Two forms of responsibility: Reassessing Young on structural injustice

Valentin Beck

Abstract

In this article, I critically reassess Iris Marion Young's late works, which centre on the distinction between liability and social connection responsibility. I concur with Young's diagnosis that structural injustices call for a new conception of responsibility, but I reject several core assumptions that underpin her distinction between two models and argue for a different way of conceptualising responsibility to address structural injustices. I show that Young's categorical separation of guilt and responsibility is not supported by the writings of Hannah Arendt, which Young draws on, and that it is also untenable on independent systematic grounds. Furthermore, I argue that several of Young's other criteria fail to clearly demarcate two distinct phenomena. I therefore propose to transcend Young's distinction of two models in favour of a related, but conceptually different distinction between two forms of responsibility: interactional and structural. Embracing this terminology facilitates the conceptualisation of the general features of responsibility that are shared by both forms, including their retrospective and prospective time-direction and their applicability to individual, joint and group agency. The distinction between interactional and structural responsibility also yields a more compelling general account of the role of background structures and of blame within ascriptions of political responsibility.

Introduction

Iris Marion Young's late works have become a cornerstone of the contemporary debate on structural injustice. In a posthumously published book manuscript (Young, 2011) and a number of journal articles (Young, 2003, 2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c), she provides an account of the then underdeveloped topic of responsibility for justice. 1 Young's focus is on real-world injustices, most notably sweatshop labour in poorer countries and homelessness in wealthier

ones, which are as relevant now as they were at the time. She also outlines how her theory could be applied to other issues and cases. Contemporary theorists have followed up with treatments of other intersectional issues, such as responsibility for colonial injustices, climate change and sex- and race-based discrimination.2

Notwithstanding its many virtues, a critical reassessment of Young's work is warranted. Her account contains crucial shortcomings, many of which have not yet been addressed. In this article, I attempt to correct this omission. My focus will be on Young's centrepiece; her distinction between the ´liability model´ and the ´social connection model´ of responsibility. After an initial outline, I will argue that several of the elements that underpin these models are in need of revision. The first of these elements is the lower-level dichotomy between blame/guilt and political responsibility, which is a central pillar of Young's higher-level distinction between the two models. Young associates this lower-level dichotomy with the work of Hannah Arendt – mistakenly so, as I will show in detail. Moreover, the alleged separation between blame/guilt and political responsibility is also implausible on independent systematic grounds. I will argue that several other elements of Young's higher-level distinction also require revision, including assumptions concerning the time-direction of responsibility, individual and collective agency, and the role of background structures. In the last part of the paper, I propose that we transcend Young's distinction between two *models* of responsibility in favour of a distinction between two *forms* of responsibility: interactional and structural. This alternative preserves some of Young's most valuable insights, but can accommodate the discussed criticisms: it is consistently applicable in both time-directions and to individual, joint and group agency; it also yields a more compelling general account of the role of background structures and of blame within ascriptions of political responsibility. In virtue of these more satisfactory general characteristics, the interactional/structural distinction also achieves more convincing results when applied to concrete instances of structural injustices, which I will

demonstrate with examples. Although my proposal is disanalogous to Young's in a number of important respects, I hope it will nevertheless be evident to the reader that my understanding of responsibility remains profoundly indebted to her work.

Two models of responsibility

Young's core insight is that structural injustice requires the ascription of a kind of responsibility that is qualitatively different to responsibility as it is commonly conceived. Structural injustice is a special kind of wrong that is not attributable to the actions of any specific agent. Rather, it is the result of large-scale processes which are constituted by the interplay of institutional rules and social norms, and the confluence of actions by many individual and collective agents (Young, 2006a, p. 114; 2011, pp. 45, 52):

> Structural injustice, then, exists when social processes put large groups of persons under systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities, at the same time that these processes enable others to dominate or to have a wide range of opportunities for developing and exercising capacities available to them. (ibid., p. 52)

For Young, the introduction of the ´social connection model´ of responsibility, which she distinguishes from the ´liability model´, answers the need to reconceptualise responsibility in the light of such structural injustices.

According to Young, the liability model represents the common way of ascribing responsibility, not only to individuals, but also to collective agents such as companies or governments. This model is used when agents are held responsible for a specific outcome, based on their direct causal contribution to it. On the basis of the liability model, blame and guilt are attributed to agents by taking into account ´the fairly direct interaction between the

wrongdoer and the wronged party´ (Young, 2006a, p. 118), as well as criteria such as voluntariness and knowledge about foreseeable consequences of actions (see ibid., p. 116). Young does not deny the importance of the concept of liability. She observes that it is central to legal reasoning and to everyday understandings of morality (Young, 2004, p. 381). But since structural injustices have complex, multiple causes, they cannot be directly attributed to the actions of specific individuals or collectives. Structural injustices involve a broad array of agents and often reach across national boundaries, such as in the case of sweatshop labour. Young does not argue that the liability model needs a wholesale replacement in the light of these injustices. To the contrary: It will often be possible to hold single agents, such as the manager of a factory, responsible for concrete harms that they caused directly, even where structural injustices arise (see Young, 2004, pp. 367–368; 2006a, pp. 116–117; 2011, p. 131). But Young argues that the liability model does not take into account ways in which the actions of directly involved agents can be highly restricted by structural factors. Nor does it consider the moral relation of other agents who indirectly contribute to structural injustices. It therefore needs to be complemented.

Young devised the social connection model for this purpose. She lists five criteria that characterize it (see Young, 2004, pp. 377–380; 2006a, pp. 119–124; 2011, pp. 105–113). First, this model does not single out and isolate one or a few liable agents who are morally or legally guilty for concrete harms. Instead, it attributes responsibility to all those who are socially connected to structural injustices in a more indirect way, namely via their participation in social structures that reproduce these injustices. For example, in the case of sweatshop labour, responsibility is ascribed to consumers of the goods made under such conditions, even though they have not directly caused the wrongs in question, but only indirectly contributed to them by creating economic demand for the relevant goods. In more general terms, all those are responsible who are embedded in often transnational networks of social structures that

reproduce structural injustices. (This includes even those who seek to avoid buying products made under inhumane conditions.) Second, the social connection model asks us to consider and critically reflect on the background conditions of action, as opposed to the liability model, which takes such conditions for granted and focuses on clear deviations from the norm. Third, the social connection model emphasizes forward-looking responsibility, as opposed to the liability model, which is backward-looking and emphasizes responsibility for past actions. While the main purpose of the liability model is to identify those who must make reparation for a harm, the purpose of the social connection model is to ascribe forward-looking responsibility for changing unjust structures. Fourth, social connection responsibility is essentially shared, insofar as its subjects jointly bear responsibility for the elimination of structural injustices. Fifth, social connection responsibility can be discharged only in collective action. This feature is closely aligned with the shared nature of this responsibility, since the structures that create injustices can usually only be changed if many agents engage in cooperative efforts. Social connection responsibility is therefore ´specifically political responsibility, as distinct from privately moral or juridical´ (Young, 2011, p. 112).

Objections to Young's account

Young's argument that structural injustices require a new conceptualisation of responsibility is important and far-reaching. However, there are major problems with her distinction between the two models of responsibility, which lies at the heart of her project. In my view, these problems have not yet been fully addressed. There are also other shortcomings in her account, which have been more extensively dealt with in the literature, and which I will briefly touch upon first.

Indeterminacies

Young's theory of responsibility for structural injustice is underspecified. Commentators have identified two main areas of indeterminacy. First, the criterion of social connection is too vague as a ground of political responsibility.3 In our economically and ecologically interdependent world, people are connected within and across political borders in multiple specific ways. Hence, we need a more detailed account of how involvement in different kinds of structural injustices can generate a political responsibility to correct them. Second, critics have rightly pointed out that Young's account does not specify what individuals are responsible for in the face of structural injustices. Young emphasizes that political responsibility to address structural injustices varies on the individual level, even though it is essentially shared (2004, p. 385; 2006a, p. 126; 2011, p. 144). Her four ´parameters of reasoning´ – power, privilege, interest and collective ability – are meant to facilitate judgment about the content and degree of social connection responsibility borne by individual agents (Young, 2004, pp. 385–387; 2006a, pp. 125–30; 2011, pp. 142–151). But these criteria are still too vague (see Barry & Macdonald, 2016, pp. 112–113), which Young has conceded (see 2006a, p. 125). The notions of ´power´ and ´privilege´ are both underspecified (see Schiff, 2013), and there is a tension with the criterion of ´interest´, understood by Young as self-interested reasons for reducing injustice. This is because many structural injustices are such that those with greater power and privileges also lack narrowly understood interest in a radical alteration of the unjust status quo. A case in point are the financial interests of fossil fuel exporting countries and the associated lobby groups, which constitute major forces in the exacerbation of climate change (see Eckersley, 2016, p. 353). So a more detailed account is needed that explains how to specify the content and degree of political responsibility, and how to deal with cases of conflict between the proposed parameters.

These criticisms are warranted and deserve more detailed treatment than I am able to accommodate here, given this article's main aims. What should be clear, however, is that neither of these objections challenges the distinction between Young's two models of responsibility. However, there are fundamental problems with this distinction. One concerns Young's assumption that ascriptions of responsibility for structural (in)justice do not also entail ascriptions of guilt and blame. The other concerns the clarity of the distinction in general and of the other criteria on which it is based (see further below).

Guilt vs. responsibility?

According to Young, attributing political responsibility should not involve ascribing guilt or blame. This lower-level dichotomy between political responsibility and guilt/blame is not just a peripheral feature, but a central pillar of her higher-level distinction between liability and social connection responsibility. Not only is it contained in the first criterion for political responsibility (´not singling out´), its importance is such that Young at times refers to the liability model as the ´blame model´ (2004, pp. 368, 377; 2006a, p. 116). For Young, the difference between guilt and political responsibility `is a matter not of degree, but of kind´, while ´[g]uilt can come in degrees´ (2011, p. 92). Young emphasizes the idea of political responsibility without guilt in all her late articles and throughout her book manuscript.[4] A chapter of the latter is entitled ´Guilt versus responsibility´ (2011, ch. III), and is dedicated to Hannah Arendt.[5] Young sees a parallel with her own distinction in Arendt's work. Arendt's thoughts on guilt and responsibility are profound and complex, and therefore deserve their own in-depth treatment. I can only demonstrate here why I believe that the relevant texts by Arendt do not reveal anything like a precursor to Young's dichotomy. First, an overview of Arendt's use of terms is warranted. [6]

Arendt did not consistently separate responsibility from guilt throughout her writings. Closer to everyday usage of these terms, she sometimes used them interchangeably. So did Karl Jaspers, her friend, mentor and colleague, with whom she discussed the question of German guilt for Nazi crimes in a vivid letter exchange that spanned over four decades (Arendt & Jaspers, 1992; see also Jaspers, 1946/1948). It is true that Arendt distinguished between ´collective responsibility´ on the one hand, and individual guilt on the other (see Arendt 1968/2003c), which is the starting point for Young's interpretation. For Arendt, ´collective responsibility´ derives from political membership and therefore includes responsibility for ´things one has not done´, whereas ´[g]uilt, unlike responsibility, always singles out; it is strictly personal´ (Arendt 1968/2003c, p. 147), which is a phrase that reverberates in Young's writing. But these definitions must be read in the context of another recurring distinction in Arendt's work, namely that of *individual* and *collective guilt* in the face of the atrocities committed under Nazi rule. Arendt criticised the concept of collective guilt specifically as it was used in post-war Germany. She argued that ascribing guilt to *all* Germans amounted to ´a highly effective whitewash of all those who had actually done something´ (Arendt, 1964/2003a, p. 21), disguising the extent of the individual guilt of the many Germans who uncritically followed the regime, profited from it, or actively supported it. This is the context of Arendt's famous (and paradoxical) phrase ´Where all are guilty, nobody is´ (Arendt, 1968/2003c, p. 147; see also Arendt 1964/2003a, pp. 21, 28).

On the whole, Arendt's use of the concepts of guilt and responsibility is quite different to Young's. The differences become most evident when reading two posthumously published lecture manuscripts by Arendt (1964/2003a; 1965/2003b), to which Young does not refer, most importantly ´Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship´, but also ´Some Questions of Moral Philosophy´. In these manuscripts, Arendt discusses her notion of ´collective responsibility´ and the sometimes synonymously used ´political responsibility´ in terms of a *liability* for

misdeeds committed in the name of all citizens, which, according to her, constitutes the basis of reparation claims against a state and its citizens, such as those enacted by the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg. While this type of liability has a purely political, non-moral, basis, it is ascribed to *all* citizens of a single state.[7] What is more, these elements should not be considered in isolation from Arendt's treatment of personal moral responsibility. Far from minimizing the role that an overwhelming number of Germans played during Nazi rule, Arendt deplored the ´universal breakdown [...] of personal judgment in the early stages of the Nazi regime´ (1964/2003a, p. 24) as well as the ´complicity in crimes of all ranks of society´ (p. 34) (see also 1965/2003b, p. 50).

Arendt nevertheless highlighted the disparities between individual Germans' behaviours.[8] In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963/1964), she argued against what she called the ´cog theory´, according to which individuals are replaceable parts of a social system and therefore bear no personal responsibility for crimes committed by representatives of the state. Arendt objected that, while attributions of moral responsibility must be sensitive to the circumstances and conditions of agency, they must never be suspended with reference to the system, not even under totalitarian rule:

> [W]hile courtroom procedure or the question of personal responsibility under dictatorship cannot permit the shifting of responsibility from man to system, the system cannot be left out of account altogether. It appears in the form of circumstances, from the legal as well as the moral point of view, much in the same sense in which we take into account the conditions of underprivileged persons as mitigating circumstances, but not as excuses, in the case of crimes committed in the milieu of poverty. (Arendt 1964/2003a: 32; compare 1965/2003b, p. 58)

While Germans incurred different degrees of personal guilt, depending on the ways in which they participated in society, they could not have been expected to actively resist totalitarian rule, which Arendt distinguished from ´dictatorships in the usual sense´ (1964/2003a, p. 32; compare 1951/1958, p. ix). According to Arendt, ´there exist extreme situations in which responsibility for the world, which is primarily political, cannot be assumed because political responsibility always presupposes at least a minimum of political power. Impotence or complete powerlessness is, I think, a valid excuse.´ (1964/2003a, p. 45; compare 1965/2003b, p. 79) Therefore, ´[o]nly those [Germans] who withdrew from public life altogether, who refused political responsibility of any sort, could avoid becoming implicated in crimes, that is, could avoid legal and moral responsibility.´ (Arendt, 1964/2003a, p. 34)

To synthesize Arendt's views, she argued, first, that attributions of personal responsibility must be sensitive to the circumstances of agency. In the most extreme circumstances, they may be such that taking ´responsibility for the self´ requires a complete retreat from public life, even though ´[p]olitically speaking – that is, from the viewpoint of the community or of the world we live in – [such a retreat] is irresponsible; its standard is the self and not the world, neither its improvement nor change´ (Arendt 1965/2003b: 79). Second, such a differentiation between the private and the public realm, which surfaces here and in other passages of Arendt's work,9 does not mean that attributions of political responsibility can never involve blame.10 Next to the non-moral notion of ´collective responsibility´ for past wrongs committed by state representatives, we encounter a second and altogether different notion of political responsibility, called ´responsibility for the world´. Arendt's treatment of this concept implies that if humans have such responsibility, except in the ´exceptional circumstances´ (1965/2003b, p. 104) of ´complete powerlessness´, which provide an ´excuse´ for a retreat from the public realm, then rejecting this responsibility under less hostile conditions can make someone blameworthy. What is more, Arendt refuses to legitimize the public conduct of regime

collaborators and followers by separating it from these people's supposedly neat private lives as ´family men´ (1945/1994). In her view, such a separation is not only artificial, but highly problematic, because it led to a high degree of social conformity by a majority of citizens of Nazi Germany. For Arendt, many Germans were guilty of a cluster of attitudes which she framed with the concept of ´thoughtlessness´.11 Thoughtlessness, for Arendt, is a refusal to entertain an inner moral conversation with oneself, which she saw at work in these people's susceptibility to ideological indoctrination, and which cohered with an inability to ´judge and tell right from wrong´(1965/2003b, p. 145).

Following this overview of Arendt's writing on guilt and responsibility, I can now highlight four main differences between Arendt's and Young's uses of these concepts. First, Arendt's focus on the social circumstances of personal responsibility contrasts with Young's characterisation of the liability model, which assumes ´normal´ background conditions of agency and only looks at deviations from the norm. Second, Arendt's non-moral notion of ´collective´ or ´political´ responsibility, which is based on citizenship, bears little resemblance to Young's forward-looking notion of political responsibility for structural injustice, whose subjects and objects transcend state boundaries. Young noted this difference herself, and criticised Arendt for defending a conception of political responsibility which is based on national membership, and which is ´just as backward-looking as guilt´ (Young, 2011, p. 92).12 Third, Arendt's notion of ´responsibility for the world´ – to which Young does not refer13 – is less narrow; however, this second notion of political responsibility is more amorphous than Young's when it comes to the goals of political action, as it is not specifically tied to the concern for the *justice* of *background structures* that is at the heart of Young's project.14 Fourth, neither Arendt's notion of ´responsibility for the world´ nor her treatment of the individual guilt of Nazi collaborators and followers offer support for Young's strict dichotomy of blame and political responsibility.

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Of course, there could be independent grounds for upholding such a dichotomy. Its origin in Young's thought is easily reconstructed: Young argued that individuals are not guilty of their participation in an increasingly global network of social structures, although it is the *source* of political responsibility. It is impossible to avoid such participation, due to the ubiquity of the system. As such, subjects cannot be blamed for being a part of it, but they can be held responsible for jointly making these structures more just.

However, despite the importance that Young herself attaches to the separation of guilt and political responsibility, it does not stand up to independent systematic scrutiny, either. Although Young is right to stress that subjects ought not be blamed for being socially connected to structural injustices, agents could nevertheless be found guilty of not complying with certain reasonable demands that they assume political responsibility. Starting with Martha Nussbaum's early critique of this element of Young's theory, commentators have remarked that categorically separating the language of guilt from that of responsibility undermines the possibility of temporally consistent ascriptions of political responsibility (see Nussbaum, 2009, pp. 141–142, and Barry & Ferracioli, 2013, p. 255). That is to say, this separation would make it impossible to blame subjects in hindsight, after they have failed to meet their political responsibility to correct structural injustices. Young suggests that we *should* publicly speak up against structural injustices, hold agents accountable and work with others towards improvement on the structural level.15 If this is the case, then temporal consistency should require us not only to ascribe such forward-looking political responsibility, but also to blame agents in retrospect if they have failed to meet this responsibility (see also Lu, 2011, p. 259).

One could point to the relative openness of the *objects* of political responsibility, that is, of the actions that subjects can and should take to contribute to structural change. There is no single task that agents must perform in order to fulfil their responsibility for structural change. Such change is complex and there are multiple paths that a subject could pursue. It is

therefore normally unreasonable to blame agents in retrospect for *specific* omissions in the context of their political responsibility. However, without specifying exactly which actions subjects should take, they can be blamed in retrospect for doing nothing, or even for not doing enough. Moreover, subjects could also be blamed for concrete things they *have* done in the political sphere, if these predictably increase structural injustices. Imagine a very powerful individual who spends large sums on political advertising, lobbying or even bribing politicians to promote socially regressive policy. Young writes that, while ´we should not be blamed or found at fault for what we do to try to rectify injustice, even if we do not succeed[,] [...] we can and should be criticised for not taking action, not taking enough action, taking ineffective action, or taking action that is counterproductive.´ (2011, pp. 143–144) It remains unclear, however, why such criticism can never involve blame. The upshot is that blaming in the context of political responsibility must remain a possibility, although it should be sensitive to the social positions and actions of subjects and to the particular nature of this kind of responsibility.

Young argues that there are *pragmatic* reasons, next to her principled ones, for not blaming agents if they do not take up political responsibility (2011, p. 117). She states that it can be counterproductive to blame agents, because they will likely become defensive and dismissive rather than politically active. Instead of moving them to do their share to contribute to positive structural change, retrospective blame demotivates people. Is this line of thought convincing? It might be true for some agents – perhaps for those who have so far been unaware of their social connection to a structural injustice, and who therefore need some time to adjust to this new reality. Instead of blaming them for their lack of awareness, one could opt for further stimulating their thought processes, if this is a precondition for them assuming political responsibility. Depending on the circumstances of the case, using softer language might be more effective. Finding the right strategies is an empirical matter of moral psychology. But more than a decade after Young's writing, people generally do not lack access to knowledge

about their connection to global or national structural injustices. Injustices such as exploitative working conditions, or the effects of climate change, are now increasingly well-publicised. The more pervasive problem seems to be thoughtlessness in the Arendtian sense, as well as indifference and deliberate inaction in the face of these injustices. Even from a purely pragmatic angle, the language of blame might therefore be more effective than a less decisive tone (compare Nussbaum, 2009, pp. 142–145; Barry & Macdonald, 2016), although advocacy work that raises awareness of our complex social connection to injustices remains helpful, too. Recall, further, that subjects may deserve blame not because of their social connection to structural injustices, but because of their inaction with regards to them. One of Young's aims at the time of her writing was in part reconstructive, insofar as she wanted to make sense of the demands of social movements such as the anti-sweatshop campaign. But it would be surprising if social activists had not adapted their strategies to changing circumstances and attitudes. And whatever the stance of activists with regard to the language of blame at the time, many are certainly making use of it now.

It should be clear that the case for political responsibility is not furthered by categorically separating it from the language of guilt and blame, either on principled or on pragmatic grounds. One might wonder if Young's account could be rescued simply by parting ways with the lower-level dichotomy of blame vs. political responsibility. However, the problems with Young's higher-level distinction of the two models of responsibility run deeper.

An unclear distinction

Although Young lists five criteria in order to distinguish social connection responsibility from liability (see above), none of these is actually capable of drawing a clear line between the two. So far, I have argued that the dichotomy of guilt and political responsibility is not helpful for distinguishing the two models. As Young's first criterion (not isolating) is closely aligned with

this dichotomy (see 2004, p. 377; 2006a, pp. 119-120; 2011, pp. 105-106), it similarly fails to demarcate them. Young's second criterion is that an ascription of political responsibility ´brings into question precisely the background conditions that ascriptions of blame and fault assume to be normal´ (2011, p. 107). But this criterion is also unhelpful, because ascriptions of direct liability for harms should also reflect on the background conditions, as I have discussed above with respect to Arendt's observation that attributions of personal responsibility must be sensitive to social circumstances. Think of someone who steals food from a supermarket. If the theft is performed out of necessity, for example by a malnourished person in a country with insufficient social welfare, then this should be considered a mitigating factor in both moral and legal reasoning. Her third criterion (´more forward-looking than backward-looking´, Young 2011, p. 108) is also not sharp enough. I have argued in the preceding section that political responsibility should in principle be applied prospectively and retrospectively. Likewise, liability for concrete harms is standardly ascribed in both time directions, such as in the law, which both prohibits future harms and sanctions past transgressions. I will come back to this point below.

The fourth and fifth criteria state that political responsibility is ´shared´ and can be ´discharged only through collective action´ (Young 2011, pp. 109, 111). These are important, but not exclusive characteristics of political responsibility, as liability for concrete harms can also be shared. Think of a couple who jointly neglect their children and are jointly liable for a harm resulting from this neglect. What is more, the fourth and fifth criteria also lack precision. Young uses the term ´collective action´ to refer to formerly unorganised groups of individuals who shall take up their shared political responsibility by joining forces, for instance by protesting certain government policies or corporate actions. But ´collective action´ can also be understood in a second sense, which Young solely associates with the liability model; namely when responsibility for concrete harms (as well as for delivering certain concrete goods) is

ascribed to organised collectives, such as governments, companies or NGOs. For example, a company can be held liable for channeling waste from its factory into a nearby river. If the fifth criterion is meant to demarcate a clear line between the two models, one would have to qualify the meaning of ´collective action´ so that it only applies in the first sense. But we would then want to know why organised collectives should not be treated as subjects of political responsibility, alongside unorganised groups. I will come back to this point, too (see 3.)

To complicate matters further, the labels ´liability´ and ´social connection responsibility´ do not draw a clear line, either. First, subjects can in principle be held liable for performing or omitting actions in the context of their political responsibilities. Consider again the example of a wealthy individual who spends vast sums to advocate, lobby or bribe for a socially or environmentally regressive policy. Even if such behaviour is unjustifiably legal in a given political system, this person should nevertheless be held accountable on moral grounds. Second, as I will discuss in more detail below (see 3.), subjects can in principle bear a responsibility for combating structural injustices in a social context to which they are not connected. Here, one may point to a hypothetical example of a completely isolated country whose inhabitants are brutally repressed and need outside help. It should be noted that such cases of completely isolated domination are not just increasingly rare, but have perhaps even been made contingently impossible in our economically, politically and environmentally interdependent world. Plastic waste, which is largely produced in the industrial nations, now ends up on the most isolated islands; micro plastics wind up in waterways, the air and the human body, regardless of where they originated; a novel virus, transitioning from an animal to a human, can in turn infect large portions the global population; and greenhouse gas emissions enter the atmosphere and contribute to global warming regardless of where they are generated. Nevertheless, we can in principle conceive of a political responsibility to change structures that is solely based on humanitarian grounds, and which is not rooted in social

connection (compare Owen, 2013, pp. 107–108). One may argue in Young's defence that she was not interested in such cases, as she explicitly sought to conceptualise the responsibility that arises from social connection. However, by equating the responsibility to change structures with its most important normative sources, the possibility and relevance of other grounds of responsibility to address structural injustices is needlessly obscured. These considerations suggest that, in order to safeguard Young's valuable insights about responsibility for justice, both the criteria and concepts involved in her distinction between the two models need revision.

3. Interactional and structural responsibility

It should be evident by now that Young's two models of responsibility are fraught with problems and indeterminacies. There are different ways of responding to this diagnosis, however. Some may conclude that Young's argument for the social connection model is fundamentally flawed, and that there are no reasons to dispense with the liability model (e.g. see Barry and Ferracioli, 2013). But Young's central thesis – that the structural nature of injustices calls for a new way of conceiving responsibility – remains untouched by the objections addressed above. In this section, I will argue that the abovementioned objections can be overcome by an alternative distinction between two complementary *forms* of responsibility. These differ primarily in the *object* of responsibility, that is, in the kinds of the actions that the responsible subject must carry out. The plausible elements of Young's account can be saved by assembling them in a different manner, and by supplementing them with additional criteria not found in her work. This can be done by introducing the distinction of interactional and structural responsibility.[16]

Interactional responsibility is the responsibility of subjects in direct *interactions* with other agents. It is similar to liability insofar as its attribution involves applying normative

standards to these direct interactions. However, contrary to Young's characterisation of the liability model, interactional responsibility is equally forward- and backward-looking. Both time-directions are irreducibly in play: If someone is judged guilty of a past misdeed, this judgment must be based on a retrospective application of normative standards that prescribe what agents are expected to do (or to omit) in moral and/or legal terms; ascriptions of liability for potential future harms are equally standard in legal and moral discourse (see 2. above) and always involve a normative commitment to subsequently hold agents accountable in retrospect. Moreover, different normative standards (legal, moral or functional) can be applied in ascriptions of interactional responsibility, which means that subjects are not always found morally guilty when they are held responsible in this sense. They can, for example, be legally punishable for the outcome of an action without being morally blameworthy for it, or vice versa. Interactional responsibility is to be attributed to individuals and to collective subjects, that is, group agents such as governments, NGOs or companies. For example, firms can and should be held interactionally responsible for the treatment of their employees, or for harming others by causing environmental damage.

Analogously to Young's description of liability, interactional responsibility resembles the standard way in which different kinds of subjects are held responsible in common moral and legal discourse. Contrary to her characterisation, however, even standard attributions of interactional responsibility in moral and legal discourse can take the background conditions of the interactions into account, although they of course often fail to do so. Indeed, as Arendt writes (see 2.b), they should always do so – not just in the case of severely unjust background conditions, which will often be considered a significantly mitigating factor.

One of Young's most important insights is that in cases of structural injustice, holding agents liable for harms that they have directly caused is insufficient. I will rephrase this insight in the terms of the distinction put forward here: under unjust background conditions, we should

not stop at calibrating interactional responsibility. We must also ascribe responsibility for minimizing structural injustices, by asking all relevant subjects to join forces and change the structures in question. I prefer to call this *structural responsibility*. Its defining feature is that its objects are actions that aim to contribute to structural change. As opposed to interactional responsibility, structural responsibility is *directed at structures* within which people act. Subjects of structural responsibility ought to contribute to changing structures for the better, paradigmatically by making a given social context more just and/or by making its political decision-making procedures more democratic. When fulfilling this responsibility, subjects only indirectly target the beneficiaries (i.e. those towards whom they are responsible), by changing the social circumstances and background conditions of agency. In contrast, *interactional responsibility* is based on normative demands that apply to the direct interaction between subjects and beneficiaries *within* the given structures.

The fact that structural responsibility is directed at structures ought not be taken to imply that its subjects perform actions from a position that is external to the structures that they target.17 Young is right in claiming that subjects are always entangled in structures which they at the same time reproduce through their actions.18 Furthermore, those structures that subjects have the most reason to change will be those to which they are more or less closely connected, although this does not exclude normative reasons to change structures to which they are not connected. Structural responsibility is indeed *genuinely political*, analogous to Young's characterisation of social connection responsibility and to Arendt's characterisation of responsibility for the world. However, as the discussion of Arendt has shown, there are also other kinds of political responsibility with different normative characteristics,19 which is why it is preferable to use a distinct label.

Structural responsibility possesses several additional features, which are to some extent analogous to the criteria Young refers to in outlining her social connection model: first, the

background conditions of actions must be evaluated when ascribing responsibility to change them. Second, structural responsibility is essentially shared between many subjects, not just because large groups of people participate in the injustices in question, but because establishing structural change requires effective agency by many. Third, structural responsibility may be ascribed with an emphasis on its forward-looking aspects; however, contrary to Young's characterisation, ascriptions of structural responsibility always involve both time-directions, just as attributions of interactional responsibility. Correspondingly, depending on what they have or have not done, subjects may in principle be blamed, shamed or criticised in retrospect if they have failed to fulfil this kind of responsibility (see above). Fourth, an agent's indirect contribution to structural injustice in the past or present should be regarded as a weighty moral ground for their responsibility to tackle the injustice in question. In addition to what Young writes, one may add that such connections to structural injustices may be more or less direct. Therefore, agents may correspondingly have more and less weighty moral reasons to address them. Moreover, as we have seen, structural responsibility can in principle also be ascribed on humanitarian grounds (see 2.c), including to those who are not even indirectly connected to the structural injustice in question. Fifth, structural responsibility is best ´discharged through collective action´ (Young 2011, p. 111), even though I have already indicated that it is important to specify the meaning of this criterion in a more precise and systematic manner than Young has done. In particular, this must involve not only an account of joint action, but also an account of group agency—a point to which I will return below.

All these additional criteria apply to structural responsibility, but they do so non-exclusively. That is because attributions of interactional responsibility, too, can and should be sensitive to background conditions and involve both time-directions. Interactional responsibility, too, can be shared in some contexts, and can be borne by group agents, next to

individuals. The defining and unique feature of structural responsibility is therefore its specific *object*, namely actions directed at social structures, with the aim of changing these structures.

One may wonder whether people can act in such a way that they simultaneously take interactional and structural responsibility.[20] What is clear is that taking structural responsibility does not happen by accident, given that a subject must have the intention to change structures in order to act responsibly in this sense. If someone without such an intention happened to involuntarily contribute to such change, then they would not have taken responsibility even if the relevant outcome were beneficial. The necessary intention, however, can in principle be present in an action that also serves as an object of interactional responsibility. Assume I donate money to an organisation that provides food and shelter to homeless people in my area and simultaneously advocates for affordable housing policies. If I make such a donation with the dual intention to help the homeless in my area and to contribute to structural change, this would count as taking interactional and structural responsibility simultaneously. My donation can count as a fairly direct interaction and as an action through which I join others in supporting advocacy for a world in which such remedial transfers would be unnecessary. Although there seem to be many similar scenarios involving intermediary agents that satisfy both the criteria for interactional and structural responsibility, I take such cases to be the exception rather than the norm. Standardly, subjects will perform actions that qualify as objects of either one of the two forms of responsibility. These forms are *complementary* in the sense that acting responsibly in the structural dimension does not relieve me of my obligations in the interactional dimension, and vice versa.

In this account of interactional and structural responsibility, I have intentionally refrained from using the language of *models,* because it can be misleading in this last respect. It can lead us to think that there is a relation of opposition or competition between two accounts of the same subject matter, such that only one of them can be correct, while the relation is really

one of complementarity. To be clear: Young for the most part does not portray her two models as competing or mutually exclusive accounts of responsibility. She explicitly and repeatedly states that the social connection model does not make the liability model obsolete.21 In a few passages, however, she diverts from this line by implicitly treating the two models as competing, by assuming that blaming agents for certain harms obscures the responsibilities of other agents with respect to those harms.22 However, blaming some agents for what they have done should not be taken to absolve others, if the latter also stand in a significant relation to the wrong in question.23 As joint responsibility is possible, these other agents may also bear interactional responsibility for the wrong, as in the case of conspirators who are jointly responsible for committing a crime, although to differing degrees. 24 Alternatively or additionally, they may bear structural responsibility to change the background conditions that enable or facilitate the wrongdoing. Abandoning the language of models in favour of forms protects us from such misunderstandings. Structural responsibility for justice is to be understood as a distinct form of responsibility that is directed at structures (formal social institutions, and informal rules and culturally engrained practices)25 and that subjects bear in addition to their various interactional responsibilities.

Embracing the terminology of two forms also facilitates the conceptualisation of the general features of responsibility that apply to both forms, several of which I have outlined in this section. One important general criterion, to which I will now return, is applicability to group agents, such as companies, NGOs or state governments. Such groups should be conceived of as genuine *subjects of responsibility,* alongside individuals (including their individual members). Such agents bear not only interactional responsibility towards others, but also structural responsibility, for two main reasons. First, group agents contribute to and profit from structural injustices in a variety of ways. Companies and their shareholders, for example, indirectly participate in structural injustices in the same sense that Young has established for

individuals: they often profit from a lack of social and environmental regulations and from unequal power relations within and across societies, even when they have not directly contributed to the structural deficits in question. This is not to deny that group agents are often also more directly involved in structural injustices, such as governments that enact harmful legislation or policies, or corporate agents who finance advertising campaigns and lobby or bribe politicians with the intent of either sabotaging legislation intended to correct certain injustices, or of promoting policies that are socially or environmentally regressive. Second, many group agents are very powerful and uniquely positioned to effectively change unjust background conditions. They should therefore be attributed structural responsibility, although their actions must be in conformity with the demands of democratic legitimacy. For companies and large multinational corporations in particular, the most important aspect of this structural responsibility will in any case be negative, insofar as they should refrain from sabotaging socially and environmentally progressive legislation and policies.

As Young has argued, individual subjects also bear a responsibility to change social structures. In fact, any view that excludes individuals to focus on elected officials or company representatives would be one-sided. However, her account is tilted too far in the other direction. She generally neglects the role of group agents as subjects of social connection responsibility, while she discusses the role of companies and their representatives mostly in terms of the liability model.[26] Young also downplays the role of state agents when it comes to their power to achieve structural change, focusing instead on civil society agents (2011, ch. V,VI). I believe that this is a mistake. Structural responsibility should be ascribed to a wide range of group agents: most intuitively to governments and elected politicians, but also to companies, NGOs and civil society organisations more broadly. Many such agents are very powerful, and they shape the societies and the international order in which they are embedded, for better or worse. Although Young's parameters of reasoning are not elaborate enough (see 2.a), they certainly

give us reason to rank group agents among the subjects of structural responsibility. Furthermore, the degree and content of the structural responsibility of individuals can be determined more concretely by considering their internal or external relation to such group agents, since individuals can influence the behaviour of these groups, depending on their exact social position, e.g. as employee or shareholder of a company, as citizen of a state, as member of a workers' association, etc. The overarching importance of group agency is not systematically addressed by Young. She instead emphasizes the *shared* responsibility of individuals, without considering their relation to a broader range of internally structured groups. Analogously, her appeal to ´collective action´ in the context of the social connection model is amorphous, as it is not linked to a theory of group agency, either (see also 2.c).

In summary, working with the distinction of interactional and structural responsibility helps to differentiate between various general aspects of responsibility, including its subjects, objects, beneficiaries, temporal orientation, normative standards and grounds. I have shown that interactional and structural responsibility differ on the level of their objects, but share several features. Attributions of blame and guilt cannot be restricted to either form, and both forms must be ascribed retrospectively and prospectively. Moreover, ascriptions of both forms of responsibility should be sensitive not only to the agency of individuals, but also of relevant collectives. Finally, both interactional and structural responsibility can, at least in principle, be grounded in special relationships or different variants of social connection, but also in the common humanity of the subject and the beneficiary. (Again: This is not to deny that special ties provide more weight to a particular responsibility relation, all other things being equal.) In contrast, Young implausibly associates several of these general features with only one of her two models, which unnecessarily obscures the picture.

As I have argued in this section, the distinction of interactional and structural responsibility also helps to avoid a false choice between the two. This is because both forms

standardly apply in a complementary, simultaneous and interrelated manner. The example of man-made climate change may serve as a final illustration. Social processes that cause and aggravate climate change are to be conceived as a structural injustice, as they ´put large groups of persons under systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities´ (Young 2011, p. 52). Climate change entails interactional responsibilities on the part of individual and collective agents, next to structural responsibilities. [27] Individuals and group agents are certainly interactionally responsible for reducing their emissions within the existing, environmentally destructive system. However, although many agents have significant leeway in cutting their emissions, it is unrealistic to expect radical behavioural change within the given economic structures of production and consumption and their current regulatory frameworks. Decarbonisation can only be achieved if the whole range of relevant subjects assume responsibility to enact deep structural change in social attitudes, economic and cultural practices, and formal political and legal institutions. This must include the establishment of effective sanction mechanisms in order to eliminate free-riding, effective subsidisation of renewable energy instead of fossil fuels, and many other policies that apply at the structural level. Acknowledging the complementarity and interrelation of interactional and structural responsibility is therefore warranted as a matter of principle, but also on pragmatic grounds.

Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed a number of objections to Young's account of responsibility for justice. The problems and difficulties that I have addressed (see 2.) do not speak in favour of a wholesale replacement of her account. Rather, they justify a constructive correction, rearrangement, reconceptualization and supplementation of various theoretical assumptions, leading to the alternative but related distinction of interactional and structural responsibility

(see 3.). These steps not only help avoid misconceptions, but are in line with what can be considered Young's central insight: that pervasive structural injustices call for action based on a new conception of responsibility.

I hope to have shown that Young's late works on responsibility for justice point to an important distinction between two elementary *forms of responsibility* – interactional and structural – which are to be attributed to individuals and group agents alike. However, in order to determine the more exact content and weight of interactional and structural responsibility in different contexts, these insights must be combined with demands derived from plausible, comprehensive theories of democratic legitimacy and of social and environmental justice within and across political boundaries. Such considerations clearly exceed the scope of this article, but I hope to have demonstrated how my main conclusions could be integrated into such comprehensive theories.

1 For the vivid first-hand reception, see e.g. the contributions in the anthologies edited by Ferguson and Nagel (2009), Johnson and Michaelis (2013), and Niesen (2013).

2 See e.g. Lu (2011, 2017), Eckersley (2016), Hayward (2017), and Aragon and Jaggar (2018).

3 See Barry and Macdonald (2016, p. 111–112). See also McKeown (2018, pp. 484–502), who distinguishes four different senses of ´connection´ that are all evoked by Young without being fully specified or argued for. Aragon and Jaggar (2018, pp. 448–450) argue that the criterion of social connection should be more precisely understood as ´structural complicity´.

4 Remarkably, Young's first article on the topic, ´From Guilt to Solidarity´ (Young, 2003), already contains this emphasis in its title.

5 See also Young (2004, pp. 375–377).

6 Young refers to *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Arendt, 1963/1964), as well as to two shorter texts (Arendt, 1945/1994 and Arendt, 1968/2003c). It should be noted that Young apparently did not know (or at least does not cite) Arendt's most extensive and richest contribution on the topic, ´Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship´ (Arendt, 1964/2003a), which synthesizes major themes of her view. This text is based on the manuscript of a lecture which Arendt gave in different locations in the years of 1964 and 1965, and which was published in English in full-length for the first time only in 2003. At the time, only a much shorter version of the presentation had appeared in print (see Arendt, 1964), which Young does not cite, either. Nor does Young refer to Arendt's posthumously published lecture ´Some Questions of Moral Philosophy´ (Arendt 1965/2003b), which offers further specifications on the relation of political responsibility and guilt.

7 In this respect, Arendt's treatment bears a striking resemblance to Jaspers's view. Jaspers used the concept of ´political guilt´ in the narrow sense of an exclusively political ´liability´. For him, ´political guilt´, to which he also referred as ´political responsibility´, is a genuinely collective category and can be juridically enforced. It derives solely from membership in a political community, in opposition to individual moral and criminal guilt, which both derive from personal conduct. See Jaspers (1946/1948, pp. 25–40).

8 Compare again Jaspers, who wrote that, when it comes to individual moral guilt, ´Germans are divided by the greatest differences´ (1946/1948, p. 57). Jaspers gave a detailed account of attitudes and actions that were widespread during the Nazi Era, which, according to him, ´incurred´ (ibid., p. 58) individual moral guilt, depending on the particular motives and circumstances. Among the morally blameworthy behaviours, he listed: ´living in disguise´, such as when those Germans who did not share the Nazi ideology nevertheless performed the Hitler salute in public in order to ´camouflage´ their real convictions and to thereby shield

themselves from retribution (ibid.); ´false conscience´ (ibid.), ´self-deception´ (ibid., p. 61) and ´inner assimilation´ (ibid.), ´passivity´ in the face of avoidable wrongs (ibid., p. 63), ´outward compliance´ and ´running with the pack´ (ibid., p. 64).

9 In particular, see Arendt (1958/1998, ch. III).

10 For an interpretation of Arendt's work according to which ´both private and public life´ have ´a moral basis´, see Jacobitti (1991: 281).

11 For this general point, see in particular Arendt ([1945] 1994, 1963/1964 and 1965/2003b: 94). For a comprehensive treatment of three different kinds of ´thoughtlessness´, as conceptualised by Arendt, see Schiff (2012).

12 Compare Williams (2015), who argues that this assessment by Young ´misses the mark´ (p. 52).

13 Young instead seeks to show that *Eichmann* implicitly supports an idea of forward-looking political responsibility. See Young (2011, ch. III).

14 Young (2011) rightly points out that Arendt ´would not have been very sympathetic to´ (p. 75) her overall project, which focusses on responsibility *for justice*. Even though the idea of justice is largely absent in Arendt's political theory, she tied her notion of responsibility for the world to the constant need for political reform, citing Hamlet (´The time is out of joint: O cursed spite/That ever I was born to set it right!´) (Arendt, 1964/2003a, pp. 27–28); see also Arendt (1958/1961, pp. 192–193), and Williams (2015, pp. 43–44).

15 See e.g. Young (2011): ´This responsibility falls on members of a society by virtue of the fact that they are aware *moral* agents *who ought not* to be indifferent to the fate of others and the danger that states and other organised institutions often pose to some people.´ (p. 92; my emphasis). A bit further below, she writes: ´We are in a condition of having such political

responsibility, and the fact of having it implies an imperative to *take* political responsibility.´ (ibid., Young's emphasis)

16 Related conceptual distinctions can be found in the literature. Without referring to Young's work, I have distinguished between ´interactional responsibilities´ and ´institutional responsibilities to promote justice´ (Beck, 2010, p. 2). In a later text, I have briefly discussed Young's work und used the German equivalents to the English terms ´interpersonal´ and ´structural responsibility´ (Beck, 2016, ch. IV). See Lu (2011 and 2017), for the distinction of ´interactional´ as opposed to ´structural injustice´ in the context of colonial injustices, and correspondingly, of ´interactional´ as opposed to ´structural reconciliation´. In my view, either ´interactional´ or ´interpersonal´ can mark the distinction from structural responsibility. However, ´interactional responsibility´ is more neutral than ´interpersonal responsibility´ with respect to whether responsible agents should be attributed ontological personhood. That said, either term can accommodate the concept of group agency. Young herself comes close to using these concepts when she writes that ´a theory of responsibility for justice properly distinguishes between two levels of social relations: an interactive level and a structural level´ (Young 2011, p. 163), but she does not develop these terms.

17 Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for asking me to clarify this point.

18 See in particular Young (2011, ch. 2).

19 For example, next to the topic of political liability discussed above in reference to Arendt and Jaspers, both role-related responsibilities of political representatives as well as the obligation to obey the law, standardly discussed as ´political obligation´, can also be categorised as political responsibilities. For a discussion of the latter, see Scheffler (2018). Each of these variants of political responsibility is different from, although related to, structural responsibility.

20 I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for raising this question, which allowed me to further clarify the relation of the two forms.

21 See Young (2004, p. 368), where she states that the social connection model is meant to ´supplement´ the liability model. See also Young (2006a, p. 125).

22 Young for example writes: ´Practices of blaming look for "'whodunit". As in mystery novels, when we find who did it, we absolve other people, who by implication didn't do it.´ (2006b, p. 41). In another passage, Young writes that 'if corporate executives [...] believe that anti-sweatshop activists are blaming them for the conditions under which the shoes are produced, they rightly become indignant' (2003, p. 42). Apart from falsely presuming that social connection responsibility cannot involve blaming its subjects, this passage also implies that agents can be *either* held liable for concrete harms *or* ascribed a responsibility to change the structures in question, while in fact they often bear both forms of responsibility simultaneously. This is also true for companies and their representatives, since doing their part to enable positive structural change, e.g. by ceasing their practice of sabotaging socially progressive legislation, does not permit them to cause concrete harms more directly.

23 See Nussbaum (2009, p. 143), see also Barry and Ferracioli (2013, p. 252). However, Young clarifies in other passages that ascribing liability to some agents does not absolve others, either from liability or from social connection responsibility (see 2004, p. 377; 2006a, p. 120).

24 See Kutz (2000, ch. 5, 7) for a normative analysis of conspirator responsibility.

25 Young's conceptualisation of structure (see Young 2011, ch. 2), which refers to the interplay of formal institutions and informal rules and practices, remains instructive when it comes to applied questions of locating potential objects of the responsibility to address injustices in different contexts.

26 It should be noted that important contributions in the field of social ontology, such as that of List and Pettit (2011), appeared only after the time of Young's writing.

27 For an overview of contemporary accounts that justify individual responsibilities to adopt a greener lifestyle and/or to take political responsibility in the face of climate change, see Fragnière (2016).

Notes on Contributor

Valentin Beck is a lecturer in Philosophy at the Freie Universität Berlin and currently a Feodor Lynen Research Fellow at the Department of Philosophy at UC Berkeley. He is the author of *Eine Theorie der globalen Verantwortung* (Suhrkamp) and Co-Editor of *Dimensions of Poverty* (Springer). His articles on consumer boycotts, fair trade, global justice theory and global responsibility have appeared in journals and anthologies, including: *Journal of Applied*

Philosophy; *Moral Philosophy and Politics*; *Global Justice: Theory Practice Rhetoric*; and *Zeitschrift für Praktische Philosophie*.

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