More than a list: The Grand Challenges Approach and legitimate agents of social change

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Abstract

In this paper we ask who is a legitimate agent of social change for Grand Challenges. To answer this question, we build on the philosophies of Hannah Arendt, Friedrich Nietzsche, Maurice Blanchot and Emmanuel Levinas on the human condition. This is important in sensitizing the project management community to the political responsibility of the project manager at times of crises and Grand Challenges, when new social orders, such as the Grand Challenges Approach (GCA), emerge and are delivered through projects. We introduce philosophers who have spoken about the human condition a) to escape definitions of legitimacy which have arisen from the very social processes and institutions which contribute to social injustices; and, b) because we all share the human condition irrespective of origin, religion, race, gender, education and life experiences, and as such it carries significant democratic potential. The philosophers tell us that an agent of social change is s/he who acts with the Other as the end goal in mind, and that legitimate is the social agent who appears in front of the watchful eye of society and fully discloses past, present and future intentions (Arendt); who can embody meaning and make decisions based on their humanity (Nietzsche); who can echo ideals which extend thought, intelligence, decisions and actions from what is already known to the creation of new spaces of action (Blanchot); and, finally, who can stand upright and engage with fellow-world-citizens in defining what is to be known, the reality of tomorrow (Levinas).
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Abstract

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Keywords – Grand Challenges Approach (GCA); social injustices, Arendt, Nietzsche, Blanchot, Levinas, human condition, political responsibility; Grand Challenges Ethos (GCE).

1. Introduction

In this paper, we ask the question who is a legitimate agent of social change for Grand Challenges, and explore the implications of essential conditions of legitimacy for the practice of project management. This is an important question because, at testing times such as ours, when multiple Grand Challenges are at play concurrently and induce multiple layers of complexity and uncertainty (Popkova and Konstantinou, 2021), social inequalities are amplified and productivity diminishes giving rise to a vicious cycle of economic despair and social unrest (Sedik et al., 2020). At a global level, rising social inequalities translate into a divided world and global instability (Shah, 2021). At such times, new social orders emerge, such as the Grand Challenges Approach (GCA) which we develop in the first part of this paper, and, at the same time, the legitimacy of various agents of social change is re-evaluated and re-defined anew. For example, over the pandemic our understanding of who is a critical worker shifted radically from the financiers and regulators spurred by the 2008 financial crisis to the doctors, nurses and cleaners of the C-19 pandemic. In this paper, we do not look at the complex social dynamics, relationships, processes or practices through which new social orders emerge, but to the legitimacy of agents for social change, i.e. we ask who is a legitimate agent of social change for Grand Challenges, based on an understanding of project managers as change agents (e.g., in the sense of Turner and Müller (2003). The paper focuses on the political responsibility that project managers carry with their role and aims to build awareness and sensitize them in this direction in the management of projects (see Konstantinou, 2017), rather than shed light on how new social orders are produced. We have been preoccupied by questions such as who can the project manager legitimately listen to, read, take advice
from in making decisions during crises such as the C-19 pandemic and when their projects have the potential to amplify or diffuse social inequalities and unrest, and bring back inclusive and green growth and prosperity? Who should the project manager aim to work with? And, what is the profile and identity that the project manager should be aiming to develop for themselves and find in others, so that Grand Challenges are addressed by projects and their management? Is it the client, the public, green celebrities (such as Greta Thunberg), the profession of project management, political leaders, the scientists, academics and experts, someone else that the project manager should be turning to and aiming to be? We contend that – at trying, challenging times – the conversation about who is a legitimate agent of social change is rare and confusing business. But, it does not justify political irresponsibility on the part of the project manager, especially when it is precisely the work and projects of project managers which will deliver adaptation and mitigation responses to Grand Challenges. Here, and based on the work of Judt (2007), “political irresponsibility or ‘not knowing what is happening’ arises when a professional practitioner displays a salient and noticeable lack of understanding of their time and place – that is, lack of understanding of the environment or the context of the project” (Konstantinou, 2017: 7). As Konstantinou notes, political irresponsibility leads to making decisions which are decontextualised. In practice, this means that the needs of certain groups of stakeholders are prioritised over the needs of other rightful stakeholders without sufficient or adequate justification, and the project manager can hardly claim that they are acting responsibly, which is critical for any professional role. At a broader level, political irresponsibility at work feeds in the erosion of democratic processes and institutionalised, systemic corruption which ultimately accentuates social injustices, giving rise to academic fields of study, such as that of Corporate Political Responsibility (Young, 2006).

There are three parts to this paper. Firstly, we conceptualise what is the new social order of the Grand Challenges Approach (GCA). Secondly, we use seminal accounts of sociologist Margaret Archer to denote the power of agents in defining the meaning behind social orders, such as the GCA, and we explain why we ought to be able to articulate who is a legitimate agent of social change. Here, we also explain why we have turned to philosophy and work with Levinas’ ideas to define an agent of social change as the one with “a destination leading to the Other”. Thirdly, we identify the essential conditions for legitimacy for agents of social change, such as Grand Challenges, by working with Arendt, Nietzsche, Blanchot and Levinas, and discuss how their ideas extend the scope of project studies. Finally we discuss our conclusions on how we can define a legitimate agent of social change, along with the limits of our paper and future research.

2. The Grand Challenges Approach: a new social order for addressing key, global issues
In various fields, including engineering (Mote et al., 2016), management (McKiernan, 2017) mental health (Collins et al., 2013), information technology (Winter and Butler, 2011) and social work (Uehara et al., 2013), the notion of Grand Challenges aims to mobilise future generations towards the development of a prosperous, sustainable and safer future. Various agents, such as academic disciplines, sectors, industries, professional bodies and associations, universities, multilateral organisations, including the United Nations (UN), and other local, national, governmental and global communities, are required to work collaboratively beyond traditional professional, disciplinary and national boundaries in creating this future. A first glance into how different agents use the notion of Grand Challenges suggests that it is frequently perceived as not more than a list of key, global issues that agents pledge to deliver to demonstrate their commitment to socially, publicly-spirited purposes and missions (see, Mazzucato, 2021). However, a closer look at the agendas of these social agents shows they all follow one, very similar approach irrespective of the Grand Challenge they are seeking to
address. As such, the Grand Challenges Approach (GCA) involves a new social order which can be captured in the following, 4 key priorities (Konstantinou et al., 2019: 2):

GCA Priority 1 - the identification of key, global issues that are already or will affect the wellbeing, prosperity and security of the global community and the planet;
GCA Priority 2 - the development of evidence-based interventions and strategies that will address these key, global issues in a coherent and systematic manner;
GCA Priority 3 - the development of teams and collaborations which extend beyond disciplinary, professional, sectoral, and national boundaries and bring together stakeholders and other social agents who can develop impactful solutions to key, global issues;
GCA Priority 4 - the development of education priorities, systems and programmes that prepare future generations to address global issues and learn the skills needed to contribute to collaborative efforts that extend all over the world.

For example, the UK government identifies 4 Grand Challenges (artificial intelligence and data; ageing society; clean growth; future of mobility) (BEIS, 2021) (GCA Priority 1), which are captured and addressed in the UK Industrial Strategy (BEIS, 2018) (GCA Priority 2), which is to be delivered ‘by bringing government, businesses and organisations across the country together’ (BEIS, 2021) (GCA Priority 3) and the funding of academic research projects which then feed into educational initiatives dedicated to each one of the four Grand Challenges (UKRI, 2022) (GCA Priority 4).

At the global level, the new social order of the GCA is inspired by seminal reports, such as the Brundtland Report (1987) which defined and established the importance of sustainable development, and by the global multilateral initiatives, such as the Millenium Development Goals (2000) and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (2015) which set out key global issues which are now beginning to appear in the strategies of commercial and other organisations (Zerjav and Konstantinou, 2021). Similarly, progress on the new social order of the GCA at the global level is discussed and recorded in reports such as the IPCC reports on Climate Change and the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP) meetings. Especially in project management, there have been calls for coordination of climate change initiatives at the global level, by creating a single point of accountability (SPA) which would translate, support and record progress on the new social order of the GCA in the project management community (Morris, 2017).

However, the risks associated with addressing these challenges can be projected as much higher than ever before. Already in 2005 an OECD global progress report on aid projects summarized (OECD, 2005, p.10):

*Overall, while the scope and geographical coverage of activities to meet the Rome commitments is impressive, good practice has not yet become general practice. .... Intensified efforts are needed by bilateral and multilateral donors, working closely with country partners.*

In 2018, the IPCC report on Global Warming of 1.5°C and the COP24 meeting in Poland focused on why action on Climate Change is lagging behind expectations. A few years on, the same concerns have monopolised the 2022 6th Assessment Report by the IPCC report and the 2021 COP26 in Glasgow, albeit with a much stronger sense of urgency. This does not come as a surprise, as it is in line with existing lessons learned from global development projects, such as those reported by Youker (1999, p. 10-11) in reference to evaluations by the Economic Development Institute of the World Bank, which show:
• Lack of a shared perception and agreement on the objectives of the project by staff and stakeholders,
• Lack of commitment to the project by the team, management, and stakeholders,
• Lack of detailed, realistic, and current project plans (schedule, budget, procurement),
• Unclear lines of authority and responsibility (organization not structured for project management),
• Lack of adequate resources,
• Poor feedback and control mechanisms for early detection of problems,
• Poor or no analysis of major risk factors,
• Delays caused by bureaucratic administrative systems (approvals, procurement, personnel, land acquisition, and release of funds).

Why is this? Why does the GCA fail to address key, global issues in significant ways? Seminal sociological accounts by Archer suggest that a new social order, such as the GCA, will be established through enculturated ‘cycles of structural conditioning, social interaction and structural elaboration over time’ (p. 306). This means that, social orders are tried and tested in a dynamic relationship with agents of social change who constantly define, assert and advance their ideological and material identities and who cannot be expected to be forced or disciplined into embodying the 4 GCA priorities. Indeed, Archer notes that social orders and agents of social change can be put on the same ‘ontological footing’ (2000: 310) as forces with generative power to induce morphogenesis and morphostasis. That is, both social orders (such as the GCA) and agents of social change contribute to change in society. This is shown by its application in the realm of project management, where structure and agency identify the role, relationships and distinguishing characteristics of concepts that are often confused or used interchangeably, such as project management, project leadership, project governance and project governmentality (Müller, 2019). Similar, division in structure and agency resembles contemporary academic perspectives in project management research, such as used in the recently developed balanced leadership theory for projects and the related series of publications (e.g. Müller et al., 2018).

Yet, Archer takes this argument a step further and gives prominence to agents of social change for their key role in defining the meaning and purpose of new social orders. She writes ‘the structural and cultural properties (SEPs and CEPs) [of social orders] only emerge through the activities of people (PEPs), they are only causally efficacious through the activities of people’ (p. 307) and alludes with confidence to the persisting role of human beings on the social construction, maintenance and transformation of social orders. She writes “indeed my key argument maintains that it is precisely because of our interaction with the natural, practical and transcendental orders that humanity has prior, autonomous and efficacious powers which it brings to society itself” (p.17-18, emphasis added). These are crucial observations, well grounded in project reality (e.g. Pilkien et al., 2018). Once it emerges as a new social order, as it has, the GCA may be reproduced or transformed by our and future generations. In this context, we can conceptualise academics, professionals, politicians, activists, the public and other – all – interest groups, including the project manager, as agents of social change who can engage in the dynamic interplay with the GCA. They can employ, mobilise and embody the GCA to articulate and address key, global challenges. We now turn to conceptualising agents of social change, before we look at the conditions of legitimacy that philosophers propose for agents of social change and we develop in the context of project studies.

1 Morphogenesis is linked to the notion of creation and change, whilst morphostasis is linked to institutional theory and the forces that come into play to drive societies and various interest groups in a mode of stability (Archer, 2000: 273-277).
3. Agents of social change

3.1. Agents and the quest for meaning and purpose

According to Archer (2000), agents of social change have persistent ‘generative power’ which is located in their self-consciousness and allows them to reflexively formulate, influence and shape social orders, such as humanity’s responses to grand challenges, including inheriting and applying or transforming the GCA. The notion of self-consciousness is important here as it alludes to the creation and choice of meaning behind our actions. Our self-consciousness helps us define the purpose and meaning of our decisions and actions, and by implication the purpose and meaning of projects. It also helps us debate, articulate and ultimately decide which social orders, such as the GCA, we will define as being important to society and why. Agents of social change define the purpose, meaning and direction underlying the social order. These are crucial observations in the discussion about the GCA because they encourage us to ask: if agents of social change define the meaning and the direction of the GCA, who are the legitimate agents who should undertake this critical task? One way of answering this question, perhaps the most democratic way, is to say that since Grand Challenges, such as Climate Change, affect all human beings on the planet, then all humans are legitimate agents of social change and have a say in defining why and how we as a global community should address key global challenges. But is this the case? Or will this stifle urgent and necessary progress, and projects? This is a provocative, dangerous question as it calls for a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate (or, at least, less legitimate) agents of social change. Asking who is a legitimate agent of social change harbours anti-democratic sentiment and potential. Caution is needed! Scientifically and philosophically, however, we ought to be able to articulate with confidence the reasoning behind our choices and the most obvious, perhaps fundamental, principles which guide and characterise our society. This is for three reasons, and applies to how we define the legitimacy of agents of social change for any matter, including key global challenges.

Firstly, as Archer and other philosophers have argued (see Arendt, 1958; Foucault, 1989; Nietzsche, 1886), our self-consciousness and the ability to articulate and argue for our reasoning is what defines us as human, political beings (in the Aristotelian sense). If we unconsciously or uncritically follow a social order, even if it is democracy or the GCA, we cease to be human, and are reduced to mechanistic beings, or cultural products (“Society’s being”, according to Archer, 2000: 86), “slaves” of others’ meanings (according to Nietzsche, p.244) or beings of labour or fabrication (the “Homo Faber”, according to Arendt, p.153-159). In the world of projects, Archer’s opinion manifests itself through the discourse on rule-based (e.g. PMI, 2013) versus principles-based (APM, 2011) governance structures, whereas Nietzsche’s view is mirrored in the relationship between project sponsor and project manager (Konstantinou & Müller, 2017). There seems to be consensus that being human depends on being able to articulate why we think and act the way we do. Secondly, social orders (such as the GCA) are embedded in social contexts which are political and are thus prone to be exposed to undemocratic sentiment or sentiment which runs opposite to notions of the public good, such as in the failed Eastern India Rainfed Farming Project (Kumar & Corbridge, 2002). Politics can be strong forces and, in a democratic society, it is only competent arguments which can sustain democracy, social inclusion and justice. Thirdly, by asking the question, who is a legitimate agent of social change, we are inviting project managers to a) acknowledge their political responsibilities and obligations (Konstantinou, 2017; Locatelli et al., 2022); b) acknowledge that projects are arenas of commercial and geopolitical tensions, and fierce competition (Jensen et al., 2016; Lundin et al., 2015); c) acknowledge that power and political forces can transpire in the project and silence weaker, less privileged stakeholders who otherwise represent legitimate and rightful stakeholders in the project and our global community (Gaim et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2019). We are opening up the debate to the issue of stakeholder legitimacy and the
question of GCA’s (or any other project’s) management for or of stakeholders, as described by Huemann, Eskerod and Ringhofer (2016).

3.2. Philosophy and agents of social change

To answer the question who is a legitimate agent of social change for Grand Challenges, the paper turns to philosophers – Arendt, Nietzsche, Blanchot and Levinas - who have written extensively about the human condition, i.e. “all limitations that a priori define man’s fundamental situation in the universe” (Sartre, 1947: 42), and, by implication, in reference to the Heideggerian notion of being, which is “the most universal concept” (Heidegger, 1962: 22). We have focused on what these philosophers have in common and have chosen to blatantly disregard the boundaries of their philosophical and ontological differences. We are inspired by Bernstein’s view that “once we set aside the anxieties about [disciplinary] constraint and compulsion that have been so powerful in philosophy, then the scene of culture and the potential contribution of the voice of philosophy in the conversation with mankind becomes far more alive and dramatic” (1980: 775). In this way, the paper reorganises academic thinking between disciplines as Geraldi and Söderlund (2018) and indeed the GCA (specifically, Priority 3) suggest. Our contribution is interdisciplinary and further links project studies with philosophy (see Konstantinou and Müller, 2016).

So, what is it that these philosophers have in common? Their main commonality is their link to the existentialist/ Heideggerian phenomenological tradition, where Nietzsche (with Goethe) were Heidegger’s precursors (Ellis Dye, 2010; Crowell, 2020); Arendt was Heidegger’s student; Levinas’ first philosophy has been seen in an ongoing dialogue with Heidegger’s first philosophy; and, apart from being friends, Levinas’ and Blanchot’s work is similar to Heidegger’s in asking and seeking to answer the question of being, how human existence is (i.e., exists) before “class or genus” (Heidegger, 1962: 22). More specifically, by focusing on what is human, firstly, they appeal to the project management community in a democratic, inclusive manner. Their focus on the human condition helps us escape notions of legitimacy based on socially-constructed structures such as the institutions of education, corporate, professional and project membership, career paths and other forms of social organisation and professional inclusion which have been seen as preordained by social and economic inequalities (Dingwall, 2014, also see Rosanvallon, 2016). Secondly, by focusing on what is human, they reveal interpretations of humanity which are - as Bernstein explains – ‘alive and dramatic’ and emphasize the human aspects of agency which constitute its transformative power (which is prevalent in project studies via the adoption of Agency theory).

3.3. Agents of social change: the definition

To define who is a social agent, we side here with the words of Emmanuel Levinas who defines human consciousness as the "urgency of a destination leading to the Other and not an eternal return to self” (1999: 2). We have chosen Levinas because, from his perspective, in answering the question who is a legitimate agent in defining and transforming the meaning behind our response to key global challenges, the aim is to address issues that are pertinent to the public/common good, to society and the injustices it entails, the future generations, and of course the planet. As Archer (2000) and Sarkissian (2010) note and is highlighted above, meaning will be delivered by various agents. But agents in themselves are not the end point. The end point is the public, the fellow citizen and the future generations, and the planet. We side we philosophical accounts because, rather unhelpfully, prominent sociological accounts on legitimacy (Suchman, 1995; Suddaby et al., 2017) focus on the social dynamics which enable the construction and maintentance of legitimacy, while the meaning and essense of legitimacy remain
within the realms of matters that are relevant to oneself, rather than the Other (e.g., the legitimacy of the organisation as a property, process or perception of and in society, rather than for society).

To illustrate this point with an example, if the profession of project management identifies better ways of encouraging sustainability through projects and it creates and institutionalises another certification of sustainable project management for their members – nothing much will change, and this paper would argue that their legitimacy is on shaky grounds. However, if a profession is successful in helping project managers employ sustainability insights in everyday practice, then the end goal of its efforts will have moved to matters that concern the Other and the profession will have earned the legitimacy to engage with topics which concern society beyond the profession itself, since projects have an impact on society. The project management profession will have moved from being an agent involved in its own internal conversation to an agent of social change. Until they use their advancements for the public and the planet, their focus will remain on the self and not the Other, and therefore their legitimacy will remain in the realm of matters that are relevant to themselves, rather than Others. That links to Turner and Müller (2003) describing the project manager as the agent for change, using the project as a temporary organization to bring about the change. Levinas’ view extends this by widening the scope of the role of project managers to ensuring the active use of the change for the Other. This has been suggested by project management scholars before, for example, Shenhar and Dvir (2007) suggest an active involvement of project managers in tasks traditionally assigned to project sponsors only, such as linking and adjusting projects to ensure acceptance and use of their outcomes.

Levinas’ observation suggests that at different points in time and under different cultural and political circumstances, the potential of an agent to induce social change will vary. As such, it might be more relevant to talk about a) conditions for legitimacy which an agent may fulfil at different levels in defining the meaning behind our response to key global challenges and in transforming social orders, such as the GCA; and b) to focus on the individual level, the human being, as he/she can act as an agent of social change both individually and in an organised form in a profession, organisation, government, etc.

4. Essential conditions for legitimacy: appearing, embodying meaning, echoing ideals and being upright.

4.1. Appearing as an essential condition for legitimacy

In her book, the Human Condition, Arendt (1958) writes:

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A \text{ life without speech and without action [...] is literally dead to the world. [...] To act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin [...] to set something into motion (which is the original meaning of the Latin agree) (p.177). [Action] becomes relevant only through the spoken word in which he identifies himself as the actor, announcing what he does, has done, and intends to do” (p.179)
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For Arendt, life is precarious, unknown, unpredictable and unexpected and what defines us as humans is intentional speech and action. These are acts of self-revelation and disclosure which give us our place in the world and, more specifically, in society. Deep inside the human condition is the capacity to make new beginnings which appear against all odds and which cannot be predicted and, as such, accounted
for. For Arendt, in any given moment in time, we will act and, as long as we speak and proclaim our actions in public with others, we bear no responsibility or accountability for the beginnings we make. We speak to others and, in this way, show who we are, not our physical attributes which exist without any doing of our own, but our “unique personal identities” (p.179) which become real and visible in the presence of others. She writes “this revelatory quality of speech and action comes to the fore where people are with others and neither for nor against them – that is, in sheer human togetherness” (p. 180). As such, we “must be willing to risk the disclosure” (p.180) in public, in the Aristotelian polis, otherwise we “remain outside the pale of human intercourse and are, politically, marginal figures who usually enter the historical scene in times of corruption, disintegration, and political bankruptcy” (p. 180). Arendt does not give us a choice in terms of our capacity to make new beginnings – one way or another we will do something today; we will act in the primitive sense in some way. But she places it wholly upon us to speak out about our past, present and future actions and the intentions behind them, to explain them, narrate and articulate them in the audience of our society. We have to appear through words, explain our acts to society. This is where - for her, we become human in the truest sense, i.e. in front of the watchful eye of the Other in society.

Arendt extending the scope of project studies

In Arendt’s world, project agents would be legitimate stakeholders in the discussion about Grand Challenges if they acted politically, rather than independently, professionally, or commercially. Project agents would be legitimate stakeholders if they joined projects with the intention to engage in a process of self-revelation of their intentions and ideas which would allow them to fully engage with Others in contexts such as Aristotle’s polis, i.e. in the audience of society. These two perspectives were addressed by Turner and Müller (2003) and Shenhar and Dvir (2007) respectively, when they outlined a) the role of the project manager as the CEO of the temporary organization that is the project, including a wider mental horizon and political responsibility than the project itself, and b) the need for project managers to accept strategic responsibilities and accountabilities to engage to their full potential as the pivotal point for leading their project in the widest sense. This would be a project world that would be free from organisational, professional and project boundaries, hierarchies and ideologies which define projects today (see Evetts, 2013; Muzio and Kirkpatrick, 2011). Here, power and organisational and human resources would be attributed to those who spoke of their intentions and explained why projects are important for the Other, rather than those who manage, control and organise under the ideology of either the professionalism of project management, the client or the organisation. This would be a world where the focus would not be on project effectiveness and success (as argued by seminal project management scholars, such as Shenhar and Dvir, 2007), but on the reasoning behind its birth. It would be a world were project scrutiny and how a project addresses Grand Challenges would be examined by the public, rather than particular groups of project stakeholders, such as project sponsors, clients and investors. Even though this seems to be echoing the advent of social media which have been used for both the mobilization of and scrutiny of projects by the public (Clegg, 2019), Arendt’s account suggests a broader approach of actively and agentially engaging in projects and society firstly as humans (through purposeful speech and action) and secondly as agents of organising. In Arendt’s world, legitimate stakeholders stand up in front of fellow citizens and explain why their decisions address the public, future generations and the planet and why they reflect new beginnings. By purposeful speech and action, Arendt talks about far more than communication and other interpersonal skills (including social and emotional intelligence, e.g. Clarke, 2010), personality traits or teamworking roles and skills for project teams (e.g. Sommerville & Dalziel, 1997). She is talking about prioritising what is human

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2 For Arendt, routine, repetitive actions require no purposeful speech and action – no leadership or management.
which she identifies in the meanings, purposes and intentions which guide the embodiment of notions of the public good and other publicly-spirited goals, such as the notion of Grand Challenges. She is talking about deprioritising the technical supremacy and rational orders which are legitimised by the discourse of technological efficiency, and which have been criticized for “destroying all organic life on earth” (Arendt, 1958: 269) and divorcing life from humanity and its meaning (Dewey, 1927). In summary, Arendt would side with Turner and Müller’s suggestion that project agents need to act as a \textit{real} CEO of the project and adds that this is based on their human nature and intentions.

4.2. Embodying meaning as an essential condition for legitimacy

In his book, \textit{Beyond Good and Evil}, Nietzsche (1886) writes:

\begin{quote}
\textit{The noble type of man feels himself to be the determiner of values, he does not need to be approved of, he judges ‘what harms me is harmful itself’, he knows to be that which in general first accords honour to things, he creates value. Everything he knows to be part of himself, he honours [...] In the foreground stands the feeling of plenitude, of power which seeks to overflow, the happiness of high tension, the consciousness of a wealth which would like to give away and bestow... (p. 242)}
\end{quote}

With the shrewdest language, Nietzsche distinguishes between a noble and slave morality in words and notions which are almost embarrassing in our time and age. But he has a serious point to make. Nietzsche seems to be a man of great distinctions, the primary of which is between man himself and society (which he sees through the dimmest of lenses). Nietzsche seems to be the greatest humanist of all, proposing a human being that is in touch with what is real in herself and which separates and distinguishes her from the Other, i.e. a strong sense of human distinctiveness and uniqueness. He talks about the human being as the ‘hermit’ (p.273), but not in an a-social manner - i.e. as a being that is not social by nature -, but rather in an anti-social manner - i.e. one that should avoid society and, more precisely, those human beings in it who are not masters of themselves. For Nietzsche, all we need to know and find out about our existence and the world, i.e. the value of and behind life, is within us, inside us, in our souls, hearts and minds. Our role is to listen and embody, be in complete harmony with the values we find inside us, revere them and safeguard them against an entropic society. He asks us to conceal ourselves, to hide from the world and those who are part of society, to focus deep in our thoughts and their value and follow only them. He asks us to have no relationship with the Other, when the Other is looking outwards from themselves, to be alone, in solitude, and to be listening to our inner thoughts and inclinations. But why does he take such a harsh view on society? To say the least, Nietzsche was suspicious of the discoverers of truth, whether they were philosophers or scientists. He saw them as creators of structures, i.e. rulers whose empirically and philosophically derived patterns, constructions and architectures, stand outside the human being, and can therefore hold no other role in our lives but to suppress, dominate, subordinate and tyrannize us from a distance, almost in the Foucauldian sense, and lead us to our death – the death of our human condition, rather than our physical death (which he saw as the ultimate liberation). He wants us to respectfully listen to our “confidential discourse” (p.273), our instincts and inclinations. He sees this as an enlightened state where our energy resides. It is a “gold-mine” (p.273) whose exploration Nietzsche believes will lead us to something noble, transient and transformational, to life itself. Everything else is, for him, irrelevant.
**Nietzsche extending the scope of project studies**

In Nietzsche’s world, project agents would be legitimate stakeholders in the discussion about Grand Challenges if – above and beyond all else – they stayed true to themselves, their distinctiveness and uniqueness, to the values that they hold true and emerge from their own confidential, internal and personal discord and discourse. Nietzsche locates all goodness in the world within each one of us and therefore argues for our loyalty and respect to ourselves and our values, rather than any social order or structure, such as the philosophy and practices of project management, the sciences, religion, commercial and other organisations, the GCA and political systems, such as democracy. Thus, in a twist of faith about all that we take for granted as good in life and the practice of managing projects, Nietzsche’s project agent would not embody any socially-constructed approach, any approach to management, to addressing Grand Challenges, or political system which - for her - would reflect phenomena which stand outside herself and are therefore irrelevant to discovering meaning and what purposeful agency means. This stands in stark contrast with academic thinking emerging from the institutional and structuration theories (Suddaby, 2010 and Giddens, 1991) and the morphostatic qualities these theories rightfully recognise in projects and organisations, yet Nietzsche would disqualify these as creations which stand outside/beside humans. The ways projects are organized, with sponsors, steering groups, project management offices and other governing institutions, reflect the closest that the project world has come to Nietzsche’s thought of a ‘noble’ man (in form of one of these governing institutions) as the determiner of values for the project, and passing them on to the ‘slave’ (in form of a project manager) for implementation (Konstantinou & Müller, 2017). So how could project agents legitimise their role in resolving the Grand Challenges we are facing? Based on Nietzsche’s insights, legitimacy would need to be seriously conditioned by our internal discord and discourse, our internal values and forces, our instincts and inclinations, i.e. our humanity. Towards this direction stands the shift from process-based to principles-based standards (e.g. ISO, 2017), whereby project managers legitimate their action by their and other stakeholders’ values rather than by reference to a general-purpose project management methodology and process. We agree that this deepest questioning and introspection is what defines us as human and masters of ourselves. We add to project studies that such forms of personal reverence can remain respectful of our humanity, and that various forms of slavish followership reflect illegitimate contributions which need to find their entropy in projects, Grand Challenges and society in an accelerated fashion.

**4.3. Echoing ideals as an essential condition for legitimacy**

In his book, the Space for Literature, Blanchot (1982) writes:

> The work moves from gods to men. It contributes to this movement; for always it pronounces the word ‘beginning’ in a way which is more original than are the words, the powers which borrow that word in order to become manifest or to act (p. 231).

Blanchot talks about the unworldly, the imaginary, the fascinating origin of work. His thoughts can be seen to refer to ideals, i.e. those concepts and notions that reflect end goals in themselves, such as justice, health and freedom. For Blanchot, ideals are concepts which are ‘genuine’ (p. xx), i.e. they remain the same even when they are displaced, very much like Beethoven’s 9th Symphony or Mahler’s Adieu which, when performed out of time and place – say, in London in 2018 by the London Philharmonic Orchestra –, still convey the same meaning throughout time. Secondly, ideals are concepts which are ‘infinite’ (p. 22) and indeterminate, i.e. they have no beginning and end, their
expression evolves in history’s ongoing movement, very much like a painting of freedom gives different depictions and images every time it is drawn. And, thirdly, ideals just are, they just exist - eternally. For Blanchot, these are god-like, unexplainable, omnipresent notions. But here Blanchot is not appealing to a deity or any such notion; he certainly maintains that ideals are beyond any one individual, that they persist through time and various civilizations and he wants us to open up ourselves, our thinking and work to notions that may seem distant – to the imaginary, the illusory, the fascinating. For this he advises that there is a state of essential solitude in which the ‘I’, the self, and the Other cease to exist and where the ideals take over moving us in directions which are unscripted and unperformed, but which hold the potential to unite us and involve us – human beings – in something that is greater, more real, and more important than our transient human existence. Our role is to search and echo these ideals; to become part of ‘what cannot seize happening’ (p. 27); to allow ourselves to be lost in the background and to give way to the ideals to guide us in unknown directions. In other words, Blanchot is talking about what constitutes our creativity. He wants us to be involved with that which is ‘fascinating’, sublime and spectacular to the extent that, in its presence, we become effaced, we cease existing, become temporarily powerless, but ever so close to the eternal. For Blanchot, we cannot grasp ideals, we cannot even approach them or stand close to them. Does Blanchot defy agency or humanity? No. He gives it meaning! For Blanchot work is the involvement with an ideal. Work that does not relate to an ideal is not work, it is mere, purposeless effort. And, when our work echoes ideals, we become agents whose creativity resemble the gods themselves.

Blanchot extending the scope of project studies
In Blanchot’s world, project agents would be legitimate stakeholders in the discussion about Grand Challenges if they undertook meaningful work only. Blanchot’s ideas have very significant implications for project management, as for him the meaning of work stems from ideals and not the project agent. Even though, the socially constructed nature of the project (Morris, 2013) intricately ties the existence of the project with the human agent the superiority of the project agent, their entitlement as the ‘manager’ or ‘owner’ of the project and confidence in their aptitude to control the project are not based on thoughtful and grounded consideration. They are arbitrary and belittle the project as a form of work. It implies that project work has been granted a master – a dominus, the primitive Latin word for the master of the house (Lovett, 2010). Blanchot’s philosophy suggests that ideals can be seen as alternative forms of project ownership (not just inspiration). Here, the legitimacy of the project agent emerges from him/her echoing infinite, indeterminate ideals in a state of solitude that does not isolate the agent from the social context but reserves the space for him/her to echo ideals, transcendental values and orders. This would eliminate wasteful projects which are designed, funded and executed but are not expressions of ideals, i.e. they are – for Blanchot – meaningless. In project studies, Van Marrewijk (2017) shows the power of ideals using a megaproject as example. From the inception of a great idea as fascinating, sublime and spectacular, he takes the reader through the inability to grasp the implications of its implementation and the final disappointment in both project team and society. Flyvbjerg (2014) describes four sublimes (technological, political, economic, aesthetic) that raise these projects to a status of ideals, well knowing that the chances of meeting these ideals are low. These authors echo the view that through involvement with an ideal project tasks become work. Yet, in their accounts and narrative, the aim remains rooted firmly in performative priorities such as continued sponsoring, sponsor engagement and addressing highly risky undertakings, which keep on being “over budget, over time, over and over again” (Flyvbjerg, 2011, p. 321).

4.4. Being upright as an essential condition for legitimacy
In his essay, Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas, Derrida (1999) writes:

There is no intentionality before and without this welcoming of the face that is called hospitality. And there is no welcoming of the face without this discourse that is justice, "the uprightness of the welcome made to the face" (p. 50).

Levinas is explosive in his reconceptualization of the human condition. Levinas talks about what our inherent nature - our being - can be; he talks about us (i.e. who we are) before reason is conceived and articulated, before an ethics is sensed and materialised, before our relationship to the Other is in action, and as we are in anticipation of standing in front of the Other. He talks about existence itself, not a position that we can adopt, embody and embrace partially, but about a stance/an approach to life that precedes all that is known to humans. For Levinas, our existence is above all “thematization” (p.21), it “exceeds all thematising formalisation or description” (p.21). Perhaps he is talking about our soul – similarly to Aristotle who contended that the soul keeps our existence together. For Levinas, we are to stand upright in life, to receive, stand in front and anticipate the possibility of welcoming life and within it the Other; we are to be hospitable, to exist in and from a position of openness, of reaching, embracing and approaching the Other in discourse, to “welcome [his] expression”, “to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I” (p. 18). In this sense, Levinas proposes a deeply social, outward from the self, existence which materialises – comes to bear – primarily in relation to the Other. As he says, “there is no face without welcome” (p. 25). For Levinas, our movement towards the Other is the ‘right’ or ‘good’ movement; it is where the goodness of the human condition stems from, and our responsibility to the Other is the precondition to this goodness. Levinas understands goodness as justice – a justice that extends beyond our personal affairs and into the public realm. By standing upright, we position ourselves in discourse with the Other, and, for Levinas, “discourse presents itself as justice in the uprightness of the welcome made to the face” (p. 29). In a way Levinas roots justice, our relationship with the Other and our existence to us being positioned in a way which allows us to open up the space for listening, embracing, empathising with life which he sees through the Other. He posits an eternal question, search, position of engaging and requesting – even demanding – justice. This is the precondition of our existence. And he authoritatively reinstates the boundaries of this existence – if our position is upright, if our questions, quests, efforts, approach and identity comes from the responsibility to the Other, if this positioning of ours constitutes our transcendence (i.e. our existence not only in our mind and body, but even beyond mind and body) and extends beyond the capacity of the self, if that is where our face appears, then society’s laws may “betray ethical uprightness” (p. 33). This leaves us open to the possibility of receiving the worst, but for Levinas this is no excuse for us to change, alter or modify an existence of uprightness and welcoming.

Levinas extending the scope of project studies
In Levinas’ world, project agents would be legitimate stakeholders in the discussion about Grand Challenges under the realisation that our entire existence comes into life when we stand upright in front of the Other and extend our understanding of ourselves in discourse with Others. For Levinas, reaching out and welcoming the Other is not limited to the social and emotional intelligence that the project literature identifies as key in interacting with others (e.g. Clarke, 2010). Developments in project management research reflect the growing understanding of the importance of individuals and personality as a major factor in professional project delivery (Turner & Müller, 2006). To this Levinas adds that welcoming the Other is not a self-identity that is replaced by a professional identity which adheres to the traditions, hierarchies and values of organising in projects. Welcoming the Other is an
expression of humanity which leads to a landscape of justice rooted in listening, empathising and seeking to understand the Other. In Levinas’ world, projects would be conceived, executed and live in a landscape of justice as project agents welcome the Other and by implication future generations and the planet. For Levinas, the strength of this just, unprejudiced but negotiated world would direct our attention to ethical uprightness. It would allow us to transcend and go beyond the rules of organising, thus finding new ways in which not only our existence, but also our projects, would prioritise the Other in expressions of our humanity. By implication, projects would need to be ended when they no longer contributed to humanity. Project scholars suggest that standing upright in projects requires strong ethical footing. Kvalnes and Øverenget (2012) remind us of the many dimensions and complications involved with ethics. Projects are especially vulnerable to ethical issues (Müller et al., 2014) and require therefore project agents whose will to stand upright in the name of the Other cannot easily be bent. This would mean that Levinas – similar to the other philosophers in this paper – sees agency as the key determinant of the future of not only our projects, the way they are managed and contribute to Grand Challenges, but also of our world in its entirety. This is an interpretation of an agency which as long as it listens, empathises and embraces life and the Other, is allowed in Levinas’ world to break the rules and prioritise justice and ethics over project execution and completion.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we have sought to answer the question who is a legitimate agent of social change and to build awareness of the political responsibility of project managers in trying times, such as the ones we are now facing. To do this, we identified and described the Grand Challenges Approach as a new social order which has significant potential to define how society (and within it the project management profession) will address Grand Challenges. We turned to Margaret Archer to explain that agents of social change define the meaning and purpose behind social orders, and we introduced philosophers who have spoken about who we are and can be (the human condition) to escape definitions of human potential and legitimacy which have arisen from the very social processes and institutions which are accused of infusing social life with great social injustices. We focused on the human condition because this connects all of us and is given to us at birth (Sartre, 1947) and as such can be seen as holding significant democratic potential. The human condition is something we all have, irrespective of origin, religion, race, gender, education and life experiences. We clearly defined a social agent as the one whose actions are destined to lead to the Other and not to an eternal return to the self, as Levinas recounts. And finally, we talked about the essential conditions for legitimacy which complete our answer to the question: who is a legitimate agent of social change for Grand Challenges. The paper suggests that an agent of social change is s/he who thinks and acts with the Other as the end goal in mind. From then on, legitimate is the social agent who appears in front of the watchful eye of society and fully discloses past, present and future intentions (Arendt); who can embody meaning and make decisions based on their humanity (Nietzsche); who can echo ideals and engage with ideals that extend thought, intelligence, decisions and actions from what is already known and into the creation of new spaces of action (Blanchot); and, finally, who can stand upright and engage with fellow-world-citizens in defining what is to be known, the reality of tomorrow (Levinas).

Our work is limited in two ways: Firstly, using more or other philosophers may have led to an other definition of legitimacy. Indeed, the expressions and interpretations of humanity and the human condition can be multiple, and evolving. This work can indeed be expanded and further developed, yet we maintain it builds a space for our humanity in addressing Grand Challenges, the projects that will deliver the solutions needed and their management. Secondly, the views of Arendt, Nietzsche, Blanchot and Levinas are conflicting in many ways. For example, Nietzsche wants us to escape, even ignore,
society, and Levinas sees us existing through society, and our relationships with other people. But this does not mean that the individual, the project manager, cannot handle these tensions. If nothing else, underlying the thoughts of these philosophers, and similarly sociologists such as Archer, is their silent, yet deep and persistent belief in human potential. We can appear in front of the watchful eye of society. We can embody meaning and lead meaningful lives and work. We can echo ideals, no matter how elusive they are. We can stand upright in front of the Other. Like the challenges we face, we too are multidimensional (Konstantinou, 2008, 2019; Liu et al., 2019) and can handle and fend off tensions arising from the knowledge-intensive, exchange driven nature of work in a global context (Konstantinou and Fincham, 2010). We contend these tensions, perhaps even paradoxes, are the reason why the project professional will find it hard, and challenging to carry out their political responsibility in the project. How much to engage others? How much to follow ideals? How much to disclose? How much to trust oneself (rather than others or against the odds) in making decisions which will shape projects for Grand Challenges?

At the more detailed level, future studies can look into a) elaborating on the definition of the political responsibility of project managers, b) defining sets of selection criteria for identifying project stakeholders who can be legitimate agents of social change, as this is discussed in the preceding paragraphs, and c) how, in projects, legitimate agents of social change can help bring together the values and ethical principles most relevant to Grand Challenges and articulate a Grand Challenges Ethos (GCE) that complements and gives meaning to the Grand Challenges Approach (GCA) and the debate in ethics in project studies (for example, see Müller and Kvalnes, 2017). At the broader level, future studies can follow Arendt, Nietzsche, Blanchot and Levinas and other philosophers who propose that our responses to all of life’s challenges should be rooted in our humanity. Humanity needs to receive attention in project studies as a field of study, in project management as a practice, and as a professional role that is persistently hijacked by technological and performative priorities and standards. We insist that it is the humanity in all of us, including the project manager, which can inspire and lead the way to identifying the meaning behind the solutions that are needed for Grand Challenges, which then most certainly need to be urgently complemented by excellent, even extraordinary, performances in managing projects.

The GCA in itself can do very little to address Grand Challenges. The paper proposes that the GCA needs to be preceded, supported and led by project managers who are legitimate agents of social change by the observation of the essential conditions of appearing, embodying meaning, echoing ideals, and being upright. Then projects can perhaps have a better chance at escaping the social injustices which have brought the world to its current form. Projects can be built on humanity and the “unrealised potentia of our species” (Archer, 2000: 17, own emphasis). Hopefully, this essay has created a wider, more ethical and democratic perspective by extending the definition of a legitimate agent of social change from one who masters the execution of the GCA to one who masters the compelling humane qualities that exist in all of us for the common good. Hopefully, it has also sensitized its readers to the political responsibility which lies dormant in projects and their management.

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