

On the ‘restorative idea’: setting boundaries, innovating and exploring the unknown

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1 The idea of a special issue on the concept and scope of restorative justice

Every special issue has a special story behind it. This one is no exception. And stories, of course, depend on who is telling them. This one is being told by two members of the Editorial Board of this journal, who took part in email exchanges and discussions that led to the idea of a special issue on the meaning, concept and scope of restorative justice, and then agreed to take the lead in co-organising it. All this to say that this is how *we* feel the story of this special issue unfolded.

The story begins in May 2021, when a proposal for a special issue on arts and restorative justice was shared with all members of the Editorial Board and the International Advisory Board of the journal. Unlike with most other proposals, which normally prompt immediate positive reactions from board members, this one enticed a heated debate around how far we could stretch the concept of restorative justice. It probably all started after Lode Walgrave’s provocation:

The hotbed of restorative justice was the response to crime. Afterwards, the notion has been extended very much. Too much, in my view, as the concept of restorative justice is losing accuracy and credibility. I would like to see in the proposal also a text that makes a clear link between the subject presented here and restorative justice in its strict original meaning. I know, I am a veteran ... but concern for accuracy and generalisability is not completely outdated, I guess.¹

While most board members welcomed the idea of an issue entirely dedicated to the intersections between the arts and restorative justice, many endorsed Walgrave’s concerns. Some brought up the restorative justice–restorative practices divide (i.e. the journal issue as such would be about restorative *practices*, not restorative

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1 Email communication from Lode Walgrave to the Editorial Board, 11 May 2021.

justice); the fact that restorative justice still finds a strong foothold in relation to crime, particularly serious crime (i.e. that a focus on crime is the most needed); and a worry about (methodological/epistemological) rigour. Others firmly disagreed with Walgrave's viewpoint, highlighting the need to stretch the parameters of what defines restorative justice and how it can be practiced if we are to reach a culturally inclusive definition.²

A similar debate came up just a few months later, in September 2021, when the Editorial Board members were invited to comment on the written version of Jennifer Llewellyn's inspiring Annual Lecture.³ One of us pointed to the need for further discussion of the contributions made by Llewellyn during the lecture and the concerns expressed by Walgrave afterwards. We all felt called to build on the insights arising from the 'political', ground-breaking and far-reaching commitment of the former, and the appealing call to focus on the boundaries and aims of restorative justice from the latter.

In June 2022, as agreed in one of our Editorial Board meetings, Lode Walgrave shared his concept note, that would initiate the discussions for this special issue. The format for these exchanges was originally conceived as a *Notes from the field*, but the editors invited us all to think about a symposium, a roundtable discussion or a more 'classic' special issue, given the relevance – both theoretical and practical – of the matter(s) raised. We also all had in mind the insightful debate (or dialogue) around Nils Christie's thought-provoking (as usual ...) article 'Words on words' (Christie, 2013) and the responses it generated.⁴ Exactly ten years later, as restorative justice has grown, we felt that another debate (or dialogue) was due, to better face the challenges of the next decade (while wishing the restorative idea or its future transformations a much longer life).

Long, long story short, we ended up with a mix of symposium, roundtable discussion and special issue. All contributions stem from Walgrave's 'locomotive' text,⁵ a paper that pulls the discussion, and hence the first in the sequence. The following articles⁶ go beyond 'mere' responses and profoundly engage with the question of what restorative justice is or ought (not) to be – coming, thus, closer to 'a more classic' special issue.

2 The special issue on arts and restorative justice, guest edited by Brunilda Pali and Lindsey Pointer, was published at the end of 2022 – Issue 5(3) of this journal. The issue certainly benefited from the rich debate it created among the members of the board.

3 Entitled 'Transforming restorative justice', it was published in Issue 4(3) of this journal.

4 All gathered in the 2013 Symposium, Issue 1(1) of *Restorative Justice: An International Journal*. As for the format, see also Issue 3(1) of this journal on the occasion of the anniversary of Braithwaite's 1989 landmark book *Crime, shame and reintegration*.

5 It should perhaps be mentioned that in his original proposal, Walgrave recommended that the 'locomotive' text be written by members of our Editorial Board, in what he termed a 'written shuttle-discussion', not by him alone.

6 Published in alphabetical order by author.

2 Making the special issue 'happen'

Among the many challenges to make this special issue happen, perhaps the most difficult was to 'cherry pick' authors among so many potential candidates. Our final team was built out of some points of consensus amongst the Editorial Board: we wanted this to be an academic debate, but one inclusive of more practical views too; we wanted this debate to be truly international and as 'global' as possible; we wanted to hear from a diverse pool of respondents, not only in terms of geography, but also disciplines, gender, native languages spoken, and so on. The final list of authors speaks for itself.

We are certain that in doing such an exercise again we would be able to come up with an equally diverse and qualified list of contributors. Indeed, there are so many other voices that we would have loved to see included here ... but there is a page limit to adhere to! Although, bringing some peace of mind, many of these other fundamental voices are included in a way, through the rich reference lists we have been gifted in this issue.

We interpret these hard choices and wealth as signs of the growing interest in restorative justice worldwide, in different fields and from different approaches, which is indeed a confirmation of the 'meaningfulness' of the debate on the 'meaning' of restorative justice, which this special issue endeavours to enrich.

The contributions gathered in this special issue are very different from each other: the text by Walgrave presents a thesis and defends this thesis; the other texts represent a response, a reaction, feedback, additional explorations and either contain reflections adhering to his thesis or questions, criticisms and even opposing theses. The space for the elaboration of arguments, criticisms and counter-theses is necessarily limited, partly due to the constraints of a journal and partly to the breadth and depth of the topics discussed. Moreover, some of the arguments presented here have a radical critical dimension pointing to the necessity – and the difficulty – of elaborating a *pars construens*, a constructive – not merely reactive – proposal. It seems to us that the challenge the restorative idea will have to face in the immediate future is at a crossroads between the different and sometimes opposing conceptions presented here and offered for the reader's reflection.

This special issue has been conceived as a kind of imaginary circle in which restorative justice is both the accused and the victim in need of protection (and growth), and in which the contributors play the role of a questioning and caring community of theories and practices, unanimously concerned about this peculiar subject but committed to advocating for its future development in many nuanced (or even opposite) ways. This means that this special issue is a new beginning, not an end, of an ever-increasingly rich discussion on the 'meaning' of restorative justice: the circle is indeed open and a wider participation in the quest is strongly hoped for.

3 What is restorative justice? The issue of definition(s) and field(s)

To the best of our knowledge, the only ‘official’ definitions of restorative justice relate to the criminal justice field and, literally, to ‘criminal matters’. We are not aware of similar definitions of restorative justice in other contexts and subjects – at least not at the supranational level. This is not only true for how restorative justice is explicitly defined by the United Nations’ *Basic principles on the use of restorative justice programmes in criminal matters* (ECOSOC, 2002), but also for how other international instruments – including treaties and United Nations standards and norms⁷ – (directly or indirectly) refer to restorative justice. The same can be observed regionally. For example, in Europe, one finds the Council of Europe’s *Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)8* and the European Union’s *Victims’ rights Directive* (2012) – both instruments refer to restorative justice as related to crime. Interestingly, all the above-mentioned (soft) legal or official instruments offer an almost *identical* concept of restorative justice, the ingredients of which are voluntary and active participation, togetherness, inclusion of the two essential sides of a criminal offence (the sometimes inaccurately called ‘offender’ and the victim), openness to other affected parties (such as community members), and constructiveness of the objectives. Furthermore, all the above-mentioned tools identically invite the application of restorative justice to all ‘criminal matters’, regardless of the type or seriousness of the offence and at every stage of the criminal proceeding.

Unsurprisingly, none of the ‘respondents’ to Walgrave’s text discuss or draw on an ‘official’ definition of restorative justice in another field – such as in schools. We might ask why. Is it because the criminal field has been the elective or main context? Or the ‘cradle’ of (contemporary) restorative justice practices? And if so, is it because criminal justice is the dark side of democracy and we urgently need(ed) to infuse more democracy in that ‘unlikely place’ (Dzur, 2018)? Or is it because international bodies, such as the United Nations and the Council of Europe, have lagged behind and have not yet noticed other areas and contexts? Will there soon be recommendations, resolutions, and United Nations handbooks on restorative practices outside the field of criminal matters? And if so, will restorative justice still be conceived as a ‘response’ to wrongdoing, or will it shape other types of ‘affirmative’ (or ‘preventive’) interventions?

While Ezzat Fattah some decades ago said that restorative justice means ‘different things to different people’ (1998: 393), and this sentence has been repeated by so many ever since, maybe restorative justice has come to mean *different things* to different people and in *different contexts* (criminal matters, schools, workplaces, welfare systems, cities, diplomacy, etc.). And maybe we need different definitions based on the different contexts? Be that as it may, when working with restorative justice *in criminal matters*, one cannot ignore Walgrave’s

7 For example, the *Declaration of basic principles of justice for victims of crime and abuse of power*, the *United Nations’ Standard minimum rules for the treatment of prisoners*, the *United Nations’ Standard minimum rules for the administration of juvenile justice*, among others. For a full list, see UNODC (2020).

cry for a more delimited scope (or indeed, definition) of restorative justice. In criminal matters, the definition and practice of restorative justice shall, by necessity, stick to the fundamental principles enshrined in rule of law, due process, constitutions, and so on. The 'criminal matters field' would abhor a broad, 'fluid', 'liquid' definition of restorative justice. Indeed, a *justice restaurative 'frou'* (vague) would represent a big problem.⁸ And for very important reasons. Having clear definitions in criminal law and procedure, we must remember, is a heavily fought-for safeguard.

At the same time, the law can provide boundaries and grounds – and, very importantly, *democratically movable* boundaries and grounds – to better frame restorative justice, transformative justice, and other, forthcoming ideas on justice. And vice versa: restorative justice, together with all other or similar innovations, is a challenge to criminal justice systems and legal systems in general precisely because it advocates (more) flexible ways of meeting justice needs and responding to crime than the legalistic 'conventional' responses. And it does so by relying on something that is both weak and strong, positive and risky, variable and firm: voluntariness and agency. In this way, restorative justice challenges also the public authorities' monopoly on coercion, undermining one of the key features of the modern state. According to the principles of restorative justice in criminal matters (as enshrined in the UN and Council of Europe recommendations), the state itself is called upon not only to use the least amount of force possible – the well-known and by no means new principle of *ultima ratio* – but to do so (this is rather new, instead) by *trusting citizens* even in the *aftermath of a crime*: by trusting them as the real and active experts of the case (Christie, 1977), by relying on their ability to work *together* – even victims and perpetrators or accused persons – on the 'matters arising from the crime' (ECOSOC, 2002), all in a positive and forward-looking way, and, finally, by trusting the promise of citizens' future compliance.

It would certainly be well beyond the scope of this special issue, but we missed, in all responses, a more intentional interaction with legal thought and theory and mostly with fundamental safeguards, beyond the matter of punishment and punitiveness, which is almost omnipresent (and also brilliantly addressed) in this special issue (e.g. Altman, Claessen, and Garland). And perhaps we have only missed that for having, both of us, a legal background. Responses to Walgrave's 'espresso-definition' of restorative justice, we feel, have been more 'social' in tone and, to a certain extent, detached from the legal ground upon which policymakers, legislators, judicial powers, and so on, like it or not, must operate.⁹ This speaks to a concern that one of us, Claudia, has been voicing for some time now and that we would both like to see further scrutinised (perhaps in a new special issue?): there still seems to be a lack of (or insufficient) engagement by legal scholars, thinkers and practitioners working on restorative justice, which in turn might be among the

8 See *Le frou du droit*, Delmas-Marty's seminal book (1986), and her interesting reflections on the need for a less rigid and immobile, more multidimensional and 'mobile' legal system, on the one hand, and on the concerns about the ambiguities and imbalances that the dominance of this fluidity may entail, on the other.

9 Lewellyn's response is perhaps the closest exception to this, particularly where she argues 'Beyond criminal law' and 'Beyond law'.

causes of a lack of trust by justice professionals, resulting in a widespread underuse of restorative justice even in criminal matters.

Legal scholars who support restorative justice (and we do not exclude ourselves from this formulation) tend to let themselves be ‘domesticated’ by less strict legal reasoning when dealing or facing restorative justice. This is rather curious as restorative justice, transformative justice, and similar models of non-coercive or non-punitive mechanisms have so much in common with democratic/constitutional/human rights-based theories and principles of law and justice. The notion of harm, for instance, is key in criminal law reasoning (in a democratic system), much more relevant than the notions of ‘illicit’, ‘illegal’, ‘against the law’ and so forth.

Now, in the opinion of most of those responding to Walgrave’s provocations, restorative justice is *not* by definition limited to *criminal matters*. This seems to be Mark Umbreit’s opinion too, who features in this issue’s *Conversation* section and said something that still echoes in our minds: ‘A lot of the issues that Lode addresses have no meaning to folks on the street.’ Others in this special issue have conveyed the same message, although in other – at times more subtle and at times more hard-hitting – ways.

This message by Umbreit and others may come as a surprise: one has to ask what is driving the shift of interest from the criminal to the social sphere, from restorative justice to other forms of justice (e.g. transformative justice). Reading the insightful contributions collected here, especially in the points of tension and contrast, we sense something that intrigues and concerns us: in the twenty-first century, we would have believed that macroscopic injustices, the most serious harms, were all considered (criminal) *offences* (thus sending a clear message about their harmfulness and engaging in their prevention): international core crimes (genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, aggression), transnational crimes, economic crimes, organised crimes, hate crimes, institutional abuses, and so on. If this was true, it would then follow that the agreed-upon task of restorative justice was to reconcile the response to these harms with our (universal?) ideals of human dignity, human rights, human flourishing, and so on, also thanks to restorative justice’s unique ability to counter a dangerous ‘pan-punitivism’ and to foster voluntary compliance while encouraging desistance.

This is not the case. Some of the voices in this special issue – especially those coming from outside the ‘old continent’ and those who, for many reasons and sensitivities, are closer to global transformations and epochal changes – seem to locate the core business of restorative justice (of its ancestors or descendants) in the structural injustices of an enormously complex, divided world, full of inequalities, disrespectful conditions, subtle or overt hatreds. It is as if there is a cry rising from the earth itself that cannot and should not be addressed by criminal justice alone, however improved by innovative restorative practices and ideas. The problem is so vast, urgent and profound, and the harm and damage so severe, that after Rawls, Habermas, Sandel, etc., a whole new theory of justice is needed that reaches far beyond criminal matters (e.g. Llewellyn and González & Schiff, in this issue; Llewellyn, 2012; Rossner & Taylor, 2024). In so doing, though, the seeds and

threads of what is referred to today as restorative justice are still useful. Again, beyond criminal matters.

4 Rigorous but not rigid: challenges for academic research and teaching

According to Walgrave (this issue), 'Good research on restorative justice must describe unambiguously the object of its investigation.' This statement opens the debate to a number of immense issues that bring us back to our discussions around the special issue on restorative justice and the arts, particularly to the concern expressed by some about the scientific 'rigour' of such an enterprise.

How important is methodological and epistemological rigour in the field of restorative justice? For whom? Or, who says what is rigorous? Based on which criteria? Some respondents in this issue call for a more 'decolonised' view of research, knowledge production and dissemination (see, e.g., Gabagambi's call for the importance of 'oral history' in the African context; González and Schiff's arguments around the need for restorative justice research to engage with 'emerging localised and activist formulations of restorative justice'; and Andrade and Budó's request to 'overcome colonial rationality' when thinking about and doing restorative justice). And this all throws us to another topic that also goes beyond the scope of this special issue and suggests the need for another one: what have we been teaching in restorative justice courses in university curricula or trainings? How have we been teaching restorative justice? Who has been teaching it? To whom?

Following the thread of this tangled and thorny skein, we are led to other controversial questions, such as the training of facilitators and whether they need to be professionals, which in turn comes with the worry of over-professionalisation and what Christie (1977) called the theft of conflicts by the so-called experts. 'What we're trying to do in New Zealand is to *get the voice of Māori to be facilitators, to be academics*' is Bowen's advice, as collected in the *Conversation* in this issue (emphasis added). And since restorative justice was born out of experience – and is therefore a practice in search of a theory, and not the other way round – even within the Editorial Board we wondered what role practitioners and participants in restorative programmes could play in defining this strange object called (so far) restorative justice. One of us (an academic) remarked: 'Surely practitioners and activists are ahead of academics. They lead and innovate. We follow and reflect, and research.'

Finally, a common thread in this special issue concerns the multiple forms and scopes of activism among advocates of restorative justice, be they practitioners or academics. This brings to the fore, on the one hand, the initial question of scientific methods for studying, teaching, evaluating and monitoring restorative justice – methods which in principle should be objective and verifiable – and, on the other hand, the dangers of a lack of public engagement. There is a danger of intellectuals isolating themselves in an ivory tower, detached from reality and blind to the world's injustices (and wisdoms on how to counter these).

As if this list of problems was not enough, there is one final point. The concept, meaning and definition of restorative justice – which has an impact on theory,

practice, research and teaching – is also a linguistic matter. The debate herein is in English but it is not without its blind spots:

And names are important. Names influence action ... Restorative justice has been the general designator within the field [of alternative handling of conflicts] ... And the designation sneaks into other languages as well – *un-translated* (Christie, 2013: 15, emphasis added).

This is true, and the reason for this is probably related to the difficulty of precisely capturing the concept. When it is necessary to translate ‘restorative justice’ (the concept, not the mere wording, of course) in other languages, there are interesting conceptual conundrums and revelations: for the sake of our arguments, what gets actually ‘lost in translation’ captures in fact something more to be understood. Take, for example, German – an exact language *par excellence*: there is no equivalent term for restorative justice, forcing European Union officials to translate it into a (incorrect? confusing?) *Wiedergutmachung* (reparation) in the Victims Directive.¹⁰ Take French and its double rendering: *justice réparatrice* (as in the EU Victims Directive, for instance) and *justice restaurative* (as in the official text of the *loi Taubira*, the criminal justice reform act adopted by France in 2014; see Cario & Sayous, 2018). We also find *justicia restaurativa* and *justicia reparadora* in Spanish: it would be interesting to analyse their different uses and contexts in the many countries where one of the world’s currently most widely spoken language is used.¹¹

If the evolutions of today’s restorative justice will take on other names, we will all have to be very careful in choosing them: they will have to be simple, clear, rigorous but not rigid, capable of being meaningful to all those who will choose or happen to encounter this strange form of justice that we do not even know how to name and define, but that we know has something to say and do.

5 Plenty of ‘food for thought’ to help us (re)think and (re)create the future of restorative justice

The aim of this special issue has never been to create – or advocate for – one agreed-upon definition of restorative justice, nor for a *definitive* conception or meaning or scope. Walgrave made this clear from the very beginning in his formal proposal: ‘The objective is not to achieve a definitive fixed position, but to clear out some misunderstandings and to understand better the differences in approaches, convictions, and visions.’ As Braithwaite (in this issue) eloquently reminds us, divergent, contested conceptualisations create a fertile ground for the strived-for

10 Problems with German language and reflections on the ‘meaning’ of restorative justice are addressed by Weitekamp & Parmentier (2016: 141 ff).

11 Of course, the linguistic-conceptual issue we are addressing here is much broader and perhaps more complex: it involves the meaning of what are (inappropriately) called ‘self-evident’ terms used in the English-speaking restorative justice world: e.g. ‘victim’ and ‘community’, which may not be self-evident at all, and may (or do) convey different concepts in different geographical, linguistic, cultural contexts and legal systems.

development of any field. And this is what this special issue is ultimately about: an 'ode' to the development of restorative justice.

Now, as our imaginary circle here comes to show, the contemporary restorative 'idea' (given the debate in this issue, we dare not even call it 'justice'), like it or not, is no longer limited to a response to crime. The discussion concerns both terms: the restorative idea can be opened up to include more than just *responses* (ex-post reactions) to wrongdoing and can be extended to include more than just *criminal* offences. If this is indeed the case, every new area of theory, practice and research will need to maintain its own rigour, use its own context-specific terminology, and remain open to cross-fertilisation and multidisciplinary.

And even if everyone were to adhere to Walgrave's 'espresso-definition', the expansion of restorative justice beyond the 'walls' of the *criminal* justice system would probably be inevitable. Indeed, to truly change the criminal justice system (in fact, any system), we need to look and act beyond the walls of that very same system. There is no way to transform systems without transforming the contexts in which they exist and persist, without 'transforming the entire legal system, our family lives, our conduct in the workplace, our practice of politics' (Braithwaite, 2003: 1). To genuinely change the way we respond to crime, said Braithwaite *twenty years ago*, we need a 'holistic change in the way we do justice in the world' (Braithwaite, 2003: 1). The reference we make here to earlier publications is intentional. It is to remember that discussions around how far we are to deviate from the core theme of restorative justice as an alternative way of responding to crime *are by no means new*. As far back as in 2008, Gerry Johnstone had acknowledged and organised the many different 'agendas' of the 'restorative justice movement', in what continues to be such a relevant and didactic publication (Johnstone, 2008). And already then, he pondered, those interested in particular agendas – such as in promoting the use of restorative processes within the social response to crime – do *not* need to discuss or evaluate all the agendas of the restorative justice movement. Nonetheless, he warned, 'they should be aware that in discussing a particular agenda, they are not discussing restorative justice per se, but only one dimension of it' (Johnstone, 2008: 76).

The literature on restorative justice is filled with tables, figures, boxes that aim to highlight the distinctive and salient elements of the restorative idea, usually in contrast to features that constitute the essence of other 'paradigms' or practices (e.g. McCold & Wachtel, 2003; Zehr, 2014, 2015). This has largely been the case with the very same 'criminal matters' that seem to have contributed most to the initial delimitation of the subject. It is as if restorative justice – the object of our reflection and search – can only be grasped through *difference* and only in relation to something *else*. This may be the fate of every pioneering concept, or practice, that breaks with precedent and the status quo. But this in turn highlights how important the attempt to provide a precise conceptual framework is today, as the political, legal, social and academic impact of the restorative idea expands. Finally, this underlines the need for rigorous intellectual honesty in looking back at the 'real history' of 'restorativeness',¹² while at the same time grasping the truth(s)

12 On 'restorativeness', see also Olson, Connel, Barbieri & Rodriguez (2023).

revealed by its 'mythology' (Daly, 2002) in order to move the restorative idea forward.

The fact that the 'movement' continues to grow into multiple contexts and in so many different (even conflicting) directions requires that we stop, from time to time, to reflect, as well as to trace and resettle the field's overall framework or locus of inquiry. This special issue, we would like to argue, is also an exercise in doing that. And in so doing, it reveals many new, fundamental addendums to what could – only from a myopic standpoint (Gal, 2020) – be accused of being an 'old' debate.

Speaking from 2023, the expansion of the theoretical and applied fields of restorative justice seems to go hand in hand with overcoming Eurocentric or Western-centric or Northern-centric visions of it (Peacock, 2023; see also Wong's and Gabagambi's responses). Therefore, there seems to be three directions, or dimensions, of 'expansion': one is context-related (beyond criminal justice: schools, workplaces, cities, etc.), the other is culture-related (North-South-East-West), the third is 'political' (social injustices at large). This three-directional (or dimensional) expansion seems to nourish and enrich spaces, perspectives, practices, visions, and theories of the 'restorative idea'. Such growth also seems to require (or call for) an additional wisdom to integrate 'well' the different emerging contexts and multiple cultural/political perspectives. The richness and abundance that restorative justice enjoys nowadays must not, in fact, lead the 'restorative idea' to fall into what seems to be a double trap: on the one hand, the trap of *confusion* (the risk feared by Walgrave); on the other, the *dominance* of one vision (or 'orthodox' vision; or, even more dangerously, a Western/Northern conception; or – what would horrify us – a 'colonial' vs. 'post-colonial' approach) to the detriment of others (the risk feared by some respondents). Nor, of course, should we fall into the trap of blindly and naively assuming that all Indigenous, native or traditional practices are *a priori* and intrinsically good, when they too, or their outcomes, may be problematic in terms of non-discrimination of certain subjects – for example, women and children – and respect for fundamental human rights (see examples in Gabagambi, this issue).

The ability to bring opposites into dialogue is in the fibre of restorative justice; hence, the vivid debate around the expansion of the restorative idea should be welcomed as a good and coherent sign.

It is also important to highlight that, if the views in this special issue are, in many cases, conflicting, there are also some common denominators running through all texts, including the conversation between Bowen, Buntinx, and Umbreit, and the book reviews by Fellegi, Kirkwood and Soulou. There seems to be a common consensus that boundaries should be drawn, even if they are flexible, permeable ones, permanently open to constant elaboration. That is, ultimately, what we must be able to discern, whether a certain programme, initiative, discourse, or practice is or is not *restorative justice* – or at least *restorative ... 'something'*. And it seems that the values and principles of restorative justice agreed upon so far – for example, through the workings of the European Forum for Restorative Justice, as Chapman's response in this issue reminds us – offer us a compass to find a just and fair way to make the most of the richness of diversity, exchange, and respectful confrontation of ideas.

In this vein, in reading this special issue, we looked for features that would qualify this 'something' (people, schools, organisations, welfare systems, diplomacy, etc.) to be considered *restorative* in nature. That is, from Walgrave's text and all ten responses, what stands out as 'unanimous'? The following list seems truthful to what the reader will find throughout the next pages:

(a) *Restorative justice is grounded in the importance of respectful and fair (just?) relations.* And not only interpersonal relations at the individual level, but relations between people in other more complex, collective, institutional or organisational settings too, and also relations with nature and 'more-than-human animals' (see Llewellyn, Andrade & Budó in this issue). In Walgrave's narrower view of restorative justice, there is space, of course, for environmental crimes, a topic, we risk saying, absent from the earlier writings about restorative justice. But for advocates of a broader 'meaning', it is high time to talk about 'environmental restorative justice', which deals with more than just crime (Pali, Forsyth & Tepper, 2022; see also this journal's 2021 special issue 4(1)).

(b) *Restorative justice is future-oriented.* Although the term 'restorative' also evokes the idea of reparation, of restoration, of, thus, going *back* to before (the harmful event or the wrongdoing), there is a now sedimented realisation that there is often no better 'before' to return to or to strive for. Indeed, terms such as 'transformative' move away (and disengage) from the before/after relationship and/or from the action/reaction relationship to emphasise more strongly the momentum towards a future and a *better* future.

(c) *Restorative justice aims at change.* The concept of change seems essential, in the sense that it is a key element shared by several theories and practices that coincide with or are inspired by the philosophy of restorative justice (e.g., responsive regulation, transformative justice, etc.). 'Change' reconciles in itself both the concept of 'reaction' to something negative that must not be repeated (a concept typical, for example, of criminal justice) and the concept of 'innovation'. Moreover, the ideal of changing 'systems' is present in every contribution to this issue – be it the criminal justice system (e.g. Walgrave, Claessen) or (oppressive) systems more generally (e.g. Llewellyn, González & Schiff, Andrade & Budó).

(d) Last but not at all least: *On the ground, restorative justice manifests itself through participatory and deliberative practices where and when they are unlikely.* Ultimately, restorative justice is a mutually respectful, collaborative and collective enterprise in cases where these features are normally absent or even unthinkable. That, we think, is the core of the matter. This unlikeliness, this implausibility ultimately help us both to draw a line between the specificity of the *restorative* idea and the broader notion of democracy as such, and to make that line at the same time a very porous one (a point of connection rather than a boundary), in the name of a certain coherence with inalienable human dignity and a duty of care for people, their equality and diversities, and the environment that is common to the best versions of both restorative justice and democracy. It is a 'doing together', that is, in the gerund and not alone – whatever this 'doing' entails (responding to a crime, responding to another 'problematic situation', responding to transgenerational harm and/or systemic injustices, building a culture to prevent future harm, etc.)

and whatever this ‘togetherness’ creates (a reparation plan, an agreement regarding standards of coexistence in a particular space, etc.).

The above ‘common features’ perhaps do not amount to a handy checklist that can be used to separate what *is* from what *is not* restorative justice, but it surely helps to explain the passion that connects all the contributions in this special issue. It helps to explain why restorative justice makes sense, even if it does so in so many different senses.

6 Some concluding thoughts

Looking back ten or twenty years ago, would we have ever imagined how relevant and broad the concept, scope and reach of restorative justice would go? We do not think so. We are at a ‘good/healthy crisis’, at a crossroads with multiple pathways. And although we are phrasing this as restorative justice being at a crossroads, ‘this is a movement, not a moment,’ as Carl Stauffer reminded us, during Jennifer Llewellyn’s Annual Lecture. That is, restorative justice is not standing still at a crossroads, but moving nonstop. And while it moves, as Fania Davis said during Llewellyn’s Annual Lecture, ‘we should forget certainty and predictability because, if it’s certain, it’s based on the past, and we can’t get to a new place in an old way.’ This, we think, summarises the challenges ahead of us.

From the horizon open to the future, and therefore to the unknown, comes an adventure whose outcome and fruits we will only be able to recount in years to come. Every story is the result of a journey and can only be understood at the end, as Adriana Cavarero (2000) wisely points out, referring to a folktale by Karen Blixen (*The roads of life* in Blixen, 1937-1970: 250-251) in which a man wakes up at night and finds himself running in many different directions (South, first, then North), only to discover the next day, looking at his footprints from ‘his little round window’, that his run has drawn a stork.

We, the advocates of restorative justice and its future transformations, are perhaps a little like the man in the tale: we do not know the sign (the meaning?) that will emerge from our debates, our arguments, theories or practices. But we do know the energy that drives us to run, and of course to fall and make mistakes: as the following writings show, this energy is a ‘militancy’ that is as peaceful as it is firm, in favour of a better world in the very places and among the very people who are sadly experiencing its opposite.

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