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SCHOLARLY ARTICLE

Just Accounting

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Abstract

This article examines the evolving landscape of accounting, distinguishing between mainstream practices and critical developments that challenge conventional notions of accounting and accountability. By engaging with perspectives that reimagine accounting's role, the paper highlights how rights intersect with accounting practices and how accounting, in turn, shapes rights. While financial and non-financial disclosures can expose human rights abuses, concerns persist over 'accountability-washing' and the dominance of economic interests. The reluctance of standard-setting bodies, such as the International Sustainability Standards Board, to integrate human rights underscores the political and institutional barriers to change. The article concludes by exploring future research directions through which business and human rights scholars and critical accounting researchers can mutually benefit from each other's insights.

Keywords: accountability; critical accounting; financial and non-financial reporting; justice; neoliberalism

I. What Does Accounting Have to Do with Human Rights?

I am often asked this question when attending conferences on business and human rights. Looking back, I did not initially enter this field with an interest in human rights. My education and training were directed towards becoming a professional accountant in the conventional sense—starting in an audit firm and later transitioning into financial institutions. However, my engagement with questions of business and human rights emerged through the exploration of the politics surrounding what accounting should be. This exploration in sketching what constitutes just accounting led me to consider how human rights, as the fundamental principles of justice and fairness, may be relevant to both accounting practice and accounting research. In this article, I will first look back to provide an overview of accounting practice, examining mainstream accounting as well as peripheral developments that seek to reimagine what accounting should be. By distinguishing between these perspectives, it becomes possible to see how rights matter to accounting practice and, conversely, how accounting matters to rights. I conclude by looking ahead to potential future research directions that could further develop this area.

Accounting has long been criticised for its implicit alignment with profit maximisation as its guiding rationale.[1] It inherits the basic logic of utilitarianism, a 'rational exercise of utility

[1] John Flower, *Accounting and Distributive Justice* (UK: Routledge, 2010).

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maximisation', that is, to 'produce the greatest good for the greatest number within a pristine neo-classical framework'.[2] Accounting decisions are often reduced to cost-benefit calculations, focusing on the foreseeable economic consequences of choices—a core tenet of transaction cost economics.[3] This transactional logic underpins the rise of positive accounting theory, which prioritises decision usefulness as the primary objective of financial reporting and accounting information. Under this model, accounting information is deemed valuable only if it is useful and relevant for shareholders' investment decisions.[4] Consequently, accounting standards and the quality of accounting information are often evaluated based on their ability of 'explaining and predicting security prices'.[5]

Some contend that accounting's focus has become overly skewed towards the 'production problem' – the provision of information and the development of techniques that maximise production output and profit – while overlooks the 'distribution problem'.[6] Others argue that the emphasis on decision usefulness represents a transformation of accounting from an 'autonomous discipline' into a 'sub-discipline of a neoclassical economics'.[7] It not only reduces accounting into merely 'calculative practice',[8] but also results in dehumanising 'the social' and treating individuals no differently from resources and thereby 'it reduces person'.[9]

By encouraging a consequentialist logic—where all potential consequences of an action are weighed and compared to select the one that yields the greatest benefits—accounting can be used to justify decisions made at the expense of one's welfare or even human rights.[10] Schweiker also points out that attempts to rely on a single 'calculus' to evaluate future consequences—typically aimed at maximising aggregate outcomes—reveal 'the fragility of life counts against precision', simplifying complex and lived realities to abstract numerical measurements.[11] As DiMaggio states, this logic may result in assuming organisation and people as 'more plastic, calculating and manipulable than they usually are'.[12] Even more troubling, accounting's detachment from social reality may lead to what Chwastiak calls a 'metaphysics of death,' wherein accounting is dehumanised and shaped by markets rather

[2] Rob Gray, Jan Bebbington, and Ken McPhail, 'Teaching Ethics in Accounting and the Ethics of Accounting Teaching: Educating for Immorality and a Possible Case for Social and Environmental Accounting Education' (1994) 3:1 *Accounting Education* 62.

[3] Harold Demsetz, 'The Cost of Transacting' (1968) 82:1 *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 33–53. Oliver E. Williamson, 'Transaction-Cost Economics: The Governance of Contractual Relations' (1979) 22:2 *The Journal of Law and Economics* 233–61.

[4] Paul F. Williams, 'The Legitimate Concern With Fairness' (1987) 12:2 *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 169–89.

[5] Nihel Chabrak, 'Money Talks: The Language of the Rochester School' (2012) 25:3 *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* 456.

[6] Flower, note 1.

[7] Sue Ravenscroft, and Paul F. Williams, 'Making Imaginary Worlds Real: The Case of Expensing Employee Stock Options' (2009) 34:6–7 *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 775. See also Sara Ann Reiter, and Paul F. Williams, 'The Structure and Progressivity of Accounting Research: The Crisis in the Academy Revisited' (2002) 27:6 *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 575–607.

[8] Danture Wickramasinghe, and Chandana Alawattage. *Management Accounting Change: Approaches and Perspectives* (Routledge, 2007) 53.

[9] Edward J. O'Boyle, 'Economics: A Moral Science Because Persons Matter More Than Things' (1986) 13:10 *International Journal of Social Economics* 39.

[10] Prem Sikka, 'Accounting for Human Rights: The Challenge of Globalization and Foreign Investment Agreements' (2011) 22:8 *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 811–827. See also, Christine Cooper, Andrea Coulson, and Phil Taylor, 'Accounting for Human Rights: Doxic Health and Safety Practices—the Accounting Lesson From ICL' (2011) 22:8 *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 738–758.

[11] William Schweiker, 'Accounting for Ourselves: Accounting Practice and the Discourse of Ethics' (1993) 18:2–3 *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 243.

[12] Paul DiMaggio, 'Interest and Agency in Institutional Theory' in Lynne G Zucker (ed.), *Institutional Patterns and Organizations: Culture and Environment* (Cambridge: Ballinger Publishing Co, 1988) 5.

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than by people, reducing its role to the mere accumulation and distribution of wealth and income.[13] This shift, Murphy and O'Connell argue, runs counter to what accounting has historically been and ought to be—an act of giving an account and taking accountability for what is generated.[14]

To reconstruct and rearticulate what accounting should be, various attempts have been made to do so in both accounting practices and scholarly research. The concept of stewardship has been proposed as an alternative accounting principle; some equate it with a call for accountability, emphasising the need to hold managers accountable for their actions and judgements.[15] Cooper and Sherer argue that accountants need to take account of the effects of accounting reports on the 'distribution of income, wealth and power in society'.[16] Watts and Zimmerman contend that accounting and financial reporting takes up a significant role in 'wealth transfers', which are 'affected both directly and indirectly by the political process'.[17] Flower suggests that accounting should generate information that is 'relevant to assessing justice'[18]—that is, accounts should enable users of accounts to evaluate the justice of the firm's activities 'according to his (the user's) chosen theory'.[19] In this view, accountants, in Flower's expectation, seem to take an important role in deciding what, how and why some information are included or excluded from the presentation of financial statements, and thus become 'the dispenser of justice'.[20]

Nonetheless, Pelger observes that in the final version of the International Accounting Standards Board (IASB) conceptual framework, despite an enduring debate within standard setting, stewardship was ultimately omitted.[21] The Discussion Paper states that 'providing information for the specific purpose of helping to decide what constitutes excessive remuneration or unjust enrichment is not the purpose of financial reporting'.[22] Flower himself concedes that he is being 'rather pessimistic' about the prospect of developing a report that would enable users, especially secondary stakeholders, to use in assessing whether the treatments or harm from the firm is just or not.[23] For some, this implies a neoliberalist view of accounting that is becoming 'the most effective form of power' that commands consent and force acceptance in public.[24] Such dominance is so pervasive that it

[13] Michele Chwastiak, 'Deconstructing the Principal-Agent Model: A View From the Bottom' (1999) 10:4 *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 434.

[14] Tim Murphy, and Vincent O'Connell. 'Discourses Surrounding the Evolution of the IASB/FASB Conceptual Framework: What They Reveal About The "Living Law" of Accounting' (2013) 38:1 *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 72–91.

[15] Sue Ravenscroft, and Paul F. Williams, 'Making Imaginary Worlds Real: The Case of Expensing Employee Stock Options' (2009) 34:6–7 *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 775. See also Tim Murphy, and Vincent O'Connell. 'Discourses Surrounding the Evolution of the IASB/FASB Conceptual Framework: What They Reveal About the "Living Law" of Accounting' (2013) 38:1 *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 72–91.

[16] David J. Cooper, and Michael J. Sherer 'The Value of Corporate Accounting Reports: Arguments for a Political Economy of Accounting' (1984) 9:3–4 *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 218.

[17] Ross L. Watts, and Jerold L. Zimmerman 'The Demand for and Supply of Accounting Theories: The Market for Excuses' (1979) 54:2 *Accounting review* 280.

[18] Flower, note 1, 87.

[19] Ibid, 85.

[20] Ibid, 87.

[21] Christoph Pelger, 'Practices of Standard-Setting—an Analysis of the IASB's and FASB's Process of Identifying the Objective of Financial Reporting' (2016) 50 *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 51–73.

[22] Ibid, 60, Discussion paper published by IASB, quoted by Pelger, 2016.

[23] Flower, note 1, 111.

[24] Barbara D. Merino, Alan G. Mayper, and Thomas D. Tolleson, 'Neoliberalism, Deregulation and Sarbanes-Oxley: The Legitimation of a Failed Corporate Governance Model' (2010) 23:6 *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* 777.

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'makes it very difficult to imagine alternatives',[25] and any research, comment or criticism that does not conform to this dominant discourse tend to 'fail to win credibility'.[26]

For years, critical accounting scholars have sought to envision alternatives. One approach has been advocating for the expansion of financial reporting, leading to the rise of social and environmental accounting and the emergence of integrated reporting. For example, there has been a shift from accountability in capital markets towards accountability in a 'wider range of organisational contexts' including 'cooperatives, social enterprises, NGOs, and employee-owned companies'.[27] Some scholars argue that accountability should extend beyond these entities to encompass environmental concerns as well.[28] Shearer thus recommends 'an enhanced social reporting for employee groups, customers, suppliers, and other parties with whom the economic entity contracts, as well as environmental concerns and others with whom the entity does not contract'.[29] Some see this as a potential to re-narrate business stories.[30] This gives rise to new forms of accounting and development of accounting techniques, such as carbon accounting, water accounting, human rights accounting and accounting for biodiversity.[31]

However, the proliferation of these reports has been met with scepticism. Gray argues that they are 'far from helpful', and he views the Integrated Reporting initiative—which seeks to incorporate environmental and social data into annual reports—as ultimately 'misleading'.[32] One key issue is the poor quality of such reports, which are produced voluntarily and lack regulatory oversight or standard evaluation mechanisms.[33] Moreover, many of these reports exist as 'stand-alone' documents under various titles, including social reports, sustainability reports and human rights reports, rather than being integrated into financial reporting frameworks.[34] When decisions about disclosure are left entirely to businesses, it is argued that firms will 'take into account only the impact of [their] decision on [their] own wealth and ignore the impact on the welfare of other people'.[35] Although integrated reporting is often presented as a progressive step, critics argue that it constitutes little more than symbolic change, allowing businesses to continue with 'business as usual' without challenging the 'present mode of operation of the global capitalist economic system'.[36] In a similar vein,

[25] Christine Cooper, Mike Danson, Geoff Whittam, and Tommy Sheridan, 'The Neoliberal Project—Local Taxation Intervention in Scotland' (2010) 21:3 *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 209.

[26] Christine Cooper, 'Ideology, Hegemony and Accounting Discourse: A Case Study of the National Union of Journalists' (1995) 6:3 *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 202.

[27] Brendan O'Dwyer, and Jeffrey Unerman, 'Fostering Rigour in Accounting for Social Sustainability' (2016) 49 *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 38. See also Rob Gray, 'Is Accounting for Sustainability Actually Accounting for Sustainability … and How Would We Know? An Exploration of Narratives of Organisations and the Planet' (2010) 35:1 *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 47–62.

[28] See Jill Atkins, Barry C. Atkins, Ian Thomson, and Warren Maroun, 'Good" News From Nowhere: Imagining Utopian Sustainable Accounting' (2015) 28:5 *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* 651–70.

[29] Teri Shearer, 'Ethics and Accountability: From the For-Itself to the For-The-Other' (2002) 27:6 *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 568.

[30] Colin Dey, Shona Russell, and Ian Thomson, 'Exploring the Potential of Shadow Accounts in Problematising Institutional Conduct', in Stephen P. Osborne, and Amanda Ball (eds.), *Social Accounting and Public Management* (UK: Routledge, 2010) 78–90.

[31] See Jan Bebbington, Jeffrey Unerman, and Brendan O'Dwyer, B. (eds.), *Sustainability Accounting and Accountability* (UK: Routledge, 2014) for a synthesis.

[32] Rob Gray, 'Back to Basics: What Do We Mean by Environmental (and Social) Accounting and What Is It for?—a Reaction to Thornton' (2013) 24:6 *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 464.

[33] Matias Laine, 'Towards Sustaining the Status Quo: Business Talk of Sustainability in Finnish Corporate Disclosures 1987–2005' (2010) 19:2 *European Accounting Review* 247–74.

[34] Gray, note 32.

[35] John Flower, *The Social Function of Accounts: Reforming Accountancy to Serve Mankind* (UK: Routledge, 2017) 13.

[36] Ibid, 195.

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Deegan is also sceptical of integrated reports and their 'poor cousin' reports produced under the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) framework, doubting their ability to push businesses beyond a profit-driven focus.[37] These reports emerge as part of 'organised hypocrisy', serving as tools to manage conflicting stakeholder interests;[38] while effecting 'change-but-no-change'.[39]

In addition to the incremental changes in financial reporting, some view the accountability to a broader range of actors as a call for greater accountability and increased democratic participation by multiple stakeholders. In this light, the concept of accountability plays a critical role in enabling both disclosive and normative critiques of existing accounting practices. It could be defined as 'answerability' to provide justification for how resources are allocated and used. Some frame accountability as a relational practice enacted through 'talk, listening, asking questions', a form of care and mutual responsibility.[40] Others see it as creating opportunities to engage with the oppressed group and assist them in fighting for political recognition by advancing 'counter-accounts'.[41] Some others view it as a practice 'intended to challenge and de-legitimate power relations in order to mobilise change agendas in social movements',[42] or as 'a counter-practice to the numeric evaluation'.[43]

Some scholars ground the concept of accountability in relational ontology, arguing for a re-framing of accountability in terms of an 'accounting for-the-other' to replace the prevailing economic model of 'accounting for-the-self'.[44] This shift aims to make 'economic institutions more responsive to the other'.[45] Some connect the concept with political theories and argue for an agonistic accountability that takes pluralism seriously and thus designs accounting frameworks that enable democratic dialogues between the 'engager and engaged',[46] or amongst affected stakeholders.[47] Some view accountability as a means of providing a voice for the suppressed or the marginalised to make them counted.[48] Others argue that it helps to make these people visible and promotes more democratic debate on a societal level.[49]

[37] Craig Deegan, 'The Accountant Will Have a Central Role in Saving the Planet … Really? A Reflection on "Green Accounting and Green Eyeshades Twenty Years Later"' (2013) 24:6 *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 457.

[38] Charles H. Cho, Matias Laine, Robin W. Roberts, and Michelle Rodrigue, 'Organized Hypocrisy, Organizational Façades, and Sustainability Reporting' (2015) 40 *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 78.

[39] Markus J. Milne, and Rob Gray, 'W(h)ither ecology? The Triple Bottom Line, the Global Reporting Initiative, and Corporate Sustainability Reporting' (2013) 118 *Journal of Business Ethics* 14.

[40] John Roberts, 'No One Is Perfect: The Limits of Transparency and an Ethic for "Intelligent" Accountability' (2009) 34:8 *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 969.

[41] See examples in Sonja Gallhofer, Jim Haslam, Elizabeth Monk, and Claire Roberts, 'The Emancipatory Potential of Online Reporting: The Case of Counter Accounting' (2006) 19:5 *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* 681–718.

[42] Ian Thomson, Colin Dey, and Shona Russell, 'Activism, Arenas and Accounts in Conflicts Over Tobacco Control' (2015) 28:5 *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* 810.

[43] Peggy Kamuf, 'Accounterability' (2007) 21:2 *Textual Practice* 253.

[44] Shearer, note 29, 561.

[45] Ibid, 570.

[46] Jan Bebbington, Judy Brown, Bob Frame, and Ian Thomson, 'Theorizing Engagement: The Potential of a Critical Dialogic Approach' (2007) 20:3 *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* 358.

[47] See research around agonistic and dialogical accounting, Judy Brown, 'Democracy, Sustainability and Dialogic Accounting Technologies: Taking Pluralism Seriously' (2009) 20:9 *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 313–42; Judy Brown, and Jesse Dillard, 'Integrated Reporting: On the Need for Broadening Out and Opening Up' (2014) 27:7 *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* 1120–56; Jesse Dillard, and Eija Vinnari, 'Critical Dialogical Accountability: From Accounting-Based Accountability to Accountability-Based Accounting' (2019) 62 *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 16–38.

[48] Christine Cooper, Phil Taylor, Newman Smith, and Lesley Catchpowle, 'A Discussion of the Political Potential of Social Accounting' (2005) 16:7 *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 951–74.

[49] Ian Thomson, and Jan Bebbington, 'Social and Environmental Reporting in the UK: A Pedagogic Evaluation' (2005) 16:5 *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 507–33; Crawford Spence, 'Social Accounting's Emancipatory Potential: A Gramscian Critique' (2009) 20:2 *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 205–27.

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II. Accounting for Human Rights and Human Rights in Accounting

Now, I return to the question I began with: what does accounting have to do with human rights, and vice versa?

The introduction of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) recognises that businesses have a responsibility to respect human rights, irrespective of legal obligations. The UNGPs place emphasis on the voluntary self-regulation of business organisations, that is, effectively on corporate social responsibility.[50] The approach overall is polycentric, a 'principled pragmatism',[51] within which law remains crucial. It is expected that states will build on the foundation of the UNGPs by, when appropriate, making mandatory practices, such as human rights due diligence procedures, initially required on a voluntary basis by the UNGPs.[52] The implementation of 'due diligence' for human rights requires businesses to actively monitor and promote their respect for human rights while also documenting and addressing any abuses or violations in which they may be complicit.

The introduction of human rights due diligence challenges the dominant image of accounting, even though its disclosive and informational role remains significant in addressing human rights concerns. Financial information, for instance, can help expose human rights abuses, such as by analysing a corporation's labour costs and wage expenses to reveal potential labour rights abuses.[53] Similarly, non-financial reports and disclosure can highlight the presence—or absence—of human rights-related information.[54] However, some view corporate human rights disclosures as little more than additional requests for information, akin to sustainability and environmental reporting—a superficial expansion of accountability.[55] Corporations may engage in accountability washing, by providing the appearance of responsibility through the provision of accounts and more disclosure, without substantive change in their practices.[56] In a more recent study, there is a notable deficiency in action-oriented disclosures, as detail accounts of the human rights due diligence processes and implementation are largely absent.[57]

The grammar and discourse of human rights have certainly, in some cases, acted as catalysts for innovation. Cooper, Coulson and Taylor explore the possibility of translating the right to work in a safe environment into accounting language to enhance protections for health and safety.[58] Hazelton argues that if political participation is considered a fundamental human right, then access to information itself may also be a human right that businesses

[50] John G. Ruggie, 'Multinationals as Global Institution: Power, Authority and Relative Autonomy' (2018) 12:3 *Regulation & Governance 317–33*.

[51] John G. Ruggie, 'Regulating Multinationals: The UN Guiding Principles, Civil Society, and International Legalization', in César Rodriguez-Garavito (ed.), *Business and Human Rights: Beyond the End of the Beginning* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[52] John G. Ruggie, Rees Caroline, and Rachel Davis, 'Ten Years After: From UN Guiding Principles to Multi-Fiduciary Obligations' (2021) 6:2 *Business and Human Rights Journal* 179–97.

[53] Sonja Gallhofer, Jim Haslam, and Sibylle Van Der Walt, 'Accountability and Transparency in Relation to Human Rights: A Critical Perspective Reflecting Upon Accounting, Corporate Responsibility and Ways Forward in the Context of Globalization' (2011) 22:8 *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 765–80.

[54] see, for example, Christ et al., 2019, on corporate disclosure of human rights in Australia; Katherine L. Christ, Kathyayini Kathy Rao, and Roger Leonard Burritt, 'Accounting for Modern Slavery: An Analysis of Australian Listed Company Disclosures', (2019) 32:2 *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* 836–65.

[55] Dillard and Vinnari, note 47.

[56] See examples in Daniela Pianezzi, and Lino Cinquini, 'Assessing the Validity of Accounting for Human Rights: A Pragmatic Constructivist Perspective' (2016) 13:3 *Qualitative Research in Accounting & Management* 370–91; Sepideh Parsa, Ian Roper, Michael Muller-Camen, and Eva Szigetvari, 'Have Labour Practices and Human Rights Disclosures Enhanced Corporate Accountability? The Case of the GRI Framework' (2018) 42:1 *Accounting Forum* 47–64.

[57] Michael Rogerson, Francesco Scarpa, and Annie Snelson-Powell, 'Accounting for Human Rights: Evidence of Due Diligence in EU-Listed Firms' Reporting' (2024) 99 *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 1–19.

[58] Cooper, Coulson, and Taylor, note 10.

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should respect in order to allow stakeholders to participate in political debate.[59] However, translating human rights into accounting practices remains a matter of judgement and interpretation. McPhail and Adams discover four distinct 'grammars' used by corporations when disclosing about their human rights policies, risks and impacts.[60] Meanwhile, a recent study exploring the varying interpretations of human rights amongst managers found that the essence of human rights may get lost in these translations into business terms and organisational languages.[61] Without a moral grounding on what it means to respect human rights within corporations, it indeed 'leaves room for discretion at the implementation level'.[62] As McPhail and Ferguson point out, as yet there is no agreement on accounting for human rights, it is risky to 'rush' towards standardisation.[63]

In addition, power dynamics also play a critical role in shaping and obstructing the discharge of corporate accountability, and on what should be disclosed and communicated. For example, Siddiqui and Uddin observe the complex and intertwined relationship between state and business, creating an environment that legitimise negligence of workplace safety and poor working conditions.[64] Study also shows how dominant actors in the UK extractive sector shape the framing and interpretation of modern slavery, thereby preventing alternative perspectives from emerging.[65] Kreander and McPhail provide evidence that financial logics often hinder the integration and implementation of human rights considerations within business practices.[66]

Research on accounting and human rights appears to offer valuable insights for both fields. The challenges from critical accounting scholars on the classic and neoliberal image of accounting continue, incorporating or mobilising the moral and critical power of human rights.[67] The political potential of accounting and accountability is mobilised to stage dissensus and disagreements, and hereby to enable claims for human rights by affected stakeholders as well as by the general public.[68] Both the focus on counter accounts and the claim for broader accountability have been regarded as emancipatory tactics to re-orientate the development of non-financial reporting and to challenge the dominant forms of

[59] James Hazelton, 'Accounting as a Human Right: The Case of Water Information' (2016) 26:2 *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* 267–311.

[60] Ken McPhail, and Carol A. Adams, 'Corporate Respect for Human Rights: Meaning, Scope, and the Shifting Order of Discourse' (2016) 29:4 *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* 650–78.

[61] Marisa McVey, John Ferguson, and François-Régis Puyou. '"Traduttore, Traditore?" Translating Human Rights into the Corporate Context' (2023) 182:2 *Journal of Business Ethics* 573–96.

[62] Florian Wettstein, 'Normativity, Ethics, and the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights: A Critical Assessment' (2015) 14:2 *Journal of Human Rights* 169.

[63] Ken McPhail, and John Ferguson, 'The Past, The Present and the Future of Accounting for Human Rights' (2016) 29:4 *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* 531.

[64] Javed Siddiqui, and Shahzad Uddin, 'Human Rights Disasters, Corporate Accountability and the State: Lessons Learned From Rana Plaza' (2016) 29:4 *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* 679–704.

[65] Gabriela Gutierrez-Huerter O, Stefan Gold, and Alexander Trautrims, 'Change in Rhetoric But Not in Action? Framing of the Ethical Issue of Modern Slavery in a UK Sector at High Risk of Labor Exploitation' (2023) 182:1 *Journal of Business Ethics* 35–58.

[66] Niklas Kreander, and Ken McPhail, 'State Investments and Human Rights? The Case of the Norwegian Government Pension Fund Global' (2019) 32:6 *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* 1742–70.

[67] Though relying on different philosophical frameworks, these papers all invoke the moral ground of human rights; Yingru Li, and John McKernan, 'Human Rights, Accounting, and the Dialectic of Equality and Inequality' (2016) 29:4 *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* 568–93; Florian Wettstein, note 62, 162–82; Muhammad Azizul Islam, Craig Deegan, and Shamima Haque, 'Corporate Human Rights Performance and Moral Power: A Study of Retail MNCs' Supply Chains in Bangladesh' (2021) 74 *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 1–24.

[68] Yingru Li, John McKernan, and Meiyi Chen, 'Turning Around Accountability' (2022) 35:1 *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* 48–60; Mercy Denedo, Ian Thomson, and Akira Yonekura, 'Ecological Damage, Human Rights and Oil: Local Advocacy NGOs Dialogic Action and Alternative Accounting Practices' (2019) 43:1 *Accounting Forum* 85–112.

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reporting captured and shaped by wicked capitalism and the neo-liberal order.[69] This emancipatory movement is based on two key assumptions: first, that it is possible only through 'the manifestation of existing but unfulfilled rights to information',[70] and second, that claims made by different parties are given equal weight, ensuring that all participants are treated equitably.[71] Within a neoliberal view of accounting, the right to accounting information and to be accounted for exists. However, this right is neither universally accessible nor equitably enjoyed by those who do have access, as the interests of capital providers tend to outweigh all others. In contrast, in an alternative view of accounting, the right to access accounts—whether generated by corporations or other sources—is just as important as the right to be accounted for, ensuring that no one is excluded and that everyone has the opportunity to 'speak and be heard, and where individuals can exercise agency'.[72]

However, these discussions also inherit challenges from both fields. In accounting, the dominance of mainstream practices leaves little room for innovation. Only one paper, by McPhail, Macdonald and Ferguson, touches on the standard-setting process and argues for the necessity and responsibility of the International Accounting Standards Board (IASB) upon the integration of human rights into accounting standards.[73] Though the International Sustainability Standards Board (ISSB), established under the IFRS Foundation alongside the IASB, has identified human rights as one of its potential future priorities, it decided not to 'embark' on a project related to human rights but only about human capital.[74] At the same time, the conceptual debate around human rights, particularly in relation to whether or not and how a responsibility for human rights may look like within businesses, may likely be dogmatised as a call for humanitarian aid or moral solidarity.[75] In this scenario, corporate accountability to human rights claims could be diminished into a process of distributing accounts as if they were a generous gift rather than a genuine obligation. Furthermore, it may result in a demand for more accountability. The dialectics of accountability, the potential of an accountability to revert from being progressive and even emancipatory force to become oppressive, is acknowledged by Bovens, who contends that accountability is a 'dustbin filled with good intentions … and vague images of good governance'.[76] Coming from quite different perspectives, Messner views accountability without limit, as having the potential, if made real, to turn into 'ethical violence' under which subjects are forced to account for things that are difficult or impossible to account for, and impossible to justify.[77]

[69] Eve Chiapello, 'Critical Accounting Research and Neoliberalism' (2017) 43 *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 47–64.

[70] Rob Gray, 'Accounting and Environmentalism: An Exploration of the Challenge of Gently Accounting for Accountability, Transparency and Sustainability' (1992) 19:5 *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 412.

[71] See the discussion of equality in agonistic accounting in Brown, note 47; Judy Brown, 'Democratizing Accounting: Reflections on the Politics of "Old" and "New" Pluralisms' (2017) 43 *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 20–46.

[72] Jan Bebbington, Judy Brown, Bob Frame, and Ian Thomson, 'Theorizing Engagement: The Potential of a Critical Dialogic Approach' (2007) 20:3 *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* 373.

[73] Ken McPhail, Kate Macdonald, and John Ferguson, 'Should the International Accounting Standards Board Have Responsibility for Human Rights?' (2016) 29:4 *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* 594–616.

[74] ISSB, 'ISSB to Commence Research Projects About Risks and Opportunities Related to Nature And Human Capital', https://www.ifrs.org/news-and-events/news/2024/04/issb-commence-research-projects-risks-opportunities-nature-human-capital/# (accessed 31 January 2025).

[75] Li and McKernan, note 67.

[76] Mark Bovens, 'Analysing and Assessing Accountability: A Conceptual Framework 1' (2007) 13:4 *European Law Journal* 449.

[77] Martin Messner, 'The Limits of Accountability' (2009) 34:8 *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 918.

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III. So What Then?

Maybe we should just stop asking the question of the relevance between accounting and human rights. Change truly takes flight when we no longer question whether a relationship exists between accounting and human rights, but rather focus on how to navigate it. For nearly a decade, I have had the privilege of teaching a course on accountability and human rights for accounting students. In the early years, students often chose the course out of curiosity, surprised by the very idea of such a connection. But over time, I noticed a shift. When I asked why they were taking the course, their responses were no longer about whether the link existed—it was about how they could engage with it, shape it and make a difference. As an accounting educator, my role—and my commitment—is to ensure that 'human rights' no longer come as a surprise or cultural shock to accounting students. It should feel natural for them to engage with courses that address justice, inequality and human rights. We should appreciate the aesthetics of education: by disrupting and unsettling a particular 'sphere of experience'[78] and reconstructing and reconstituting 'the framing of a we'.[79] Through this process, we cultivate 'aesthetic multiplicity'[80] in learning and teaching experience, exposing students to diverse perspectives and fostering innovation in accounting.

This should not even be a question for business and human rights scholars. If the goal is to challenge and resist capitalist interests to ensure the proper respect for human rights, then accounting lies at the very core of enabling that resistance. The impression that accounting is all about book-keeping should be dismissed. Mike Power's *The Audit Society* (1997) and Sally Engle Merry's *The Seductions of Quantification* (2016) illustrate how society is shaped and transformed by indicators and the ways we quantify aspects of life.[81] These works reveal the profound influence of accounting tools and techniques in governing and controlling our daily lives, demonstrating how measurement practices extend beyond technical functions to become powerful instruments of social and economic regulation.

In the context of land disputes and community relocation, the tendency to approach and measure assets solely in monetary terms reflects an ontological arrogance that dismisses the social, environmental, spiritual and emotional dimensions attributed by local communities.[82] In the case of Sri Lankan tea plantations, budgets are used by managers to dictate work quotas and wage structures, serving as tools to monitor and regulate workers' productivity. At the same time, these workers endure extremely low wages and long working hours, alongside discrimination and workplace violence as a result of gender and race.[83]

In a court case in Australia concerning wage payments, it was discovered that an employee's claim of unfair and inadequate salary was dismissed by the court based on the

[78] Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (UK: Polity, 2009) 24.

[79] Jacques Rancière, Steven Corcoran (ed. and translated) *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2010) 141.

[80] Gustavo H. Dalaqua, 'Aesthetic Injustice' (2020) 12:1 *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 1–12.

[81] Michael Power, *The Audit Society: Rituals of Verification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). Sally Engle Merry, *The Seductions of Quantification: Measuring Human Rights, Gender Violence, and Sex Trafficking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

[82] Indigenous example by Sonja Gallhofer, Kathy Gibson, Jim Haslam, Patty McNicholas, and Bella Takiari, 'Developing Environmental Accounting: Insights From Indigenous Cultures' (2000) 13:3 *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* 381–409; And example of heritage valuation by Oana Apostol, Hannele Mäkelä, and Eija Vinnari, 'Cultural Sustainability and the Construction of (In)Commensurability: Cultural Heritage at the Roşia Montană Mining Site' (2023) 97 *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 1–24.

[83] Chandana Alawattage, and Danture Wickramasinghe, 'Appearance of Accounting in a Political Hegemony' (2008) 19:3 *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 293–339.

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company's accounting calculations.[84] These calculations included non-monetary benefits such as pre-approved leave arrangements, blood donor leave and defence service leave, which were classified as 'costs' and 'liabilities' to the company. This cost-focused logic was justified by referencing accounting standards that dictate how benefits should be valued: 'we have accounting standards that dictate how certain benefits should be costed, and taking into account any profit and loss statements… that's the reality of all employee benefits, not just any one of these, is that how they will play out in terms of cost to an employer, total cost'.[85] In other words, employee benefits were accounted for as costs to the company, effectively offset by lowering wages. All these examples illustrate the deep connection between accounting practices and human rights, highlighting their profound significance.

It is important for business and human rights practitioners to be aware of the danger of assuming the universality of Western accounting frameworks, which often overlook or marginalise local knowledge systems and alternative economic logics—especially in contexts of land dispossession and resource extraction in colonial and post-colonial settings.[86] These risks perpetuate injustice and inequality by imposing a singular accounting logic onto diverse worldviews, thereby contributing to epistemic injustice—treating others as incapable of being 'givers' of knowledge.[87] For accounting scholars, particularly critical accounting scholars, our responsibility extends beyond examining injustices and tracing political issues linked to inequality. We must actively embrace and embed human rights principles in our research practices. Methodologically, we must recognise the limitations of our positionality as outsiders. When we challenge an insider's understanding or claim to offer emancipation, we do so through the lens of our own cultural and political background. Our conceptualisations and interpretations are inevitably shaped by these influences, requiring us to approach our research with humility, reflexivity and a deep awareness of the potential for misrepresentation or epistemic imposition.[88] Otherwise, we risk reducing our research subjects to mere objects of knowledge.[89] This phenomenon is evident in the accountability practices designed to support refugees in Rwanda: the chronic 'exposure' to accountability measures—wherein individuals must be continuously recognised and identified as refugees—reinforces their classification as 'vulnerable' and 'in need'.[90] Consequently, this constrains their capacity to develop an alternative identity beyond these imposed labels. It would be essential that our research does not hinder our subjects' capability to resist and to challenge.

I want to conclude with a statement John Rawls once shared with his students in a moral philosophy class: 'It is a delusion to think that rigorous analysis in a small area unguided by a large idea is of much value'.[91] Critical accounting scholarship began as an intellectual endeavour rooted in the grand questions of economics and politics, drawing inspiration

[84] Da Yang, John Dumay and Dale Tweedie, 'Accounting for the "Uncounted" Workers: A Dialectical View of Accounting Through Rancière' (2020) 33:7 *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* 1627–55.

[85] Ibid, 1643.

[86] See some examples in the imposition of Westernised accounting assumptions: Shanta SK. Davie, 'The Politics of Accounting, Race and Ethnicity: A Story of a Chiefly-Based Preferencing' (2005) 16:5 *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 551–77. Sonja Gallhofer, and Andrew Chew, 'Introduction: Accounting and Indigenous Peoples' (2000) 13:3 *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* 256–67.

[87] Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (UK: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[88] We should be aware of 'methodological humility and methodological caution', proposed by Uma Narayan, 'Working Together Across Difference: Some Considerations on Emotions and Political Practice' (1988) 3:2 *Hypatia* 37.

[89] Fricker, note 87, 132.

[90] Corinna Frey-Heger, and Michael Barrett, 'Possibilities and Limits of Social Accountability: The Consequences of Visibility as Recognition and Exposure in Refugee Crises' (2021) 89 *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 2.

[91] David A. Reidy, 'From Philosophical Theology to Democratic Theory: Early Postcards From an Intellectual Journey' in Jon Mandle, and David A. Reidy, (eds.), *A Companion to Rawls* (US: John Wiley & Sons, 2013) 9.

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from towering figures such as Kant, Smith, Marx, Habermas, Foucault, Bourdieu, Latour and many others. It was never meant to be confined to technical precision alone but to engage with the broader forces shaping our world. Yet, despite decades of critical inquiry, the social and political impact of our work remains limited.[92] Perhaps now is the time to extend our reach—by engaging with human rights and the field of business and human rights, we may find a new pathway to channel our research towards meaningful change. This is not merely an academic pursuit but a call to reimagine the role of accounting in shaping a more just and equitable world.

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[92] Jesse Dillard, and Eija Vinnari, 'A Case Study of Critique: Critical Perspectives on Critical Accounting' (2017) 43 *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 88–109.

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