ricoeur's arguments; and Bernard Williams (1993) broadens the field of responsibility out of intentionality to unintentional actions that are also imputable to responsible subjects, complementing Ricoeur's notion of recognition. Although coming from different historical and philosophical traditions, these authors provide complementary insights that enable the construction of a coherent model of recognition of corporate moral subjectivity.

Built under a process of theoretical synthesis, the framework contains the following key conceptual dimensions – action and capability, political belonging, mutual recognition, virtue, and visibility. These concepts were integrated into a coherent structure after an initial engagement with the selected authors so as to work them up individually. These dimensions are interrelated philosophical constructs that together support the central argument of this essay: that corporations can, under certain conditions, be regarded as moral subjects. Priority was consistently given to ensuring theoretical coherence, conceptual depth, and ethical consistency.

[35] As already mentioned, Ricoeur considers that ethics is about "aiming at the good life, with and for others, in just institutions" (1992, p. 172).

A central methodological challenge involved the transposition of concepts traditionally attributed to individual moral agents to the level of collective or institutional actors. By resorting to authors advocating theories of group agency (De George, 1981; French, 1979; Pettit, 2007), as well as to authors exploring the notion of citizenship or political action regarding corporations (Henning, 2011; Matten & Crane, 2005; Néron & Norman, 2008; Palazzo & Scherer, 2008; Scherer et al, 2014), this essay assumes that corporations can perform actions and bear related responsibility, owing to the imputability of those actions to them as single moral agents per se. The key criterion for transposition was the assumption of the capability of corporations to act as single agents in the political scene (see Henning, 2011), making them distinct from the mere sum of individual intentions. Accordingly, concepts such as virtue or recognition are not applied metaphorically, but reframed hermeneutically to reflect the institutional and relational dynamics of corporate action.

This research is conceptual in nature. As such, limitations include the absence of direct case analysis and the reliance on philosophical abstraction, which may restrict the model's immediate applicability. Nevertheless, the framework is designed to be adaptable for future empirical studies, including critical case evaluations, discourse analysis, and institutional critique.

This essay is situated within the domain of critical-interpretative organisational studies, adopting a normative and interpretive philosophical approach. Rather than accepting dominant conceptions of the corporation as a merely legal or economic entity, the essay challenges the instrumental rationality that underpins mainstream theories of the firm. By elaborating a conceptual framework for corporate moral subjectivity, grounded in the ethical philosophies of Aristotle (1934, 1944), and Ricoeur (1992, 2005), complemented by Sen (1987, 1999), and Williams (1993), this work seeks to reframe how agency and responsibility are understood in the corporate domain under the concept of recognition. The aim is not empirical generalisation, but theoretical reconfiguration: to expose the limitations of current models of corporate accountability and responsibility, as well as to articulate an alternative rooted in moral philosophy, civic belonging, and relational recognition. In doing so, the study contributes to critical scholarship that resists technocratic neutrality and advocates for a more ethically responsive understanding of corporate action.

2.5. Theoretical Elaboration of the Moral Subjectivity of Corporations: Corporate Action, Political Belonging, and Recognition

This section develops the theoretical framework for understanding corporate moral subjectivity. The model is structured around five interrelated dimensions that, taken together, articulate the conditions under which corporations may be regarded as capable of moral subjectivity. These dimensions are: (1) corporate action and capability, (2) political belonging and corporate citizenship, (3) mutual recognition, (4) corporate virtue and conditional moral existence, and (5) visibility, power and recognition. Each dimension is grounded in philosophical concepts drawn from Aristotle (1934, 1944) and Ricoeur (1992, 2005), supplemented by the encounters with Amartya Sen (1987, 1999) and Bernard Williams (1993). Together, they provide a comprehensive foundation for assessing whether, and to what extent, corporations can be considered moral subjects.

The ethical significance of corporate action becomes clear through Aristotle's distinction between potentiality and actuality because capacities need practice to become active (Aristotle, 1934). The corporate environment contains distributed institutional capacities which include resources and governance procedures and decision rules and role structures. The ethical value of these capacities emerges when individuals within the corporation perform work that brings them to life. The main argument of this section establishes that corporate capabilities achieve actualisation through human activities performed by corporate employees. The outcome of this process produces two essential results. The actions performed by individuals within corporate roles create institutional acts which the corporate subject can be held accountable for (Altman, 2007; De George, 1981; French, 1979). The corporation earns moral subject status through passive recognition from multiple observers who assess its contributions to or harm of the common good (see Ricoeur, 2005).

The established concept enables the development of two essential arguments that form the basis of this essay. The first argument states that corporate activities create political effects which transform social environments, just like a citizen acting within the polis, following Aristotle (1944), thus making all corporate actions inherently political and non-neutral (see also Deslandes, 2012; Henning, 2011; Palazzo & Scherer, 2008; Scherer et al., 2006; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007). As for the second argument, the existence of corporations depends on social acknowledgment of their ongoing contribution to shared prosperity because society will cease to recognise them as subject that can be counted on when their actions harm the common good. The social recognition of corporations serves as an ethical moment since their good actions lead to their recognition, whilst simultaneously acknowledging others' value (Butler, 2010; Ricoeur, 2005).

2.5.1. Action and Capability (Individuals as Surrogates of Corporate Action)

This section argues that corporate action, understood through institutional capabilities, can be morally attributable to corporations when individual roles are embedded within structures that produce collective intentions and commitments.

The concept of corporate capabilities functions as institutional potentialities which describe what corporations can perform through their organisational structure and role-based operations. According to Aristotle (1934) potentiality exists independently of moral value because actualised action through praxis reveals excellence and determines the direction of agency toward specific goals. The organisation defines how persons execute their actions through their designated roles and duties (Rowland, 2009). The actualisation of corporate capacities occurs through the actions of individuals who perform their assigned roles (see Evans et al., 2011; Rowland, 2009). Two essential points emerge from this analysis. The concept does not minimise the person to become a mere extension of the organisation (see Pettit, 2007). People make decisions and perform tasks while their organisational capabilities determine their available resources and operational boundaries. The institutional framework enables their actions to exist because it provides the necessary structure for their execution (see Altman, 2007; Burchell et al., 1980; Henning, 2011; Painter-Morland, 2006).

The corporation holds primary responsibility for actions performed by employees in their official roles, although personal accountability may apply in specific situations (Altman, 2007; Pettit, 2007). Group agency research demonstrates how corporate capabilities transform individual actions into unified moral agency of the corporation which challenges the term *group agency* (see De George, 1981). According to Pettit (2007), a group functions as a single agent through its decision-making processes, which create separate intentions and judgments beyond member attitude aggregation. The corporation functions as a single agent because its decision-making processes create organisational commitments that form its own distinct pattern of behaviour (French, 1979). The organisational policies and procedures of Corporate Internal Decision (CID) structures, according to French (1979), create structures which produce intentions that enable action attribution. These accounts support the argument that corporate intentions and capabilities manifest through actions performed by employees in their designated roles. The corporation functions as an independent agent because its actions create new entities that differ from the individual perspectives of its agents who perform tasks on its behalf (Pettit, 2007).

The Aristotelian connection between action and goodness proves to be pivotal to the assessment put forward at this stage regarding corporate and individual agency. Virtuous action emerges from proper goal orientation through the selection of wise methods (*phronēsis*) rather than from operational efficiency

or regulatory compliance (Bragues, 2006). The ethical assessment of corporate actions depends on their ability to advance community well-being through the actualisation of corporate capabilities (see Albareda & Sison, 2020; Kraus et al., 2024). The corporation's legal nature requires it to prove its value through shared community growth instead of financial success (Sison & Fontrodona, 2012). The connection between capability and community becomes complete through mutual recognition (Ricoeur, 2005). A corporation demonstrates that its capabilities extend beyond prima facie self-interest when it treats others as ends in themselves instead of using them as means to achieve its goals (see Aßländer & Curbach, 2014, 2017). The corporate subjectivity emerges from recognition which serves as both the foundation for corporate existence and the framework for evaluating its actions (see Ricoeur, 2005).

2.5.2. The Corporation, Politics and Corporate Citizenship

The ethical manifestation of capability through action leads to the essential inquiry about corporate action (see Ricoeur, 2005). Aristotle (1944) positions practical life within the political framework of the polis because politics stands as the supreme practical science which pursues the best life (*eudaimonia*) for the community. The political sphere encompasses corporate action because it controls resource distribution, determines employment markets, guides technological development, and shapes environmental, educational and health conditions (Henning, 2011; see also Allinson, 2004). The effects of corporate actions are not ethically neutral because they directly impact the common good beyond individual self-interest (Killian & O'Regan, 2020; Price, 2007; Sen, 1987).

The interpretation of corporations through the perspective of the polis framework by Henning (2011) establishes this fundamental point. The political community contains corporations as organised powers which function within its framework (Crane et al., 2008; Matten et al., 2003; Matten & Crane, 2005). The decisions made by corporate entities help create the social framework of the community together with state institutions and civil organisations (see Matten & Crane, 2005). The decisions made by corporate boards about strategic direction and value chain transformation function as political actions which reshape the fundamental life conditions for everyone (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). Corporate actions extend beyond economic transactions because they function as political acts which help determine how people should live together (see Henning, 2011; Ricoeur, 2005). The stance provides clarity about the temporary nature of corporate existence which was previously discussed. The nature of corporations as created artifacts means their survival requires them to deliver valuable contributions to the community's success, justifying their existence and activities (Jeurissen, 2004). The status of moral actor which society

grants to corporations emerges from how their actions transform the shared environment (see Arrington, 2007; Ricoeur, 1992; 2005; Schweiker, 1993).

The concept of corporate citizenship creates a connection between corporate activities and political membership, but different parts of the literature focus on different aspects of citizenship. In his work, Carroll (1998, 1999) applied his CSR pyramid framework to develop a four-part model of corporate citizenship that includes economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic elements. According to Carroll (1999), profit generation serves as the base for corporate activity, but corporate citizenship requires businesses to fulfil legal and ethical obligations that exceed minimum standards, and they can choose to perform philanthropic work as a voluntary social contribution. Wood and Logsdon (2002) expand upon Carroll's model by introducing the concept of citizenship, transforming corporate duties into essential civic responsibilities that exist within the social structure. For them, the concept of corporate action moves beyond philanthropic and ethical practices that supplement profit-making because it represents a fundamental aspect of community membership rights and responsibilities.

Wood and Logsdon (2002) support Matten and Crane's (2005) extended view of corporate citizenship, but they develop their own distinct perspective. According to Matten and Crane (2005), the corporation functions as a governmental actor when it provides or protects citizen rights that governments cannot fulfil. Wood and Logsdon (2008) agree that corporations have social duties, but they warn against using citizenship terminology in a purely figurative sense. Business citizenship needs to base its foundation on institutional practices which understand the mutual connections between corporations, governments and their stakeholders. Their method unites ethical goals with the actual political and structural elements which influence corporate operations.

The extended corporate citizenship framework of Crane et al. (2008) shows how businesses can deliver citizenship rights through their operational activities when states fail to provide these rights (Crane et al., 2008; Matten et al., 2003; Matten & Crane, 2005). The organisation functions as a rights provider and enabler through its operational activities when public institutions fail to deliver these rights. Néron & Norman (2008a) establish the corporation as an active political entity which operates like a citizen under democratic rules that include political equality and public discourse control. The goal is to avoid treating businesses as human beings while understanding their institutional activities through role-based execution of corporate abilities which create substantial impacts on collective life thus requiring citizenship-like standards (Néron, 2010; Néron & Norman, 2008a, 2008b). The present essay adopts an agency-forward perspective because people function as representatives of corporations by executing corporate functions (Rowland, 2009). Those actions ought in turn to contribute to building the public welfare (Sison &

Fontrodona, 2012), something that corporate charters necessarily had to reflect in the nineteenth century (Allinson, 2004; Davoudi et al., 2018).

Aßländer and Curbach (2014, 2017) establish a vital distinction between *bourgeois* citizens who operate through market-oriented private interests and *citoyen* citizens who base their actions on public reasoning. The corporate citizenship model succeeds through its ability to merge business-oriented logic with public-minded responsibilities, yet it must preserve their distinct nature because the corporation functions as one unified entity (see Pies et al., 2014). The distinction between *bourgeois* and *citoyen* actions creates two essential moral obligations which stem from the argument put forward in this section. The exercise of citizenship by firms requires them to prevent market dominance from silencing democratic voices while their political membership depends on their ability to deliver public benefits through their role-based activities(Henning, 2011; Néron, 2010, 2016).

The concept of Political CSR develops the existing argument to address modern governance systems. The research of Scherer and Palazzo (Palazzo & Scherer, 2008; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007, 2011; Scherer et al., 2006, 2014, 2016) illustrates how corporations now join states and civil society organisations in creating norms and participating in public dialogues because of globalising markets and insufficient regulations. Through their establishment of multi-stakeholder initiatives, industry standards and voluntary codes, businesses create the rules which control their operations as well as their competitors and supply-chain partners (Scherer et al., 2006; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). And through their collaborative efforts, corporations help to establish economic regulations that extend beyond their own operations, something the current political and economic structure includes as a fundamental characteristic (Scherer et al., 2014; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). The ethical nature of business activity becomes unavoidable because its value depends on whether it promotes or damages the common good (Scherer & Palazzo, 2007). Political CSR requires businesses to demonstrate deliberative quality through inclusive practices, transparent operations and responsive decision-making so as to gain legitimacy (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). On the other hand, political CSR reveals an inherent conflict between corporate governance and democratic processes. The expansion of corporate governance functions creates an elevated danger that private organisations will dominate democratic decision-making processes (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011, 2016). The political equality principle and avoidance of public discourse domination are essential for firms to respect, according to Néron and Norman (2008a), while Crane et al. (2008) and Aßländer and Curbach (2014, 2017) agree that corporate citizenship should enhance democratic institutions, rather than replace them.

Regarding the implications of this perspective for this essay, the political nature of corporate activities makes them subject to ethical evaluation from the community because of their political character. The evaluation of corporate political involvement for common good advancement should be performed by multiple stakeholders who represent different perspectives (Apffelstaedt et al., 2024; Crane et al., 2004; Néron, 2010, 2016). The surrogate-action argument remains intact throughout this entire discussion, since the exercise of corporate capabilities via political CSR occurs in the domain of norm-creation and public reasoning, which individuals perform through their in-role actions (Scherer & Palazzo, 2007, 2011). The ethical value remains constant because actions prove good when they use wise methods to achieve suitable targets and corporate legitimacy emerges from their ability to preserve good common life conditions (Sison & Fontrodona, 2012).

The political nature of corporate action requires ethical assessment because it represents a practice that extends beyond economic operations. Consequently, and owing to the role of actions (Ricoeur, 2005), recognition becomes an essential process within the political domain because it determines whether corporate actors receive moral subjectivity from their community (see Scherer & Palazzo, 2007). The following section examines recognition as the process of subjectivation which transforms institutional actions into actions that require ethical assessment through collective acknowledgment. The corporation's actions that take others as ends in themselves lead to community recognition of the moral subjectivity of corporations, sustaining their existence (Schweiker, 1993).

2.5.3. Mutual Recognition and Moral Subjectivity

The theoretical referential of Ricoeur (1992, 2005) depicts that recognition functions beyond simple identification, as it involves giving normative value to something. According to Ricoeur (2005), recognition happens through external acknowledgment from multiple people who validate a subject's ability to perform actions and take responsibility for their effects on the world. The concept holds special importance for corporations because they exist as (legally) created entities without physical bodies (see De George, 1981; Jeurissen, 2004). The establishment of corporate subjectivity requires external validation from the community which treats corporate actions as meaningful contributions to the shared world (Crane & Matten, 2008; Sison & Fontrodona, 2012; Trittin-Ulbrich, 2023). The emphasis on passivity does not eliminate corporate agency from existence. Indeed, the relational nature of ontology establishes that corporate capabilities gain ethical significance through their actualisation by corporate actions, what gives rise to the recognition of corporations as moral subjects from those who experience their effects (see Ricoeur, 2005). Recognition transforms potential actors into moral subjects because

only entities that receive recognition can be subject to consequential praise or blame, as well as sanctions and trust (Ricoeur, 2005).

Ricoeur (2005) identifies imputability as the link between actions and actors. The moral assessment of actions depends on Aristotle's (1934) requirement that they stem from deliberate choices made by individuals who pursue good objectives. The combination of French's (1979) Corporate Internal Decision structures with Pettit's (2007) corporate agency illustrates how organisational procedures create corporate intentions which exceed individual preferences, even if aggregated. The corporation functions as a single agent when members perform their roles because their actions proceed from corporate intentions which remain imputable to the organisation. The corporation stands as the first visible entity for responsibility assessment, since people perform their duties as corporate representatives before personal accountability for corporate actions emerges (Pettit, 2007). The community needs to understand actions before they can be held accountable through imputability. Corporate narrative processes, which are reflected in, e.g., documentation, work as performative activities that create understanding for corporate actions (Brennan et al., 2013; Craig & Amernic, 2008; Hines, 1988; Merkl-Davies & Brennan, 2011). The combination of Austin's (1975) performative speech-act theory with Butler's (1988, 2010) performativity framework[36] explains how specific statements create new conditions for understanding action. The organisation establishes its position through policies, CEO letters and public commitments that become effective when supported by actual organisational conduct (see Amernic et al., 2007; Amernic & Craig, 2013; Craig & Amernic, 2006, 2008). The discursive elements form the basis for community actor assessment, although they do not fulfil the requirements of technical accountability[37] (see Kamuf, 2007; McKernan & McPhail, 2012).

Ricoeur (2005) warns against reducing recognition to mere exchange reciprocity because he supports a mutual approach that depends on virtuous disinterested actions instead of equal exchanges, buttressed on commercial settings and prone to neoliberal reifications of self-interest (see Sen, 1987; Shearer, 2002). The practice of mutuality in corporate settings emerges through how organisations manage trade-offs and their capabilities in order to make affected parties visible (see Ricoeur, 2005). The ethical transformation of corporations becomes clear through Aßländer and Curbach (2014, 2016, 2017), who distinguish between *bourgeois* and *citoyen*. The firm reveals mutual recognition through its market actor role (*bourgeois*) when it uses public reason of the *citoyen* to integrate stakeholder feedback that

[36] Austin's speech-act theory sees language as action, while Butler's performativity extends this to identity, arguing selves are constituted through repeated, socially regulated linguistic performances. These theories will be developed in the third essay.

[37] The question of technical or calculative accountability regarding the importance of overall accountability within the recognition of corporations as moral subjects is the subject of analysis of the second essay.

impacts fundamental capabilities. The practical approach functions as a decision-making tool which decides what ends are acceptable and what methods are wise, which is in line with Aristotelian *phronēsis*. The practice of mutuality enables corporate entities to move past individualistic goals because they must now measure their success through contributions to the public welfare (see Aßländer & Curbach, 2016). The defined area exists within political boundaries. The process of legitimacy emerges from corporations' ability to function as deliberative societal and political actors who participate in multi-actor negotiation networks based on deliberation and constructive conflict (Deslandes, 2012). The process may operate independently from voluntary participation (Matten & Crane, 2005; see also Williams, 1993) yet corporations need to uptake their role as deliberative actors who match other participants (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021) or at least they should do so, according to Henning (2011). Chabrak (2005) explains that recognition emerges through intersubjective processes because different subjects need to understand and know each other to achieve mutual recognition through vision confrontation, something that requires communication for negotiation (Brennan et al., 2013). The goal of recognition involves reaching a compromise between different perspectives rather than seeking explanation or prediction. Recognition becomes a mutual process because agents need to recognise others as ends in themselves, as rightful subjects who, existing outside their sphere, experience the effects of their actions (Ricoeur, 2005; Schweiker, 1993; Shearer, 2002). The corporate agent receives meaningful recognition from the other party through the act of receiving its recognisable identity from the other who performs a mutual act of giving (Ricoeur, 2005). The corporate agent's acts of giving resemble the gift economy described by Ricoeur (2005) which business ethics and accountability research has explored through Cunningham (1998), Deslandes (2012), Hartman (2008), Masiero (2020), and McKernan (2012).

The capability of subjects to perform actions determines their ability to deliberate, something argued by Sen (1999). Frey-Heger and Barrett (2021) show how the way people view others leads to changes in their recognition of those others, affecting their capability enhancement. By studying cases of refugee crisis in Rwanda, they explore how the other person suffers from being viewed as *in need*, with this perception blocking their ability to develop new capabilities that would enable them to show themselves in ways that eliminate unwanted perspectives. Consequently, the two parties (the self and the other) must maintain ethical conduct toward each other because any failure to do so will block one party from using alternative methods they find superior due to capability restrictions. The concept is thereby linked to existence, according to Roberts (2009) and Schweiker (1993).

The existence of corporations depends on their continuous recognition because they do not have natural foundations. This bears two consequences. First, the community performs continuous evaluations

about how the corporation actualises its capabilities through action to determine if it supports or damages the conditions for a good common life. The removal of recognition remains a constant threat to corporations because their subject status weakens when they perform actions that damage shared resources. Second, as political, the actions of corporations receive its evaluation always with its final objective in the horizon, drawing on Aristotle (1944), because the highest political goal focuses on community growth, which leads to happiness, rather than focusing solely on technical performance. According to Foucault (1997a, 1997b, 2007), subjectification processes simultaneously restrict and empower individuals. The discourses which expose corporate activities to view simultaneously establish monitoring systems and performance standards. Political life thus contains an essential conflict which requires better practical reasoning for action improvement instead of seeking recognition avoidance (see Ricoeur, 2005; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011; van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021; Whelan et al., 2013). The quality of corporate action toward common goods which others can agree upon determines the strength and durability of corporate recognition.

The political community thus grants corporate moral subjectivity through recognition, which completes the transition from capability to subjectivity. In turn, granting corporate moral subjectivity through recognition of institutional acts as being those of the corporation is ethically significant, since it enables for the mutual recognition of the corporation and the other who are affected by its actions (see Ricoeur, 2005). The measure functions as virtue in action because corporate actions depict whether wise methods (or means) were used to achieve goals which promote collective well-being. In order to better explore the role of virtue in action and recognition, the following section examines corporate virtue and conditional existence by uniting Aristotle's (1934) theory of character development with corporate capability implementation patterns throughout time.

2.5.4. Corporate Virtue and Conditional Existence

As posited before, Aristotle (1934) defines virtue as a permanent character trait which develops through consistent practice of right actions that stay within the middle ground between overdoing and underdoing. The character of a corporation emerges through its established patterns of capability utilisation during decision-making processes rather than through individual instances. The actual expression of codes, values statements and governance charts through consistent organisational behaviour reveals their true value, according to Loacker and Muhr (2009) and Mercier and Deslandes (2017). Sison (2009) and Sison and Fontrodona (2012) claim that the common good serves as the basis to evaluate these patterns because corporations enhance political community development through

shared good support, instead of pursuing personal profit. The repeated choices made by an organisation reveal its disposition through the difference in outcomes. The corporate practice of virtue develops into a lasting pattern which directs actions toward the common good (Hartman, 2008; Moore, 2005).

Bragues (2006) supports the practical approach to ethics because it focuses on developing goodness through proper conduct rather than listing rules in an abstract manner. He argues that the firm as a moral agent needs to focus on its collective actions to determine its path toward becoming a better organisation. Bragues (2006) sees virtue as representing the process of transformation that leads to becoming a better corporation, in an analogy with Aristotle's (1934) view regarding persons. As mentioned before, for Aristotle (1934), *phronēsis*, or practical wisdom, functions as a rational ability that enables people to ponder and reflect about beneficial actions and proper conduct. Regarding corporations, the main location for *phronēsis* is situated within boards, executive teams and operational forums, which handle trade-off decisions (see, e.g, Henning, 2011; Sison, 2011). The organisational culture affects present members' capability to deliberate because it contains previous deliberated choices made by people who might no longer work for the corporation (see Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Pentland & Feldman, 2005). The ability to select appropriate methods for achieving community-approved goals defines wise corporate governance beyond following rules and formal procedures.

The concept of *phronēsis* or practical wisdom appears throughout business ethics literature because it demonstrates its value for managers to deliver appropriate responses in specific circumstances (Bachmann et al., 2018; Moberg, 2007). The research investigates both the individual elements of practical wisdom and their connection to wise decision-making (Steyl, 2020), examines the boundaries of practical wisdom (Koehn, 1998) and investigates how corporate virtues address these constraints (Moore, 2005). According to Durand and Calori (2006), practical wisdom functions as a moral attraction that guides actions toward exemplary conduct, instead of numerical optimisation. The decision-making patterns that use narrow efficiency metrics as self-measuring tools differ from processes that focus on the use of these metrics to evaluate selfhood (see Hoskins, 1996; Miller, 1992; Roberts, 2001, 2009, 2012). The practice of corporate *phronēsis* focuses on both the selection of organisational goals and the methods through which these goals should be achieved by involving fair treatment of others. As a result, recognition exists at this point as a potential site for gaining or forfeiting acknowledgment (see Kristjánsson, 2022).

The main characteristic of corporations emerges from their extended time perspective. The status of going concern allows corporations to survive beyond individual lifespans because people join and leave the organisation *in medias res* (Crane et al., 2008; French, 1979; Henning, 2011; van Oosterhout, 2008).

The social promise of incorporation requires corporations to perform actions that benefit the community throughout time[38]. The enduring nature of organisations enables actions attributed to them to accumulate value across time, which affects how recognition develops or diminishes. The narrative approach to identity developed by Ricoeur (1984; 1985; 1992) helps to explain, through analogy, how organisations are recognisable via their reputation through internal and public stories that combine decisions with their resulting effects. Corporate virtue then emerges as a narrative pattern which discloses ongoing dedication to common good objectives that others can identify. The organisation maintains its right to exist through narrative justification when its actions demonstrate shared good-oriented goals, but hurts its recognition when its actions are considered to have failed to uphold these goals (see Moore, 2005; Ricoeur, 2005; Palazzo & Scherer, 2006).

Allinson (2004) uses Amartya Sen's approach to demonstrate that capability expansion through agency tools like capital and technology becomes valuable only when it enables real freedom for people, but loses value when these tools become the main focus of pursuit. The assessment of ethical conduct requires examination of how people's capabilities, together with community capabilities, are transformed as a result. People who perform their roles should be seen as developing corporate capabilities which lead to specific organisational objectives that are taken as good; that happens when they ultimately reflect the pursuit for happiness, drawing on Aristotle (1934).

The concept of organisational character may also be interpreted as related to corporate virtue, since it represents a recurring pattern which determines how employees handle situations through decision-making and action execution (Moore, 2005). The existence of reliable elements which direct decision-making toward common good objectives allows us to identify corporate virtue in such organisations. These elements may be embodied in structures (CID procedures and decision rights), corporate culture, and leadership discourse, which create the available range of actions for employees, affecting their agency (see French, 1979; Pettit, 2007). The identification of corporate vice becomes necessary when organisational systems consistently direct choices toward domination and harm and opacity. The notion that individual employees' actions within their corporate roles are surrogate actions of the corporation (see French, 1979) remains valid regarding corporate virtue because individuals who work within their corporate roles make decisions for the benefit of the corporation (see Moore, 2005). The concept of corporate virtue thus emerges from observable patterns of wise decision-making which appear in both organisational results and decision-making processes involving others (Moore, 2005; see also Crane et al., 2004; Hartman, 2008). The community will maintain recognition of the corporation

[38] The relevance of promise for the recognition of corporations as moral subjects is the purpose of the second essay, and is therefore discussed there.

when it observes a virtuous pattern of capability actualisation which benefits the common good. That virtuous pattern is expressed by what actions are imputed to the corporation as its agent, since they represent the actualisation of the capability to act (see Ricoeur, 2005). Yet, community will cease the process of recognition when this pattern disappears. The existence of conditionality regarding corporate moral subjectivity makes corporate capabilities dependent on reflecting virtuous direction toward common good objectives, which results in the corporation's continued existence through recognition (see Schweiker, 1993). The ethical and political value of corporations emerges through their actions when supporting shared prosperity; yet, it disappears when their actions fail to do so (see Bragues, 2006; Crane, Matten & Moon, 2008; Néron & Norman, 2008a; Sison & Fontrodona, 2012).

2.5.5. Power, Visibility, and Recognition

With corporate meaningful existence dependent on recognition (see Schweiker, 1993) there is the need to consider how power functions within it. The justification lies in how the mechanisms that create visible actions and judgeable actors simultaneously produce the subjects who will face governance through assessment systems (Foucault, 1977, 1997b). The corporate world uses policies and disclosure statements to create more than just communication channels, because they actually determine behaviour (Christensen et al., 2013; Roberts, 2009). The act of publishing organisational purpose serves two objectives regarding visibility and exertion of power: it creates space for monitoring, as well as binding rules that others either follow or use to challenge the organisation (see Roberts, 1991; Macintosh et al., 2009). The process of recognition brings both advantages and risks into the equation. On the one hand, making things visible enables public reasoning to take place. The availability of deeds and reasons to multiple observers allows them to evaluate these actions based on what benefits the common good (Ferry et al., 2024; Killian & O'Regan, 2020). On the other hand, making things visible may also lead to a disciplinary system which substitutes performance metrics for judgment, replaces deliberation with auditability, and transforms political decision-making into managerial practices (Francis, 1994; Hoskins, 1996; Roberts, 2009).

The Aristotelian solution to this problem requires that visibility serves the purpose of *phronēsis*, which means selecting appropriate means to achieve goals that people in the community can agree on, i.e., goals that are considered as commonly good. Practical wisdom then functions as a system which controls the exercise of power (see Hartman, 2008). The main goal is to recognise how business capabilities affect social life rather than to make corporations participate in partisan battles (Moore, 2005; Néron & Norman, 2008a). The recognition of political power in business operations does not grant firms

unrestricted control, but establishes standards for evaluating participation based on inclusiveness, non-domination and public justifiability. The political approach to CSR focuses on these evaluation criteria for modern governance systems (see Scherer & Palazzo, 2007, 2011); yet, the approach followed in this essay bases these standards on the capability to act of corporations, which requires transforming their capability to act into capability to be, as explained earlier (see Ricoeur, 2005; Schweiker, 1993). The ontology that emphasises recognition through action represents actual capability execution (Ricoeur, 1992, 2005). The process of recognising actors qua actors emerges through the performance of actions (and their related visibility) regarding others who are affected by them (Ricoeur, 2005). Actions are what is first seen, or felt, by others. With others as other selves, recognition functions as a two-way process which acknowledges both the performing agent and the affected party who receives recognition (Ricoeur, 2005). Regarding corporations, the corporate entity is also capable of being recognised as a performing subject because it is the entity to which action is attributed, achieving visible meaningfulness, as a moral subject. The organisation becomes subject to recognition because its capabilities enable employees to perform actions, even though they act through their organisational roles, and thus on the corporation's name (French, 1979; Pettit, 2007). It is the corporation that becomes visible for the purpose of the imputation of actions. The corporation stands as the primary entity for recognition purposes because it receives the initial responsibility for actions performed by its representatives, even before individual accountability can be considered. The reason lies in that the imputation of actions to subjects is a process set on visibility (see Munro, 1993; Roberts, 2009).

The pursuit of recognition through visibility affects both the numerical and narrative aspects of corporate operations. The neoliberal approach to individualism which focuses on maximisation of self-interest (Macintosh et al., 2009; Sen, 1987; Shearer, 2002) leads ethical assessment to become limited to quantifiable data points (Hoskins, 1996). According to Killian and O'Regan (2020), neoliberal interpretations of Adam Smith's[39] work through utilitarian lenses transform the common good into an individualistic sum of personal interests, as they focus on maximizing self-interest (Sen, 1987). Price (2007) argues that modern liberal interpretations of rational agency have transformed happiness into an individualistic pursuit of personal goals. The approach fails to recognise Aristotle's (1934, 1944) connection between happiness and community. The reason is that performance measurement approaches create a sense of moral detachment among corporate employees, according to Dobson (2008). Following Boyce (2014), markets promote individuality through their tendency to eliminate personal identity because they use simplified models of rational human beings. The ipseity of subjects

"[39] Adam Smith was an eighteenth-century Scottish economist and philosopher, founder of classical economics and author of "*The Wealth of Nations*".

disappears, according to Ricoeur (1992, 2005), because their subjectivity gets reduced to measurement standards. But the purpose of calculation should be to enhance *phronēsis* rather than obstruct it, with metrics' appropriate utilisation performing a subsidiary, not sovereign, role (see Kristjánsson, 2022; Steyl, 2020).

Sustained upon visibility, the recognition of corporate moral subjectivity does not imply that corporations can achieve complete personhood The conditions of imputability are applicable to corporations because corporate actions performed by employees in their official roles receive primary attribution to the corporation, as the entity possessing the capability to act. That does not undermine the fact that specific persons become responsible whenever their personal deliberation and control can be traced to them (Pettit, 2007).

Altman (2007) argues that corporate responsibility does not require complete Kantian personhood because agency provides sufficient grounds for recognition. De George (1981) establishes a distinction between agency and personhood that shows they should not be considered equal, albeit emphasising that corporations, as agents, can be morally called to account. De George's (1981) approach maintains ontological accuracy, by avoiding metaphysical expansion, and practical effectiveness by establishing a specific entity for moral evaluation and improvement.

2.6. Conclusion

The purpose of this essay was to structure an interpretive framework, based on the theoretical approaches of Aristotle's (1934, 1944) and Paul Ricoeur (1992, 2005), that explored how corporations can be recognised as moral agents, making them capable of becoming subject to moral assessment. The corporation becomes recognised by the community as a moral subject through the process of passive recognition, which occurs when others, affected by the actions occurring, can understand those actions as imputable to the corporate subject. Given that action represents the actualisation of the capabilities to act (Ricoeur, 2005), for corporations, the actualisation of corporate capabilities occurs through individual actions of its employees acting within their assigned corporate roles; they act as surrogates of the corporation, and their individual capability to act on the behalf of the corporation derives from their corporate role (Rowland, 2009). The institutional capabilities of corporations exist through their material resources, decision-making systems and organisational structures that determine what actions become possible (Henning, 2011). The organisational procedures and structures that guide individual actions – like French's (1979) CID structures – make the corporation recognisable from these actions because they represent the core site of capability execution. The passive aspect of recognition, according to Ricoeur

(2005), enables institutional actions to become ethically assessable deeds that uphold the meaningful moral existence of the corporation.

The theoretical framework of this essay extends beyond procedural aspects. It is also political. For Aristotle (1934, 1944), the highest practical science consists of politics, which seeks to arrange public life for achieving supreme Good, i.e., happiness. The political side of corporate actions reveals that they lack ethical neutrality while establishing public authority to make evaluations. The corporation exists as an organised but single actor that operates within political structures because its powers function as part of the political community, rather than operating outside it (Crane et al., 2008; Henning, 2011; Matten & Crane, 2005; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007, 2011). The decisions made by these entities help create the shared environment together with state institutions and civil society organisations (Crane et al, 2008). The political nature of corporate actions determines their ethical value because they must support the flourishing of community life, or in Aristotelian terms, happiness.

The political domain serves as the area where recognition achieves its full potential. The existence of corporations as actors depends on continuous social recognition because they do not persist naturally. The community determines through recognition whether corporate capability to act, actualised through action, meets standards for community membership. But given the mutual nature of recognition, corporate moral subjectivity becomes an eminently ethical question, since it is related to existence (see Schweiker, 1993). The corporate agent needs to show the righteousness of its actions to others, so they can evaluate them accordingly, for ethical recognition purposes. In turn, the evaluating others are recognised as subjects as well, also possessors of equal capabilities to act. The practice of making others count repeatedly creates a stable foundation for corporations to maintain their social standing, sustained on mutual respect.

This essay contributes to the literature on business ethics by exploring the foundations of corporate moral subjectivity, adding depth to existing views about the reification of corporations as moral subjects. It integrates Aristotle's theoretical approaches on ethics and politics with Ricoeur's theory of recognition in order to develop a theoretical framework that changes the way corporate morality can ensue. The tone is set not on a mere active perspective of how corporations act – departing from a premise that corporations *are* agents – but on a passive perspective of how corporations are recognised as moral agents through their actions. This shift of perspective brought by the theoretical framework here developed is the reason behind the title of this essay. It opens a new perspective from where to make corporations capable of being subject to moral assessment.

Yet, this research faces restrictions because it operates at a conceptual level. It lacks the ability to assert its validity through empirical evidence. The analogical application of Aristotle's philosophy and Ricoeur's theory of recognition (which is buttressed on his hermeneutics of the self) to corporate entities may raise ontological doubts about corporate agency that require further investigation. Moreover, its claims depend on untested assumptions that corporations can become moral subjects through their recognition as such because it establishes a normative framework. Future research should investigate the mechanics operating behind the recognition of corporations as moral subjects, particularly regarding processes of imputability and account-giving, owing to the nature of corporations as fictional entities. Longitudinal comparative studies could also explore how different institutional environments affect the recognition of corporate moral agency across various cultural settings, deepening the understanding of recognition's ethical aspects. Nevertheless, the prospects for the application of the theoretical framework developed in this essay seem to be wide, since ultimately the process of recognition concerns the way social actors should act and live, which is the cornerstone of ethics.

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3. PROMISE KEEPING AND CORPORATE ONTOLOGY: ACCOUNTABILITY AS RECOGNITION AND RENEWAL OF CORPORATE MORAL SUBJECTIVITY

3.1 Introduction

Questions recurrently emerge about the reduction of accountability to a procedural or technocratic mechanism designed to monitor behaviour or ensure compliance (see, e.g., Agyemang, 2024; Dinh & O'Leary, 2025; Roberts, 2009). Pivotal contributions such as McKernan (2012), Roberts (1991, 2009; 2018), Schweiker (1993) or Shearer (2002) have illuminated accountability as an inherently moral and relational practice – an act of ethical exposure through which subjects, both individual and collective, render themselves visible to others. Yet, despite this ethical reorientation, the ontological foundations of accountability remain underexplored (see Agyemang, 2024; Rana et al., 2022; Shearer, 2002; Vosselman, 2022). As an abstract legal entity, many consider that to recognise a corporation as a moral agent is problematic at the least (see De George, 1981; Rönnegard, 2024). But "if it is impossible to render economic forces morally accountable, then human beings have becomes (sic) slaves to their own financial and corporate creations" (Schweiker, 1993, p. 231). By setting the tone on the ethical import of accountability and the hypothesis of corporations being recognised as moral agents, the question sustaining this essay is: what is accountability's role in the process of recognition of the moral agency of corporations? This research question reflects the aim of this essay, which is to construct an interpretive framework that elucidates how accountability operates as an ethical system sustaining the recognition of corporate moral subjectivity within institutional contexts, thereby enabling the actualisation of moral agency over time.

This essay begins from the premise that recognition is not merely an epistemic act of knowing *what* something is, but an ethical act of acknowledging *who* someone is (even if that someone is a fictional actor such as a corporation). Recognition constitutes the condition of moral subjectivity. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's *Oneself as Another* (1992) and *The Course of Recognition* (2005), this study contends that accountability functions as the performative medium through which corporations actualise their moral selfhood. Ricoeur's (2005) phenomenology of the *capable human being* – one who can speak, act, narrate oneself, and have actions imputed – offers a framework to understand how capability and responsibility interrelate in the constitution of moral agency. When transposed to the corporate sphere, this framework allows accountability to be seen not as an instrument of control, but as the act through which a corporation asserts itself as a recognisable moral subject. From audit mechanisms to algorithmic

governance, accountability is often mistakenly equated with transparency, surveillance, or liability (see Argento et al., 2025; Dinh & O'Leary, 2025; Francis, 1994; Roberts, 1991, 2009). Such forms – what Roberts (1991) called *individualising accountability* – privilege control over care, measurement over meaning, and exposure over understanding. They render subjects visible but not recognisable; they produce data but not acknowledgment (see Nelson, 1993). The paradox of contemporary accountability lies precisely in its capacity to reveal, while concealing the moral self. Revisiting Ricoeur's (2005) ethics of promise, memory, and recognition provides a philosophical lens through which the moral substance of accountability regarding corporations can be reclaimed.

This essay uses Paul Ricoeur's (2005) phenomenology of the capable subject to develop its critical-interpretive methodology. It sustains its analysis on textual interpretation instead of using empirical data to study the moral requirements for corporate accountability. Ricoeur's (1992; 2005) hermeneutics of the self, particularly regarding the recognition of selfhood, provides the foundations to analyse key philosophical terms (promise, memory, recognition) within the context of current accountability discussions. The method uses constructive analogical reasoning to apply human agency ethical frameworks to corporate operations without fully attributing human qualities to businesses, i.e., without turning corporations into persons (see De George, 1981).

Ricoeur (1992, 2005) establishes ethics as a fundamental aspect of human life through its temporal nature. The ethical formula of Ricoeur – "aiming at the good life, with and for others, in just institutions" (1992, p. 172) – shows how selfhood (*ipse*) and sameness (*idem*) interact through institutional frameworks. Within this horizon, the two capabilities of promise and memory create temporal permanence for identity: promise sustains self-constancy (ipse identity) through time, while memory ensures self-continuity (idem identity) across change. The fragile nature of promise is due to the threats from forgetting and betrayal that haunt them, respectively. But their fragile nature creates the foundation for moral life to gain its ethical value. These Ricoeurian concepts, working as the basis for the theoretical framework here built, allows us to understand corporations as moral entities whose legitimacy depends on their ability to maintain their initial promise of excellence – present right from their founding moment – through constant recalling of memory and ongoing visibility, both sustained on accountability.

Following Ricoeur (2005), the corporate subject upholds its commitment to pursue the Aristotelian Supreme Good through performative accountability, which reaffirms its original promise to contribute to the collective well-being. The juridical process of incorporation serves as an initial promise,

an illocutionary commitment to support social collective flourishment, i.e., Aristotelian *eudaimonia*[40]. The existence of corporations depends on their ability to maintain their original promise throughout time, sustained by memory and renewed through each act of giving an account of their actions. The corporation becomes recognisable as a moral agent insofar as its accountability practices maintain their foundational promise rather than betraying it.

The proposed framework also addresses the ongoing debate in critical accounting about the transformation of accountability from control-based to responsive practices (see Dillard & Vinnari, 2019; Painter-Morland, 2006, 2007; Roberts, 2009; Shearer, 2002; Stewart et al., 2023). The ethical nature of accountability is restored through Ricoeurian analysis because it is grounded on the dialectical relationship between the self with the Other, contrary to neoliberal rationalities that entrap accountability within calculative and technocratic frameworks (Killian & O'Regan, 2020; Shearer, 2002). The process of giving an account functions as a dialogic exchange which reveals oneself to others for their assessment. The act of giving an account thus mirrors Ricoeur's notion of *attestation* – a performative affirmation of one's capability ("I can"). Through self-attestation, accountability evolves from calculative protocol into an ethical practice.

This essay establishes a connection between philosophical ethics and critical accounting research in order to enable new insights into the meaningful aspects of accountability. It asserts that corporate moral existence depends on accountability, with the latter exceeding its status as an institutional requirement. Through accountability, the corporation upholds its original promise, preserves its memory, and secures recognition as a moral subject capable of contributing to collective flourishing. The interpretation of accountability in modern times, with digital transparency, algorithmic control and corporate distrust, brings back its ethical value to sustain recognition, vulnerability and organisational moral agency (see Bottausci et al., 2024; Dillard & Vinnari, 2019; Dinh & O'Leary, 2025; Kraus et al., 2024; Schweiker, 1993).

In addition to this introductory section, the essay comprises five further sections. The second section establishes Ricoeur's theory of moral selfhood through an examination of how memory and promise work together to sustain the recognition of ethical subjectivity. The third section outlines the methodological approach adopted for this essay. Then, the fourth section reconceptualises accountability as a relational practice that operates through performative ethical exposure and legitimacy, rather than being confined to procedural or calculative systems. This section, whose content is directed to

[40] The role of Aristotelian *eudaimonia* regarding recognition was thoroughly discussed in the first essay. It represents every actions' ultimate aim so as to become a virtuous subject.

corporations, is divided into four parts, which analyse the importance of the speech act of giving an account regarding accountability, the ethical exposure subjects face so as to enable their moral agency (justifying that, regarding corporations, exposure is essential for their meaningful existence), and the conflicts between transparency, legitimacy and vulnerability regarding recognition. The fifth section unites all previous findings to illuminate how accountability fulfils the corporate original promise that forms the basis for the recognition of their moral agency. The essay opens with a philosophical foundation, advances through to ethical implementation, and concludes with an ontological reflection that discloses accountability as the process throughout which corporations sustain their moral presence over time. The study ends with a concluding section that synthesises the main insights and implications of the analysis.

3.2. Ricoeur: Promise, Recognition and Ethics

3.2.1. Memory and Permanence in Time

By establishing the sense of his ethics upon the formula "aiming at the good life, with and for others, in just institutions" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 172), Ricoeur sets the problematic of self-recognition as eminently ethical by subjecting it to the power of examination or evaluation. It represents a rejoinder to the Socratic notion that an unexamined life is not worth living (Ricoeur, 1992), whether it is the life of an individual or that of an organisation (see Schweiker, 1993). Ricoeur (2005) reifies self-recognition as sustained upon the actualisation of the capabilities subjects possess to act. In other words, the recognition of a subject becomes dependent on a sense of the visual since it is achieved within activity, i.e., which actions are performed in the world and which attributes are ascribed to them. The moral nature of the agent arises out of his capability of having actions imputed, which enables the agent, as a moral subject, to be recognisable for what he has done.

For Ricoeur (2005), the capabilities of speaking, acting, narrating oneself, and being capable of imputation – which he considers as the essential capabilities behind the phenomenology of the capable human being – must be complemented by the pair composed by the capability to remember or recall, which is substantiated on memory, and the capability to promise. Memory and promise are linked to recognition as they represent capabilities as well. As capabilities to act, they become therefore subject to the identical process of actualisation via action inherent to the four initial capabilities mentioned above. But with memory and promise, recognition is given a temporal structure hitherto absent from those capabilities constitutive of the capable human being, with the effect of action becoming able to be situated in time. Time, for Ricoeur (2005), is not, however, chronological abstract time, but time expressed in and

by the meaningful visibility of the change operated upon persons and things, time's objects. Time's value is empirical. But paradoxically, what is revealed by time is the permanence in time, within change, of the two values constitutive of personal identity: the subject composed of sameness (idem identity) and of selfhood (ipse identity). For Ricoeur, "personal identity is a temporal identity" (2005, p. 121). Owing to visibility, it is also a signifier of the self (Ericson & Kjellander, 2018). It is due to the dimension of temporality that the pair memory-promise helps to sustain the dialectic between sameness (idem) and ipseity or selfhood (ipse), part and parcel of subjectivity as it constitutes identity. Both express permanence in time, but to a different degree, since

> With memory, the principal emphasis falls on sameness, without the characteristic of identity by ipseity being totally absent; in promising, the prevalence of ipseity is so great that the promise can easily be referred to as a paradigm case of ipseity. (Ricoeur, 2005, p. 110).

Yet, time can be revealed as "a double agent, both of lack of recognition and of recognition" (2005, p. 67), because the recognition of the subject qua subject is also *subject* to the threat of the lack or denial of recognition, of being unrecognisable. As an effect, the capabilities of the subject to act are diminished or even destroyed, up to the basic act of giving (see Rhodes & Westwood, 2016). Indeterminacy is inherent to the emergence of identity, since it depends on a temporal and spatial setting formed within and by a pervasive narrative stance, which is never constant (Bruner, 1991; Colonomos, 2005; Ericson & Kjellander, 2018). This threat of the negative is present in the pair formed by memory and promise. For Ricoeur (2005), contrary to the capabilities of speaking, acting, narrating oneself, and being capable of imputation, the pair of capabilities linked to memory (the capability to remember) and promise (the capability to make promises) is subject to problems when the emphasis falls upon their actualisation through action. Those problems are linked directly to the threats haunting these capabilities, their negatives, something demanding a different treatment from what was adopted when addressing the other four capabilities. This is so in that their negative is constitutive of "their meaningfulness: forgetting for memory, betrayal for promises (...). Their opposite is part of their meaning: to remember is to not forget; to keep one's promise is not to break it" (Ricoeur, 2005, p. 110).

Starting with memory, Ricoeur (2005) discloses the capacity of remembering as ambivalent, in that it depends upon a passive moment, characterised by the coming of an image of a passed past to mind, and an active movement of remembering. The centre of this process becomes the trace as an icon, like the mark of something, an imprint, left in wax. For Ricoeur, the trace represents an enigma, because

> Every trace, in effect, is in the present. And the trace will always depend on the thought that interprets it, that takes it as a trace *of* – of the "impact" of the seal in the wax; in other words, the trace bears the paradoxical character of being the effect of some initial impulse, of which it will be at the same time a *sign*; an effect that is a *sign* of its cause – this is the enigma of the trace. (Ricoeur, 2005, p. 112, emphasis in the original; additional emphasis added).

As a sign, the passive nature of the trace becomes revealed in the threat of forgetting, as it can disappear. It is the active movement expressed by remembering that discloses the temporal quality of memory, since it introduces distance to time: remembering possesses the sense of traversing a distance between what happened and what is remembered, in the form of a trace. Memory represents the notion of time as enduring, expressed by "the continuation of existence" (Ricoeur, 2005, p. 114, emphasis in the original). Remembering, as an act of reflexion, represents a countermovement to which the menace of forgetting gives rise, in turn confirming the remembered object as having been forgotten – and thereby confirming the positive nature of forgetting. Memory in its activity of remembering consists of a rediscovery translated into recognition: what is now remembered is recognised as being the same thing that once was, and not another. Ricoeur (1992, 2005) sees in this character of a thing being identical to itself the utmost expression of the relationship memory shares to sameness regarding identity[41]. Identity here is tantamount to being identical, and therefore highlights sameness.

Ricoeur (2005) finds in the retrospective direction of the process of remembering the answer to the enigma of the trace: from the recognition of the trace to its presumed persistence, which refers to its survival as an image, a memory. Survival of the image means that it was not really lost, since it was rediscovered and recognised as a memory. Survival represents duration in the sense of what has been (the past) occurs in the present, with the trace, as a memory, preserving itself and ceasing to be both a cause and an effect; it becomes something constitutive of identity. The recognition of images of the past in the present as preserved memories enables the continuation, through time, of identity, even if it is our own. It is how memory, as expressive of sameness, contributes to self-recognition.

3.2.2. The Capability to Promise and Self-Constancy

At the opposite side of the pair, Ricoeur (2005) places the capability to promise, as expressive of ipseity, ipse identity. Like the dialectic of sameness and selfhood they help to sustain, promise shares

[41] Ricoeur draws on John Locke's notions of identity, consciousness and the self, sustained only upon what he defines as idem identity, i.e., identity as sameness, without ipseity.

with memory a relationship of simultaneous opposition and complementarity. Their opposition, whilst substantiated upon the difference between sameness and ipseity, is for Ricoeur (2005) clarified by reference to their end: memory emphasises the *mineness* of the subject, in the sense that there is no substitution therefor – that is why we can talk of continuity; on the other hand, promise brings forth the alterity of the other, making it forcefully present at the moment the capability to promise is actualised by promise itself. Ricoeur (2005) argues that the presence and strength of the other regarding the act of promising represents a sort of transition between self-recognition and mutual recognition, owing to the character of (self-)constancy. The nature of the capability to promise, actualised by an illocutionary act, will mark the difference between continuity (expressive of sameness) and constancy (expressive of selfhood), even if both express permanence in time. The constancy inherent to promises will nonetheless become a paradoxical permanence in time, since it represents a challenge to time itself, as a denial of change (Ricoeur, 1992).

With alterity, Ricoeur (2005) states that the capability to promise incorporates all the four initial capabilities of the capable human being mentioned above. Nevertheless, the phenomenology of promises – how promises manifest themselves in the world – still keeps the relationship between a capacity and its actualisation through action. It unfolds first as a speech act vested with illocutionary[42] force, "where meaning and use cannot be dissociated" (Ricoeur, 2005, p. 128) owing to the particular kind of effects achieved upon the receiver – in the case of promises, that effect is materialised by the commitment inherent to the promise (Austin, 1975). The illocutionary force of promises lies less upon the promise made than on the act of giving that is constitutive of promises. When promising,

> the speaker does not simply limit himself to "placing himself under a certain obligation to do what he says". This relation is merely from himself to himself. But the commitment is first of all to the other to whom the promise is made. It is a commitment to "do" or "give" *something held to be good* for him or her. In other words, the promise has not simply a receiver, but a *beneficiary* of the promise. (Ricoeur, 2005, p. 129, emphasis in the original; additional emphasis added).

It is the sense of giving proper to promises that brings forth the moral character of promises as a commitment regarding future action, owing to the expectation created upon the beneficiary of the promise

[42] An utterance is considered as an illocutionary act when the utterer, *in* saying something, necessarily *does* something to the listener (Austin, 1975). The force of the illocutionary act lies precisely in what one does in speaking.

about something good. And it is the character of goodness inherent in what is given that turns the simple receiver into a beneficiary, i.e., to whom something (necessarily) good is done.

Ricoeur (2005) adds that the moral force of the commitment embedded in promises, located behind their illocutionary force as a speech act[43], lies in the subject's will to self-constancy, of keeping one's word to himself and to the other, regardless of circumstances. Commitment, as the preservation of self-constancy, expresses the selfhood of the subject, where his identity is preserved by holding firm to what might lead someone to break his *given* word. Self-constancy expresses the uniqueness of the subject in that others can *count on* him regarding what he has given (Ricoeur, 1992). Contrary to the permanence in time characteristic of sameness, which is set on the uninterrupted continuity of character[44], self-constancy, as ipseity, perpetuates through time thanks to the ethical justification of the promise, which compels the agent who promises "to safeguard the institution of language and to respond to the trust that the other places in my faithfulness" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 124).

For Ricoeur (1992), and like every other action, the virtuous nature of promises resides in habit, in the sense of a habitual disposition to respect the word that was given. It is the aspect of reliability behind habit that makes keeping one's word to act like a promise preceding every other promise, where the commitment towards the other and the commitment to do something good are united in the single illocutionary act of promising. As a binding obligation, the promise finds in reliability the ability to remove the insecurity of the other that menaces its confidence into expecting what was promised, that being something done or given, as it depends on action. As a moral obligation, a promise could never be about rendering something bad; otherwise, no one could talk about an obligation in its moral sense – no agent is forced by no receiver to do something bad to the receiver himself, since no one wishes for himself something that does not seem good to himself (Aristotle, 1934, 1136b7-8).

The negative side of promises is revealed in betrayal, in the ability not to keep one's word, to break it. Negativeness is also a power: "the power not to keep one's word" (Ricoeur, 2005, p. 127). It is so, since capability, as power (they share the same Greek word), is actualised through action. Regarding an action that is performed, there lies always the possibility of it becoming either a virtue or a vice according to what is ascribed to actions. Virtue or vice is achieved by what we do, something already stated by Aristotle (1934). Ricoeur (2005) emphasises the fact that the power for breaking a promise is an inherent part of the capability to make promises since it discloses the weak side of the act of promising.

[43] As a speech act, especially as an illocutionary one, a promise also represents a commitment to keep the linguistic conventions where it is performed intact. In other words, the promise as an utterance has a certain conventional force given by language, which is threatened when the effect of the illocutionary act of promising is not achieved, as when a promise is broken (Austin, 1975).

[44] Ricoeur (1992, p. 119) describes character as being "The set of distinctive marks which permit the reidentification of [an] (...) individual as being the same."

Consequently, the attestation of selfhood is put to the test, since self-constancy is at check when the power to break a promise looms. Ricoeur sees in the responsibility to care for the other out of the act of giving an answer to counter the possibility of betrayal. Because "another is *counting on* me and on the reliability of my word (...) I must answer his *expectation*" (2005, p. 134, emphasis added). The mention to *expectation* in the previous citation brings forth the relationship of complementary between memory and promise. But memory here possesses a particular sense, drawn out of literary narrative, of enabling past expectations and anticipations to be recounted, and thereby unable to be forgotten, orientating actors towards the future (Ricoeur, 1992). Memory here is tied to the will, in the sense of "a desire for the continuance of something desired once" (Ricoeur, 2005, p. 133, emphasis in the original).

Ricoeur (1992, 2005) concludes that the relationship memory shares with promise regarding the recognition of moral subjectivity lies in the fact that memory possesses a complementary role regarding the capability to promise, turning these capabilities into complementing opposites. By bringing back into the present past expectations, memory acts also upon the future, by constantly sustaining the continuous fulfilment of the promise to act, so that the other can continuously *count on* the subject. That effect is achieved and renewed by every recall it prompts about the expectations that were built through time.

3.3. Methodological approach

This research employs a philosophical and conceptual approach aimed at constructing a theoretical framework. It follows a normative and interpretive perspective, seeking to clarify and integrate key concepts relevant to the moral subjectivity of corporations. The objective is to develop a set of interrelated conceptual dimensions that may support a renewed understanding of corporate moral agency.

This study makes use of a critical-interpretive and hermeneutic approach grounded in Paul Ricoeur's phenomenology of the capable subject. This perspective provides the conceptual foundation for understanding how the capabilities to promise and to remember, essential for the ongoing recognition of moral subjectivity, are related to accountability (see Ricoeur, 2005). In turn, it reveals accountability as a practice buttressing the recognition of selfhood itself, since accountability's motive is that of existence (Schweiker, 1993).

The framework was constructed through a process of theoretical synthesis. Key conceptual dimensions – namely, capability, memory, promise, accountability, and recognition – were first developed individually through engagement with the work of Ricoeur (2005), and then integrated into a coherent structure. These dimensions represent interrelated philosophical constructs that, working together,

support the central thesis: that accountability is pivotal for the recognition of corporations as moral subjects. Theoretical coherence, conceptual depth, and ethical consistency were given priority throughout this process.

As a conceptual essay, this study's focus centres on the ethical structure of accountability and in its role in the recognition of moral agency regarding corporations. As such, it does not concern specific practices or perspectives about accountability; rather, the contributions it aspires are related to the elaboration of a theoretically grounded model that, through its ethical robustness, can encourage further normative inquiry and potential empirical application. The limitations of this approach arise from the absence of direct case analysis and the reliance on philosophical abstraction, which may constrain the model's immediate applicability. Nevertheless, the framework is designed to be adaptable for future empirical studies.

As a study within the domain of critical-interpretative organisational studies, rather than representing a piecemeal approach to ethical issues of accountability, it explores the ontological side of accountability, focusing on the foundations of corporate moral agency, challenging prevalent conceptions of the corporation as a merely legal or economic entity.

By elaborating a conceptual framework for exploring the relationship accountability shares with recognition (in what corporate moral subjectivity concerns), this work seeks to reframe how agency and accountability itself are understood in the corporate domain under the concept of recognition. For that purpose, the conceptual framework is grounded in the ethical philosophies of Ricoeur (2005) concerning the role of both promise and memory in the process of recognition.

3.4. The Ethical Import of Accountability Under Its Different Guises

Although extant literature recognises the ethical dimension of accountability (e.g., Agyemang, 2024; Helle & Roberts, 2024; Macintosh et al., 2009; Messner, 2009; Pagan et al., 2023; Roberts, 2009; Schweiker, 1993; Shearer, 2002), it has largely been approached as answerability to others, without exploring its role in sustaining the moral agency of corporations. What remains underexamined is accountability as a practice that continually enacts institutional commitments and enables the recognition of the corporation as a moral subject. This theoretical gap is where the present framework intervenes, drawing on Ricoeur's philosophy to articulate promise, memory, and recognition in the conceptualisation of corporate accountability.

3.4.1. Accountability and the (Speech) Act of Giving an Account

Accountability is something pervasive to our lives, since it bears upon our social condition (Willmott, 1996). The foundation of accountability requires us to explain our actions to others because this process creates our social identity, granting us membership in a community (Munro, 1996; Munro & Hatherly, 1993). Being accountable means existing within a social network where others can request explanations from us whilst we gain understanding through shared moral principles. The process of becoming accountable leads to social recognition because it establishes how people demonstrate their subject status to others.

According to Butler (1997, 2005, 2010), our identity is enacted less by acts of doing than by acts of telling, which lead us into giving accounts of ourselves to others in order to enable a meaningful explanation of our conduct, and consequently to make possible the emergence of what is to become *our* identity out of *our* accounts. Through the use of possessive language, Butler (2005) shows that self-narration functions as a performative act which creates our identity through our interactions with others. Before providing an account "[w]e do not assume anything about the being of the actor" (Schweiker, 1993, p. 246). The practice of accountability functions as an existence-based performance which reveals how we perceive ourselves and those around us (Schweiker, 1993). Roberts (1991) explains how accountability functions through his distinction between individualizing and socializing accountability, because it reveals identities while simultaneously moulding the visible self. The process of becoming visible to others, whilst remaining exposed, creates our identity.

The pervasiveness of accountability explains why it cannot be restricted to managerial or technical domains. It is a condition of social life, and as such it applies not only to individuals but also to corporations (French, 1979; Pettit, 2007). Whilst evident regarding individual subjects, such claims are also valid towards corporate subjects (see, e.g., Kraus et al., 2024; Pettit, 2007). When corporations give accounts of themselves, they too are constituted as recognisable entities within community, and are thus granted legitimacy and intelligibility (Schweiker, 1993). Drawing on Austin's (1975) sense of linguistic conventions as socially established rules and procedures that grant performative utterances their illocutionary force and enable them to achieve conventional effects, organisations are not capable of using physical social conventions like gestures, owing to their lack of physical substance. Consequently, corporations' way of becoming accountable agents is mainly discharged via speech acts either with illocutionary or perlocutionary force[45] (see, e.g., Brennan et al., 2013; Craig & Amernic 2008; Li et al.,

[45] Following Austin (1975), the difference between illocutionary and perlocutionary acts lies in the effects utterances produce, as well as their relationship to linguistic conventions. An illocutionary act consists of an utterance vested in a certain force drawn out of conventional usage; in short, *in* saying something,

2022). Austin (1975) addresses in a sense this relevance of speech acts regarding corporations' accountability when he states that

> The sense in which saying something produces effects on other persons, or "causes" things, is a fundamentally different sense of cause from that used in physical causation (...). It has to operate through the conventions of language and is a matter of influence exerted by one person or another. (Austin, 1975, p. 113, fn. 1, emphasis in the original).

The core function of accountability as a legitimacy and intelligibility carrier enables corporations to establish their status as subjects and potential moral agents (Schweiker, 1993). The fundamental basis of ethical accountability emerges from this situation, because meaningful existence within community requires individuals to explain their actions to others. Roberts (2009) explains that transparency-based accountability reveals individuals and organizations to public scrutiny which transforms their self-perception even when these changes occur through unethical means. The dual nature of accountability allows individuals to establish their identity through self-affirmation while simultaneously making themselves vulnerable to potential misinterpretation (see, e.g., Hänninen, 1995). The process of becoming an accountable subject involves two aspects: self-identification and potential misinterpretation by others, which relates to Ricoeur's (2005) concept of recognition. Accountability requires individuals to demonstrate their actions to others while establishing their recognizable identity as a subject (De George, 1981; Schweiker, 1993).

3.4.2. Accountability as Ethical Exposure

The complete meaning of accountability extends beyond control and information systems because it represents an ethical connection between subjects. The ethical nature of accountability stems from its foundation in the meaningful existence of subjects, according to Schweiker (1993) and Ricoeur (1992, 2005). Our identity emerges through our actions and our verbal explanations of those actions. When we provide explanations, we make ourselves vulnerable to how others will understand and evaluate our statements. The subject who speaks cannot completely manage their exposure because their words depend on how others receive their statements (Boland, 1993; Boland & Schultze, 1996; Butler, 2005; Kraus et al., 2024). The process of exposure transforms external accountability requirements into an

someone *does* something. One paradigmatic illocutionary act is that of promise: In saying "I promise", I am effectively committing myself through a speech act *conventionally* understood as a promise. A perlocutionary act does not possess this strength of linguistic conventions, since the effects it produces are not linked to the utterance itself – something is done *by* saying something. An example of a perlocutionary act is that of convincing someone: I convince someone of something *by* what I say to him or her, the utterance itself bearing no special conventional meaning.

internalized ethical practice, which develops from our social and environmental responsibilities. People practice self-examination through which they construct their personal and professional identities, based on global discussions about responsibility (Eckersley et al., 2025).

Shearer (2002) and Macintosh et al. (2009) use Levinas[46]' ideas to demonstrate that accountability functions as an ethical bond that serves the needs of others rather than as a tool for enforcing compliance. The concept of accountability requires complete openness toward others because this obligation exists before any form of calculation. Accountability as a calculative practice is associated to neoliberal ideas about the individual, who is reified as a self-interested actor who views others as tools to achieve his maximum gain (see Killian & O'Regan, 2020; Price, 2007; Sen, 1987). According to Hoskins (1996), the implementation of calculative practices transforms accountability into numerical measurements that focus on targets, while eliminating its ethical and interpersonal aspects. Miller (1992) sees the allure of calculative accountability in the simplicity of single figures, where governing by numbers provides a definitive answer to the expectations of fully knowing individuals. They are seen, and thereby recognised, within calculative practices. That can justify Foucault's expression that "visibility is a trap" (Foucault, 1977, p. 200), one where accountability is *caught*. But Vollmer (2007) points out that numbers generated through calculative methods lose their meaning when removed from their original context. Nevertheless, the exposure of accountable individuals through calculative routines of accountability leads to disciplinary practices. The research of Roberts (1991) demonstrated how calculative accountability systems can function as disciplinary tools, creating self-monitoring behaviours instead of actual recognition of individuals. The purpose of discipline serves as a goal, even though it can operate with unethical methods (Joannides, 2012). The ethical value of accountability through visibility creates a problem, because it can become oppressive to those who become visible. The process of accountability requires subjects to become exposed to scrutiny since this exposure makes the accountability system function. The process will not occur without it. The ethical nature of accountability becomes most apparent when individuals expose themselves to others. This exposure creates a situation where they ought not to escape providing an answer to others and their expectations (see McPhail et al., 2016).

McKernan (2012) extends this concept by defining accountability as *aporia*, as people constantly request it but it remains impossible to fulfil completely. Every statement made contains unexpressed elements which exceed the boundaries of quantifiable data. That draws much on accountability's nature of *testimony*, as McKernan (2012) states, a term that shares close ties to both *attestation* and *promise*, where the value of truth is practical since it is set in the reflexive activity of belief, in the sense of believing

[46] Levinas was a 20th-century French philosopher who grounded ethics in responsibility to the Other, preceding ontology and self-interest.

as taking as true (Ricoeur, 2005). Kamuf (2007)[47] uses the term *accounterability* to describe the unattainability of achieving complete account closure. The requirement to provide an account creates a paradox because people understand they cannot deliver a complete or definitive explanation. The incomplete nature of accountability represents its fundamental characteristic (Butler, 2005; Messner, 2009; Roberts, 2009). The enigmatic nature of the trace in memory, according to Ricoeur (2005), matches this concept because every account presents itself as both present and absent, whilst representing past events that remain partially elusive in the present. The same way memory faces the danger of forgetting the past, so too accountability faces the risk of the account being insufficient. The ethical significance of giving an account becomes evident because it creates vulnerability to judgment and misinterpretation. Yet, that remains essential for our actions.

The concept of accountability extends beyond its use as a management tool or legal obligation, as its power stems from its ability to expose subjects ethically. The power behind the ethical exposure of subjects lies in the fact that it requires them to stand in a position of vulnerability. Roberts (2009) demonstrates this point through his analysis of transparency, which reveals that complete visibility actually increases exposure of uncontrollable elements. Roberts advocates for more intelligent accountability systems that will balance transparency's dominant position without eliminating its essential role (see, e.g., O'Regan et al., 2022; Roberts, 2018). Messner (2009) supports this perspective by stating that exposure functions as an essential boundary for maintaining ethical accountability. The relationship between authentic moral responsibility and performative accountability creates a potential conflict because actors use accountable identities to sustain their legitimacy, even when it does not lead to meaningful changes (Pagan et al., 2023).

The research conducted by Frey-Heger and Barrett (2021) demonstrates how social accountability through visual representation transforms refugees into permanent needy subjects while exposing them to continuous vulnerability. The research demonstrates how accountability systems create situations where people must accept restrictive identities that limit their ability to take action. Agyemang (2024) examines the different accountability systems through Rached's (2016) *coordinates of accountability* framework to demonstrate that accountability needs to serve various stakeholders, including marginalised groups who have been silenced. The concept of ethical exposure reveals different aspects when accountability systems fail to acknowledge moral responsibility because they hide suffering from view. Agyemang (2024) stresses the importance of creating counter-accounts that reveal concealed stories in order to bring back respect to voiceless communities.

[47] Kamuf's paper works as a foundation to McKernan's (2012), where the notion of *accounterability* is also mentioned.

The digital transformation era has introduced new technologies which actively reshape how organizations handle accountability through ethical standards. The research by Argento et al. (2025) investigates how digital transformation impacts the fields of accounting and auditing and their relationship to accountability. The implementation of AI and big data and automation systems brings efficiency and transparency, but creates new accountability problems that traditional systems fail to address. Digital systems that mediate organizational interactions tend to restrict accountability to technical output results while diminishing human decision-making abilities. The authors emphasize that digital infrastructure systems contain embedded values which distribute power and influence trust relationships, but warn against accepting digitalization as an automatic accountability improvement because it could maintain existing inequalities and hide responsible parties (Argento et al., 2025).

Regarding the promises new technologies purport to bring and their relationship to accountability, Carlsson-Wall et al. (2025) analyse how organizations use digital promises to introduce new technology, with accounting serving to validate or dispute these claims. Digital projects are frequently presented as answers to accountability problems because they claim to enhance operational efficiency, visibility and build trust. The authors demonstrate that these promotional stories about new technologies create false impressions that hide potential dangers and generate false hopes, while diverting focus from moral duties (Carlsson-Wall et al., 2025). The practice of making excessive promises leads to trust breakdowns, which ultimately damages accountability systems (Ricoeur, 2005).

Fortin et al. (2025) study how permissioned blockchains transform supply chain accountability systems. The research demonstrates that blockchain technology fails to provide sufficient transparency and efficiency to establish accountability. The study illustrates that information quality, together with governance systems and social interactions between parties, determine the success of supply chain operations. The study illustrates how increased visibility through transparency does not prevent unethical practices from being hidden through selective disclosure or manipulation. The implementation of algorithmic governance systems creates three major ethical problems because they create power imbalances and produce systems that are difficult to understand and lack user comprehension (Fortin et al., 2025). As a response, human responsibility stands as the foundation of accountability because it requires ethical commitments to maintain fairness and truthfulness, as well as to protect against fraudulent activities and to unite technological aspects with organizational elements and moral accountability frameworks (Fortin et al., 2025).

Massaro et al. (2025) establish that permissioned blockchains need to evolve into socio-ethical systems which analyse the current difficulties that arise when organizations attempt to maintain

accountability within the developing metaverse environment. Most businesses promote idealistic concepts about decentralization, empowerment and inclusivity. Yet, they fail to disclose their governance systems and transparency measures and enforcement systems. The absence of clear information demonstrates *techwashing*: companies use advanced technological terminology to hide their actual risks and duties and moral consequences. The metaverse platforms create new social inequalities whilst pushing out vulnerable users and strengthening corporate dominance through their appearance of openness. The authors advocate for thorough analysis to develop metaverse technology which includes authentic stakeholder participation for user protection against deceptive practices that hide behind technological marketing claims (Massaro et al., 2025).

What the references to new technologies help to justify is that, regardless of context, accountability is always a process where ethics is inherent, as it consists upon a relationship of openness: those feeling or already being accountable after the effects of *their* actions upon others must keep open to those *others* who seek to be able to demand for an account (Agyemang, 2024; Dinh & O'Leary, 2025; Ferry et al., 2024; Shearer, 2002) for the relationship to maintain its ethical imprint (Schweiker, 1993; Shearer, 2002). Otherwise, they risk solipsism (Roberts, 2001, 2009, 2012). But for that to happen, accountability has to be discharged within reasonable frameworks of operability (Butler, 2005; Messner, 2009).

3.4.3. Accountability, Corporate Social Responsibility, and Legitimacy

Although there are nowadays several approaches to understanding the impact of corporate participation in society through their policies and practices, such as corporate citizenship (Crane et al., 2008; Matten et al., 2003; Matten & Crane, 2005; Moon et al., 2005; Néron & Norman, 2008), business citizenship (Wood & Logsdon, 2002, 2008), or political CSR (Scherer & Palazzo, 2007, 2011), Garriga and Melé (2004), Melé (2008) and Whelan et al. (2013) argue that those concepts are frequently reified as falling under the umbrella of what is broadly termed as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in literature. For these authors, they represent different theories that depart from a same hub. The reason behind their arguments lies in the fact that CSR is unable to be rendered with an all-encompassing definition, due to its elusiveness and broadness (Murphy & Schlegelmilch, 2013). But achieving an all-encompassing, definite notion is quite opposite to a social practice, owing to the nature of society itself. Furthermore, and even if Garriga and Melé (2004), Melé (2008) and Whelan et al. (2013) arguments can be contested (see, e.g., Edward & Willmott, 2008; Matten et al., 2003; Matten & Crane, 2005), they are sufficient for the purposes of this essay, in that the relationship every one of these approaches shares to

accountability is similar: they all question the legitimacy and motive of corporate action, even raising concerns about the way accountability can be achieved regarding what is allowed to corporations as capabilities to act (see, e.g., Matten & Crane, 2005; Moon et al., 2005). Therefore, the discussion about legitimacy around accountability will pivot around CSR.

Albeit frequently and originally reified as a field of corporate discourse and practice (Gond et al., 2011), CSR is neither restricted to corporate issues on their own, i.e., as isolated from society at large, nor does it bear exclusively upon corporate guidelines; on the contrary, CSR, due to the extension of the concepts it can enclose, is seen rather as a quite subjective a process (Jones et al., 2009; Murphy & Schlegelmilch, 2013). Therefore, what CSR can be (seen to be) is dependent upon subjects themselves and what is taken to be accepted as rightful, i.e., legitimate within society. In order to be legitimate, "business needs social acceptance" (Melé, 2008, p. 52), because business is part of society and its conduct has an effect thereupon. CSR thus becomes broadly linked to issues of legitimisation of corporate conduct before society as a whole. In other words, it concerns the legitimacy of corporate identity, which is tied up to how others see corporate subjects' behaviour regarding them.

The process of CSR involves how businesses seek to render meaningfulness to their actions[48], a process based on their ability to become accountable subjects that society can recognize as legitimate actors. The four initial capabilities Ricoeur (2005) describes in "The Course of Recognition" regarding the capable human being – to wit, the capability to speak, to act, to narrate oneself, and to have actions imputed – now apply to corporations, enabling them to establish themselves as accountable subjects (Ricoeur, 2005). The accounts corporate subjects give about themselves determine what people see as corporate social responsibility because it requires that accountability works for the sake of meaningfulness (Schweiker, 1993; see also O'Dwyer, 2003; Roberts, 2003). Bracci and Llewellyn (2012) demonstrate that legitimacy exists as an essential element of accountability since corporate social intelligibility emerges from their narratives about *their* actions and justifications thereof. CSR initiatives need accountability processes to gain their meaning as these processes enable others to evaluate and understand their activities.

The concept of legitimacy is tied to the exertion of power and the question of visibility, meaning it is not neutral (Gombert, 2025; Kuruppu et al., 2019; Richardson, 1987). As a result, the systems of accountability work as the main tool to monitor power and prevent its misuse, as Grant and Keohane (2005) explain. And according to Eckersley et al. (2025), accountability functions as a dynamic process

[48] Owing to the fact that actions represent the actualisation of the capacities to act of subjects, regardless of their human or corporate nature, the meaningfulness of actions renders the recognition of the corporation's identity intelligible (see Ricoeur, 2005).

which reflects power distribution patterns and conflicts and authorization systems. The concentration of power leads to symbolic accountability practices which replace actual responsibility with formal compliance. The balance of power between entities leads to accountability building trust and promoting transparency and active responses.

The requirement for CSR as accountability stems from worries about power boundaries. The search for security, which defines all living beings (Ricoeur, 2005), leads to ethical blindness in accountability demands because of their specific tone. The search for security leads to the reduction of accountability into calculative systems that people view as dependable and secure (Kamuf, 2007). The practice of CSR reporting has evolved into frequent exercises of disclosure management, focusing on reputation control and risk management instead of genuine ethical openness to others (see Archel et al., 2011; O'Dwyer, 2003; Roberts, 2001, 2012, 2018). Painter-Morland (2007) extends this analysis by demonstrating that network societies require organizations to demonstrate accountability through interactive exchanges, instead of simple fact-based reporting. The concept of accountability functions as a web-based system which requires corporations to handle diverse and opposing stakeholder requirements. The research by Cooper and Johnston (2012) introduces "vulgate accountability", where accountability practices develop through popular cultural expectations within specific fields, such as football. The study elucidates how cultural fields determine accountability through recognition standards which surpass basic technical reporting requirements. Stewart et al. (2023) introduce a team accountability framework that focuses on member-developed responsibility, as a replacement for external monitoring systems. The authors demonstrate through their research that team accountability develops through trust-based dialogue and mutual recognition, and not amidst hierarchical supervision. Team members who take responsibility for their individual work and team achievements create a strong sense of shared identity which supports collective performance. The system of responsibility creates an environment where members can support each other while also providing constructive feedback instead of focusing on pinpointing blame. The study reveals that relational accountability enhances ethical choices, stopping employees from taking advantage of situations or shirking their duties (Stewart et al., 2023).

The study by Boyce (2014) demonstrates that ethics requires direct connection to accountability systems. For the author, the absence of ethical principles in CSR initiatives makes the practice function as an empty rhetorical tool. Within political engagement, Néron and Norman (2008) analyse corporations through a political lens, while Néron (2010, 2016) investigates the moral aspects of corporate political activity. The political nature of corporations requires accountability to function as a public political

relationship and not as a private numerical assessment about their results (see Aßländer & Curbach, 2014, 2017). The belief in corporate virtue creates a moral economic system that uses profit and virtue discourses to determine recognition, according to Colonomos (2005). Henning (2011) applies Aristotelian principles to explain how corporations function as actors in the polis by seeking the good life. However, their accountability determines their success in achieving this goal.

The significance of CSR (and related concepts, such as corporate citizenship) in corporate action makes them showcase both the advantages and disadvantages of accountability systems. The practice of CSR reveals corporate activities to the public which enables them to evaluate these actions. But it also creates a risk of transforming accountability into management of appearances, as organizations pursue illusive legitimacy, instead of genuine ethical engagement, before powerful stakeholders (Roberts, 2018).

3.4.4. Beyond Liability: Accountability as Relational Practice

The concept of accountability receives common interpretation as equivalent to responsibility and liability (Kamuf, 2007; Lindkvist & Llewellyn, 2003). The belief that accountability functions as a form of liability for actions and their resulting effects leads to this interpretation. Accountability is frequently considered to be meaningless if there are no meaningful consequences attached (Dillard & Vinnari, 2019). The notion of responsibility as liability fails to capture how accountability creates fundamental connections between individuals and their social environment. The reason lies in that responsibility as liability focuses on past events in order to assign blame. Accountability is more related to performativity. It structures the process referring to how our (perceived) value makes us visible as subjects and, consequently, endows us membership within the community (Munro, 1996). Following Arrington (1999, pg. 3, emphasis added), "one makes oneself accountable by an engagement that *selects, interprets, and orients*. In a *practical* and *performative* manner, and by a *decision* that begins by getting caught up."

According to Ahrens (1996), accountability exists in multiple styles that express different social connection patterns. Berry (2005), drawing on a religious setting, describes accountability through the metaphor of a "cat's cradle" which represents complex interdependencies that cannot be simplified into straightforward liability connections. Roberts and Scapens (1985) demonstrated that accounting systems create accountability relationships through their design which determines what actions will be considered responsible. Painter-Morland (2006, p. 95) defines accountability as relational responsiveness, owing to how complex adaptive systems develop accountability, through interactive processes rather than fixed rules or codes, something shared by Loacker and Muhr (2009) and Mercier and Deslandes (2017). The relational perspective serves as the foundation for understanding accountability as an ethical practice and

not purely as a matter of attributing responsibility out of blame. The concept of *dialogical accountability* referred to by Dillard and Vinnari (2019) shows that accountabiglity extends beyond information provision as it requires ongoing dialogue. Steccolini (2025) proposes that accountability needs to evolve from its current institution-based monological structure in order to embrace dialogic and participatory approaches. She develops accountability theory through her focus on *accountee*-ability, which examines how citizens and other actors can effectively hold governments accountable. Digital tools enable citizens, activists and communities to create counter-accounts that challenge official state narratives, forcing governments to respond. Steccolini (2025) warns that dismissing multiple *accountees* leads to sustained power inequalities, with the effect of silence dissenting voices.

Accountability functions as a communicative practice that depends on mutual recognition between parties[49]. Gilbert and Rasche (2007) establish accountability through discourse ethics because being accountable means accepting justification from others while respecting their rights to mutual respect. Dinh and O'Leary (2025) explore how social media platforms affect participatory accountability in humanitarian organizations during digital transformation. The authors use the International Committee of the Red Cross to demonstrate how crisis-affected communities use digital platforms to express their concerns, whilst seeking transparency and influencing aid distribution. The new approach of bottom-up accountability breaks down traditional organizational structures by enabling aid recipients to take an active role instead of remaining as recipients. Ferry et al. (2024) conduct a critical study about democracy's connection to accountability and accounting and trust through their analysis of a UK Parliamentary investigation into government financial reports. The combination of inadequate account design and insufficient user needs led to government responses that evaded questions, while accounting practices became a tool for hiding information from democratic oversight. Accountability operated as a mere ritual instead of delivering actual public service.

Hardy and Ballis (2013) show that providing accounts through any method, including product information and labels, requires interpretation, rhetorical skills and persuasive abilities, showing that accountability exists through multiple linguistic means. Greiling and Spraul (2010) highlight the obstacles that prevent effective information disclosure, as organizations face structural barriers to present data that enables recognition. Kamuf (2007) introduces the concept of *accounterability* to demonstrate how accountability functions as a necessary yet unattainable requirement. Laughlin (1996) and Joannides (2012), focusing on accountability in the care sector and a religious organisation respectively, emphasise

[49] As a communicative practice, it will be subject to what Butler (2005) defines as "scenes of address", the locus where effectively recognition can ensue, a locus where the recognition of both parties must necessarily take place. But that is discussed only on the third essay.

the choice carried out by subjects regarding who are considered to be relevant others. The idea of pertinent others to whom one feels obliged to account (and are thus expressive of the subject's accountability) bears upon the notion of higher principals, who hold a superior status regarding others towards whom the subject accounts himself to. This selection is ethical, contrary to what it may seem, since it relieves the subject of the burden of having to answer for multiple accountabilities (Messner, 2009). It keeps the essence of goodness that is essential for accountability to be linked to recognition (as discussed below), since those higher principals tend to express what is evaluated publicly as the common good. They work as what Roberts (1991) mentions as being the *generalised other*.

Jane Davison brings vital cultural elements to the field of accountability through her research. The studies of visual imagery and rhetoric in accounting by Davison (2007, 2008, 2011) show that accountability exists beyond text, as it also includes visual elements and rhetorical aspects. The way accountability is discharged and can affect people's interpretation about the identity of accountable subjects also depends on the combination of photographs, images and repeated discursive patterns. Drawing on Davison (2011), the process of recognition depends on more than factual information; it requires the use of forms, images and representations as well that act as mediators. The research by Davison and Warren (2009) focuses on how visual activities in accountability create imaginative possibilities through non-textual communication methods like pictures and charts, which expand available interpretation options. The process of corporate identity and responsibility creation through accountability goes beyond basic factual descriptions.

These perspectives highlight that accountability extends beyond its common association with legal responsibility. Accountability unfolds as a relational practice sustained by dialogue, storytelling, and culture. Corporations achieve accountability through their participation in recognition systems which reveal their activities to interpretation and evaluation. According to Ricoeur (2005) recognition functions as a two-way process which requires both parties in a relationship. The relational approach to accountability creates conditions for corporate entities to establish their status as moral agents. The ethical nature of accountability emerges from its ability to expose entities while fostering open relationships between them. The process of accountability reveals subjects but it does not show everything (Messner, 2009; Joannides, 2012) and it makes subjects visible but only partially and conditionally. The incomplete nature of accountability functions as its ethical foundation rather than being a deficiency. The recognition of its imperfect yet elusive nature enhances, oddly enough, our understanding of it (Sinclair, 1995; Messner, 2009), particularly regarding its link to ethics. We must always bear in mind that due to it being inherent to us, imperfect selves, accountability is endowed with its imperfect nature. Even if it

may not seem so, accountability is so much dependent on us to exist as we ourselves are dependent on it for our existence. This bears on the fact that it is sustained on the essential relationship self and the other must necessarily have, as it is through such bondage that the self emerges as one in society[50]. What motivates such an encounter and in what way(s) it can take place will justify accountability's basic motive as being that of existence itself (Schweiker, 1993).

The corporation exists without physical substance because it receives its existence through symbolic and legal frameworks which need continuous social validation (Ahrens & Ferry, 2022; Ricoeur, 2005; Schweiker, 1993; Kraus et al., 2024; Vinnari & Laine, 2017). The corporate subject exists through recognition because it needs others to acknowledge its ability to perform actions and create narratives and receive imputations (see Ricoeur, 1992, 2005). The practice of accountability functions as the fundamental site for recognition because it enables the corporation to exist through attestation and exposure (Butler, 2005; Messner, 2009; Roberts, 1991, 2009; 2012; Schweiker, 1993; Shearer, 2002).

3.5. Accountability as the Fulfilment of the Corporate Promise: Recognition, Memory, and the Supreme Good

3.5.1. The Ontological Fragility of the Corporate Subject

The corporation exists without physical substance because it receives its existence through symbolic and legal frameworks that need continuous social validation (Ahrens & Ferry, 2022; Ricoeur, 2005; Schweiker, 1993; see also Kraus et al., 2024; Vinnari & Laine, 2017). The corporate subject exists only through recognition because, having no physical substance, it needs others to acknowledge its ability to perform actions, narrate itself and to bear imputations (cf. Ricoeur, 1992, 2005). The practice of accountability functions as the fundamental site for recognition as it enables the corporation to exist out of attestation and exposure (Butler, 2005; Messner, 2009; Roberts, 1991, 2009; 2012; Schweiker, 1993; Shearer, 2002).

Ricoeur (2005) articulates the *capable human being* through capacities – speaking, acting, narrating oneself, having actions imputed – which, in an analogical way, enable corporations to become recognisable as entities with a meaningful identity and capable of acting in the world (see Arrington, 2007; De George, 1981; Schweiker, 1993). The corporation demonstrates its capabilities through disclosing statements and decision-making processes that produces real-world effects, using its accounts to present its self-narrative and consequently attempting to become recognisable by having actions imputed thereto

[50] And because we are intrinsically social, the other is confirmed, i.e., recognised as a subject due to the address the self enables it to perform.

(see Butler, 2005; French, 1979; Pettit, 2007; Roberts & Scapens, 1985). Ricoeur (2005) completes his tetrad with the pair memory-promise, which confers temporal permanence to identity: continuity (*idem*) and self-constancy (*ipse*). The corporate existence faces the risk of collapse but also the opportunity for ethical growth, as its existence is bestowed and does not exist *per se* with physical substance, depending on external validation through accounting practices which include both accounting-for and accounting-to – in short, the practice of account-giving (Ericson & Kjellander, 2018; Messner, 2009; Schweiker, 1993; Shearer, 2002; van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021; Wright, 2025). The practice of account-giving, fundamental to accountability, requires that the corporation becomes *subject* an endless moment of subjection for the sake of its existence (Roberts, 2009). This hermeneutic framework shows that accountability serves as attestation in the sense Ricoeur (1992, 2005) gives to the word, because it represents a reliable assertion of capability: the corporation is also able to say "I can" as a singular agent, even if consisting prima facie in a collective entity – where it should be "we can"; nevertheless, for agency purposes, attestation of the capability to act makes the corporation a single agent (De George, 1981). Attestation of corporate capability to act links words to actions and duties (Ricoeur, 1992; McKernan, 2012). The declaration functions as a performative statement (see Butler, 2010), making the subject exposed and as a result vulnerable to evaluation from others (Bottausci et al., 2024;Butler, 2005; Kraus et al., 2024; Roberts, 2009). The moral essence of accountability emerges through accepting exposure to others who hold the power to prevent recognition (Shearer, 2002; Sinclair, 1995). The corporation maintains its identity not by the persistence of organisational form alone, the continuity of its character (*idem* identity), but through its commitment to keep to the word that was given, the constancy of its promise (*ipse* identity). For the promise to disclose its ethical nature, the given word must be rendered visible, perceptible from the accounts that are given (Ricoeur, 2005; Schweiker, 1993)[51].

As a result, calculative routines and audit checks cannot the essence of accountability (Francis, 1994; Kamuf, 2007). The core of accountability exists in social relations of justificatory address which both create and control the subject (Hoskin & Macve, 1986; Willmott, 1996; Richardson, 1987). Technical transparency in accountability systems creates a visibility regime that, instead of enabling ethical recognition, entraps organisations into Foucault's (1977) concept of visibility as a potential trap (Roberts, 2009; Miller, 2001). Hence Roberts' (1991) emphasis that accountability functions as a dual mechanism that enables the individualisation and socialisation of people, so as to create a self that emerges through exposure. This doubleness of accountability is somehow implicit to recognition for Ricoeur (2005): the

[51] Whilst the fulfilment of a promise through account-giving can lead to self-inflicted ethical violence (Roberts, 2009; 2018; Steinhoff et al., 2024), the purpose here is to explore how self-constancy is essential for corporations to keep the original promise that presided at its foundation: to act so as to enable the pursuit the Supreme Good, i.e., Happiness, collectively. That is unavoidably ethical (Aristotle, 1934; Sison, 2011; Sison & Fontrodona, 2012).

self becomes itself through seeing and being seen, and judged (see Munro, 1993); the corporation, likewise, and because it can act and have actions imputed thereto, becomes morally legible, and thus recognisable, not by introspection but by submitting itself to the gaze of others through its speech acts, basic acts of the accountable subject. Recognition is thus a *prima facie* passive process (see Ricoeur, 2005).

The corporate being's ontological weakness transforms into ethical potential because it lacks inherent substance, so it must create promises for good and sustain these commitments through repeated dialogic account-giving practices (Ricoeur, 2005; Dillard & Vinnari, 2019; Gilbert & Rasche, 2007). The promise-memory-account cycle enables corporate selfhood to develop moral depth through the attestation of its recognition as a moral subject (Ricoeur, 1992, 2005; McKernan, 2012; Shearer, 2002).

3.5.2. The Promise as the Ethical Condition of Corporate Existence

Ricoeur (2005) establishes the promise as the fundamental expression of ipseity. Promising creates a temporal bond between the self and the other which establishes enduring self-constancy beyond character traits. According to Austin (1975), promising functions as an illocutionary act which creates binding commitments that start with the beneficiary of the promise, who receives it, rather than the person making it (Ricoeur, 2005). The very process of incorporation functions as a promise, an original promise that establishes a commitment for entities without physical bodies to follow actions that their recognising community deems beneficial (French, 1979; Pettit, 2007). The ethical framework of Aristotle explains how commitment works because things achieve their purpose through *purposeful* action that reveals their excellence (*ergon* and *aretē*)[52] when leading to *eudaimonia* (Aristotle, 1934). The corporate world receives its ethical framework through this approach which does not anthropomorphise the firm. It rather ensures that corporate membership into society requires the organization to pursue communal flourishing (Crane et al., 2008; Katona, 2024; Matten & Crane, 2005; Moon et al., 2005; Garriga & Melé, 2004). The Supreme Good serves as the final objective, where profit and efficiency function as operational tools to achieve it, because it represents the political understanding of living well (Aristotle, 1944; Bragues, 2006; Sison & Fontrodona, 2012). The corporation maintains its legitimacy through ethical conduct before it becomes useful, as it exists only through its commitment to serve the well-being of others and the

[52] The ancient Greek word *ergon* means literally *task* or *function*. It is employed here so as to translate Aristotle's idea of a supreme human task – *ergon* – beyond all other tasks, which is to aim at the Supreme Good, i.e., Happiness. And Happiness being an activity, the ergon is then to act virtuously, virtue being *aretē* in ancient Greek.

common good, something it reconfirms through each disclosure process (O'Dwyer, 2003; Nishitani et al., 2025; Ricoeur, 2005; Roberts, 2009).

Ricoeur (2005) asserts that promise includes its own destructive potential, its negative, as the ability to make promises also enables the act of breaking promises, i.e., not keeping one's word. The ability to break promises emerges from the same power that enables promise-making, which transforms constancy into a moral quality, a virtue, instead of an absolute requirement, a necessity. The process of avowal and justification under accountability procedures determines if the corporate entity stays true to its foundational promise which establishes its existence (Schweiker, 1993; Shearer, 2002). The ethical focus of accountability points toward external parties who depend on the promisor because promises exist so as to benefit specific recipients, i.e., their beneficiaries, who are *counting on* the promisor (Deslandes, 2012; Dillard & Vinnari, 2019; Loacker & Muhr, 2009; McKernan, 2012; Mercier & Deslandes, 2017; Ricoeur, 2005). The promise logic differs from self-focused compliance because its outward orientation requires more than auditability to fulfil accountability requirements when beneficiary relationships become neglected (Greiling & Spraul, 2010; Francis, 1994; Roberts, 2018).

The political registers of CSR and legitimacy discourse show how social authorisation for business operations depends on this promise-based system (Garriga & Melé, 2004; Matten & Crane, 2005; Richardson, 1987; van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021). The corporation needs social approval for its actions in the public space (Melé, 2008) because its initial unspoken promise needs periodic verbalisation to prevent legitimacy from becoming empty symbolic gestures (O'Dwyer, 2003; Roberts, 2018). The literature on narrative and visual accountability (e.g., Craig & Amernic, 2008; Davison, 2008) shows that numerical data alone does not fulfil that promise. Organizations need rhetorical and storytelling and visual elements to make reliability understandable (Davison, 2011; Davison & Warren, 2009; Craig & Amernic, 2008; Bracci & Llewellyn, 2012). A company maintains its corporate word by creating stories about actions and their results which prove their connection to initial promises, thus preserving their *ipseity* within change, through time (Macintosh et al., 2009; Ricoeur, 2005; Wright, 2025).

The Aristotelian foundation of promises leads to additional consequences. Virtue as "a settled disposition of the mind determining the choice of our actions and emotions" names the habitual, practised dimension of keeping one's word throughout time (Aristotle, 1934, p. 1107a1). Corporate life demonstrates this practice through established dialogic accountability systems that focus on beneficiary needs instead of internal control mechanisms (Ahrens, 1996; Dillard & Vinnari, 2019; Gilbert & Rasche, 2007). The practice of responsiveness depends on ethical principles: it demands both the acknowledgment of others' claims and the willingness to let one's own story open so as to face

interruptions from unexpected and unfitting elements (Butler, 2005; Shearer, 2002; McPhail et al., 2016; Steyl, 2020). The promise introduces both unfinished business and openness to the world when calculative systems claim to be complete; transparency alone does not warrant faithfulness (Joannides, 2012; Kamuf, 2007; Roberts, 2009; 2012).

Promise creates an expectation of future trust, which leads to the internalisation of memory as its fundamental counterpart (Ricoeur, 2005). The fulfilment of promises depends on remembering them through the process of account-giving. The corporate subject uses the promissory word to evaluate its past actions and declare its future intentions through this ethical framework (Are we who we claimed to be?). The test of promissory constancy operates through accountability, which will work not as a retrospective tally but as warranting that corporate performance is oriented toward the Supreme Good (Arrington, 1999, 2007; Messner, 2009; Ricoeur, 2005; Roberts, 2009; Schweiker, 1993).

3.5.3. Memory, the Trace, and Institutional Permanence

Memory functions as a present-oriented capability, whilst the promise is future-oriented; the two are paired capabilities that sustain permanence-through-change, according to Ricoeur (2005), who describes identity as the combination of idem identity and ipse identity. He asserts that memory operates through traces that function as enigmatic signs of both the effects and indicators of causes absent in present time. They are fragile, as are always vulnerable to effacement, but open to interpretation. Transposed to organisational life, traces sediment as practices, routines, narratives and artefacts through which the original commitment of the corporate subject is continuously recalled and rendered visible (see Aroles et al., 2024; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1997; Ericson & Kjellander, 2018; Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Pentland & Feldman, 2005; Ricoeur, 1984, 2005). The natural process of forgetting defines memory not as automatic persistence of form but as a deliberate effort to remember in order to remain faithful to the promise given (Ricoeur, 2005). Through the process of organised exercise of recalling[53], corporations sustain their original promise by actively remembering and reaffirming their initial commitments (Schweiker, 1993; McKernan, 2012; Shearer, 2002).

Ricoeur (2005) explains that memory operates through two distinct processes: the passive emergence of mental images and the active work of remembering across time. The dual nature of memory regarding corporations manifests through accounting records and disclosures, working as traces that need interpretation to become morally understandable within organisational narratives (Boland, 1993;

[53] The idea is drawn on Ricoeur (2005), who speaks of the Aristotelian idea of *anamnesis*, which was translated into Latin by *reminiscentia*, i.e., what is left behind so as to enable and prop up recalling.

Boland & Schultze, 1996; Davison & Warren, 2009; Davison, 2011; Matringe & Power, 2024). Numbers require contextual placement and narrative explanation to transform into remembered information (Kamuf, 2007; Vollmer, 2007). Corporate entities need narrative identity to survive because their moral existence requires uniting scattered actions into a unified story that upholds their original commitments, i.e., reflects constancy of the word given (see Ricoeur, 1992; Schweiker, 1993). The replacement of narrative work with transparency ideology – where it is claimed the provision of full knowledge – leads to memory becoming increasingly dependent on calculative visibility. That explains why transparency creates more exposure but weakens recognition's significance (Helle & Roberts, 2024; Fortin et al., 2025; Roberts, 2009, 2018).

Recent work on dialogic and participatory accountability displays how recalling functions as a key element. Dillard and Vinnari (2019) establish that authentic accountability requires dialogical interactions between parties. They need to recall their mutual obligations and promises in each other's presence. Ahrens and Ferry (2022) show how public services maintain what can be understood as relational accountability, where collective memory of organizational goals and limitations through conversational methods ensue, instead of depending on compliance-based artifacts. Carlsson-Wall et al. (2025), by exploring how accounting reconstructs digital promises through iterative reporting, reveal that accounting practices function as ethical memory sites which transform past commitments into organizational credibility and direct future responsibility. In a similar spirit, Kraus et al. (2024) argue that accounting functions as a moral dialogue facilitator, enabling organizations to translate values and match past actions with future goals while creating ethical accountability through continuous narration of corporate commitment. The authors believe that new accountabilities require organizations to exercise moral agency through their ability to recall and reinterpret past actions under emergent normative expectations.

These research threads demonstrate a Ricoeurian perspective that states that memory functions as a practical tool for maintaining fidelity through narrative activities that preserve past events for future promise-keeping, i.e., for the sake of the wider or original promise itself that buttressed the foundation of the corporation. They also acknowledge both affective and embodied aspects which influence organisational memory processes. The process of recognition depends on both cognitive and moral-affective elements because accounts that do not resonate with a community's sense of justice[54] will not achieve recognition, even when their technical accuracy seems perfect (Brown et al., 2015; Li et al., 2022; McKernan & Kosmala, 2004). Boedker & Chua (2013) also show how emotional responses from

[54] The expression "sense of justice" follows directly the meaning Ricoeur (1992) gives to it in his book "Oneself as Another": it is justice set upon the good, represented as rectitude or righteousness, as opposed to its deontological or legal meaning, which composes the rule of justice. These interrelated terms were already presented more thoroughly in the first essay, owing to their relevance therein, and will not be the object of further description here.

accountability interactions within accounting practices determine which memories should stay and which can be discarded to reveal the selective ethical nature of institutional memory. All this research represents an expansion to Roberts's (1991) dual nature of accountability. It shows how memory functions as both inward and outward attestation resulting from exposure, which transforms individual identities through the gaze of the Other[55] (Butler, 2005; Shearer, 2002).

As traces can be effaced, memory needs institutions that maintain them – through recording, review and retelling processes that fight against intentional or strategic forgetting (Messner, 2009; Ricoeur, 2005). Yet, the same institutions which keep those records intact can become vulnerable to reputational calculations that lead to purposeful memory selection and recalling, concealing what is self-believed to be undesired traces (O'Dwyer, 2003; Roberts, 2018). The ethical importance of counter-accounts emerges here, as they reintroduce neglected traces whilst bringing back the Other to historical awareness (Agyemang, 2024; Dillard & Vinnari, 2019; Dinh & O'Leary, 2025Dinh & O'Leary, 2025). The fight for accountability pivots around memory: it determines which historical records will survive, which stories will dominate, eventually determining whether the corporation will continue to be recognised as faithful to its promise to contribute to the common good (see Matringe & Power, 2024; Sison & Fontrodona, 2012).

The current digital environment creates stronger effects on these processes. Data infrastructure systems promise to offer complete data retrieval for the sake of full knowledge, but they can also create memory loss through information overload and complex and opaque system structures (Argento et al., 2025). Blockchain technology and algorithmic systems maintain permanent records without the narrative contexts that render them ethically meaningful, making them seem like memory storage without actual remembrance (Fortin et al., 2025; Massaro et al., 2025). The tone of these works can be said to be Ricoeurian: in order for the original promise to be kept, memory must function as a process of interpretation which links past actions to future trustworthiness (Ricoeur, 2005; McKernan, 2012; Schweiker, 1993). Corporations that develop memory practices through human interpretation may sustain and reinforce their moral identity, but devices that handle memory functions as mere calculative practices may lead to permanent loss of subjectivity (in the sense of the moral uniqueness of subjects) out of meaninglessness, which threatens their existence (Schweiker, 1993).

The ethical ability to remember in order to uphold recognition represents the true essence of institutional permanence, according to Ricoeur (2005). The corporate subject maintains its identity

[55] The Other (capitalised "O") is used here to mark the ethical imprint of Shearer's interpretation of the work of Levinas, where the Other is the locus of the summon to responsibility launched upon the self – it translates a complete asymmetry between the self and the other qua Other, close to the sense of the *generalised other* referred to by Roberts (1991).

through the practice of tracing its history as a promise that enables ongoing accountability to those who bestow or deny recognition (Dillard & Vinnari, 2019; Kamuf, 2007; McKernan, 2012).

3.5.4. Accountability as the Actualisation of the Promise

In line with Ricoeur (2005), accountability represents the performative moment when promise and memory meet in attestation. Attestation functions as a performative act of an avowal (Austin, 1975) where subjects declare their ability to perform – by being able to say: "I can" (Ricoeur, 2005) – whilst creating a self-imposed obligation to responsibility. The corporate ability to perform actions through speech acts creates institutional accountability as a process of commitment and exposure (Pettit, 2007; see Austin, 1975). The process of giving an account requires both public memory of the initial promise and a new pledge to maintain faithfulness in the future. The act of giving an account surpasses mere reporting because it involves making a new promise while facing moral assessment (see Ricoeur, 2005; Schweiker, 1993; Shearer, 2002).

Seen this way, the many *guises* of accountability (financial, managerial, social, environmental, etc.) are modalities of a single ethical practice of keeping faith in the accountable subject (see Ahrens, 1996; Massaro et al., 2025; Sinclair, 1995). When these modalities are reduced to surveillance or procedural transparency, their promissory core is hollowed out (Roberts, 2009; Messner, 2009). Miller (1992, 2001) and Vollmer (2007) inadvertently show why: numbers govern by simplifying and decontextualising; they can produce visibility without recognition, in the sense Ricoeur (2005) sees it: a mutual process founded upon ethics. The corporate subject is then seen or even known, but not recognised in its uniqueness as a moral subject. Denying the difference between unique selves would "negate [the] other's uniqueness, the very thing that self needs in order to be self" (Macintosh et al., 2009, p. 754). The corporation, as a subject, thus is exposed without being understood as a meaningful moral agent, which is precisely the slippage that Ricoeur's (2005) ethics of attestation resists. In contrast, narrative accounts embed measures in stories that render actions intelligible in relation to a *telos*, thereby actualising the promise rather than merely displaying performance (Cooper & Puxty, 1994; Kamuf, 2007; Schweiker, 1993).

The dialogic approach supports the interpretation of this promise. Dillard and Vinnari (2019) frame accountability as an ongoing conversation with *accountees* capable of response, something similar to what Steccolini (2025) defends regarding *acountee*-ability. These dialogic structures enable the for-the-other principle which Shearer (2002) and Butler (2005) identify as fundamental to ethics. For Ahrens and Ferry (2022), the accounting function as a mediator between institutional logics matches relational

accountability approaches that view account-giving as a collaborative process to maintain public goods. The emergence of new accountabilities enables organizations to develop moral agency through their need to redefine their commitments when public expectations shift (Ahrens & Ferry, 2022; Roberts, 2009). The account serves as an actualisation of the promise through its present-tense execution of the word given (see Ricoeur, 2005).

Ricoeur (2005) explains that Aristotle's teleology provides the criteria to evaluate actualisation: through the assessment of activities with reference to their purpose, understood as leading to community flourishing (Aristotle, 1944). The Supreme Good remains the ultimate purpose, to which profit and efficiency serve merely as essential operational tools; but with neoliberal notions of efficiency (Shearer, 2002; Sen, 1987), the question remains whether the accounts corporations give can exhibit orientation to the Supreme Good (Allinson, 2004; Henning, 2011; Killian & O'Regan, 2020; Sen, 1987). The core evaluative aspect of accountability focuses on determining whether our actions promote the well-being of the community. A corporation can answer this question through narrative and dialogic accounts, basic for establishing its corporate subjectivity (see Agyemang, 2024; Dillard & Vinnari, 2019; Ferry et al., 2024).

But the capability of keeping one's word faces a constant threat from its negative side. The ability to make promises comes with the risk of non-compliance (as the power of breaking one's word), subjecting accountability to inevitable failure, incompletion and opacity (Butler, 2005; Messner, 2009; Ricoeur, 2005). McKernan (2012) therefore claims that accountability exists as a concept that combines aporia with testimony and gift-giving: it represents an offering that leaves the gap open between actions imputed and words given, which maintains accountability's ethical power through recognition of the Other's claim. The concept of *accounterability* by Kamuf (2007) describes this prima facie impossible situation because the need for explanations surpasses any possible complete response. The acknowledgment of this reality strengthens accountability since it prevents false claims of completion as well as the use of forced disclosure out of unethical transparency (Roberts, 2009; Joannides, 2012).

Modern technological promises need constant monitoring for proper oversight. Digital transformation, artificial intelligence, and blockchain promote the creation of new accountability systems at request. Yet, these digital promises may transfer ethical duties to automated systems, producing new opacities and asymmetries (Carlsson-Wall et al., 2025; Fortin et al., 2025; Argento et al., 2025). These architectures lack human interaction for attestation and dialogic response, thus enabling them to create the illusion of reliability but allowing for selective remembrance or control (Massaro et al., 2025). A Ricoeurian approach demands that accountability functions as a human practice, one depending on

promising sustained by remembering and avowing. The moral duty of keeping one's word remains essential for human beings because technology cannot substitute this responsibility; otherwise, the word given would lose its meaning, making recognition meaningless (see Ricoeur, 2005; Butler, 2005; Dillard & Vinnari, 2019).

Thus understood, accountability can be reified as the process by which the corporation, constantly seeking to renew its original promise of ultimately acting towards the Supreme Good, is recognised by what it accounts for in the shape of performative speech acts, acts of saying, wherein the act of account-giving is included (see Butler, 2005, 2010). In line with Ricoeur (2005), it represents a continuing performance of ipseity in which the promise is remade before those to whom it was given and memory is curated so that recognition, rightly, may continuously ensue (see Ahrens & Ferry, 2022; Pagan et al., 2023; Roberts, 2009).

3.5.5. Recognition, the Supreme Good, and the Continuation of Corporate Moral Agency

Recognition completes and renews the cycle that promise, memory and accountability sustain: it represents the whole purpose behind the entire operation. For Ricoeur (2005), recognition functions as a process that encompasses not merely cognitive identification but, and especially, ethical acknowledgment: the self is affirmed and recognised as one who can be counted on. The legitimacy of corporations depends on continuous acknowledgment from their community, which observes their actions and evaluates their self-reported explanations in the shape of accounts (Richardson, 1987; Schweiker, 1993). A subject without physical existence requires recognition to survive because society grants approval to entities that demonstrate their commitment, their promise, to serving the public good (French, 1979; Killian & O'Regan, 2020; Pettit, 2007; Sison & Fontrodona, 2012).

The shared life's flourishing represents the final meaning of that contribution, according to Aristotle's (1934) concept of Happiness. The goodness of corporate activities becomes recognisable to the extent their operations serve the shared purpose of the community (Henning, 2011; Sen, 1987). The CSR discussions about its different forms (Garriga & Melé, 2004) demonstrate that corporate legitimacy extends beyond following rules and maintaining images because it depends on the assessment of community about the corporate participation in the fostering of the Supreme Good (Crane et al., 2008; Garriga & Melé, 2004; Katona, 2024; Matten & Crane, 2005; Moon et al., 2005; Néron & Norman, 2008; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007; Scherer et al., 2013, 2016). Owing to its link to the original promise of acting good, whenever accountability degenerates into symbolic disclosure or reputational choreography, recognition's moral meaningfulness decays; whenever dialogic accountability renders faithful

responsiveness, recognition is strengthened (O'Dwyer, 2003; Roberts, 2018; Dillard & Vinnari, 2019; Ahrens & Ferry, 2022).

The current academic research shows that recognition exists across multiple locations whilst facing ongoing disputes. The creation of publics occurs through specific issues which accounts help develop (Li et al., 2022). The dominant audiences cannot control recognition (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021) when counter-publics and silenced stakeholders are able to activate corporate accounts through memory recall and promise-making (Agyemang, 2024; Dillard & Vinnari, 2019; Vinnari & Laine, 2017). The ethical assessment depends on how corporate ipseity maintains stability when faced with such claims: It must be capable of processing criticism whilst retrieving hidden information and delivering the renewal of the promise credibly (Ricoeur, 2005). Authors such as Hornsey et al. (2024) and Li et al. (2023) suggest that modern corporate responsibility depends on companies' ability to transform their exposure into learning experiences that build trust, instead of triggering defensive reactions.

The linguistic, juridical and political institutions behind recognition shape who counts and what is counted (see Ricoeur, 2005). That is why the process of dialogic and relational accountability must redesign functions as a moral requirement since they maintain the cycle of recognition open. That enables both corporations and their beneficiaries to give mutual recognition through dialectical action: the accountable corporation achieves a meaningful identity of an attested moral agent, and the beneficiaries act as *accountees* with a voice that matters (Agyemang, 2024; Dillard & Vinnari, 2019; Dinh & O'Leary, 2025; Ricoeur, 2005; Roberts, 2009; Schweiker, 1993; Shearer, 2002; Steccolini, 2025). The corporation exists through its original promise, continues through memory, it is recognised because it can morally account for itself (Schweiker, 1993). The Aristotelian Supreme Good defines the boundaries that determine how these practices should be measured, while Ricoeur's phenomenology of capable subjects reveals their human and institutional nature. When memory works for the sake of sustaining the promise, by keeping traces as past expectations recallable, when accounts renew the promise before beneficiaries, and when recognition is granted in view of the constant fulfilment of the promise to pursue the common good, corporate moral agency is not a metaphor but a lived reality. In that reality, the corporation justifies its ongoing existence as a performing subject capable of having actions imputed through its participation in the Happiness of the community (Aristotle, 1934; Bragues, 2006; Jeurissen, 2004; Price, 2007; Ricoeur, 2005; Schweiker, 1993; Sison & Fontrodona, 2012). Consequently, accountability works as the materialisation of the promise in action – it attests that the action was performed according to the greater promise of achieving the supreme good. Drawing on Ricoeur (2005), the promise is the only activity that does not exhaust itself when the activity ends, because its end is

always the future (to fulfil the original promise of pursuing the supreme good), contrary to other capabilities, which are actualized through action itself in the present, where it leaves behind its product, its effects, as a mark of its completion. These effects are associated to a future perspective – with the future being *present* in the present, like Ricoeur (1984, 2005) states. On the other hand, the promise *uses* the present in order to ensure that the future is conducive (and fitting) to the supreme good, i.e., happiness.

3.6. Conclusion

This essay explores the role of accountability in the recognition of the moral agency of corporations. It argues that accountability functions as the operational framework through which corporations assert and renew their moral existence. According to Ricoeur (2005), accountability functions as an ethical and temporal practice sustained upon the capability of remembering and, more importantly, on the capability to promise (rather than a procedural mechanism of control), whose role is to attest to the recognition of the corporation as a moral agent, one the community can count on. The process of accountability materialises the original promise (which presided over the corporations' foundation) through action, in order to attest that corporate activities align with the pursuit of the Supreme Good. The corporation becomes a recognisable moral entity through its account-giving process, enabling it to attest to its ability to act, speak and bear responsibility. The corporate original promise continues to exist through the practice of accountability.

But what is the relevance of the relationship between memory and promise regarding the recognition of the moral subjectivity of corporations? Whilst promise assumes a more relevant role regarding recognition, as it is an illocutionary act[56], the importance and meaningfulness of memory for organisations is not neglectable. Memory's significance lies mainly on its complementary role regarding the capability to promise, which breaks the antithetical relationship between memory and promise. They are complementary opposites. By bringing back into the present past expectations, memory here has its tone set upon the future, by constantly sustaining the continuous fulfilment of the promise to act towards the supreme good. That effect is achieved and renewed by every recall it prompts about the expectations that were built through time. Like memory in its fulness, it is also composed of traces that can be effaced when corporate attitude or culture changes, without the organisation ceasing to exist. Therefore, the permanence in time out of sameness is achieved. But it is those traces that allow for memory in

[56] As an illocutionary act, it forcefully achieves an effect upon the receiver of the statement, something the capability of memory alone does not possess, whose actualisation via the action of remembering corresponds to no utterance. Consequently, it does not go out of the private sphere of the self.

organisations to affect the fulfilment of the promise they must give for justifying their existence. As a result, organisational existence is dependent on the capability to promise, which in turn is part and parcel of the recognition of organisations' moral agency or subjectivity. The capability to promise, like other capabilities, is actualised through action and imputed to the organisation as a single agent that is recognised morally as praiseworthy or blameable according to the way it kept or deviated from its original promise to act towards the supreme good, i.e., happiness, in what way did it contributed to its achievement. Contrary to human agents, corporations are formed out of an original promise that presides over their foundation – they are socially approved and permitted to exist so long as they contribute to the pursuit of the perceived common good (see, e.g., van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021). Their existence depends on how that original promise is fulfilled. The link between its social purpose of contributing for the common good and their incorporation was clearer up until the nineteenth century, in that they had to necessarily give back to community (Allinson, 2004; Davoudi et al., 2018). And it is to this original promise that *expectation* refers back, since it allows for others to *count on* the conduct of the corporation as a *good* moral agent. The link between accountability and recognition will bear on this *counting on* inherent to promises.

There are three main insights that can be drawn from the theoretical framework established in this essay. First, accountability becomes constitutive of their moral agency. Corporate moral existence is enabled through constant renewal of the corporation's primordial promise – to contribute to the pursuit of what Aristotle defines as the Supreme Good – thus preserving its *ipseity* through time. Second, accountability's ethical power lies in the exposure the corporate subject must endure so as to become a moral subject. Exposure is related to the act of giving an account. The purpose is to open oneself to the Other, subjecting to vulnerability and judgment in order to achieve meaningfulness. Whilst this second point is not entirely original within the literature about accountability (see, e.g., Messner, 2009; Roberts, 2009), the novelty of introducing the concept of recognition into accountability clarifies the ethical import upon corporate actions by making them dependent on pursuing an ultimate end, that of the Supreme Good. In turn, the process of attestation, which is part and parcel of recognition, shows how actions are key to how corporations become recognised as moral agents. Setting the tone of the verb into the passive discloses the importance of the Other regarding the recognition of corporate subjectivity. Third, the entire cycle of recognition depends on how promise, memory and attestation work together to create the temporal structure that supports moral identity. Accountability becomes the locus where the fulfilment of the promise is evaluated; and together with it, the evaluation of corporate moral subjectivity ensues, so as to justify existence (Schweiker, 1993). A corporation risks losing its status as a meaningful moral entity

when it forgets its initial promise; but recognition enables corporate legitimacy to be attested when the original promise is remembered and renewed.

This essay's purpose was to add depth to existing critical views about accountability through its exploration of moral foundations. It integrates Ricoeur's hermeneutical approach to capable subjects with dialogic and relational accountability theories, in order to establish moral agency through attestation. As a consequence, corporate accountability is established as the actualisation of the corporate original promise, which directs moral agency toward Aristotelian Supreme Good achievement, instead of instrumental or calculative approaches. The integrated conceptual framework provides a moral foundation to analyse current accountability systems, ranging from digital transparency to algorithmic governance, which demonstrate that exposure without ethical attestation leads to moral voids.

This research faces restrictions because it operates at a conceptual level. It lacks the ability to assert its validity through empirical evidence. The analogical application of Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the self to corporate entities may raise ontological doubts about collective agency that need additional investigation. Moreover, its claims depend on an untested assumption that corporations can display moral responsiveness because it establishes a normative framework. Future research should investigate how businesses use narrative and dialogic reporting to express their original commitment to the Supreme Good, as well as determine if these methods foster recognition more effectively than calculative approaches. Comparative studies could explore how different institutional environments affect the recognition of corporate moral agency across various cultural settings and examine how digital systems affect accountability through time-based and ethical aspects. The moral structure of accountability would also benefit from additional development through applying this framework to Ricoeur's complete works on narrative identity and just institutions.

Accountability functions as a unifying force between promise, memory and recognition to create an active ethical practice for the recognition of corporate moral agency. Corporate accountability requires three essential elements: maintaining faithfulness to the original promise to perform well through constant remembering, and renew – through every act of disclosure – the promise to act towards the good life "with and for others in just institutions" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 172). Corporations need to accept accountability as ethical attestation to maintain their status as moral agents who can help advance the shared pursuit of the Supreme Good.

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4. RECOGNITION THROUGH DISPOSSESSION: REORIENTATING ACCOUNTABILITY TOWARDS SUBJECTIVITY

4.1. Introduction

Accounting is more than a system for counting and verifying information. The practice of accounting functions as a moral and linguistic system which enables subjects – whether individual or collective – to seek intelligibility in the eyes of others (Butler, 2005; Kamuf, 2007; Messner, 2009). The act of giving an account requires individuals to enter a linguistic setting, a scene of address, that imposes certain limitations on how they can account for themselves and thereby become recognised (Butler, 2005). The allure of calculative language, still in force throughout modern society (Fortin et al., 2025; Power, 2018) has made accounting one of the most visible ways people achieve recognition through the performativity inherent to the act of giving an account, itself a performative speech act (Arrington, 2007; Austin, 1975; Butler, 2010; Vosselman, 2022). However, the ethical aspects of presenting an account to others were traditionally undermined within calculative accounting practices (Kamuf, 2007; McKernan, 2012) and the digital transformation now in place affecting accounting as well may risk perpetuating such deficit not only regarding accounting, but also accountability (Argento et al., 2025). This essay represents an attempt to readdress accounting's ethical value through an analysis of its fundamental act of giving an account of oneself and the way belief supports recognition, despite unclear situations.

The argument builds on Judith Butler's "Giving an Account of Oneself" (2005) to show that subjectivity is mediated through language, which introduces opaciness to the account being given. The self emerges through language because it exists only within the boundaries of linguistic structures that condition what counts as meaningful speech. The subject needs to present an account to be recognised as a member of society, but such an account will always remain incomplete (Butler, 2005; Messner, 2009). The process of accountability requires an inevitable dispossession – an act of giving away *our* prima facie account into the interpretive power of others, who make it truly *ours*[57]. According to Butler (2005), the ethical aspect of accountability emerges through exposure because one must risk oneself before an Other, meaning that recognition is a process one cannot command.

The argument develops this understanding of Butler (2005) through its analogical application to corporations. Paul Ricoeur's concept of recognition (2005), together with Schweiker's (1993) work,

[57] Before giving away the account, *our* has a possessive sense, i.e., *absolutely mine*, whilst after *our* is attributive, i.e., it represents the subject out of an account no longer in his possession, but through which he is recognised (Butler, 2005).

provide some support to the arguments put forward in this essay regarding Butler's (2005) notion of recognition. According to Ricoeur's ethics of recognition (2005), people establish responsibility through their capacity to speak, to act, to narrate itself, and to be able to have actions imputed as being the author of *its* acts. Schweiker (1993) introduces the concept of doubleness into accountability, which portraits the self as existing both as a performing agent and as its own accountant; as a result, there is a split between actual actions and the ensuing account.

According to these frameworks, the process of giving an account functions as testimony instead of requiring proof. The process of testimony needs someone to listen because it relies on receiving belief from that person. According to Kamuf (2007), the process of accountability needs faith because people must believe that an imperfect account demonstrates genuine sincerity. To McKernan (2012), trust functions as the foundation which supports testimony, instead of verification. The essay establishes belief as an ethical response to opacity because human self-transparency remains impossible thus requiring trust in partial disclosures to establish truth. Belief creates a connection between what can be expressed and what remains unexpressed, and is revealed as essential for recognition to ensue.

The ethical and communicative nature of accountability becomes visible when we view it through this perspective (Hoskin, 1996; Loacker & Muhr, 2009; Messner, 2009; Roberts, 2009). The subject giving his account seeks to be understood rather than to prove anything to the listener, who needs to believe in order to find meaning in the incomplete information (Kamuf, 2007). The process of accountability functions as an ongoing dialogue between subjects who share their hidden aspects and listeners who must trust in order to recognise the truth. That is what reinvigorates ethics back into accountability, since belief enables an opening towards mutual care, i.e., towards the recognition of both the self and the other as counting (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013); otherwise, recognition would not ensue (see Ricoeur, 1992; 2005). The absence of a receptive space for listening makes accountability collapse, denying the possibility for recognition. The breakdown of communication reveals itself as the fundamental moral flaw that exists within accountability.

The research question for this essay is therefore: How does accounting, reified as an ethical practice sustained upon the act of giving an account of oneself, sustain the recognition of a corporate subject? In order to provide it with an answer, a case study of a Portuguese corporation, Águas de Portugal, is carried out, where an analogical application of the theoretical approach framed by Butler's (2005; 2013) ethics of dispossession is performed regarding a corporation. The purpose is to explore the way accounting sustains, and contributes to, the recognition of corporations as moral subjects. It is argued that accounting enables recognition out of a process sustained by belief and ensuing between

parties who accept incomplete information within normative linguistic boundaries framing communication. Recognition arises out of the act where an account is given, received, and believed despite its incompleteness.

The research adopts interpretive and hermeneutical approach (Gadamer, 1975; Scapens, 1990) that reflect its philosophical and epistemological assumptions. It analyses public communications from AdP between 2007 and 2013 in order to understand how the organisation handled accountability and sought recognition during times of financial and political turmoil. The research method combines Gadamerian hermeneutics with close reading (see Amernic & Craig, 2001, 2013, 2017; Merkl-Davies & Brennan, 2017) to explore corporate discourse as an organizational narrative space of communication. Texts are analysed drawing on Butler's (2005) ontology of the subject to analyse texts as active statements which establish subjectivity through recognition.

The essay shows how AdP shifted its communication style from confident declarations about economic strength to uncertain statements about its dependent position. The organization underwent dispossession through its language evolution from result-based sustainability claims to crisis-related ethical statements about its vulnerable state. The transformation shows how accountability functions as a performative mechanism which generates fresh ways for entities to receive acknowledgment. New realities are created through the accounts the organisation renders about itself, even if contrary to the accountable subject's purpose. The organisation faces continuous challenges to its narrative owing to external political and public stakeholders, who forcefully reinterpreted the account given and work upon the recognition of the accountable subject. The case study depicts both the potential and unstable nature of recognition as an ethical foundation.

The research presents a new perspective on accounting which establishes itself as an ethical practice for the sake of recognition through the vulnerable nature of human communication. The process of accounting requires individuals to risk being doubted by others. The process of exposure in accounting enables recognition to exist as a shared belief in understanding despite the presence of opacity. The core ethical value of accounting emerges from its ability to give and believe and provide accountability.

The essay is structured as follows: after the introduction, the second section illustrates the theoretical framework of Butler's (2005) philosophy regarding the relationship the recognition of subjects bears with the act of account-giving and the dispossession the subject endures when giving an account of himself. It is divided into four parts, concerning an analysis of Butler's (2005) scene of address concept, of the performative aspects of account-giving, of the testimonial nature of accountability in account-giving, and of the moral value of dispossession. The methodology is presented in the third section. The fourth

section, which contains the case study of Águas de Portugal, is structured into four parts: in the first, the company and its institutional context is described; in the second and third parts, the findings are presented (they correspond to two subsections, owing to a breaking point in corporate speech that occurred within the case study's timeframe); and in the fourth their discussion ensues. Finally, the fifth section presents the conclusion.

4.2. The need of dispossession for intelligible accountability and recognition of subjects

4.2.1. The scene of address and the linguistic dependency upon the other

In order to speak of the role dispossession plays regarding accountability and the recognition of who is held accountable, it is necessary first to speak of the *locus* where such process takes place: the scene of address. The idea of the scene of address is pivotal in Butler's (2005) work. For Butler, it becomes the place *par excellence* where the recognition of oneself is possible, owing to the fact that recognition arises out of the act of giving an account of oneself.

One of the main tenets of Butler's work is that a subject, in order to become one, needs a framework of language where it can expose itself through what it tells about itself. For Butler and Athanasiou (2013), subjects enter into a framework of language due to their need of, and for, responsiveness, owing to an initial interpellation to identify themselves, as if making themselves visible. By entering a framework of language, Butler (2005) states that the terms under which we account for ourselves are not ours from the very beginning, but are conveyed to us so that we are given voice within a community, providing us with a linguistic setting that enables us to tell something about ourselves in return. As Butler (1997, p. 24) states, "the speech act that brings the subject into linguistic existence precedes the subject in question".

Speech acts, as *telling*, imply both the presence of the other and the sense of reporting something that is intended to be meaningful. Hence, a speech act is not a mere act of *talking*, i.e., an expression resulting from haphazardly communicating something (Boland & Schultze, 1996). The other is posited from the moment the subject starts to account for itself, since speech needs a point of reception so as to achieve meaningfulness. However, the other does not need to be concrete; rather, the other represents a space for the subject's account to find a place for its subjectivity within language. As Buttler explains:

> If I am trying to give an account of myself, it is always *to* someone, to one whom I presume to receive my words in some way, although I do not and cannot know always in what way. In fact, the one who is positioned as the receiver may not be receiving at all, (...) doing

> nothing more for me than establishing a certain site, a position, a structural place where the relation to a possible reception is articulated (2005, p. 67, emphasis in the original).

In other words, by attempting to reach out for the other, the subject, as a self, enters into a scene of address where the framework of language precedes both the self and the account the self is capable of rendering about itself. Butler (2005) provides two main reasons for why the structure of the scene of address of the self to the other must always be prior to the existence of the self. First, the account that the self gives of itself is always given to another, who is there before the self, both spatially and temporally. Second, the terms that the self uses to give an account of itself – and consequently provide intelligibility to itself – are social through and through, established within social norms that give shape to the linguistic leeway set by the scene of address, and must necessarily serve as the structural background for the account given. The other, by preceding self, provides an opening of the space where the self becomes a subject of these norms that structure its *tellability*, and consequently make the appearance of the self always belated regarding the norms backgrounding the scene of address. Yet, it does not mean that the self becomes a mere product of the power of norms acting upon itself. On the contrary, Butler (2005) affirms that such subjection to norms enables the reflexivity that the self must perform *upon* and *for* itself[58] so as to be able to give an account about itself. Butler specifically portraits the other as the place of relay between the self and norms that shape the capability of oneself to reflect upon itself and thereby render something of itself visible to the other, in the shape of an account. For Butler, the other, with its injunction,

> sets the stage for the subject's self-crafting, which always takes place in relation to an imposed set of norms. The norm does not produce the subject as its necessary effect, nor is the subject fully free to disregard the norm that inaugurates its reflexivity. (2005, p. 19)

It is precisely because the self gives an account of itself that the self becomes part of the norm-oriented language that structures the scene of address; yet, it simultaneously starts acting within language (Butler, 1997; Greenwood & Van Buren, 2017), producing effects within it, albeit always aiming for a successful encounter with the other. We require language in order to be, and "if we are formed in language, then that formative power precedes and conditions *any decision we might make about it*" (Butler, 1997, p. 2, emphasis added).

[58] *For itself* suggests *for its own sake*, whilst *(up)on* draws on what is within its power, its capability, to enable performativity to ensue. The reference to *capabilities* echoes the phenomenology of the capable human being presented by Ricoeur (2005), where the self is capable of recognising itself due to its capabilities for speaking, acting, narrating itself, and having actions imputed to itself. These capabilities are necessary for the act of account-giving by the self to be rendered as an act for the sake of recognition (see Ricoeur, 2005), particularly regarding corporations, as stated below.

The encounter with the other takes place within the linguistic scene of address (one laid out before the self and therefore not of its making), but such an encounter is only possible due to the address of the other, who precedes the self. This precedence creates a prima facie dependency of the self upon the other for reasons of self-constitution: namely, to achieve meaningfulness as a subject that is facing the other, i.e., as a subject whose existence as such is recognised within the scene of address. Yet, subjectivity is not immediate because the answer the self gives back must be understandable, that is, must make sense to the other, who will receive that answer in light of the leeway provided by the social norms that preside over such giving. If failing to find a space for its account within the scene of address, the subject risks its own subjectivity by failing to reach out for the other. In other words, it risks unrecognizability (Butler, 2005). Butler (1997) refers to such an attempt of sense-making as the capability of linguistic survival, essential for selfhood to emerge as meaningful. However, language does not act upon the self so as to *a priori* determine how subjectivity is going to be, as stated above. From the moment language acts upon us, we start acting within language as well (Butler, 1997; Greenwood & Van Buren, 2017). The scene of address enables the self with the capability to account for itself so as to be recognised as a meaningfully existing subject, something possible within the limits set by the scene of address. Simultaneously, such capability is expressive of the linguistic agency self possesses. Self's linguistic agency is twofold: first, the account self gives of itself arises out of a reflexion carried out by the self and fashioned through recourse to a language the self did not possess before entering the scene of address, thanks to the presence of the other therein (Butler, 2005). It is an act of self-crafting, but one mediated by language and the presence of the other. Second, and because it is given away to the other for the sake of the meaningful recognition of the self (Butler, 2005), the account the self gives of itself transforms the scene of address because of the visibility it provides to the self (Munro, 1993; Arrington, 2007), a *visible* presence self did not possess before successfully giving away its account. Therefore, our linguistic agency starts from the moment our putative isolated sovereignty over ourselves ends (Butler, 2005). Ultimately, language becomes "a name for our doing" (Butler, 1997, p. 8), not because we, as selves, seemingly enter into its possession, but due to its constant use by ourselves. And we are used by language to the same degree we use it (Butler, 1997; 2005). Such use of language precludes forms of self-mastery not only by preceding self and forcing it into the scene of address, but also by installing within the scene of address the other as the gateway to the significance of the self as a subject that counts[59] (Butler &

[59] *To count* possesses here a double meaning: in the sense of self having the capability to account for itself, and (as a consequence) of holding value in itself through recognition of its meaningful existence.

Athanasiou, 2013). In short, we can only perform our utterance, and consequently have linguistic agency, when reifying language as inherently relational (Butler, 1997; 2005).

4.2.2. Performative acts, illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect

In the previous section, the scene of address was described as a *locus* where the other acts as a relay point for the self to be able to give an account of itself. For Butler (2005), and owing to the direct object of this act of giving, the account, as well as to the structure of the scene of address, the agency of the subject is essentially linguistic. Additionally, the injunction the other addresses to the self so as to present[60] itself subjects the latter to the leeway of sense and reference (see Austin, 1975), i.e., of meaningfulness framed by the norms that structure self's capability to *express* itself through the account it gives (Butler, 2005). Recognition of the subjectivity of the self as a subject within community will arise thereby, turning performativity into a constitutive act of selfhood out of the linguistic stance of the scene of address – constitution depends on discourses whose intelligibility is sustained upon norms (Butler, 2005; see also McKinlay, 2010; Vosselman, 2022).

Yet, for Butler (2005, 2010), whilst recognition is the primordial aim behind the act of giving an account, the emphasis should fall less on the subject, whose recognition will arise out of the account given, but on the act of giving an account *per se*, as an act of speech, i.e., an action, allowing recognition to ensue. The performative power of the process of recognition lies not in the subject, but in the act itself, since it is action, or acting, that will exert effects upon the other, and consequently upon the scene of address. According to Schweiker, "[w]e do not assume anything about the being of the actor prior to giving an account" (1993, p. 246).

Butler's (2010) reaction to the overemphasis, within performativity, given to the role of the subject that speaks when giving an account arises out of a criticism to the *sovereignty* Austin (1975) apparently gives to the utterer. The emphasis should be given to the act of giving an account *per se* since it *does* something to the subject itself: it makes him recognisable. As *doing*, it is a performative act (Austin, 1975). Following Austin (1975) and Butler (2010), the account as performative consists of an utterance given in a convention-established scene of address. *Convention* here refers to the linguistic setting shaping meaningfulness, as the scene of address is linguistically built. Drawing on Austin's (1975) example of promises, a promise is understood as a promise, a commitment to another, because it is conventionally reified as so within language. For Austin (1975), it would "a self-stultifying procedure" to commit to the

[60] *Present* as *presentation*, i.e., *present oneself*, and as *be there/present*, *with presence*.

promise and refuse simultaneously such commitment – it "is parallel to "it is and it is not"" (1975, p. 51, emphasis in the original). However, what Austin (1975) mentions as particular circumstances of the scene of address also impinge upon the utterance, since words alone bear neither sense nor reference. For Austin, "the occasion of an utterance matters seriously, and that the words used are to some extent to be "explained" by the "context" in which they are designed to be or have actually been spoken in the linguistic interchange" (1975, p. 100, emphasis in the original).

Performativity within language, however, is somewhat more complex than defining performative acts as acts of doing. As Austin's (1975) speech-act theory shows, there are several ways of *doing* behind speech acts, related to how they act upon the utterer and the listener, what effects it performs upon the scene of address. Austin (1975) furthers the distinction within speech acts by classifying them as locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. The simple act *of* saying something is tantamount to a locutionary act, which does not *per se* possesses any kind of performative force within the locution itself. The other two types of acts, illocutionary and perlocutionary, are the ones that are directly linked to the linguistic operations sustaining the scene of address, and consequently bear a direct effect upon the act of giving an account and its related performativity (see Butler, 2010). Drawing on Austin (1975), illocutionary acts have been described as speech acts whose performative force lies in the fact that their force is drawn out of (linguistic) conventions: their meaning and force are conventionally built, which means that *in* saying something, we *do* something[61] (Austin, 1975). The illocutionary force achieves an effect simply by being uttered, an effect that audiences uptake owing to the linguistic convention behind the illocution, from where it draws its force. In contrast, perlocutionary acts lack the conventional force behind illocutionary ones, which means that they merely produce effects *by* being uttered – *by* saying something, we *do* something, we bring about something (Austin, 1975). Regarding audiences, they do not possess the "security of uptake" inherent to illocutionary acts (Austin, 1975, p. 116). In other words, illocutionary acts include a particular kind of consequential effects defined by linguistic convention, whereas perlocutionary acts depend on the existence of certain conditions for them to achieve their objective (Austin, 1975; Butler, 2010). As examples of a perlocutionary act, Austin (1975) refers to acts of convincing or persuasion, whose effect is achieved *by* what is said, *by* saying something. For Austin, illocutionary acts "are bound up with effects; and these are all distinct from the producing of effects which is characteristic of the perlocutionary act" (1975, p. 118).

[61] Regarding the usage of Austin's (1975) concepts of illocutionary and perlocutionary acts within accounting and accountability literature, see, e.g., Locke et al. (2018), Vosselman (2022) or Yu and Huber (2023).

(Il)locutionary and perlocutionary acts, being performative – even if in distinct ways – need the relational character proper to linguistic agency, expressed behind utterances or other actions that acquire meaningfulness out of expressive communication within the scene of address. Even if communication can also be performed through non-verbal means, the scene of address will not stop being inherently linguistic, as language is what structures dialectical meaningfulness (Austin, 1975). But owing to the lack of conventional force, perlocutionary acts represent an attempt to achieve something, and are thereby exposed to failure[62] (Butler, 2010).

Regarding the act of giving an account, it lacks the conventional force of illocutionary acts – like promises – since its purpose is to enable the meaningful recognition of the subject giving the account. And that is achieved *by* what is given as an artifact of language (see Butler, 2005). Therefore, giving an account of oneself is a perlocutionary act, as it represents an attempt to achieve the recognition of the subject rendering the account. The risk of failure looms in the shape of a lack of recognition by the other who receives the account. However, Butler (2010) sees in that risk of failure the condition for performativity itself, since failure opens performativity to iteration. For Butler, "performativity never fully achieves its effect, and so in this sense 'fails' all the time; its failure is what necessitates its *re*iterative temporality, and we cannot think iterability without failure" (2010, p. 153). She gives the example of recessions as emphasising the role of failure within performativity's iterative nature.

With recognition dependent on the act of giving an account of oneself, and also linked to the ongoing fulfilment of the original promise the corporation enacted at its foundation – to act so as to contribute to the pursuit of the Supreme Good[63] – that promise is itself an illocutionary act, subject to convention so as to be fulfilled. Regarding corporations and their lack of physical substance, that promise, owing to the commitment it embodies, opens member within community to the corporation (because it is capable of acting therein). But the act of giving an account, as a perlocutionary one, possesses as an objective the achievement of certain effects on the audience (even if undesired) in order to be successful (Austin, 1975; see also Brennan et al., 2013; Craig & Amernic, 2008; Li et al., 2022; van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021), to wit, the recognition of the corporation's moral agency. The relationship the perlocutionary act of giving an account shares with the illocutionary act of the original promise that presides the foundation of corporations lies in the fact that the act of giving an account is the perlocutionary object of accountability, as it represents the attestation that the original promise of the

[62] That does not imply that illocutionary acts cannot also be subject to conditions of failure. But their failure is related to breaches of linguistic conventions (which may also refer to the conventional authority of the speaker, achieved within the sense and reference provided by language), like when a promise is broken or war is declared by a deposed sovereign (Austin, 1975; Butler, 2010).

[63] The relationship between the original promise and recognition was the subject of the second essay.

corporate subject is ongoing (see Joannides, 2012; Ricoeur, 2005). But the perlocutionary force of the act of giving an account is also related to how faithfully does the account *accounts* for the corporate subject's actions (Nelson, 1993; Schweiker, 1993). It is due to the account given that actions can be seen as imputable to the corporation, and consequently turning it into a moral subject/agent. Only by reifying the account as a perlocutionary act can the account be complete, as it needs others so as to achieve meaningfulness within the scene of address. The scene of address reflects the conventions, linguistic and/or non-verbal, that frame what *ethos* is constitutive of the audience's capabilities to receive the account (Butler, 2005; Ricoeur, 2005).

Reifying the account as a perlocutionary act allows the act of giving an account to be both a performative and a political act, as it seeks to exert an effect upon those to whom it is addressed so as to achieve a result, but one dependent on circumstances that are not upon the subject to control (Butler, 2010); his utterance is not illocutionary, since convention does not make an account a sovereign utterance, where force is *immediately*[64] turned into (performative) power (see Austin, 1975). The account is opened to the amalgam of forces that work around recognition. What follows is an impossibility of ascribing the authorship of the effects of the account to a single author only: authorship emerges out of the dispossession accounts must endure so as to enable meaningfulness to the subjectivity of the accountable subject, i.e., the one giving an account about itself (Butler, 2005). In other words, the subject receives meaningful recognition as a subject, meaningful within the scene of address.

4.2.3. Accountability as testimony for the sake of the recognition of (intelligible) subjectivity

Whilst repeatedly portrayed as an elusive concept (Sinclair, 1995; Massaro et al., 2025), accountability's basics are still associated in extant literature to what Roberts and Scapens (1985, p. 347) define as "the giving and demanding of reasons for conduct" (see, e.g., Ferry et al., 2025; Millar et al., 2024). When viewed through Joannides' framing of accountability into "four interrelated questions (*who*, *to whom, for what* and *by which means*)" (2012, p. 245), Roberts and Scapens' (1985) notion of accountability given above stresses particularly the question *for what*. The focus on reasons behind our conduct implies that to be accountable is tantamount to subjecting justifications for our actions towards the appraisal of others (McKernan & McPhail, 2012). But to be accountable frequently means becoming responsible by reason of the consequences that ultimately derive from subjecting our conduct to the judgment of others, particularly regarding negative consequences attributed to a failure to provide

[64] Contrary to illocutionary acts, perlocutionary acts are always mediate(d) (Austin, 1975).

satisfactory justifications (Hoskin, 1996; Lerner & Tetlock, 1999; Pagan et al., 2023). Accountability and responsibility are frequently overlapped in literature due to the fact that accountability is considered to be meaningless if there are no meaningful consequences attached (Dillard & Vinnari, 2019). Nevertheless, the two concepts are not identical (Kamuf, 2007; Lindkvist & Llewellyn, 2003), and the way accountability is reified can ultimately work against responsibility itself (McKernan, 2012). There is a hiatus in time between the emergence of accountability and the ascription of responsibility to someone that prevents the two from being identical, according to Schweiker, since "[w]e do not assume anything about the being of the actor prior to giving an account in order to ascribe responsibility" (1993, p. 246). Additionally, the subjectivity that arises out of the act of giving an account is necessarily incomplete, owing to the narrative nature of the account given (Bruner, 1991; Cooper & Puxty, 1994; Czarniawska, 2004), as discussed below. Yet, such claims do not intend to break the interdependence between accountability and responsibility.

The emphasis on a perspective that confounds accountability with responsibility – due to the preponderance of moralisation and surveillance of subjects – turns opaque a more primordial aspect of accountability, that of the emergence of subjectivity through the process of recognition subjects must endure out of the accounts they give of themselves so as to achieve an intelligible selfhood (see Shearer, 2002). Butler (2005), following Arendt[65], mentions that action, speech and recognition are closely related because the primordial human act must answer the question "who are you?", a question that does not carry with it a moral tone, of "who did this to whom?", but that is simply posed for reasons tied to the recognition of who is there before the other. Such perspective displaces accountability from a more moral stance, away (although never entirely) from an overlap with responsibility, to a place closer to reasons merely set upon granting a meaningful existence to the subject through its recognition within community as intelligible (see Munro, 1996).

Shifting the focus towards a perspective of accountability that has as its *raison d'être* the existence of the subject through "membership in a linguistic and moral community" (Schweiker, 1993, p. 244) reifies the act of giving an account as an act performed essentially for the sake of making possible the recognition of the subject as meaningfully existent within the linguistic community of others. For Butler (2005), focusing upon recognition transforms the act of giving an account into an act where the intention is not the extraction of responsibility for the imposition of consequences upon the accountable subject. The purpose of accounting for oneself is not a judicial one, but one related to the willingness and ability of the self to become recognisable as a meaningful subject within the scene of address. The role of desire

[65] Arendt, H. (2018). *The human condition*: Second edition (Enlarged). University of Chicago Press.

(or willingness) and ability as constitutive of accountability is linked to the idea of membership (Munro, 1996; Munro & Hatherly, 1993; Shearer, 2002; Stewart et al., 2023), and recognition of a subject as meaningful through the account it gives of itself within the scene of address provides the gateway to confirm such membership via the confirmation of its selfhood (Cooper & Johnston, 2012). A fundamental act buttressing accountability, giving an account can be seen as "providing reasons for *character* and conduct, ones held to be *understandable* to others and *thereby rendering a life intelligible and meaningful*" (Schweiker, 1993, p. 234, emphasis added).

Owing to the fact that people understand each other in a narrative form (Bruner, 1991; Czarniawska, 2004) and due to the linguistic nature of the scene of address (Butler, 2005), accountability set upon the provision of *understandable* reasons cannot aspire to the provision of objective and verifiable evidence about the subject (Kamuf, 2007; McKernan, 2012; McKernan & McPhail, 2012). With the act of giving an account a performative one, it cannot be subject to tests of accuracy or verifiability, since performative utterances cannot be evaluated as true or false (thereby unable to be *objectively* verified) (Austin, 1975). The other, with its call towards the self to account for itself, confers the possibility of recognition to the self because self's desire for recognition creates the conditions for the self to be able to read itself, to interpret itself according to a structure of language it did not have before (Butler, 2005). It inaugurates self's reflexivity and enables knowledge about the self to flow outside of itself. According to Schweiker (1993), the reflexivity experienced by the self originates a doubleness between itself as agent and itself as accountant, where the two are not self-identical. That is to say, when being called to account for itself, i.e., when being held accountable for its actions, the self endures a temporal split in its own capability of agency: self as agent *per se*, where the tone is set upon past actions, already performed, and self as accountant, who brings such past into present by giving an account of those same acts that were performed in the past. Schweiker (1993) asserts that the doubleness that the self endures prevents the other from getting into direct contact with the self as agent, who in itself has got no linguistic agency, and cannot therefore enter into the scene of address. As a result, when the other addresses the self, it is directing that query to the self as accountant. Accordingly, and for Schweiker (1993), the recognition deriving from such an encounter, whilst dependent upon what becomes visible as acts attributed to the self, depends on what is given in the shape of an account to the other, and becomes that for what the self can be held to account, i.e., become accountable. In turn, what will become knowable (i.e., *know-able*, able to be known) about the self consists in those acts the self recognises as meaningfully pertaining to itself – which are rendered in the account given – and in what the other, by receiving the account, considers to be acts attributed to the self, and therefore part of what is recognisable regarding the self

(see Ricoeur, 2005). Only if considered meaningful can such acts be recognised as such and allow the recognition of the self as an intelligible existence in community.

Understandable reasons thus depend on their plausibility, since they are dependent on the possibilities that are open by the scene of address to the willing self to make itself recognisable via the account it gives of itself. When emphasising accountability's narrative side, Kamuf (2007) and McKernan (2012) show that an account is essentially a testimony delivered by the accountable subject regarding what it believes to be truthful, trustworthy, i.e., verisimilar, even if regarding what it accounts about itself. Due to the doubleness that the accountable subject endures when giving an account of itself, the subject as accountant bears witness to the subject as agent in a way that the latter is to be faithfully accounted for by the former to the other calling the subject into account (Schweiker, 1993). In turn, fidelity is dependent on the possibilities provided (and restrictions imposed) by the structure of language (and the norms behind it) framing the scene of address. Accountability in this way can be described as "the possibility of [willingly and faithfully] accounting for something through narrative" (Kamuf, 2007, p. 251). When focusing on the act of giving an account of oneself, the *something* becomes the subject itself, responding to the other's call into account so as to make itself visible, i.e., recognisable: "Here I am. This is me" (Butler, 2005; McKernan, 2012; Roberts, 2012). The account the subject gives of itself is a testimony of the subject's intelligible existence, owing to the linguistic nature of the scene of address, and also to the narrative character of the subject's account (Boland, 1993; Bruner, 1991; Czarniawska, 2004; Cooper & Puxty, 1994; Kamuf, 2007). Additionally, the account becomes the means enabling the meaningful recognition of the accountable subject by the other (McKernan, 2012).

The testimonial nature of accountability also bears on the nature of knowledge itself (Joannides, 2012; Messner, 2009; Moerman et al., 2023; Rana et al., 2022; Roberts, 2009). For Butler (2005), what knowledge the other is capable of obtaining from the self by recognising self as existing intelligibly is always partial, due to the very structure of language and the power of the norms behind it, constraining self's interpretation about its acts. Nevertheless, it reinforces the desire driving the self for recognition, since it keeps the scene of address open for the constant recognition of the self before the question posed by the other[66]. As Butler claims

[66] It must be highlighted that the other does not ask *directly* to the self "who are you"; that question arises out of the nature of the other, as a relay point between the self and the norms/conventions framing the scene of address. As already stated, the other may not even be receiving my address at all, at least initially, so as to the account start to be given (Butler, 2005).

> [I]f there is, in the question, a desire for recognition, this desire will be under an obligation to keep itself alive as desire and not to resolve itself. "Oh, now I know who you are": at this moment, I cease to address you, or to be addressed by you (2005, p. 43).

Because desire is related to recognition, its erasure denies self from being within the scene of address. Consequently, the act of fully knowing the self becomes an impossible one (Butler, 2005; Cooper & Johnston, 2012; Helle & Roberts, 2024; Roberts, 2009, 2012, 2018), with knowledge being always dynamic (Hines, 1988; Hopwood, 2007), but always partial (Morgan, 1988; Roberts, 2009, 2018). Desire, whilst enabling reflexivity and rendering the subject with self-crafting powers, nevertheless places the subject in a state of dependency upon the other. However, as stated in the previous section, the other can work not just as an individual, but as the relay point to a frame of moral reference which both enables and limits the meaningfulness of subjectivity. The other then acts as an Other (see Shearer, 2002), the *generalised other*, as mentioned by Roberts (1991). The setting where the subject performs an act of self-constitution is unchosen, yet flexible enough for allowing the subject with the possibility of choice. Subjectivity arises as an act of self-creation against a delimitative set of moral norms embodying what is held as *truthful* or *right*, denying "a radical creation of the self *ex nihilo*" (Butler, 2005, p. 17). Paradoxically, the constraining background framed by norms creates the necessary openness for the subject to craft itself through an inventiveness that arises out of self's reflective capability. Yet, such inventiveness is always at the expense of the other and the power that norms exert upon self through their reflection by the other towards self. According to Butler and Athanasiou, recognition is

> a process which is predicated upon (albeit never entirely constrained and totalized by) the operation of particular norms: norms that determine whether and how I can recognize the other or whether and how I can be recognized by the other, but, most significantly, norms that produce an "I" and an "other" in a relation of reflective and projective co-constitution (2013, p. 64, emphasis in original).

The address of the other towards self gives shape to the site where norms exert their power upon the constitution of the subject, denying whatever possibility there could ever be for sole self-formation. Because they ground the structure of language where the account to the other is given, norms are in essence a discursive power. Their action is materialised in the conditions and possibilities for tellability, i.e., for linguistic agency. As Butler explains

> No one survives without being addressed; no one survives to tell his or her story without first being inaugurated into language by being called upon, (...) brought into the discursive world of the story. Only later can one then find one's way in language, only after it has been imposed, only after it has produced a web of relations (2005, p. 63).

For the self to make itself visible, i.e., recognisable, it must expose itself using a structure of language that will forcefully leave something unsaid. Self's exposure results from its linguistic agency, which means that visibility, and thereby recognition, emerges from language (Munro, 1993; Roberts, 2009). But the partiality of what is left unsaid is also a result of that same linguistic agency, because the account that is given represents an exercise of selection ruling out some possibilities whilst potentiating others (Bruner, 1991; Boland, 1993; Messner, 2009). The selection is never in the hands of the self as its sovereign author, tough, but governed by norms of intelligibility (Butler, 1997). Yet, it does turn self's linguistic agency into a performative agency due to the choice self carries out about what is (not) allowed to be told about itself. What becomes recognisable in the scene of address as a meaningful subject – consequently transforming the scene of address – is a result of that previous choice carried out by self for the sake of its recognition as an intelligible subject (see Bruner, 1991; Butler, 2005).

In line with Kamuf's (2007) argument, and owing to the leeway provided by norms structuring the linguistic scene of address, considering accountability as dependent on testimony subjects the knowledge emerging out of the self's linguistic agency to belief, a belief that frames the possibilities of the self to account for itself within the scene of address. The desire of self for intelligible recognition and the need to faithfully account for itself are dependent on what the self, having acquired a structure of language, believes to be meaningful regarding itself (Butler, 2005). The self becomes accountable for what it chooses to account for itself to the other – out of belief – because the recognition of the self as an intelligible subject can occur only if filling the open space within the scene of address that was created by the injunction of the other; it is the place where the possibility for self's recognition as an intelligible subject within a linguistic community of others can take place (see Butler, 2005; Steyl, 2020).

The exercise of selection carried out in the account reveals the self as opaque, as something must necessarily be left unsaid, or is not possible to be expressed in language (Butler, 2005; Messner, 2009). The self remains opaque to itself because any attempt to describe itself fully will always fail, owing to the linguistic nature of the scene of address (Butler, 2005; Roberts, 2009). The ethical condition of belief enables communication to continue because it acknowledges the ontological boundary of self-knowledge which opacity represents. The listener's belief in the speaker's sincerity provides the foundation for the reliability of the account, because it is accepted as a testimony, where belief represents the

acknowledgement of the speaker's opacity, instead of trying to eliminate it (Kamuf, 2007; McKernan, 2012). Belief functions as an ethical addition to the act of giving an account of oneself because it enables recognition when complete understanding becomes unavoidably unattainable. The accountable relationship exists because both parties share their vulnerability through their mutual belief in accepting incomplete statements as verisimilar (Bruner, 1991; Butler, 2005).

4.2.4. Recognition, dispossession and accountability

Because the exposure and opacity self is led into when entering the scene of address reflects the performative power of the norms over the subject, norms keep subjectivity's meaningfulness open to their work by making visibility dependent upon language, regardless of the linguistic agency of the self. Therefore, the self is always in a precarious position regarding norms (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013) and, as a consequence, norms interrupt self's account by denying the self to remain inside itself so as to become recognisable. Accordingly, the possibility of selfhood that arises out of the account self gives of itself becomes subject to a perspective that is never that of the first-person (Butler, 2005).

Interrupting the self's account, Butler (2005) claims, is not only possible, but also necessary for allowing the self, as a subject, into the scene of address. Interruption of the account takes place from the moment the subject gives it away, exposing the account to the force of normative discourse. Such an act of giving is tantamount to an act where the subject is dispossessed, by the conditions of its emergence, of the account that is attributed to the subject the moment the account is given. In other words, dispossession works as a vital condition for the enactment of subjectivity through recognition. It is a process where the subject is denied sovereign self-crafting by giving the account away to the other, subjecting the subject and its account to the ruling of normative discourse (Butler, 2005). The presence of the other is a cause for dispossession because it produces a responsive subject (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013), whose response will govern its recognition. The subject is dispossessed of its sole perspective due to the operation of norms "that condition what will and will not be a *recognisable account*, exemplified in the fact that I [the subject] am used by the norm precisely to the degree that I use it" (Butler, 2005, p. 36, emphasis added). But even if norms govern recognisability, their flexibility and temporality ensure that "recognition is not an ontological category; it rather works to produce frames of ontology" (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013, p. 87). Otherwise, norms would eventually fail to exert their power over subjects. Dispossessing the subject of its accounts turns the act of giving an account into an act where recognition is always partial, but always possible thanks to the openness into which dispossession leads the subject (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013). Such openness leads to self-crafting of oneself through reflexivity, a self-

poietic act that becomes possible only because the address of the other grants self with a structure of telling, as shown above. In exchange, that structure dispossesses the self of full authorship over itself.

> [S]elf-poietics (...) is a possibility whereby the self is dispossessed of its sovereign position through opening a relation to alterity. If we make, unmake, and remake ourselves, such makings only occur with and through others. Our self-poietics take place within a horizon of regulatory ideals that determine who can and cannot be an intelligible self. (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013, pp. 68 – 69)

The responsiveness whereto the subject is led turns dispossession into a performative act where the subject is constituted amid the responsibility for the other such responsiveness calls forth. Through dispossession, the subject holds a moral responsibility to account for itself before the other because the account, linguistic in its essence, reflects the power of norms. According to Butler (2005), responsibility here is not in the sense of becoming subject to the consequences deriving from the goodness or badness of the actions attributed to the subject. It is a primary responsibility – prior to any other responsibility – of the subject making itself recognisable by faithfully accounting for itself, owing to the doubleness the subject endures when giving an account of itself (Schweiker, 1993), as stated earlier. Drawing on Ricoeur (2005), it corresponds to imputability, as the purpose is to impute to the subject what enables its recognition as such. The subject is called to bear witness to itself within the scene of address, where its capability for accounting for itself is affected by language. The account is given to the other as a testimony, i.e., as something out of belief (Kamuf, 2007), reflective of a previous choice performed by the self about what it believes it can tell about itself that is capable of being recognised by the other as intelligible, i.e., verisimilar (Bruner, 1991). Inspired by Schweiker's (1993) interpretation, it is at this point only that a primary sense of responsibility can be likened to accountability, as the discharge of the fiduciary responsibility of the subject to faithfully account for itself so as to allow its recognisability within the scene of address.

The exposure of the self, which takes the shape of its account, enables norms with a place to effectively exert their power by making the self visible. The subject becomes meaningfully visible within a community of which he is now a member (Munro, 1996) by forfeiting his sovereign self-crafting powers (Butler, 2010). Visibility acquires a linguistic tone in the shape of the subject's account (Munro, 1993), which is to say that by dispossessing subjects of their account a link between normative discourse and linguistic action is created (Ahrens, 1996). Consequently, dispossession possesses the ambivalent effect

of being essential for norms to impinge upon the subject and for the subject to craft itself before the other by keeping sovereign authorship at bay (Butler, 2005).

If dispossession is inherent to the act of giving an account of oneself where the subject's acts and conduct are disclosed, then being held accountable for those same acts and conduct makes dispossession an essential part of accountability, since it enables the subject, either individual or organisational, with causal agency (Butler, 2005). Such causal agency, which derives from the linguistic agency mentioned before, reinforces the link between accountability for the sake of achieving an intelligible recognition of oneself in community and the necessary dispossession that subjects must endure by giving their accounts away to others for the sake of the subjects' recognition. According to Butler (2005), recognition is possible only when the account is established as *mine*, but not in the sense of belonging to me, as subject, as if it were my property – that is impossible due to the fact that dispossession prevents such ownership. Instead, and in order to make dispossession performative, and thereby make the subject accountable to the other, dispossession must compel self to account for itself within the scene of address if it is to enable recognition to ensue.

> If it is an account of myself, and it is an accounting *to* someone, then I am compelled to give the account away, to send it off, to be dispossessed of it at the very moment that I establish it as *my* account. No account takes place outside the structure of address, even if the addressee remains implicit or unnamed, anonymous and unspecified. The address establishes the account as an account, and so the account is completed only on the occasion when it is effectively exported and expropriated from the domain of what is my own. (Butler, 2005, p. 36, emphasis in original)

The performativity force of the account in the process of recognition of oneself thus derives from a need to be dispossessed of the account given of oneself. What becomes recognisable regarding the subject establishes in turn that for which the subject is held accountable, because it is against what the subject can be visible when being called into account. That visibility, whilst completed owing to dispossession, is still partial, as stated above, because it takes place within a linguistic setting, a scene of address that is structured by norms never fully knowable either to the self or to the other. Thence, "it is only in dispossession that I can and do give any account of myself" (Butler, 2005, p. 37), even if I cannot claim that account as my own, only as expressive of my conduct, of *my-self*. But the account from which I am dispossessed the moment I, as self, enter into the scene of address, establishes that for which

I become accountable, and as a result allows me to become recognisable before the other, something incomplete but possible, always conditioned in its tellability.

4.3. Methodology

This essay adopts a symbolic-interpretative narrative perspective (see Boland, 1993; Czarniawska, 2004; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1997), sustained upon Butler's (2005) philosophical framework about the act of giving an account of oneself. Butler's (2005) notions of scene of address and dispossession of the account one gives of oneself become the pivotal concepts for the purposes of this study. As an analogical application to corporations, the aim of this study is to explore the way accounting sustains, and contributes to, the recognition of corporations as moral subjects. Recognition is reified as a condition for achieving a meaningful and accountable existence, especially regarding corporations (see Schweiker, 1993). In turn, accounting is understood not as a technical practice emphasising instrumental and performance-driven outputs for the sake of an accountability set on "checks and balances and the threat of individual liability" (Painter-Morland, 2007, p. 515), but as an ethicomoral practice exercised by moral agents that affect others by what they do, and are thereby capable of enduring moral assessment (Carnegie, 2022; Schweiker, 1993). As a result, the meaningful identity of individual or corporate subjects arises out of the accounts they render about themselves; in other words, they are recognised through what they tell about themselves. Accounting, reified as an ethicomoral practice sustained on the act of giving an account of oneself, becomes a practice that enables the recognition of moral subjecthood, and consequently the achievement of a meaningful and accountable existence (see Schweiker, 1993).

As a speech act, the account is analysed within the linguistic setting established by the scene of address, and thereby considered as narrative (see Cooper & Puxty, 1994). The meaningfulness of accounts as speech acts depends on the communication carried out between the parties acting within the scene of address, where both perform the role of communicators and audiences (Dinh & O'Leary, 2025; Merkl-Davies & Brennan, 2017; Steccolini, 2025; Vinnari & Laine, 2017). An account gains substance through the amalgamation of a polyphony of voices acting within context (George et al., 2023; Trittin & Schoeneborn, 2017; Turunen & Lundgren-Henriksson, 2025).

Given the ambiguity of (often incompatible) meanings, beliefs and purposes behind speech acts (Brennan & Conroy, 2013; Dillard & Vinnari, 2019; Moerman et al., 2023; Smyth, 2012; Trittin & Schoeneborn, 2017), this essay consists of a critical-interpretative and hermeneutical case study about the communication ensuing between the corporation under study, *Águas de Portugal* (AdP), and its external audiences. Due to the testimonial nature of the account given by the accountable subject,

accountability and the consequent recognition of subjects as meaningful rest upon acts of interpretation undertaken by both self and the other(s) receiving the account given by the self. As an act sustained by testimony, giving an account of oneself is subject to the hermeneutical dimensions of "processes of communication, of the exploration of opinions, of linguistic impact" (Gadamer, 1975, p. 311). The apprehension of meaning is hermeneutical *per se*, owing to the fact that people understand each other in a narrative form (Bruner, 1991; Czarniawska, 2004). As a result, recognition of the subject's meaningfulness is dependent on a leeway that ranges from what the account purports to tell and what the account may mean (Bruner, 1991). Following Gadamer (1975), hermeneutical appropriation is essential for the transmission of what knowledge of the accountable subject the accounts are able to render.

The above theoretical concepts guided the analysis of how AdP communicates with external audiences. The organisation's accounts and public communications were examined as narrative speech acts, situated within a scene of address, in order to interpret how recognition is produced through the ethical act of giving an account.

Following a methodological interpretative approach, this essay employs a qualitative case study so as to address the call for McKinlay (2010) to apply Butler's work empirically. Case studies are particularly appropriate for the purposes of this essay because they enable in-depth understanding of the institutional and environmental context in which organisations such as corporations present their accounts and respond to institutional pressures (Parker, 2012; Scapens, 1990; Yin, 2018). There are two reasons buttressing AdP's choice as a case study for this essay. First, AdP is Portugal's leading public water service provider, with its deep social and political meaning surpassing its economic dimension (Correia, 2007). Acting within a sensitive sector, AdP is exposed to a wide range of pressures and expectations from a political, economic and social stance (Correia, 2007; Pato, 2011). Second, the company's shareholder structure, where 49% of its shares belong to its customers, mainland Portuguese municipalities. These facts were perceived as capable of generating tension regarding AdP's identity, given the economic adjustment programme Portugal underwent starting at 2011, and enforced by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Central Bank (ECB), and the European Commission (EC). At the time, the Portuguese water sector was experiencing a heavy process of restructuring (given the adoption of a new strategic plan, PEAASAR II[67]), where AdP's role was pivotal (MAOTDR, 2007).

[67] The acronym for *Plano Estratégico de Abastecimento de Águas e de Saneamento de Águas Residuais* (official English designation: *Strategic Plan for Water Supply, Sewerage and Wastewater Treatment*, in APA/MAA, *State of the Environment 2004,* Lisbon), the official strategic plan for the water sector between 2007 to 2013.

That process, which started in 2007 and lasted until 2013, served as the timeframe supporting this case study because it coincided with the beginning of the subprime crisis in America, which shook financial markets worldwide, making it difficult obtaining proper financing. The demanding investments of which AdP was in charge, along with its financial situation until 2007 (the company had suffered consecutive heavy losses from 2004 to 2006). Given that the focus of this study is set upon the act of account-giving and the process of recognition organisational subjects are *subject to*, a longitudinal case study was considered to be the most suitable approach (see, e.g., Bracci & Llewellyn, 2012; Craig & Amernic, 2008; Davison, 2011).

The main source documents were the letters to the shareholders issued between 2007 and 2013. The Portuguese version of the letters was the main object of analysis, with the English version used regarding quotation, and in order to find eventual dissimilarities in meaning, following Evans (2018). Apart from those signalled in this study, the differences were not considered to be substantial.

As a narrative and communicational artifact with performative power, the letter to the shareholders constitutes a crucial site for sense-making of corporate discourse, as it enables the construction of legitimising narratives and the framing of organisational performance through selective storytelling and rhetorical strategies (Edgar et al., 2018; Merkl-Davies & Brennan, 2017; Merkl-Davies & Brennan, 2011). With the focus of this essay falling upon narrative and communication between a corporation and external parties, there was the need to identify who could best fit the surrogate role of self-accountant of the organisation, in line with Schweiker's (1993) doubleness. CEOs are seen as the official communicators of the corporation's reality, since they are conventionally legitimised to do that (see Austin, 1975). As official communicators of the organisation, corporate leaders have the power to impinge upon corporate reality (Amernic & Craig, 2010, 2013; Craig & Amernic, 2008; Craig & Brennan, 2012; Hines, 1988), and are often taken to be the corporation itself through overlapping of their image (Amernic & Craig, 2017; Guthey & Jackson, 2005). They perform the role of principal, who is responsible for the content of the accounts being given and thereby the one primordially listened to by audiences, making the role of the author irrelevant (Merkl-Davies & Brennan, 2017). Letters to shareholders offer valuable insights about CEOs' attitudes, motives and beliefs regarding "the *raison d'être* motivating their corporation's behaviour" (Amernic & Craig, 2010, p. 26). They contribute to the process of recognition corporations undertake in order to achieve a meaningful existence by revealing practical and theoretical aspects of corporations against the dominant ideologies of society, and are thereby narrative accountability texts (Amernic & Craig, 2010; Craig & Amernic, 2006). Regarding AdP, the CEO is the dominant performer in practically every moment of communicative interaction with external parties, acting

as the voice of the organisation, and is thereby the one acting as the expounder of the accounts given by AdP.

The analysis took place in two stages: the first stage focused on the close reading of the letters to the shareholders from 2007 to 2013, so as to identify patterns and themes within discourse and consequently establish key moments within the case study's timeframe. The close reading was broadened to other sources, under the premise that corporate discourse is not limited to the letter to shareholders (see Amernic et al., 2010). The purpose was to explore the context and meaningfulness of the results of the close reading of the letters to the shareholders. At the second stage, the purpose was to deepen the meaningfulness of the results of the first stage, particularly regarding the characteristics of narrative and communication occurring at two distinct periods. Again, close reading was performed, but under different focal points (see below, regarding coding).

Within the field of accounting and accountability, close reading has emerged as a mode of inquiry attentive to the textual and rhetoric fabric of shareholder's letter (Amernic & Craig, 2001, 2013, 2017; Mäkelä & Laine, 2011; Martins et al., 2019, 2020; Merkl-Davies & Brennan, 2017; Oliveira et al., 2024). As asserted by Amernic and Craig (2006, p. 6), "close reading constitutes an intensive, almost forensic, scrutiny of the explicit and implicit composition of the text". It involves "multiple readings where the reading process is slowed down. The reader-analyst searches for implicit assumptions, ideology, silences, techniques of argumentation, and for metaphor" (Amernic & Craig, 2013, p. 382). Close reading provides useful insights regarding the phenomena studied (Amernic & Craig, 2017).

The coding process was iterative and primarily inductive. Meaning units within the text were identified that captured pivotal ideas and narrative patterns. The premise under the coding process was that it serves not only to classify text, but also to uncover underlying assumptions and ideologies shaping corporate discourse. Coding was based on Amernic et al. (2010) adaptation of Peshkin (2001) focal points. Working as lenses, they are meant to help to structure the analysis of relevant material/sources by establishing a focal point to close readings. However, they need not be all employed, and "they are not mutually exclusive ways of learning or exhaustive of the ways of perceiving" (Peshkin, 2001, p. 242).

The close reading at the first stage was performed under two of Peshkin's (2001) lenses: patterns and themes. The first, patterns, is related to the researcher's intentions to notice recurring actions, interactions or outcomes in narrative that give structure and meaning to the underlying order shaping the setting. The themes lens directs attention to overarching ideas – like resistance, resignation or cooperation – that can bring light upon ideological foundations and relational dynamics within the setting (Peshkin, 2001; Amernic & Craig, 2010).

At this stage, the purpose was to find patterns and themes in the CEOs speech via its shifts and trends along the timeframe, so as to identify key moments. From there resulted the division into two important instances within the case study's timeframe, with the breaking point located at the year of 2011, when Portugal became subject to the intervention of the IMF, the ECB and the EC.

The analyses of the patterns and themes in the letters to the shareholders led to the identification, in the first stage, of the main representative audiences, which enabled the selection of other sources. As already stated, CEO discourse is not limited to the letter to shareholders, and sources like interviews or speeches are important as well (see Amernic et al., 2010). Further sources entailed: (i) AdP's annual reports from 2007 to 2013; (ii) two sets of parliamentary hearings that took place between 2011 and 2013 (comprising around forty hours of recorded data); (iii) two audits performed in 2008 and 2012 by the Portuguese Court of Auditors to AdPs accounts; (iv) the regulator's annual reports on the water sector from 2007 to 2010; (v) one parliamentary report, related to the 2011 parliamentary hearing regarding the sustainability of the water sector; and (vi) several newspaper articles published between 2011 and 2013. Such sources are expressive of the discursive countermoves exerted by corporate leaders in response to the utterances of audiences (see Brennan et al., 2013), enabling the identification of those who are considered relevant. As a result, AdP's audiences were framed into four main parties: Government, parliament, municipalities, and the media.

The second stage was conducted under Peshkin's (2001) lenses of metaphor or irony. The metaphor lens represents a way of perceiving how figurative language conveys underlying meanings, hidden assumptions, and values. The lens of irony assists researchers into noticing incongruencies between words and actions within a social setting. It highlights contradictions, tensions or unintended meanings that expose complexity or hypocrisy in institutional discourse.

At this stage, the focus of the analysis was set first on the letter to the shareholders, and then jumped into the discursive moments contained in the other sources where AdP's CEOs expressed themselves towards the four audiences determined at the first stage. Employing the lenses of metaphor and irony had as its purpose bring new light into the detected patterns of speech and the identified themes of the first stage. It allowed exploring the interaction between AdP and external parties and how that shaped the accounts that AdP was giving of itself via its CEOs. Consequently, it enabled identifying what for AdP was being recognised.

Given the analytical procedures described above, it becomes essential to understand the context in which AdP operates. The following section begins by characterising the corporation and its institutional environment.

4.4. Recognition Through Dispossession: The Case of Águas de Portugal

4.4.1. The company and its institutional context

The current structure of the Portuguese water sector dates back to 1993, when AdP was established as a State-owned enterprise with business-based management. The water sector was hitherto very fragmented, with around three hundred public operators running small scale structures with no level of integration (Pato, 2011). It was structured in 1993 into two areas, with that configuration still being in force today (ERSAR, 2025): *bulk* activities, comprising all the processes from water abstraction to its transportation to reservoirs; and *retail* activities, related to the direct distribution to consumers. This layout created two sets of networks managed by distinct operators. *Bulk* activities comprise large-scale networks of mains and related infrastructure connecting several municipalities, owing thereto their characterisation as *multimunicipal* systems[68]. These are run almost exclusively by AdP. *Retail* activities, on the other hand, are carried out by law exclusively by municipalities, where a traditional public sector logic of administration prevails. Each municipality manages its own water supply and drainage system, generally without any integration with a neighbouring municipality's water network. These usually small-scale systems correspond to what is characterised as *municipal* systems. One *multimunicipal* system can provide water supply and other related services to several *municipal* systems.

The present design of the water sector was understood at that time as the best answer to access the necessary European funding so as to carry out the vast amount of investments needed for complying with European rules regarding proper water supply and drainage, as well as other requirements around social and environmental issues (Franco, 2007). Municipalities alone – which until 1993 managed in toto the water sector, and could not present a united project for the sector, owing to dissimilar political agenda – lacked the means to apply to EEC's funding schemes, as these privileged investment programmes with a certain dimension (Campos, 1988). That motivated the constitution in 1993 of AdP, government's corporate holding responsible for the development and management of *multimunicipal* systems (Pato, 2011). With its foundation, corporatisation takes shape within the water sector: the State entrusts upon one (public) enterprise the responsibilities of investing in and managing the systems under its control (Lino, 2007).

By increasing the availability of financing mechanisms and enabling reductions of operation costs through scale economies, AdP was presented as a strong political argument into persuading local

[68] Back in 1993, these systems were still inexistent. All the services related to the water sector were provided exclusively by each municipality, from abstraction to the distribution to end-consumers. And there was almost no connection between the water networks of each municipality, one exception being the area of Lisbon.

governments to back the strategy put forward (Pato, 2011). Constitutionally, they were entitled in exclusive to the management of water and sewerage systems. In order to circumvent this issue and *de jure* maintain intact local governments' competences, municipalities would be treated as shareholders of the new *multimunicipal* systems serving them and into which they had transferred the responsibilities of managing *bulk* activities via service concession agreements with AdP (Pato, 2011). But because they were not only shareholders but sole clients of the respective *multimunicipal* systems, allowing municipalities' control over them would undermine the very notion of enterprise. The majority of the capital of each *bulk* operator had then to be subscribed by the State in order to ensure their direction by AdP (Pato, 2011). AdP's ownership structure remains unchanged even today, and is directed by a chairman appointed by the central government who also accumulates the functions of CEO. Municipalities, whilst shareholders, do not possess any influence in the chairman's nomination.

Until 2006, the vast amount of investment focused upon structuring *multimunicipal* systems, i.e., those run by AdP, particularly under PEAASAR I, the government's strategy for the sector between 2000 and 2006. In PEAASAR I, the investment in these systems was privileged, to the detriment of *municipal* systems. Nevertheless, PEAASAR I's objectives were underachieved (MAOTDR, 2007). They were planned under premises of undervalued investment needs, overvalued water tariffs, and poor interaction of *multimunicipal* systems with *municipal* ones. The latter were, in many cases, unable to absorb the quantity of water supplied by *multimunicipal* systems, due to demographic, structural and economic reasons (MAOTDR, 2007). These factors lead to the enactment of a new strategic plan, PEAASAR II, lasting from 2007 to 2013. From 2007 onward, the Portuguese water sector was to undertake a great restructure, framed by PEAASAR II[69], particularly around issues concerning the costs of providing water supply and other related services, which threatened the sector's sustainability (Bau, 2007; Pato, 2011). Covering these costs was advocated as essential to solving whatever problems the sector might have, since "the existent problematic circles around one pivotal aspect, water tariffs, as the full coverage of the cost of the service is the motor for solving most of these [the water sector's] issues." (MAOTDR, 2007, p. 24).

4.4.2. Organisational discourse until 2011: net earnings as the mark of sustainability

From as early as 2007, when the inception of PEAASAR II took place, the discourse employed in AdP's annual reports aimed at portraying the company as sustainable by highlighting the accounting

[69] AdP was to assume the pivotal role in implementing PEAASAR II regarding all the necessary investments and subsequent access to proper financing.

figure of net earnings. This single figure was converted into the cornerstone of the company's speech in order to advocate its robustness towards outside parties. Net earnings were given increasing emphasis in the chairman's message during the tenure of Pedro Serra as CEO until 2011. As an accounting measure, profits are taken to be one of the oldest and most visible ways of depicting a company as good in contrast with the badness of losses (see Pinnuck & Shekhar, 2013). Establishing meaningfulness through the usage of dichotomy is something reflective of our way of learning and living, itself sustained by an opposition of either success or failure to which we become accountable and for which we are recognised (Hoskin, 1996). In addition, accounting discourse possesses a pervasive authority regarding our understanding of organisational subjects (see Francis, 1990; Hines, 1988; Miller & Power, 2013), ruling the legitimisation of subjects as a form of contemporary discourse (Miller & O'Leary, 1987; Vaivio et al., 2023). Structured as a single figure, earnings become data ready to be accumulated and compared through a putative universal understanding that society grants them, "with a legitimacy that seems difficult to contest or dispute" (Miller, 1992, p. 68). Considering accounting as a rhetorical practice accountability depends on, there is an attempt in AdP's financial statements to convert earnings into a powerful linguistic object, with the purpose of making AdP recognisable as a robust company, and thereby making AdP accountable towards rendering good results. Within AdP's discursive stance, net earnings are used in order to establish a stark contrast between the recognition of a past image of failure and the recognition of AdP's robustness that was pithily promoted after the enactment of PEAASAR II. Net earnings on the 2007 chairman's message[70] are presented as the starting point for getting the enterprise back on track, after a series of former overseas investments hit the group hard (Pato, 2011). In the words of CEO Pedro Serra,

> The year 2007 saw the company *returning* to positive results. (...) [T]his year saw the conclusion of a process of removal[71] of several operations that were revealing themselves as financially uninteresting and *with no relationship to the group's activities comprising its core business*. (Águas de Portugal, 2008, p. 6, emphasis added)

With these two sentences also placed at the top of the page, written in capital letters (as if it were the heading of the letter), the focus is set on returning to profit and to core business activities. By excluding former investments of the scope of its main activity, this statement seems to disclose a will to detach AdP from an erroneous past, which bore losses of €61.4 million between 2005 and 2006. In their essence,

[70] It is the expression used for presenting the letter to the shareholders.

[71] The word employed in the Portuguese version, *saneamento*, is linked to catharsis, as if there was an intent to translate the purifying effect the exclusion of those investments represented for AdP. This term is repeated on other occasions when referring to this operation.

they were contrary to what was lauded as the solidity of the group's core business: the capacity of *multimunicipal* systems to recover costs (MAOTDR, 2007). Such *former investments* were not pivotal to the group's activity, and their disposal became all the more relevant so as to signal a successful shift of AdP's focus back to its basics. The chairman's message of 2008 follows this perspective: the emphasis is set upon the sale of more business units not representative of AdP's core business. Earnings jumped to €63 million, even if resulting from nonrecurring events, something Pedro Serra tried to smoothen in his message in order not to taint the strength of 2008 results. The focus was set upon positive results, strengthening 2007 claims.

> If the year 2007 saw AdP group return to positive results, like we stressed in our message that year, the year 2008 provided the best result ever. It is a positive result of €63 million, one that contrasts with the €7.9 million of last year and *even more with the €33 million of negative results* of 2006. The fact that a substantial part of these earnings were of an extraordinary, non-recurring nature, does not detract from the *business success that the figures reflect*. (Águas de Portugal, 2009, p. 6, emphasis added)

The tone is set on net earnings by transforming them into a landmark expressive of the rupture with a past of "chronically loss-making operations weighing on the group's balance sheet for several years" (Águas de Portugal, 2009, p. 6). Representative of 70% of the groups' consolidated profits, heralding the sale of these operations helped to boost the strength of net earnings: almost half of the 2008 Chairman's Message was dedicated to extolling their importance. By establishing a contrast with pre-2007 activities, and thereby before the enforcement of PEAASAR II, an attempt to construct an image of renewed healthiness and responsibility out of the wreckage of the past was being carried out. Damaging to the recognition of AdP as a strong and robust company in the environment sector, the past hindered what was perceived to be representative of those qualities of strength and robustness, i.e., net earnings. With actions orientated towards achieving sound results, the scope of AdP's accountability (i.e., what permeated within the chairman's message as for what AdP was being held accountable) became reduced mainly to net earnings: these enabled the recognition of AdP as successful and robust. The success of net earnings was also attributed to the performance of its core business, something deemed to be essential so as to boost the recognition of AdP as a sustainable company, and which Pedro Serra clearly states in his 2008 chairman's message:

> This result was only possible because operations related to the management of *multimunicipal* systems, which constitute the core of the group's activities, are also

> experiencing a recovery, (...) compared to the situation that came from the past. This is a line of strategy to deepen in the next years, *in order to warrant the sustainability of these results*. (Águas de Portugal, 2009, p. 7, emphasis added)

Achieving good results justified moving back to its core business – running *multimunicipal* systems – so as to ensure the sustainability of the company. Being sustainable was merely a synonym to yielding (large) profits, and giving visibility to net earnings proved to be an essential part thereof. Right from 2009, when the first sustainability report was issued, there is a clear intent of reducing sustainability's scope to profits and AdP's core business, as if the two were interdependent. For example, the 2009 Sustainability Report highlights the sentence "our core business is, by definition, sustainability" (Águas de Portugal, 2010b, p. 9) when presenting the company's mission, its *raison d'être*. And the 2010 Sustainability Report opens with that same caption dominating a whole page right before the presentation of the group's figures regarding turnover, number of workers, volume of sewerage treated, etc. (Águas de Portugal, 2011b).

In short, returning to its basic activities meant aiming at being recognised as a sustainable company, even if such recognition had been reduced to financial concerns. Throughout PEAASAR II's timeframe, the activity of AdP's core business ended up as a function of net earnings (which grew bigger every following year), as the full set of the chairman's messages signed by Pedro Serra reveals. They were believed to be the perfect candidates for depicting the envisaged image of robustness, enabling AdP's to recognise itself and be recognised as such.

Net earnings were set against the dismal image of AdP's past in order to buttress their strength. Good results are displayed in Pedro Serra's discourse in a way that ensures that the strategic objectives the company is committed to are fulfilled, warranting its sustainability. This is evident in the following quote from the annual report of 2009:

> Contrary to what we often hear stated, companies, whether public or private, need to generate profits (...). If we were (...) unable to show that our operations are paid for by the revenue they generate, we would not be able to advance with the important investment projects that are currently underway. The €752 million contract which we signed with the European Investment Bank (...) would not have been possible if we did not produce a profit or *demonstrate that we can do so on a sustainable basis*. (Águas de Portugal, 2009a, p. 7, emphasis added)

Companies perceive their image as something valuable (Davison & Warren, 2009), particularly regarding external audiences (see Bruner, 1991; Edgar et al., 2018, 2022; Espeland & Hirsch, 1990). Because it is related to the enactment of meaning, the efforts of AdP to become recognisable as robust, i.e., sustainable, are apparently performative in themselves. They result from a process of selection, emphasising something whilst excluding something else for the sake of meaningfulness (Butler, 1997). Within AdP's rhetoric at the time, net earnings were gradually transformed into sustainability *per se*.

However, the image arising out of the effort of recognition sustained upon the publicity of net earnings as a symbol of sustainability ran the risk of becoming too idealistic, as an end in itself. Such an idealistic image may work against the subject (even if corporate) by narrowing the scope of audiences to ultimately itself alone (Roberts, 1991; 2009). The tone of the discourse employed by Pedro Serra clearly attempts to create a positive image of his corporation, something typical of CEOs speeches (see Bournois & Point, 2006; Craig & Brennan, 2012; Hyland, 1998). But CEOs may end up talking merely to themselves if they sever the link binding them to the scene of address, where the other stands. To be successfully performative, the account must be accepted as truthful by others (Butler, 1997).

4.4.3. Organisational discourse in and after 2011: a discourse attuned to the scene of address

Before 2011, the references to AdP's (un)sustainability are scarce, one exception being an audit performed by the Court of Auditors in 2008, where it was stated that the huge investments carried out in the past regarding several *multimunicipal* systems were not being recovered by the tariffs that were charged, creating tariff deficits (see below). For the Court of Auditors, recognising tariff deficits as assets resulting from increases in results was meant at "presenting more balanced and appealing accounts, but not mirroring with exactitude the reality of the facts" (Tribunal de Contas, 2008, p. 12). Pedro Serra rebuffed those critics in an interview where he stated that the Court did not take into consideration the nature of AdP's business, by questioning the recognition of tariff deficits as assets (Agência Lusa, 2008). And he added that "it was not true that AdP is financially debilitated. Were it so, we would not sign today a loan contract of €135 million with the European Investment Bank" (Agência Lusa, 2008), necessary to carry out the investments AdP was committed to, in line with PEAASAR II.

A great part of the problem of water tariffs was related to the tariff deficits that were accumulating in the sector. Tariff deficits in the water sector are due to the difference between the amount of revenue required to assure full-cost recovery, and the amount of revenue generated annually (ParPública, 2012). These deficits take place especially regarding *bulk* activities, and therefore affect AdP's operations. Because the amount of revenue generated from the activities of *multimunicipal* systems does not reach

the amount set to enable the full coverage of service costs (which include those associated with the recovery of previous investments) in many of those systems – particularly regarding those systems laid out in less populated, countryside areas – those differences are treated as income and are included in the computation of results as operating revenues, corresponding to a substantial part thereof (on average, they represent 28% of the total Operational Result) (CAOTPL, 2011). In turn, they give rise to a substantial class of assets in AdP's Balance Sheet. They are considered as "the materialisation in accounting terms of the irrevocable right to receive adequate return on its investment" (Águas de Portugal, 2008, p. 53), an idea that is repeated in every annual report of the company from 2007 to 2013. However, and albeit the State were obliged by contract to compensate those deficits to AdP, there was never, up until 2011, a guarantee that the State would proceed in that way, due to a lack of a clear definition between the amount of those deficits that was to be attributed to operational constraints and the amount that resulted from inefficient management, something for which AdP would have to take responsibility (Tribunal de Contas, 2012).

It is during 2011 that tariff deficits start gaining substance as an object contributing to the process of recognition of AdP, but now as a company in difficulties, an unsustainable company, despite profits. Simultaneously, two new elements come to the fore as marks of the company in need: the amount of debt resulting from financing activities, and the amount related to accounts receivables from municipalities, which are both clients and shareholders of AdP.

In mid-2011, the Portuguese Association of Enterprises of the Environment Sector (AEPSA), in line with the conclusions of a study conducted by them, stated that the €400 million of tariff deficits registered in AdP's accounts would hinder any attempt of privatising that company, as they were assets of doubtful recovery. Additionally, several *multimunicipal* systems were allegedly in technical bankruptcy (see AEPSA, 2011). In order to shun unsustainability claims gaining echo in the media, Pedro Serra, in a press release, takes upon himself to "restore the truth about the group's situation and of its subsidiaries, in order to mitigate the social alarm promoted irresponsibly by AEPSA" (Águas de Portugal, 2011c). Once again, earnings were heralded as the mark of the company's sustainability, promoting their magnitude in the water industry, their successive growth from 2008 onward, and the role of AdP in warranting the necessary investments in the Portuguese water sector. Pedro Serra stresses that AdP

> is presented all over the world as an unparalleled case of success by international financial agencies such as the European Investment Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the World Bank – a success case that only AEPSA does not want to see. (Águas de Portugal, 2011c)

In line with AEPSA's study (2011), questions about AdP's financial situation started emerging, and a gloomy picture about the company began arising within the media in 2011, as the following press headlines suggest:

Table 4.1.
Press headlines in 2011 related to AdP

Date	Headline	Author
18/10/11	"Survival of Águas de Portugal at risk."	RTP
26/11/11	"Minister questioned about liabilities of Águas de Portugal"	Agência Lusa
18/10/11	"Municipalities' debt may force AdP to resort to State Budget to pay wages"	Agência Lusa
07/12/11	"Municipal debts to Águas de Portugal soar to € 380 million"	Diário de Notícias
18/10/11	"Unrecovered costs in the water sector reach €700 million (updated)"	Machado
07/10/11	"Current water supply system is unsustainable"	Diário de Notícias
07/10/11	"Environment Minister calls for a sustainable solution in the water distribution sector"	RTP
06/10/11	"Mayors inform minister of intention to terminate contract with Águas de Portugal"	Agência Lusa

There are practically no references in the media to AdP's net earnings, but their importance was still stressed in Pedro Serra's discourse. In a note to the press published earlier in 2011 by AdP, and signed by Pedro Serra, the results of 2010 were described as the best ever since AdP was established, which "demonstrate the good performance of the group AdP, although not disclosing all the successes registered in the year this annual report refers to" (Águas de Portugal, 2011a). It was in line with the constant references to net earnings throughout the chairman's messages during the tenure of Pedro Serra, exemplifying an effort to persuade others to recognise AdP's sustainability. Nevertheless, unsustainability claims around AdP continued, and became the pivotal point around a parliamentary hearing held later in 2011 around the quality and sustainability of water supply and sewerage services. The introduction to the report of that hearing (CAOTPL, 2012, p. 6) reflected such perspective:

> It is important to note that the indebtedness of the AdP group is reaching alarming values, casting doubts on its capability to obtain the necessary funding for the investments still missing, about its eventual repercussion on tariffs paid by the consumer, or even over the survival of the system or of some of the companies belonging to the AdP group.

MPs argued that one of the water sector's problem, tariff deficits, remained unspoken, as if unaddressed, and expressed concerns about the risk of harming consumers by raising water tariffs substantially in order to pay for those deficits. Simultaneously, AdP's levels of debt, particularly regarding financing activities, were considered extremely worrying, representing five times more than the company's equity, and with an EBITDA ten times inferior to the liabilities linked to financing activities; these represented almost 50% of AdP's capital structure. All these parameters were characterised as "a vicious circle, dragging the group into unsustainability" (CAOTPL, 2012, p. 19).

In reply to these concerns, Pedro Serra (CAOTPL, 2011) again stressed the importance of net earnings as a symbol of AdP's sustainability, shunning unsustainability's claims, as follows:

> AdP group has always been stable, and moreover, it has distributed dividends in the last three years [2008 to 2010]. It did not do it for several years, because...I would say that the group launched itself into wild adventures and then paid a heavy price on account of that. So, between 2001 and 2007, the group experienced alternately thin positive results and weighty negative results, 7, 8 million positive, 33 million negative. (...) In 2008, the group presented significant, expressive, positive results of 63 million, in 2009 of 46 million, if observed according to IFRS they would be of 65 million, in 2010 79.5 million. And in the first semester of this year, 49 million. Therefore, *there is no reason why the group cannot be considered sustainable*. (emphasis added)

Tariff deficits are not portrayed as a problem. As previously stated, their contribution to the Operational Result is on average of 28%, ensuring the picture of sustainability provided by profits. Tariff deficits were part of the business of water[72]. And when questioned about solutions for the problem of tariff deficits, Pedro Serra (CAOTPL, 2011) stated that

> Make no mistake, we cannot write off these tariff deficits because that would have a tremendous impact, because the financing conditions behind our medium and long-term contracts (...) *presume that we have a revenue determined by contract*. If that clause is violated, those entities will feel they have the right to call for a renegotiation of those contracts, and what are today 30 or 40 basic points over Euribor will become 700 basic points. (emphasis added)

[72] Such position was in line with what Pedro Serra had stated already in 2008, when answering back to the concerns expressed by the Court of Auditors (see above).

For Pedro Serra, it was not relevant that there was no warranty that tariff deficits would be recovered; what was important was that tariff deficits ensured AdP's recognition as a sustainable company by bolstering net earnings, and also by keeping financing costs low. And when questioned about the amount of debt related to financing activities, Pedro Serra (CAOTPL, 2011) argued that, because of the medium to long-term nature of such debt, its payment did not represent a problem, judging from AdP's records. The only menace to AdP's sustainability were the accounts receivables related to municipalities, something for which municipalities were to blame, not AdP, according to Pedro Serra. If municipalities did not start to pay back AdP for the services they had received, then repayment to capital providers would become a problem, as the following statement by Pedro Serra (CAOTPL, 2011) shows

> [I]n the beginning of next year, if that problem [municipalities' debt] is not solved, then yes, the State is going to have a big problem because, if the State gives no signs of wanting to solve this problem and be willing to face it, the day may come when AdP's debt of €3 billion consolidates on the Public Accounts.

Throughout his explanations, Pedro Serra attempted to attach the causes around a putative unsustainability of AdP merely to municipalities[73], rejecting that the company itself was unsustainable. But his approach disregarded the fact that the belief in AdP's unsustainability was gaining momentum. All the questions were set around solutions for tariff deficits, AdP's debt and receivables from municipalities, and not on AdP's capacity to generate profits; whether earnings justified AdP's sustainability was never a point raised neither by the MPs nor by the media. Net earnings were not recognised as part of the language in use (see Munro, 1993).

In the 2011 chairman's message (the first signed by Lobato de Faria, AdP's new CEO after the resignation of Pedro Serra by the end of 2011, claiming personal reasons), tariff deficits and municipal debt were now mentioned as a problem (Águas de Portugal, 2012). This message dedicates almost half of its text to these two points. The impact of tariff deficits on AdP's net earnings is even quantified, by stating that "it should be noted that tariffs deficits had an impact of €41.4 million on the Group's net profit of 2011, more than double the amount, € 19.3 million, registered in 2010" (Águas de Portugal, 2012, p. 7). By disclosing their magnitude upon a net profit of € 89.6 million, another side of net earnings was revealed for the first time in the chairman's message. The discourse that ensued from the 2011 annual report onward now included these figures therein; they became pivotal to what was a recognition

[73] Countryside municipalities were particularly reproached by Pedro Serra, because these were unable to recover the costs of their own municipal systems, and thereby were not capable of paying to AdP for the services provided. However, a large sum of those receivables related to densely populated municipalities (the biggest debtor being the city of Lisbon).

of AdP as an unsustainable company, despite ongoing increasing net earnings. Tariff deficits, debt related to financing activities, and accounts receivables from municipalities became something for which AdP was called to account, i.e., for what it was now being held accountable, because these figures worked as the linguistic symbols shaping AdP's recognition. The 2012 message follows this shift, by once again quantifying tariff deficits within the chairman's message text, as well as bank debt, as follows:

> There were constraints in 2012, with an increase in the tariff deficits of water supply and wastewater treatment systems, which grew 18.1% to over 508 million euros at the end of the year, and a growth of 1.2% in short-term bank debt through the impact of customer debt on company treasury positions. (Águas de Portugal, 2013, p. 7)

Whilst still a part of the chairman's message, the praise for net earnings had to coexist with figures that were associated to AdP's unsustainability. But the tone set on net earnings did not change from that adopted in previous letters since 2007, as the references in the 2012 chairman's message disclose:

> In 2012 there was a further demonstration of the capabilities of the Group, given its good performance in key economic and financial indicators. I would *highlight* the consolidated net profit of 93.8 million euros this year, which represents an increase of more than 4% over the previous year, resulting in large part from a policy of strong cost containment. It should be noted that this extremely positive result will allow us to both *distribute dividends to the State shareholder* and *strengthen the Group's financial health*. (Águas de Portugal, 2013, p. 7, emphasis added).

Additionally, all the chairman's messages from CEO Lobato de Faria included new key financial indicators alongside net earnings (e.g., turnover and EBITDA), something never mentioned in all the chairman's messages signed by Pedro Serra. For example, the 2011 chairman's message starts by mentioning that

> Knowing that 2011 was a particularly difficult year for Portugal, it is with great satisfaction that Águas de Portugal presents the positive performance of the consolidated group in terms of its main economic and financial indicators, in particular an increase of more than 13 per cent in turnover, which last year reached €834.2 million. Other highlights include a 38.6 per cent increase in operating profit to €287.6 million and net profit growth to €89.6 million. (Águas de Portugal, 2012, p. 7).

The 2012 chairman's message contains identical references, stating that "I [the CEO Lobato de Faria] would also highlight the turnover, which grew to 791.4 million euros, and emphasize the very positive EBITDA earnings, which grew 3.4% to reach 357.2 million euros, despite the significant increase in energy costs." (Águas de Portugal, 2013, p. 7).

However, references to net earnings and other financial indicators were practically restricted to the chairman's messages, whilst tariff deficits, bank debt and the accounts receivables from municipalities became the highlights of AdP's discourse outside of the text of the chairman's message[74]. In a radio broadcast in 2012, municipalities' debt was metaphorically described by Lobato de Faria as a "snowball that obviously must stop, otherwise the system starts collapsing" and tariff deficits as a "pebble in the shoe" (RTP, 2012). No references to the Group's net earnings of 2011 were made, but the image depicted there contributed to making AdP recognisable as a company with a problem of financial sustainability. And the concerns about the *status quo* of AdP were echoed in other media as well, which were also subjecting the company to a greater level of scrutiny, as the following press headlines suggest:

Table 4.2.
Press Headlines in 2012 and 2013 Regarding AdP

Date	Headline	Author
14/05/13	"Debt of municipalities to Águas de Portugal increased 27% in 2012"	Agência Lusa
30/01/12	"Administrators of Águas de Portugal cost €8 million per annum"	Diário de Notícias
14/05/13	"National Association of Municipalities rejects debt value to AdP"	Agência Lusa
08/12/13	"Water must increase for 1.3 million Portuguese"	Marques & Freches
03/05/12	"Águas de Portugal group's tariff deficit increased 38% to 430 million euros"	Agência Lusa
17/07/12	"Águas de Portugal spent €3.8 million in automobiles"	Jornal de Notícias
03/05/12	"AdP's short-term debt raises 20% due to lack of payment from municipalities"	Agência Lusa
25/01/13	"Environment minister warns about debt in water and sewerage [sector]"	Agência Lusa
08/12/13	"Sector's reshuffle increases tariffs in all operating systems"	Marques
28/02/13	"Problems of Águas de Portugal are not the problems of the water sector"	Agência Lusa

Due to what was perceived as the increasing unsustainability of AdP, and consequently of the water sector, two further parliamentary hearings took place in 2013, with MPs expressing similar

[74] It must be added that one of those financial indicators (EBITDA) praised in the chairman's messages signed by the CEO Lobato de Faria was even mentioned in the parliamentary report regarding the sustainability of the water sector as portraying AdP's unsustainability – an opposite tone to that adopted in the chairman's messages from 2011 to 2013 – since "the present bank debt is more than ten times higher than EBITDA / free cash-flow of the group Águas de Portugal" (CAOTPL, 2012, p. 6). It is illustrative of the context in which communication was ensuing.

concerns to those raised on the 2011 parliamentary hearing (CAOTPL, 2013a). However, when replying to MPs, Lobato de Faria immediately classified the financial situation of the water sector as unsustainable, particularly due to tariff deficits (CAOTPL, 2013a). But in order to quantify the sector unsustainability, the CEO resorted to AdP's figures – "a concrete way to see the sector" (CAOTPL, 2013a), in his words – and employed a metaphor in order to describe AdP's unsustainability,

> A group that structures the sector, as is AdP's case, at this moment, *and precisely because of its unsustainability*, has accumulated two twin towers, as we designate them: on the one hand, debts from municipalities that at this moment rise to more than € 500 million, whose typical cause is obviously *retail* tariffs not recovering costs, and, on the other hand, we have a tariff deficit also above € 500 million. These two twin towers grow at the rate of € 100 million per annum, round numbers. (...) This is a snowball, with serious consequences for a sector that is essential for all Portuguese. (CAOTPL, 2013a, emphasis added)

A similar statement about the company's unsustainability, but this time using a time bomb as a metaphor, is given at the second parliamentary hearing taking place later that year (CAOTPL, 2013b). Lobato de Faria also emphasises that the problem of tariff deficits and debts from municipalities puts in peril new investments, increasing inefficiencies, and thereby the sector's unsustainability. Within his discourse, there is an overlap of the problems of the sector with those of AdP.

Examples thereof followed, like the interview given in 2013 by the environment minister (Antunes, 2013). When asked about the restructuring of the water sector, the answer was that "the water sector has a tariff deficit of more than € 500 million and debts from municipalities of more than € 500 million as well" (Antunes, 2013, p. 13). Precisely the same numbers that were part of AdP's accounts: the company's problems were a synonym for the sector's. The media also used the expressions "water system" and "water sector" as surrogates for AdP (see, e.g., Agência Lusa, 2013a; Antunes, 2013). And the last headline of table 2 refers to a news article where one of AdP's administrators mentioned that "it is a mistake *people usually commit, to confuse AdP and its problem with the sector*", and that there is "the idea that solving AdP's problem is the same as solving the problem of the country or the sector" (Agência Lusa, 2013a).

Seen as the sector's engine, the overlay of the image of the sector with that of AdP eventually took place. And as mentioned above, Lobato de Faria's speech resorts to this overlay as well. However, the way AdP acknowledged itself as unsustainable through the speech of its CEO was performed so as to divert responsibility to other parties, particularly municipalities. That is to say, even if AdP became

accountable regarding its tariff deficits, bank debt and receivables from municipalities – these were constitutive of the recognition of AdP as unsustainable – they were not seen as a responsibility AdP had to impute to itself. Not once were eventual management inefficiencies by AdP called into question regarding tariff deficits; what was important was that tariff deficits (together with debt related to financing activities and accounts receivable from municipalities) were depicted so as to justify the recognition of AdP as unsustainable, even if the company was not to be blamed for that. AdP had to account for those figures in order to render itself visible as unsustainable, but need not be blamed for their occurrence. What was relevant was that an unsustainable AdP was tantamount to an unsustainable water sector, and solving AdP's problems would therefore solve the sector's. The sector is synonymous with AdP, regardless of the role played by other parties, such as municipalities, themselves facing financial problems as well, due to the financial crisis taking place.

4.4.4. Discussion

Drawing on Butler (2005), the account as utterance only becomes an expression of self's identity if it is performative thereof, if it enables the constitution of self's recognisable identity. Otherwise, it is void of performative power (Butler, 2010). Regarding AdP's case, the tone set on net earnings by Pedro Serra (or even by Lobato de Faria) is unable to achieve performativity because of the absence of a listener granting a space within the scene of address. The other as listener does not need to be physical, but it must work as a place capable of rendering the account with meaning (Butler, 2005). Significance can only ensue if the account is situated within the leeway enabled by the structure of language. Reducing AdP to a single figure of net earnings could apparently facilitate communication, due to the pervasiveness calculative accounting language still has, owing to the characteristics numbers are seen to possess (Miller, 1992; Robson, 1992; Robson & Bottausci, 2018). That is perceptible in today's digital transformation environment affecting accounting as well (see Argento et al., 2025; Fortin et al., 2025). But that does not mean that numbers, just because of their nature, are able to speak for themselves (Kamuf, 2007). For them to speak, they must be part of the "discursive world of the story" (Butler, 2005, p. 63) mirrored by the scene of address regarding the narrative behind the recognition of the subjects, even if organisational ones. In other words, they must have expression, substance, within the language that structures the scene of address (see Butler, 2005).

With net earnings, the account fails to leave the sphere of AdP as a corporate subject because, as its self-accountant, a role performed by both CEOs, it could not convey the account outside of itself. In a way, the subject did not lose possession of the account, which, following Butler (2005), is something

paradoxical. Regarding self-identity, we cannot talk of an account if there is no other giving meaning to it, which is tantamount to say that the account never truly existed – it bore nothing of the subject in the linguistic community of others (Butler, 2005; see also Boland & Schultze, 1996). In the case of AdP, what was being exposed in the chairman's messages, particularly those signed by Pedro Serra, was something which was prevented from achieving visibility from the very beginning. It was not fit for a discourse calling for the recognition of AdP's unsustainability.

When considering recognition as a process dependent upon an act of giving for the sake of recognition of the accountable subject, if the account is not given due to a lack of space within the structure of language, it is lost through a failure of communication (see, e.g., Joannides, 2012; Mercier & Deslandes, 2017). Drawing on Butler (1997, 2005), the account as an utterance may be performed, but it is prevented from achieving performativity by the scene of address. Its perlocutionary effect is not achieved. By not enabling the performative power of the utterance, the subject's accountability may be said to have been lost due to the inability of the subject to successfully reach the other (see Hänninen, 1995), even if unwillingly. As a result, recognition does not ensue (see Butler, 2005). Losing sight of the other by failing to speak in understandable terms that form the structure of language is tantamount to a failure to account for oneself, which harms our identity before others as an unrecognisable one (Butler, 2005).

In AdP's case, the lack of recognition as a sustainable company ensued due to a self-belief in the need to disclose an image of robustness, which ended up in denials of unsustainability before others who were already talking in terms of unsustainability. What is more, the discourse of unsustainability prevents AdP from being seen as a company, another actor in the water sector; AdP is the sector itself. Therefore, within a sector portrayed as unsustainable, making AdP visible as a sustainable company could not find a place within the discursive leeway framing the scene of address. It did not follow from the structure of language in place, and was then doomed to opacity. The structure of language rules performativity by enabling or constricting what can be said by and about the subject and what audiences are capable of subjecting to interpretation. By keeping the would-be account to himself owing to the lack of capability of the other to receive it, the subject is in fact preventing the performative power of discourse to hold sway. His error lies in the way he unconsciously reifies himself as separate and separable from others (Roberts & Jones, 2009).

Within the scene of address operating particularly from 2011 to 2013, the performative force of net earnings was denied by the prevalent discourse. The discursive stance in force prevented the perlocutionary effect of the CEOs speech around net earnings to take place, as it concerned AdP's identity

of robustness. It illustrates the limits of the scene of address as argued by Butler (2005). As a linguistic setting, the scene of address enables a limited leeway for the accounts that are given to achieve meaningfulness. Rendering accounts in terms outside of that leeway is tantamount to an inability to achieve recognition according to the terms that the other, receiving the account, accepts or understands (Butler, 2005), as this case study depicts. But that does not mean that recognition does not ensue.

If the account is given, it means that, as a testimony, it will be received by the other, who interprets it under the force of the prevailing discourse within the scene of address (Butler, 2005). In the case of AdP, and because of the reduction of sustainability to merely an economic issue, the figures around the level of tariff deficits, bank debt and receivables from municipalities were understood as the meaningful parts within the account given by AdP. Contrary to net earnings, context enabled these figures with enough possibility to be brought into meaningfulness (see Vollmer, 2007), to become visible, granting them performative force through their recognition as part of AdP's subjecthood. The perlocutionary effect of what was rendered in AdP's annual reports took effect because it resonated within audiences, but in terms that were meaningful to them. Those terms' performativity was achieved by turning them into the byword for AdP's recognition as unsustainable.

What the role of the audiences in AdP's case enables to illustrate is that accounts, as linguistic artifacts existing within a given scene of address, must suffer dispossession so as to become performative, and consequently enable the recognition of the subject who gives them, i.e., the accountable subject. Dispossession is linked to corporate identity because organisations are seen as moral agents in community, able to give accounts of themselves (Macintosh et al., 2009; Schweiker, 1993). In the case of AdP, dispossession ensues when tariff deficits, bank debt and receivables from municipalities enter the CEOs speech in force. Speech is shaped into responding to unsustainability queries, even if reduced again to accounting figures. However, these were now understandable by others. The performativity of these figures results from their capability of being conveyed inside of the structure of language where AdP had to account for itself, contrary to net earnings. AdP's ensuing identity, even if considered as a negative one by audiences (as the newspapers' headlines or the environment minister's interview show), becomes a recognisable identity, i.e., AdP is recognised in that identity. Recognition ensues owing to the dispossession the accounts given by AdP endure precisely because they were given away. From the moment they entered the scene of address, AdP's accounts were also possessed by the audiences who received them, with the accountable subject no longer their sole possessor or author. The case then shows that recognition ensues from the moment an identity is enacted in language, but it is only possible if the accountable subject is dispossessed from the sovereign authorship of the accounts given (see

Butler, 2005). Otherwise, no communication ensues, and no recognition becomes possible (Butler, 2005).

Regarding AdP, the negativity of its identity is here performative because it gives rise to an identity, or rather becomes its qualifier. It is something different from utter failure to account, whose consequence is anonymity, non-identity (Hoskin, 1996). This case study shows that performativity happens only through dispossessing subjects of their self-perspectives and making them speak back to others in meaningful terms. The subject expresses itself through a set of utterances which are not performative at start – they have yet to achieve perlocutionary effect. The achievement of perlocutionary effect reinforces the figure of the other and its powers for dispossessing self of its self-driven perspective, but it also releases self from adjusting its speech only by self-reflection. Dispossession works for the sake of performativity, being its *sine qua non* condition. That is why accounts need to be open for completion (Butler, 2005). They become complete only when convincing and interpretable (Bay, 2018). Only then can recognition take place. In AdP's case, the ethical stance of recognition was revealed its fragility because audience belief became essential for maintaining the account's ability to communicate effectively. The account became complete when a recognisable identity ensued out of communication.

With accountability dependent upon the giving of accounts to ensue, its successful discharge becomes dependent upon the action of dispossession. Only by dispossessing the subject of its accounts can accountability maintain its capability of making the subject recognisable as a subject in a linguistic community (see O'Leary, 2017). Consequently, the recognition of the accountable subject qua subject is possible, because actions are *meaningfully* imputed to the agent. Following Schweiker (1993), the successful discharge of accountability by the self as accountant – even if in a negative tone, which is reflected in the figures of tariff deficits or bank debt in the case of AdP – enables the meaningful recognition of the self as an agent, even if a corporate one.

Within extant accounting research, the study of linguistic agency of subjects has taken several approaches, from numeric representations (e.g., Bay, 2018; Robson, 1992; Robson & Bottausci, 2018; Vollmer, 2007) to visual accounts (Davison, 2008, 2011). As social beings, we can make ourselves known only when showing ourselves within a linguistic setting, where we are given a voice that is meant to be understood. We can only perform our utterance, and consequently have linguistic agency, when reifying language as inherently relational (Butler, 1997, 2005). Although not of our making, language is flexible enough so as to allow choice regarding what can become visible (i.e., be told) about ourselves. The address of the other does not constrict our answer to a single one (see Trittin & Schoeneborn, 2017). As a result, accountability functions as a social performance that links recognition with dispossession. The

process of giving an account requires individuals or organisations to submit themselves to outside interpretation while giving up their storytelling authority for understanding. The relationship between account-giving and recognition remains unstable because when the structure of language or pervasive discourse do not allow space for the account to be given, then accountability collapses, as it cannot fulfil its purpose of enabling a meaningful recognition of the subject. The AdP case exemplifies the importance of the scene of address regarding recognition. Recognition becomes possible through the scene of address only when language provides someone with an opening to be able to render an account of himself (see Butler, 2005). The process of exposure results in a dispossession of the control over the narrative by the organisation, reflecting the ethical exposure that subjects experience when they speak (see Butler, 2005; Messner, 2009). The concept of accountability exists as an ontological requirement which makes subjects answerable through their use of language. The AdP case thus shows that recognition is dependent on the act of giving an account for the sake of meaningful existence (see Schweiker, 1993).

4.5. Conclusion

Through a case study, the purpose of this essay was to explore the way accounting sustains, and contributes to, the recognition of corporations as moral subjects. Drawing on Butler (2005), this essay shows that subjects, even if corporate ones, need the existing linguistic and normative environment known as the scene of address to actualise their ability to account for themselves. With the linguistic setting of the scene of address sustained by norms of *tellability*, the subject, as a self, is divided between what it can say and what it cannot articulate and consequently remains opaque. But the exposure to vulnerability creates an ethical opportunity for interaction. The practice of accountability requires the understanding that our ability to make sense of ourselves depends on the recognition of others (see Ricoeur, 2005; Schweiker, 1993).

The process of giving an account leads to the creation of a moral self as a subject. But the process of accounting for oneself is incomplete as it depends on the Other to receive and understand or accept what the account renders.

The narratives of AdP show how organisations become meaningfully recognisable subjects through their account-giving processes. The company changed its communication style after crisis struck its discourse in order to enable the recognition of what were believed to be its weaknesses. AdP moved from a defensive self-centred style of accountability to a performative tuning of its speech to prevailing discourse, which resulted in effective accountability, since recognition ensued. AdP pursued recognition through its ability towards answerability instead of closing into itself through a self-sufficient speech. The

ethical stance of recognition was revealed its fragility because audience belief became essential for maintaining the account's ability to communicate effectively.

The essay's insight produces multiple theoretical effects. First, the practice of accounting operates as a moral-linguistic system instead of a mere technical discipline. Second, the process of recognition emerges from the act of dispossession personal narratives must necessarily undergo. The process of accounting reified in the act of giving an account of oneself enables recognition through the act of revealing the subject to other people. Third, accountability depends on exposing subjects to others for recognition to ensue. Dependent on a dialogical structure sustained by language, accountability becomes open to the failure to meet expectations. The complete understanding of someone remains impossible. Yet, it is this impossibility to fully account for oneself that enables ethical relationships to form (Butler, 2005). The ethical power of accounting emerges from its ability to extend invitations for accountability even when there exists a chance of failure. The process of recognition emerges from the shared vulnerability of language as subjects (whether individual or corporate) share their vulnerability to create this fragile exchange. The accountable subject achieves intelligibility through the act of giving an account of itself, where the account remains open to the ongoing process of acquiring meaning from dispossessing the accountable subject of its account.

This essay adds value to critical accounting studies through its exploration of philosophical aspects of accounting and accountability. It connects Butler's (2005) dispossession ethics to hermeneutical and testimonial approaches in accounting theory so as to show how account-giving creates a link between subjectivity and its recognition. Dialogic and moral accountability literature is also extended through its argument that corporate discourse is dependent on the performativity of account-giving. It establishes accountability as an ongoing practice of mutual understanding and disclosure for the sake of the recognition of the corporation as an accountable subject. Accountability is then reified as a practice of recognition and exposure.

However, the study carries limitations that restrict its findings. The hermeneutic approach focuses on textual meanings but might fail to detect non-verbal accountability practices. Moreover, the emphasis on the role of the CEO for the sake of corporate recognition might leave aside other relevant voices inside the corporation that can also impinge on corporate speech addressed to external parties. In the case of AdP, the chairman and the CEO were the same person. Exploring cases where the two roles are not performed by one person only might present other perspectives linked to power dynamics inside corporations.

Future research should investigate how systems of power impinge on which accounts gain credibility while others remain suppressed. Research studies that compare different sectors and cultural environments can help to better understand the proposed ethical mechanisms across various contexts. Future research should also analyse how the act of giving an account for the sake of recognition interacts with technological advancements and automated systems. The ability to account for oneself remains uncertain when communication involves machines or automated recognition systems and environments.

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5. CONCLUSION

5.1. General Conclusions

The research question around which this thesis pivoted – how, and under what conditions, does the recognition of the corporation as a capable moral subject, accountable for its actions, take place? has led to a philosophical and interpretive investigation across three essays. The first essay explored to what extent corporations can become moral subjects. Through Aristotle's (1934, 1944) and Ricoeur's (1992, 2005) theoretical approaches, a theoretical framework was developed to study corporate actions as the departure point from which the actualisation of their capability to act and to have actions imputed to them ensues, ultimately turning them into subjects capable of moral assessment, without becoming persons like human beings. The second essay studied accountability as a process that sustains the recognition of corporate moral subjectivity. Again, a theoretical framework was built, drawing on Ricoeur's (2005) concept of recognition and the role that the phenomenology of the capability to promise and memory play therein. The third essay analysed how accounting, understood as an ethical and performative practice, enables the recognition of corporate subjectivity through Butler's (2005) theory of giving an account of oneself. The argument around which the three essays pivot is that the recognition of corporations as moral subjects derives from ethical, relational and discursive conditions that are constitutive of their recognition as capable moral subjects, i.e., capable of acting and, with those actions imputed to them, capable of moral assessment.

The research shows that recognition is not an automatic consequence of organisational existence or legitimacy. Rather, it is reified as an event that takes place when the corporation acts and as a result opens itself to others through the act of accounting for itself, the locus of accountability. As an ongoing event occurring in time, the process of recognition is not static, but ensues as a continuous renegotiation of meaning that occurs through ethical and political relationships that maintain the corporation's moral identity. Corporate moral subjectivity emerges through hermeneutical and performative processes dependent on the mutual engagement of capability, accountability and recognition (see Ricoeur, 2005).

This thesis illustrates that these three elements derive from separate yet harmonious philosophical traditions: Aristotle (1934, 1944), who places moral agency within the domain of practical activity and political organization; Ricoeur (1992, 2005), who articulates the phenomenology of the capable human being and the ethical course of recognition under his definition of ethics: “aiming at the good life, with and for others, in just institutions” (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 172); and Butler (2005), who exposes

the performative nature and vulnerable aspects of giving an account of oneself. The thesis structure consists of three parts that enable it to respond to its main research question at multiple levels of analysis, starting from ontological foundations (what makes corporate moral subjectivity capable) amidst ethical considerations (what sustains recognition), and ending with discursive and performative mechanisms of recognition (how recognition occurs through language).

The first essay explores how corporations can be understood as moral agents through the process of analogical expansion from Aristotelian and Ricoeurian ethical approaches. According to Aristotle (1934, 1944), moral life consists of performing actions that lead to the good life in the polis. As such, ethical agency is revealed as inherently political (Aristotle, 1944). The corporation functions as a social organisation that enters the ethicopolitical domain through its decision-making processes about its purposes, how it impacts on citizens' lives, and the bearing of consequences for its actions, all for the sake of the common good. The hermeneutical approach of Ricoeur in Oneself as Another (1992) enables the expansion of these insights to group entities – reified as single agents – by showing that moral subjectivity emerges not only through the dialectic of *ipse* (selfhood) and *idem* (sameness), which is related to narrative identity, but, and most especially, through the dialectic of the self and the other, fundamental for the imputation of action and consequent recognition to ensue. A corporation can be seen as a capable collective subject acting as a single agent through its ability to maintain consistent alignment between its narrated identity, actual actions, and external recognition from others.

The first layer of the arguments of the thesis, reflected in the first essay, answers the initial specific research question – to what extent are corporations capable of moral agency? This is established by asserting that moral capability exists independently of metaphysical personhood requirements; it depends essentially on the capability to act. Corporations are recognised as moral subjects to the extent that they participate in the community through imputable actions, interpretable intentions and publicly deliberated responsibilities. The capability to act is then a relational possibility, dependent on a moral community for its actualisation.

The second essay develops this theoretical structure by focusing on how accountability works as the connection between corporate moral agency and recognition. Drawing only on Ricoeur's work, especially his book "The Course of Recognition" (2005), it is argued that accountability performs the ethical connection that transforms mere actions into recognisable moral conduct. Ricoeur's (2005) concept of recognition is seen as an ethical process formed by identification, mutual acknowledgment, and reciprocal esteem; it extends beyond epistemological concerns, because it involves ethical

dimensions where recognising another person means substantiating[75] their ability to perform responsible actions. The communicative process of accountability enables substantiating, which, as a result, leads to recognition. By becoming accountable for its actions, the corporation becomes capable of being recognised as a (moral) subject; it exposes itself as an agent whose actions are open to judgment, interpretation, and response.

In the process of accountability, the corporation becomes a moral subject capable of both claiming and conferring recognition; it seeks recognition through asserting coherence and intention in the corporate narrative, yet it grants recognition by acknowledging the legitimacy of others as affected by the actions of the corporation, being thereby *beings* that *count*. This mutuality, inherent to recognition (Ricoeur, 2005), constitutes the ethical essence of accountability. The second essay then answers its specific research question – what is accountability's role in the process of recognition of the moral agency of corporations? It does so by exploring how accountability, far from being a technical and objective process, functions as a relational bond where corporations bear moral responsiveness to others. Through accountability, the corporation is legitimised in its capacity to act, opening itself to the recognition that sustains its moral subjectivity.

The purpose of the third essay was to illustrate how recognition manifests through performance and discourse. Inspired by Butler's Giving an Account of Oneself (2005), it argues that recognition takes place through the act of giving an account, in which the subject – whether individual or corporate – exposes itself to others and accepts the partiality of its own self-understanding. Butler's (2005) notion of dispossession is reified as fundamental to recognition, since it refers to the process of the subject enduring a loss of sovereign authorship of its own narrative. The corporate subject gains moral understanding through surrendering its narrative control to interpretation.

A case study of AdP was carried out to explore the way accounting sustains, and contributes to, the recognition of corporations as moral subjects. Butler's (2005) philosophy regarding the act of giving an account of oneself and the processes of dispossession and recognition inherent thereto supplied the theoretical approach of the case study. It was employed analogically regarding a corporation.

Through its letters to the shareholders – entitled by the company as "chairman's message" – and complemented by sustainability and financial reports, public statements, and ethical commitments, AdP engaged in an ongoing dialogue with society that revealed both its agency and its vulnerability. The hermeneutical analysis showed that recognition occurred when the corporation widened its narrative so

[75] *Substantiating* is here is used with the meaning *giving substance*, i.e., the capability to act of corporations is legitimised through its actualisation by what actions are imputed to the corporate subject. Thereby, the corporation as a subject is given substance within the community.

as to acknowledge the interpretations of external audiences receiving the accounts the corporate subject was giving of itself. Through these moments of disclosure, accounting transformed into a performative and ethical practice that linked recognition to accountability.

The thesis provides an answer to its general research question through the integration of these findings. The corporation is recognised as a moral subject through ethical, hermeneutical and performative conditions. First, the corporation needs an ethical horizon directing its deliberations and, as a result, its actions towards the good life (see Aristotle, 1934). It requires, second, a hermeneutical structure of capability and accountability through which the corporation interprets itself and is interpreted by others (see Ricoeur, 1992, 2005). Also, it requires, third, a performative openness to the vulnerability of discourse, in which recognition takes place as an event of address and response (see Butler, 2005). Recognition therefore reflects the interdependent nature of corporate moral subjectivity, instead of confirming the corporation as an autonomous, self-legitimised subject. The main features for recognition to occur are then a shared ethical framework for deliberation and action, communicative practices sustaining accountability, and discursive exposure for enabling performativity.

The answers provided to the general research question and the specific ones of each essay create new implications which affect both moral philosophy theory and actual business practices regarding accounting, business ethics, and corporate accountability. The process of recognition depends on specific relational conditions, whose nature makes corporate accountability impossible to evaluate through metrics, standards and disclosures detached from dialogic practices. Recognition functions as a moral practice that enables organisations to create shared meanings with the community of others through mutual acknowledgement.

These insights invite a reassessment of the fundamental purposes of accounting itself. The corporation's social representation through accounting as account-giving requires ongoing engagement from the part of the corporation with the community, for the sake of the recognition of its moral subjectivity. Discursive artifacts such as financial and sustainability reports work as narrative objects that shape how society sees and perceives the corporation as a moral entity. The corporation achieves recognition of its agency and accountability through representations that enable ethical reflection, interpretation and responsiveness.

5.2. Contributions

Several contributions emerge from this thesis, as a new perspective on corporate ethics was added to the fields of accounting (e.g., Carnegie, 2022; Laughlin, 1996), accountability (e.g., Ferry et al., 2024; Hoskin, 1996) and business ethics (e.g., Deslandes, 2012; Loacker & Muhr, 2009; Matten & Crane, 2005; Néron & Norman, 2008).

First, a theoretical framework of corporate moral subjectivity is developed here, through its integration of Aristotelian ethics and politics with Ricoeur's (1992, 2005) articulation of the phenomenology of the capable human being and the ethical course of recognition. These two concepts are explored under his definition of ethics. Butler's performative theory of recognition, sustained upon the dispossession of sovereign authorship of subjecthood accountable subjects must necessarily suffer, provides additional substance regarding the mechanisms operating behind the recognition of corporate moral subjects. Substantial depth is added to critical accounting studies because it develops a new philosophical framework for ethical analysis. Also, existing discussions about corporate political involvement in society also benefit from the arguments and theoretical framework developed in this thesis. Perspectives such as corporate citizenship (Crane et al., 2008) or political CSR (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011) can be extended when introducing the concept of recognition, particularly with respect to the passivity of its verbal stance of *being recognised*.

A different approach to corporate ethics is taken through reversing the way corporations are reified as moral subjects within political frameworks: instead of departing from the premise that corporations exist and act, analysing the nature of those actions so as to infer about the ethical and political import of the corporation, and leaving ontological presuppositions regarding corporations intact, the framework posits actions as the departing point of analysis, from which the process of recognising corporations as moral subjects begins. Hitherto, nothing is capable of being argued regarding the moral ontology of corporations; even their capability to act can be subject to question when not actualised by action. Drawing on Aristotle (1944), corporate activities as moral action become essential components of community-based ethical and political systems. The corporation exists as a social entity which works together to achieve the common goal of living a good life (eudaimonia). This perspective opposes both neoliberal views of firms as profit-driven organisations and technocratic approaches to accountability which focus on measurement and compliance.

Second, building the theoretical framework (with recognition as its keyword) upon Ricoeur's (1992, 2005) work on ethics and recognition shows how the latter is paramount for exploring the possibility of the emergence of corporate moral subjectivity. Recognition is assessed as the central

mechanism that enables moral agency. The arguments pressed forward in this thesis build upon the concept of recognition by introducing passivity into the process of assessing corporate morality, through the verbal stance of *being recognised*. The capable corporation exists as a narrative and ethical construct, whose moral agency and meaningfulness are achieved through recognition sustained on its interpretive relationship with others.

Third, Butler's dimensions of performativity and vulnerability are incorporated to enhance the analysis of corporate moral subjectivity. According to Butler (2005), people must give an account of themselves to others in order to be meaningfully recognised, under conditions of exposure and partial opacity to others. Through analogical reasoning, corporations need others to be legitimately recognised from the accounts they give. The performative approach creates opportunities to reify accounting as a practice dependent on an ethical scene of address where the subjectivity of the accountable corporation is built, going beyond procedural information transfer for the sake of control. However, recognition is also shown as always precarious. Corporate subjectivity arises from an ongoing process of account-giving, given the dynamic nature of the scene of address (see Butler, 2005). Together, these theoretical contributions foster a more advanced understanding of corporate moral agency, where moral subjectivity derives from ethical actions, narrative accounts and, ultimately, performative recognition.

5.3. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Like every philosophical and interpretive project, this research possesses its limitations. The process of analogically extending philosophical concepts focused on the individual human agent to corporate domains inevitably requires caution in its approach. The philosophical work of Aristotle, Ricoeur and Butler did not prima facie have corporations in mind. Therefore, the analogical approach to the philosophical concepts of these authors requires proper care, because it can produce valuable insights as well as potential errors.

Another limitation concerns its practical broadness. The AdP case study illustrates how recognition is a linguistic and context-specific process, because it is dependent on the giving of accounts performed within a particular scene of address; it develops differently based on institutional frameworks and social norms and/or expectations, which are linguistically framed. Yet, it does not explore how corporations' recognition may vary when exposed to different cultural environments, which can give rise to opposing scenes of address. Future research should expand the arguments put forward in this thesis by conducting comparative or longitudinal studies that analyse how the recognition of corporate moral subjectivity ensues regarding different organisational forms or various timeframes.

The philosophical depth of this research embodies both its strength and weakness. The philosophical language used in this research might not directly lead to the development of managerial tools or policy recommendations. Yet, that is a calculated limitation: it avoids transforming ethics into operational methods when those tools or recommendations are devoid of dialogic approaches. Nevertheless, the connection between philosophical studies and organisational management practices needs additional research to create educational methods for organisational ethical responsibility.

Finally, recognition is here explored under three specific philosophical approaches. But the importance of the concept towards corporate moral subjectivity could benefit from additional perspectives, including non-Western philosophies of relationality. The expansion of this philosophical dialogue would create a more diverse foundation for corporate ethics, while making recognition principles more applicable worldwide.

In addition to those already mentioned alongside the limitations that were highlighted, other clues for future research involve the application of the concepts of this thesis vis-à-vis modern artificial intelligence, digitalisation and algorithmic governance systems. The rise of automated systems in organisations can intertwine moral capability with technological mediation (see Argento et al., 2025). Exploring how the recognition of corporate moral subjectivity can take place in human-machine collectives could extend the scope of the arguments of this research into the other trending fields of study, like digital ethics.

The arguments put forward in this research can also be complemented by studies approaching the theme of recognition from within the corporation, exploring either the effects it exercises upon employees and related parties or how they contribute to enhance or constrain the process. Field work would further the understanding about the mechanisms operating within the corporation regarding its recognition as a moral subject. Additionally, another line of investigation may relate to the broadness of the ethical import of recognition, particularly regarding how other others, particularly those that cannot achieve legitimacy, given their lack of capability to be heard, are taken into account. Drawing on Ricoeur (1992, p. 172), recognition becomes pivotal for “aiming at the good life, with and for others, in just institutions”.

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