

Synderesis vs. Consequentialism and Utilitarianism in Workplace Bullying Prevention

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Abstract

The existence of workplace bullying in modern organizations is, first of all, a serious moral challenge. Since bullying characterized by intense and long-lasting persecution of the target causes serious negative consequences for organizations, there are proposals to base the prevention of this phenomenon on utilitarianism. However, some studies show that the ethics that judges the goodness of an action by consequences causes many problems at the level of interpersonal relationships. Therefore, in the context of workplace bullying, it is proposed to consider the scholastic idea of synderesis. The article theoretically examines three alternatives to bystanders’ decisions based on the ideas of consequentialism, utilitarianism, and synderesis: to act constructively actively (to support the victim), to act destructively actively (to support the persecutor), and to act destructively passively (not to intervene in the conflict). Considering that different schools of consequentialism and utilitarianism cannot guarantee constructive behaviour of bystanders, the decisions inspired by the conscience guided by synderesis can be a suitable alternative that can be easily implemented in practice.

Keywords

consequentialism; ethics; synderesis; utilitarianism; workplace bullying

1. Introduction

Because utilitarianism promises the “greatest good for the greatest number,” it may be a poor choice for preventing workplace bullying. Such assumption sounds paradoxical and contradicts the opinion that utilitarian ethics is one of the means that can protect organizations from workplace bullying (Akella, 2020;

Harvey et al., 2009). According to Zedlacher and Salin (2021), workplace bullying “consists of repeated, long-term exposure to a variety of negative behaviors.” It often involves more than one person, and persecution causes severe psychological, physical, and professional consequences for the target (Leymann, 1996; Paull et al., 2012; Zedlacher & Salin, 2021). Since workplace bullying causes more harm than good, and it is believed that organizations are interested in avoiding it (LaVan & Martin, 2008), Dollard and Jain (2019) state that effective management of employee safety and health at work requires ethical leadership, inspired by utilitarian consequentialism, especially when this is related to the psychological health climate of employees.

Utilitarianism, as an idea that assesses consequences, is related to consequentialism. Consequentialism is a theory of morality stating that moral value or good is the production or promotion of best consequences and that it is morally right to behave in a way that promotes the maximum good (in the case of utilitarianism) or the best or greatest good (Guha, 2023). However, bystanders may rationalize their destructive actions so that they are considered morally acceptable (Ng et al., 2020). In addition, the defence of the target of workplace bullying means resistance to the group. This requires certain risk and sacrifice, and in this context, according to Everett and Kahane (2020), there are at least several ways in which utilitarianism deviates from the choice inspired by common sense morality. Therefore, according to the authors, more research is needed to better understand the decision-making process.

Several previous studies raise doubts about whether utilitarianism can encourage bystanders to act prosocially. Gokce (2015) has found that namely utilitarianism and Machiavellianism hindered employees from reporting violations performed by co-workers to their organization’s management. Meanwhile, research results of Zollo et al. (2017) showed that utilitarianism could promote Machiavellianism, which justifies any means to an end. In other words, although the organization may not be interested in the existence of workplace bullying, this logic does not necessarily apply at the level of interpersonal relationships. Moreover, according to Guha (2023), an important question arises as to whether consequentialist ethics requires the promotion of objective values, i.e., valuable consequences, rather than the ones determined by the mind or psychology of the moral actor(s). The answer to the question of how consequence-oriented ethics affects interpersonal relationships is very important for understanding and predicting the behaviour of bystanders of workplace bullying, since it is their prosocially active behaviour that can stop persecution and protect the target from negative consequences (Linstead, 2013; Paull et al., 2012, 2020).

Some studies, particularly in the field of bioethics, emphasize the role of conscience in moral decision-making (e.g., Hsiao, 2022; Lamb & Pesut, 2021). Therefore, in recent years, even in the works of non-theologians, increasingly more attention was paid to the scholastic conception of *synderesis*, which refers to an innate human ability to know the basic moral principles that allow the conscience to properly judge the morality of one or another action (das Neves & Melé, 2013; O’Shea, 2018; Zollo et al., 2017). In addition, research shows that moral decision-making is significantly influenced by emotions and intuition (Schnall & Cannon, 2012), while *synderesis* allows to correct mistakes made in this context (Zollo et al., 2017). Thus, it can be assumed that conscience directed to good by *synderesis*, which follows the Golden Rule of not doing anything bad to others, what a person would not want to receive himself (Kärkkäinen, 2012), can encourage bystanders’ moral decisions that are favourable to the target of workplace bullying. Although such perspective has not been explored, the mere possibility encourages rethinking of whether the *synderesis* principle could be an alternative to consequentialism and utilitarianism. Therefore, this study aims

to examine how consequentialism, utilitarianism, and the synderesis principle are capable of coping with the challenges posed by workplace bullying from the bystander's perspective.

This study raises three questions:

Q1. What choices can be made by bystanders of workplace bullying from a consequentialist perspective?

Q2. Can utilitarian ethics provide a sound basis for making moral decisions that are favourable to the target of workplace bullying?

Q3. Can the synderesis-guided conscience be a reasonable perspective in the prevention of workplace bullying?

The article consists of several parts. First, the methodological parameters of the study are defined and, based on the literature examining the behaviour of bystanders of workplace bullying, three possible options for co-worker actions are distinguished. Further, the context of workplace bullying is described, which influences how co-workers will view the target. Options of bystander choices are discussed from three different perspectives of consequentialism and two viewpoints of utilitarianism. Finally, the conception of synderesis is presented, followed by the analysis of what way the latter perspective is significant while seeking to protect the target of workplace bullying from persecution.

2. Methods

This study employs a narrative review of scientific literature, following a critical paradigm. Snyder (2019) emphasizes that in order to generalize or evaluate a broad area of research, a rigorous systematic review approach is not possible, and instead, a semi-systematic (narrative) approach is more appropriate, intended for topics that have been differently conceptualized and examined by different groups of researchers in different disciplines. Unlike systematic reviews, this method distinguishes itself by providing interpretations, critiques and deeper understanding (Greenhalgh et al., 2018). Meanwhile, the critical paradigm requires presenting and juxtaposing different ideas before presenting one's idea so that the reader can get a clear picture (Saunders & Rojon, 2011).

The research consisted of several stages. In the first stage, publications and documents were searched in EBSCO, JSTOR, Oxford Journals Collection, ScienceDirect, SCOPUS, Web of Science databases, and the Google Scholar search engine. Various combinations of keywords ("workplace bullying," "bystander," "moral," "synderesis," "consequentialism," "utilitarianism") were used in the search. Preference was given to previously published articles and the ones cited by other authors. Then, research abstracts were read, and publications that did not correspond to the topic of this study were rejected. In the second stage, selected studies were read and the essential principles of different moral approaches were distinguished using the method of structural literature analysis. In the third stage, these principles were applied in solving three alternatives of moral choices of workplace bullying participants.

Bystanders in this study are understood as co-workers who choose one or another role with regard to the target and the persecutor. They do not directly participate in the persecution as a target or persecutor, but

through their behaviour, they can influence the process itself (Ng et al., 2020). In the bystanders' behaviour model proposed by Paull et al. (2012), roles are distributed in a continuum between constructive (actions benefit the target) and destructive (actions benefit the persecutor) ones. Constructive and destructive behaviour is further divided into active (concrete support for one or the other side) and passive behaviour. Passivity manifests itself by the inability to provide support to the target or by ignoring and avoiding the situation. Since in this study we do not aim to detail the subtypes of behaviour and maintain that a strong moral identity helps to resist harmful behaviour (Mitchell et al., 2015), we have summarized the choices of bystanders into three options: (a) to behave constructively actively (to support the target), (b) to behave destructively actively (to support the persecutor), and (c) to behave passively (to stay out of the conflict). Similarly, the bystander's behaviour is also conceptualised by Fahie and Dunne (2021), who distinguish three possible responses to persecution: inertia (doing nothing), intervention (direct intervening to help the target), and involvement (participating in persecution).

It should be noted that in this study, the terms "constructive" and "destructive" are used depending on how they are of service to the target of workplace bullying; that is, either help is provided to the target or persecutors are supported.

3. Results

3.1. *The Target in the Context of Workplace Bullying*

Before discussing the possible choices of bystanders, it is necessary to assess the complicated situation in which the co-workers find themselves. Several features of the phenomenon, due to which the personality of the target of workplace bullying can be assessed ambiguously, can be distinguished.

After summarizing the definitions offered by different authors, Chirilă and Constantin (2013, p. 1178) described workplace bullying as a situation in which "one or more individuals encountered in a repetitive manner a number of negative acts from the part of one or more of their coworkers, supervisors or subordinates, [a] situation which makes the person defenceless." Other authors emphasize that it is a prolonged process characterized by a pre-conflict phase that develops into a conflict, stigmatization of the target, involvement of management, and removal of the target from the organization (Keashly & Nowell, 2020; Leymann, 1996; Shallcross et al., 2013).

Leymann (1996) associates stigmatization of the target with aggressive manipulation, when the target is presented to others as someone who needs to be punished. In addition, workplace bullying often occurs because of external causes that cause tension. When there is strong tension in the work group, the target becomes a scapegoat who is a good "lightning conductor" (Zapf, 1999, p. 83).

Explaining why co-workers unite against the target of workplace bullying, Faldetta and Gervasi (2024) ground on René Girard's scapegoating framework. According to them, to overcome stability-threatening mutual violence (which occurs during the conflict), co-workers unite against one target that cannot respond with the same violence. In this context, Reknes et al. (2021) pointed out that anxiety characteristic to the target could be interpreted as weakness (an easy target). In addition, targets often distinguish themselves by provocative, irritating qualities due to which they receive hostility.

Although the “technical” definition of workplace bullying typically includes situations where the bully may be a single person or several individuals, in practice bullying occurs in the context of the group whose members act either actively or passively (Leymann, 1996; Zapf, 1999). In this context, group dynamics and bystanders’ behaviour have a significant impact on the course of the process and the consequences experienced by the target. Cason et al. (2020) emphasise that bystanders often do not intervene due to a lack of moral courage or fear of social consequences, which creates an atmosphere of silence and implicit approval (Rosander & Nielsen, 2023). Such passivity can signal to the bully that his/her behaviour is acceptable and unquestionable, which allows for the manifestation of open aggression. According to Kim (2020), when bystanders do not break the power imbalance between the bully and the victim, bullying can become a normal part of the work culture, leading to an escalation of bullying.

Social factors also influence bystanders’ behaviour. Goddiner (2023) points out that bystanders often evaluate their social relationships and the potential consequences of intervention; therefore, they may be reluctant to act for fear of social isolation. Such fear strengthens the bully’s confidence and aggravates the victim’s situation. Furthermore, the passive stance of bystanders can promote the phenomenon of “bystander apathy,” where due to diffusion of responsibility people feel less inclined to intervene (Mazzone et al., 2021). This creates a vicious cycle in which the bully gains more power and the victim becomes increasingly isolated and unsupported.

Thus, despite the fact that researchers have well described the workplace bullying process itself, it is not easy to understand what is really happening in a specific situation. Yamada et al. (2018), who reviewed four decades of research on the phenomenon in the USA and Europe, noticed that the phenomenon of bullying was not so well known that it could be recognized even by the victim himself or by the professional to whom the victim turned to for help.

3.2. Bystander Decisions in the Perspective of Consequentialism

Many of us make everyday decisions using moral considerations (Quiambao, 2022), and although various moral theories seek the same goal of helping us make the best decision, actually, specific decisions differ depending on which moral theory is followed. Traditionally, consequentialism is based on a standard wording: (a) the action must be performed if and only if its outcome is better than the one of any alternative; (b) the action is right if and only if its result is at least as good as the one of any alternative; (c) the action is wrong if and only if it is not right (Moore, 1912, as cited in Carlson, 1999, p. 253). However, this moral theory is not homogeneous and has many varieties that do not agree with each other, from which several competing trends can be distinguished: actualism, possibilism, and probabilism. The attitude towards the moral duty in decision-making depends on the trend that the decision-maker represents.

According to Timmerman and Zakhem (2021), actualists believe that at any time, the most precise action under their control, which would lead to the best outcome, should be performed. For the actualist, actual consequences by which the morality of the action is measured are always important (Bench-Capon, 2020), while current and future actions are always relevant (extreme actualism; see Bykvist, 2002).

Jackson and Pargetter (1986) give the example of Jones driving through a tunnel behind a slow-moving truck. Although it is forbidden to overtake in the tunnel, he intends to change lanes (it may be that he does not know

about the ban and is in a great hurry). He can choose: If he changes lanes without speeding up, he will further disturb the traffic, or he can increase the speed and overtake. The third option is not to change lanes, increase speed, and hit the back of the truck. The best option for the actualist is to change lanes and increase speed. According to the authors:

If you want the answer for some action as to whether an agent ought to do it, look at the set consisting of the action and what the agent would do instead; if you want the answer as to what an agent ought to do at or during some time, look at all the maximally relevantly specific actions possible at or during that time. (Jackson & Pargetter, 1986, p. 255)

The principle of assessing an action, considering its real consequences, can be applied to complex social scenarios, such as the bystander's behaviour in the case of workplace bullying. For example, let us look at the example below of an employee Maria, who has encountered a moral dilemma in her work environment. Maria notices that her manager constantly ridicules Tom in public, and most of her co-workers approve of this behaviour, because it ensures their status and favourable working conditions. Maria has several options: (a) to publicly intercede for Tom and incur the wrath of her manager and co-workers without changing Tom's situation; (b) to do nothing, this way creating conditions to continue harming Tom and, in such an atmosphere, to risk being harmed herself at some point; (c) to support the interests of the majority (the manager with co-workers) and ensure personal safety. If the action aimed at protecting others causes more negative consequences for the agent than the potential benefits to others, the actualist may believe that such action is not the best choice. Therefore, Maria should choose the action that would realistically produce the best outcome for all individuals involved in the workplace bullying situation, taking into account what she will actually do and what consequences of her actions will be.

In practice, where the target is being persecuted by the manager and his/her subordinates, the bystander's intervention may not change the situation and be disastrous for the moral agent himself/herself. A neutral attitude creates opportunities for persecutors to act and, as the climate worsens, poses a risk to the person who has chosen a neutral stance. Therefore, Maria has reason to think about joining the majority, because she must also evaluate the real consequences of her choice. Even if the decision does not seem ideal, actualism acknowledges that subjects have the right to evaluate their own wellbeing and choose actions that maintain a balance between moral ideals and personal interests. This also highlights the contradiction of actualism, because this perspective, which demands attention to the wellbeing of others, does not require individuals to disregard their own interests (Cholbi, 2020).

Proponents of possibilism follow the position that at any time, the agent must perform the action that is part of a series of best actions that he/she can perform in his/her lifetime (Timmerman & Zakhem, 2021). In this case, the best option for the aforementioned Jones is to do nothing and stay in the same lane, without increasing speed (Jackson & Pargetter, 1986).

The actualist standpoint, unlike the possibilist one, states that the agent's free actions in certain circumstances at least partially determine his/her moral obligations (Timmerman & Swenson, 2019), whereas extreme possibilism follows the approach that they never matter (Bykvist, 2002).

Meanwhile, based on the standpoint of probabilism, actions are assessed not according to actual consequences, but according to expected consequences, taking into account the probability of various

possible futures (Bench-Capon, 2020). That is, it is believed that to some extent, consequences can be calculated; therefore, the action is moral if there is a probability that the consequences will be positive. Since, to a greater or lesser extent, actualism and possibilism are based on intuition, Cohen and Timmerman (2024) maintain that probabilism is superior to these perspectives. Table 1 illustrates the possible perspectives of bystander decisions.

Table 1. Possible choices of bystanders concerning different trends of consequentialism.

Trend	Reaction to persecution	Choice	Consequences for the target
Actualism	Destructive	To contribute to persecution	Negative
Possibilism	Passive	To do nothing	Negative
Probabilism	Depends on a set of circumstances	All three options are possible	From positive to negative

As already mentioned, the terms “constructive” or “destructive” are used only from the perspective of the target of bullying. Thus, according to the actualist point of view, in the process of bullying, the best option for the bystander, like for Jones, is to join the persecutors who seek to remove the target annoying them. That is, the bystander may not care that the target may be harmed by such actions in the future because, among the existing choices, there are certain options of consequences (positive or negative) for the bystander himself. It is no coincidence that actualism is also criticized for being too tolerant of moral imperfection (Carlson, 1999) and dependent on the person’s egoism (Bykvist, 2002).

For the possibilist, doing nothing may be a morally appropriate choice. Considering the complexity of the situation, if the possibilist decides to withdraw now, he/she may decide not to withdraw in the future; that is why current withdrawal is an acceptable option of action. Finally, the probabilist would try to calculate all probable alternative variants, taking into account many variables (e.g., how the behaviour of the target, the persecutor, and that of other employees will change during the process, what new information may be revealed about the conflict, what attitude of the organization’s management will be, whether third parties will not intervene in the conflict, etc.), and only then make a decision. Considering the complexity of workplace bullying and the manipulative behaviour of the persecutor, it is difficult to expect a quick decision that is favourable for the target.

Since it is not possible to accurately predict all consequences of an action, Lenman (2000) calls this circumstance a very deep epistemic argument for the critique of consequentialism. There are many unpredictable and most often uncontrollable variables that can determine the final outcome (e.g., it may be contrary to the intentions of the decision-maker). Therefore, Bench-Capon (2020) does not rule out that consequentialism may serve the purpose only in very strictly defined situations; for example, when two persons are playing chess. In real life, with many unpredictable variables, it is impossible to guarantee such simple conditions. Finally, the decision maker may not have sufficient knowledge, which is of great ethical significance in decision-making (Brundage, 2014).

3.3. Bystander Decisions in the Perspective of Utilitarianism

As already mentioned, utilitarianism is a form of consequentialism, since representatives of this moral perspective focus on the consequences of decisions (Guha, 2023; Quiambao, 2022; Tseng & Wang, 2021).

Although there are different varieties of utilitarianism, the main principle is based on the pursuit of maximizing the utility of the decision and prioritizing the happiness of society (Tseng & Wang, 2021); therefore, harm made to individual people is justified if this leads to the welfare of the majority (Conway & Gawronski, 2013; Tseng & Wang, 2021).

Different versions of utilitarianism offer different explanations for when the decision made is right. Two of them can be distinguished: act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism. At the same time, they also indicate different decision-making strategies.

Act utilitarianism is based on the idea that “an act is right if and only if it results in at least as much overall well-being as any act the agent could have performed” (Eggleston & Miller, 2014, p. 126). Thus, a supporter of this school decides on a case-by-case basis how much his/her action will or will not contribute to the common welfare. In this case, it is namely welfare that is morally significant (since good is a moral category), but not the individual, who is only a receptacle of welfare and may suffer (Eggleston, 2020, p. 10).

Rule utilitarianism introduces a certain regulator—rules accepted by consensus: “an act is right if and only if it would be permitted by a system of rules whose general acceptance would result in at least as much overall well-being as would the general acceptance of any system of rules” (Eggleston & Miller, 2014, p. 131). According to Mack (2004), this school requires two things. First, a moral rule is established, the acceptance of which would maximise the expected social benefits in similar situations. Next, a morally right action is defined that is consistent with the established moral rule.

Although both schools focus on maximum benefit of a decision, there may be contradictions already within the framework of the utilitarian theory. When comparing these two schools, Savulescu et al. (2020) point out a problem arising from the difference in approaches. According to them, act utilitarianism may predict better consequences or not in determining negative consequences, but the accepted rule (rule utilitarianism) may prohibit such action.

Thus, both versions of utilitarianism agree that the most important value is the welfare of the majority, and this is the most important factor that determines the perspective of the survival of the target of workplace bullying in the organization (Table 2).

Table 2. Bystander choices in the perspective of utilitarian ethics.

Version	Strategy	Reaction to persecution	Choice	Consequence for the target
Act	Personal assessment	Destructive	To support persecutors	Negative
Rule	Collective agreement	Destructive or constructive	To support persecutors or the target	Depends on the majority's decision

In the perspective of act utilitarianism, the bystander has little freedom of choice, since the majority's welfare outweighs the welfare of the target. The bystander, guided by personal judgment, may decide to approve the persecution of the target or even to actively participate if he/she believes that this will contribute to the group's stability or wellbeing. This way, the target may be sacrificed for the sake of organisational harmony, since utilitarianism does not promote consideration of the victim's intrinsic value and the right to be protected from harm. This happens because this ethical model, oriented to the common good, can ignore the protection

of individual rights, dehumanise the victim, who is perceived as a “problem,” and justify harmful actions when they are perceived as contributing to the wellbeing of the majority. For this reason, the victim becomes an instrument, and the victim’s dignity and rights lose meaning, which, according to theories of moral psychology and violence, can lead not only to the disregard of moral duties but also to the justification of violence as an “instrumental necessity” (Bufacchi & Gilson, 2016). In addition to the fact that the approach to persons as instruments dehumanises them and diminishes their dignity, in the context of the organisation, the “common good” is inseparable from the organisation’s economic and stability and sustainability goals. Therefore, real decisions that would ensure all employees’ happiness are usually difficult to implement in practice, because the organisation’s wellbeing and the individual’s happiness do not always coincide. Thus, even if attempts are made to take into account the interests of the target (e.g., to work safely at one’s workplace, to feel co-workers’ support and job satisfaction), this does not protect against various compromises that are unfavourable to the target, because the priority is always the welfare of the majority, which is the focus when making decisions.

In general, danger of utilitarian decisions stems from the perceived distance to the potential victim of violence. According to Dinić et al. (2021), individuals are more likely to make utilitarian moral decisions when they lack personal involvement or acquaintance with the victim (Dinić et al., 2021). Such disassociation may determine a reduced empathic response, which is why decision-makers may rationalise actions that may harm the victim if such actions are assessed as beneficial to the larger group. Lower empathic concern for victims can facilitate utilitarian decisions, reflecting a lack of awareness of the consequences of such decisions for individual lives (Takamatsu, 2018).

At first sight, rule utilitarianism should benefit the target but leaves a lot of uncertainty. That is, the choice depends on the rules of what is considered permissible or impermissible behaviour. If the organization has not institutionalized workplace bullying, the rules are set by the employees themselves. On the other hand, institutionalization of workplace bullying encounters a serious problem. For example, the person’s dignity may be enshrined in legislation, but the presence of different stakeholders and their interests may become an obstacle to the stable definition (Liefoghe & Davey, 2010).

It is significant that decision-making is not an impartial calculation of arguments, since there are many influencing psychological factors that determine who will be sacrificed. First, the decision to become a defender of the target of workplace bullying requires certain sacrifice. That is, if you resist the group, you have to accept the negative consequences for yourself. Moreover, the choice is between the “happiness” of the group and the welfare of one person whom that group treats as an obstacle to its “happiness.” It is namely the pursuit of the greater good—in the utilitarian perspective—that allows people to be used, harmed, or even killed (Everett & Kahane, 2020). Thus, from a utilitarian standpoint, it is difficult to find arguments as to why the welfare of the target of bullying should be placed above the group’s welfare.

Authors examining people’s decisions in the context of violence draw attention to several other factors showing that the utilitarian moral theory does not always protect the target and can even encourage crimes. For example, research conducted by Harrison (2015) and Dinić et al. (2021) shows that situations in which the target is depersonalized make it easier to make moral decisions that are not beneficial for the target. In addition, there is a significant correlation between dark triad traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy) and utilitarian decisions, while a tendency towards sadism allows one to predict that the target will be sacrificed in the name of the common social welfare (Dinić et al., 2021, pp. 54–55).

Cikara et al. (2010) have found that participants in the experiment tended to sacrifice people whom they found less likable. In addition, the meta-analysis of Balliet et al. (2014) shows the influence of such important factors as belonging to the group, favouritism towards one's group members. According to the authors, individuals "strive for a reputation as a cooperator, thus securing future indirect benefits and reducing the probability of being excluded from the group" (Balliet et al., 2014, p. 18). Because workplace bullying is a group process in which a negative image of the target is actively created (for more details see Leymann, 1996; Pheko, 2018), persecutors present the target namely in such a perspective, which would justify the decision to "sacrifice" it. This is supported by several other studies that show how decision rationalisation mechanisms used by bystanders justify decisions that are unfavourable to the target of workplace bullying (for more see Zedlacher & Salin, 2021; Zedlacher & Snowden, 2023).

3.4. Bystander Decisions in the Perspective of Conscience Guided by Synderesis

As already mentioned, utilitarian ethics leaves gaps, due to which the target of workplace bullying may not receive adequate support from bystanders. Moral decisions are not only the result of moral reasoning but also intuition, since decisions are not always reasoned (Cushman et al., 2006; Zollo et al., 2017). Hence, both reasoning and intuition do not protect against errors; therefore, a reliable principle is needed to help avoid them. Can this principle be conscience?

Conscience is called a moral compass because its essential function is to determine what is true and good so that these can be pursued and mistakes can be rejected (Hsiao, 2022). However, conscience can also be wrong, which is why studies examining moral decisions based on personal conscience and searching for universal basic moral principles pay attention to the phenomenon of synderesis (das Neves & Melé, 2013; Lamb & Pesut, 2021; Zollo et al., 2017).

According to the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, synderesis is the innate and indestructible capacity of the practical mind to envisage the fundamental principles of natural law (Crowe, 1956; das Neves & Melé, 2013; González-Ginocchio, 2017; Hogan, 2006; Zollo et al., 2017). Synderesis is described as a universal, innate habit that is independent of the person's cultural background to seek good and reject evil (das Neves & Melé, 2013; Hogan, 2006). Since synderesis constantly directs a person towards good, it leads to universal moral principles (Melé & Fontrodona, 2017), which boil down to the basic moral rule, also called the Golden Rule: "Do not do to others what you do not want to be done to you" (das Neves & Melé, 2013, p. 770; Kärkkäinen, 2012, p. 895). Although this rule is usually formulated as a prohibition ("do not do"), the Bible encourages positive activeness: "Whatever you desire for men to do to you, you shall also do to them; for this is the law and the prophets" (Matthew, 7:12). That is, not only not to do harm but also to make such decision which the person would like to receive from another person in a similar situation. This principle is also referred to as the ethic of reciprocity, when another person is perceived and acknowledged as "the other me," who essentially has the same rights and requirements (Fuchs, 2019).

According to Korsgaard (1996), "in Thomas Aquinas's account, which became standard, synderesis grasps the basic moral principles which are the first premises of practical reasoning, while conscientia is the conclusion, the act of judging that one ought to perform a particular action." In this context, the decision based on conscience is not emotional or intuitive. According to Sulmasy (2008), the principle of synderesis contradicts to the intuition-based approach to conscience, and conscience itself means a commitment to morality, an

obligation to choose moral decisions and an assessment of whether the action the person has taken or is considering would violate this commitment. Synderesis, as a permanent non-acquired habit (*habitus naturalis*) influencing that act of conscience, is the principle of the act of conscience (Stępień, 2014, p. 378).

Thus, what choice or choices does the bystander have when responding to persecution of the target of bullying? The choice is determined by the answer that is formulated based on the Golden Rule derived from synderesis (Table 3).

Table 3. Decisions based on the Golden Rule.

Choices	Question	Answer	Consequence for the target
To support persecutors	If I were in the co-worker's shoes, would I like others to help hurt me?	Negative	Positive
To do nothing	If I were being bullied, would I want the other person(s) to withdraw and not help me?	Negative	Positive
To defend the target	If I were being bullied, would I want someone to defend me?	Positive	Positive

Unlike in the utilitarian perspective, when considering what is “good,” the focus is not on the consequences that would be determined by one or another decision, but on how much the very decision maker would like to receive such a decision in a similar situation. Even if the target of workplace bullying seems unpleasant, annoying, the Golden Rule serves as a test that in every case checks whether the action can be referred to as good. That is, if in an analogous situation, the decision would be unacceptable to “me,” it cannot be acceptable to another person too.

Although the use of the innate human ability to distinguish good from evil can help put an end to the persecution of the target of workplace bullying, in practice, people are free to act contrary to the dictate of synderesis (Ahdar, 2018). Fuchs (2019) also draws attention to the risks arising from the person's inclination to feel empathy, first of all, for the members of his/her group. This can be also used by criminals who dehumanize their victims and dehumanize themselves.

4. Conclusion

In the process of workplace bullying, bystanders are involved in the crowd's “trial” where execution of the “punishment” is carried out “here and now.” The decisions made by bystanders in such a tense situation for the persecuted person are like deciding the question of his/her life or death. Since, until now, workplace bullying has been examined from the organizational perspective, where utilitarianism seems to be the justifiable ethics, this article emphasizes the perspective of the target of bullying. That is, what decisions about the target can be made by bystanders, following the ideas of three schools of consequentialism, two schools of utilitarianism, and a scholastic idea of synderesis-guided conscience?

Consequentialism seems quite contradictory and, taking into account the ideas of its different trends, the manipulative nature of workplace bullying allows different solutions to the same situation. In any case, the consequentialist approach does not provide reliable guarantees that the defamed employee will receive

co-workers' support. From the target's standpoint, both supporting the persecutors and passive behaviour are destructive choices.

The specificity of moral acts depends on whether they are freely chosen and require certain moral awareness and understanding (Lamb & Pesut, 2021). However, this study demonstrates that consequence-focused utilitarianism seems to limit freedom of choice by insisting on calculating the collective benefits received by co-workers regardless of the act or rule version of utilitarianism. Of course, utilitarian ethics can explain why workplace bullying is harmful at the organizational level (even if we reject that in some cases the "sacrifice" of the target of bullying, who causes confusion, may seem beneficial to managers). However, this does not guarantee that every employee in all cases can feel safe and protected from being dealt with. This ethics becomes even more complicated in the group that cares about its own welfare, sets its own rules, and operates at the individual level affected by egoism. Of course, this review of research reveals only a few factors that emerge in the utilitarian decision-making process. However, they are important and cannot be ignored when considering how these ethics may affect bystanders' decisions. Especially bearing in mind the specificity of the bullying phenomenon itself, which can mislead moral decision-makers and encourage them to sacrifice the target for the greater social benefit of the group.

Synderesis allows one to discover universal moral principles on the basis of which conscience can distinguish between good and bad decisions. The Golden Rule, or the principle of reciprocity, serves as a test for deciding on a case-by-case basis what solution is fair and moral with regard to the target of workplace bullying. The decision to remain a passive bystander or to join the persecutors and "sacrifice" the target of workplace bullying for the "greater good" can be treated as "right" from a utilitarian ethics standpoint, but at the same time, can be against conscience. As Hsiao (2022) observes, the value of conscience does not depend on benefits or risks, but is related to the fact that it is an essential part of the human personality. Therefore, if the right to make responsible decisions is taken away, the person is deprived of what makes him unique—his rationality. Conscience guided by synderesis does not require complicated moral considerations and calculation of consequences and can therefore be easily applied in practice.

4.1. Implications

The results of this study may be useful for organisations seeking to develop workplace bullying prevention that takes into account the role of bystanders' moral attitudes. First, employee training should highlight the moral aspects of workplace bullying and the decisions of persons observing this process. It is easier to explain to employees what conscience-based decisions are than to suggest that they should apply complex ethical frameworks in practice. Emphasising the Golden Rule that encourages both avoiding destructive actions but also to actively helping colleagues who are being persecuted, training could include a situational analysis. This would allow employees to discuss the different roles of participants in workplace bullying from an ethical aspect.

Second, training must highlight why decisions oriented solely to the group's wellbeing may jeopardise the rights and dignity of certain employees. Such insights would help employees perceive how decisions based solely on final consequences can contribute to destructive behaviour or encourage bystanders' inaction.

Finally, psychological and social factors that influence bystanders' decisions must be taken into account. Research shows that building moral courage and reducing risk perception can promote employees'

determination to act constructively (Cason et al., 2020). Therefore, management should demonstrate zero tolerance for workplace bullying and actively support prosocial behaviour of employees. Incorporating practical exercises and group discussions into training can promote empathy and collaboration.

However, it is important to consider that ethical attitudes and value beliefs change slowly. For this reason, training should be continuous and long-term in order to ensure that newly acquired knowledge and behavioural patterns are established in practice. Training programmes should be periodically updated and supplemented with real-life examples and discussions. This would enable employees to consistently improve their moral thinking and behavioural attitudes. Organisations should also plan continuous activities, such as mentoring and support groups, which would help employees gradually integrate ethical knowledge into daily practice.

4.2. Limitations

This study has certain limitations, which are related to the fact that considerations are only partly based on empirical evidence. Therefore, in the future, empirical studies, for example, using an experimental approach, would be useful. In addition, the scope of the article did not allow us to review many other versions of consequentialism as well as principles developing conscience that is capable of distinguishing good from evil. However, this study is important in that it raises important questions as to what extent utilitarian ethics actually protects individual persons from workplace bullying in organizations. Moreover, it also lays a foundation for a new trend of research into the conscience-driven moral decisions of bystanders of workplace bullying.

Thus, although the theoretical analysis provides valuable insights, it would make sense to consider other moral paradigms in the future too. In addition, further research in different cultural contexts should be conducted and personal qualities should be evaluated (for example, analysing how perceptions of and reactions to workplace bullying vary depending on cultural norms, bystanders' moral maturity, empathy, or self-control). All this would create a broader perspective and a possibility to more deeply analyse bystanders' behaviour and moral decision-making processes in the workplace, having confronted with bullying situations.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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