

Interpreting Responsibility Politically*

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POLITICAL theorists and philosophers typically think of agents as morally responsible for injustice when two conditions obtain: the agents' behavior—their acts, attempts, and omissions—leads to or results in some wrongful event or condition (*causation*); and, that behavior is proscribed or violates moral requirements (*culpability*).¹ Few people doubt that when injustice follows straightforwardly from the culpable behavior of some agent, that agent “is responsible” or should be “held responsible” for it. This conception of responsibility captures a widely held understanding (at least in the West) of commonsense morality,² one that seems to connect agency to redress in the right way by linking causation and blameworthy behavior with an obligation to make amends, to put things right.

Moral responsibility is only one species of responsibility: legal liability often (but not always) tracks moral responsibility (they diverge, for instance, in cases of strict liability). In addition, relationships can give rise to responsibility: I might have a special obligation to clear my neighbor's sidewalk of snow simply because she needs the help and is close to me.³ Some theorists maintain that we have responsibilities to help others by virtue of our capacity to do so without giving up anything of moral significance.⁴ Further, certain social roles create responsibility:

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¹Rüdiger Bittner, “Morality and world hunger,” *Global Justice*, ed. Thomas W. Pogge (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), pp. 24–31, at pp. 28ff.; cf. Marion Smiley, *Moral Responsibility and the Boundaries of Community: Power and Accountability from a Pragmatic Point of View* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 105–6.

²Samuel Scheffler, “Individual responsibility in a global age,” *Global Ethics: Seminal Essays*, ed. Thomas Pogge and Keith Horton (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 2008); cf. Smiley, *Moral Responsibility*, pp. 76ff.; Iris Marion Young, *Responsibility for Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 97–8.

³Soran Reader, “Distance, relationship and moral obligation,” *The Monist*, 86 (2003), 367–81; Joan C. Tronto, “Partiality based on relational responsibilities: another approach to global ethics,” *Ethics and Social Welfare*, 6 (2012), 303–16.

⁴Peter Singer, *One World: The Ethics of Globalization* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002); Peter Singer, “Famine, affluence, and morality,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 1 (1972), 229–43.

societies designate people to be lifeguards or firefighters so that otherwise diffuse responsibilities can be efficiently discharged.⁵

My aim here is not to provide a comprehensive catalogue or analysis of responsibility; it is rather to ask why argument about moral responsibility has proven so disturbingly ineffective in the face of systemic injustices like hunger, poverty, and sweatshops.⁶ One plausible answer is that moral reasoning is only persuasive when it speaks to events or conditions that can be clearly and straightforwardly attributed to specific agents on the basis of having been caused by their blameworthy behavior; on this view, morality refers to the “domain of those things which can readily, or perhaps unmistakably, be put down to some particular agents’ account.”⁷ This familiar way of understanding moral responsibility treats it as a determination based on the moral and empirical facts of a particular case. I shall call this the *philosophical* interpretation of responsibility. This imperfect label captures the key feature of this approach: it treats culpability and causation as questions we can get to the bottom of through careful analysis and argumentation. That is, it treats both the normative and empirical dimensions of responsibility as factual determinations—and frequently conflates or collapses them together.⁸ The philosophical interpretation allows theorists to put agents on the hook for injustice by linking their culpable behavior causally to a particular injustice, providing a powerful justification for compelling them to change their ways or to compensate those who have been wronged. Absent such justification, remediation can seem more a matter of charity than of justice.⁹

Many theories of global justice, while not necessarily framed this way, are attempts to establish causation and to clarify what counts as wrongful behavior in a transnational context for the purpose of determining who is responsible for injustice. These theories remain controversial in part because of the indeterminacy that surrounds structural injustices of the kind that concern global normative theorists.¹⁰ Causal connections between specific agents and particular injustices are often highly attenuated or indeterminate; theories about how the world works, which might help in establishing such connections, are incomplete

⁵Leif Wenar, “Responsibility and severe poverty,” *Freedom from Poverty as a Human Right: Who Owes What to the Very Poor?* ed. Thomas W. Pogge (New York: Oxford University Press/UNESCO, 2007), pp. 255–74. The point of such designations is to make it wrong for some agent(s) to behave in certain ways—in effect, to create or clarify an obligation for agents such that their failure to fulfill it would be a form of culpable behavior.

⁶I use *systemic* and *structural* injustice interchangeably throughout this article as shorthand for serious ills arising out of complex social systems, structures, and processes.

⁷Bittner, “Morality and world hunger,” p. 28.

⁸Smiley, *Moral Responsibility*, p. 167.

⁹The distinction between moral and humanitarian duties is commonplace throughout the literature; see Brian Barry, “Humanity and justice in global perspective,” *Ethics, Economics, and the Law: Nomos 24*, ed. J. Roland Pennock and John W. Chapman (New York: New York University Press, 1982), pp. 219–52.; Henning Hahn, “The global consequence of participatory responsibility,” *Journal of Global Ethics*, 5 (2009), 43–56.

¹⁰Bittner, “Morality and world hunger,” pp. 29ff.

and often contradictory. In addition, we lack clear intuitions about culpable behavior in such cases; what counts as wrong is often precisely the point at issue. Moreover, scholars disagree about how to think about these problems—about which assumptions hold, what factors matter and how much, and so on. In short, systemic injustices are characterized by empirical complexity, ethical ambiguity, and epistemological uncertainty that make factual determinations of responsibility difficult.

Most theorists have responded to these challenges by tracing subtler chains of causality or developing innovative or more nuanced philosophical arguments about culpable behavior in the global context—by trying harder to determine the moral and empirical facts surrounding systemic injustice. I adopt a different approach, taking the uncertainty surrounding these “facts” about responsibility as an invitation to reconsider the philosophical interpretation of responsibility itself. Instead of treating responsibility philosophically, as factual determination, I propose to interpret it politically. To begin working out what this might mean, I consider two prominent and very different theories of responsibility that can be characterized as “political” approaches, those of David Miller and Iris Marion Young.

I. MILLER’S CONNECTION THEORY

Miller distinguishes what he calls “two concepts of responsibility”: outcome and remedial responsibility.¹¹ Outcome responsibility begins with agents and asks how they can reasonably be credited or debited with the results of their conduct. This closely resembles the familiar view of moral responsibility, though Miller insists on a distinction between outcome and moral responsibility. To see the difference, consider a naturally gifted ballerina who gives an exquisite performance; she is outcome responsible for it because her performance reflects her intention and effort in the right way, but talent (and luck) play too big a part to make her performance morally praiseworthy. Similarly, a clumsy gardener whose low yields reflect poor soil management and erratic watering is outcome responsible for his crop but not (normally) subject to moral disapprobation for his failures.¹² Miller insists on the distinction because he finds it relevant to national responsibility; I accept the conceptual point but doubt its relevance to systemic injustice, since the very notion of injustice entails normative assessment.¹³ Outcome responsibility is, for Miller (and for most theorists), backward-looking; it seeks the facts of moral responsibility in past behavior.

Remedial responsibility, by contrast, is forward-looking. It begins with “patients,” those who are suffering, and asks who should bear the burden of

¹¹David Miller, *National Responsibility and Global Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 81.

¹²*Ibid.*, pp. 89–90, 108.

¹³This distinction notwithstanding, Miller sees *outcome responsibility* as comprising both outcome and moral responsibility.

helping them. Remedial responsibility is a duty to put a bad situation right.¹⁴ Sometimes this duty follows from some agent's being identified as outcome responsible for the situation. We *identify* responsibility, in Miller's view, when we inquire who fits the relevant conditions for being responsible (for example, who has culpably caused an injustice). We *assign* responsibility when we attach costs and benefits to agents regardless of whether they fulfill conditions for being responsible.¹⁵ When an agent is identified as outcome responsible, the agent is also—therefore—typically held remedially responsible.¹⁶ This connection between outcome responsibility and remedial responsibility connects agency and redress in the right way, Miller argues; it attaches costs and benefits to those agents who can be debited or credited with the results. The more difficult challenge, Miller argues, arises when outcome responsibility is unclear: the challenge is to find principles for assigning remedial responsibility that are morally weighty enough to justify sanctioning agents for failing to discharge it.¹⁷ In assigning remedial responsibility, he proposes consideration of factors such as (non-culpable) causation, agents' capacity to help in remedying a situation, community ties linking agents to those affected by an injustice, and any benefits that might accrue to agents as a result of it.¹⁸ There is no algorithm for assigning remedial responsibility on the basis of such connections, Miller argues; careful weighing of the relevant factors and good judgment are essential.¹⁹ Miller acknowledges that we need remedial responsibility in part because it is sometimes difficult or impossible to blame anyone, given the moral and empirical facts; outcome responsibility is too narrow, he writes, to address many global injustices.²⁰

Outcome and remedial responsibility are better understood as different perspectives on responsibility than as different concepts of it. The two ideas are deeply entangled, as we can see in Miller's recognition that outcome responsibility provides powerful arguments for remedial responsibility—even if there are sometimes reasons to assign it elsewhere.²¹ The most interesting cases are those of what I would call *residual* responsibility, the remedial responsibility left over once all outcome responsibility has been identified. Miller observes that national societies have mechanisms for assigning such responsibility, as in the cases of lifeguards and firefighters; globally, the absence of such mechanisms is keenly felt.²²

¹⁴Miller, *National Responsibility and Global Justice*, p. 108.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 84.

¹⁶Sometimes mere causation and forms of strict liability identify agents as remedially responsible in the absence of outcome responsibility; Miller's thinking here and elsewhere is strongly colored by legal theory, specifically Tony Honoré, *Responsibility and Fault* (Oxford: Hart, 1999).

¹⁷David Miller, "Distributing responsibilities," *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 9 (2001), 453–71, at p. 454.

¹⁸Miller, *National Responsibility and Global Justice*, pp. 99ff.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 107.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 108.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 100.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 99.

I characterize Miller's as (a move toward) a *political* interpretation of responsibility for two reasons. First, his insistence that institutions are needed for making assignments of remedial responsibility and his acknowledgement that such assignments will be controversial and require justification show that he realizes responsibility is a contentious problem that requires political solutions. Second, Miller recognizes the salience of the social and political context in which assignments of responsibility are made, noting the particular difficulty of making them in the global context, where suitable and effective institutions are lacking.

These political factors figure prominently in Miller's subsequent discussion of responsibility for global poverty. In assessing what he calls the "intolerable" poverty in our world today, he laments that there is a large gap between this normative assessment and the identification of outcome responsibility. In critiques of Pogge and Singer, Miller opines that the poor themselves likely bear much—or even most—of the outcome responsibility for their plight.²³ Nonetheless, he acknowledges that they cannot remedy their own poverty and that significant remedial responsibility remains even if we account for all of their outcome responsibility.²⁴ Miller calls for formal global mechanisms to assign this residual responsibility, even though he doubts that their creation would eliminate the considerable uncertainty surrounding the many possible assignments: the uncertainty makes it difficult and contentious, ethically and politically, to impose substantial costs for remedial responsibilities upon anyone. The result is a "justice gap" between what the poor can legitimately demand and what the rich can legitimately be obligated to pay.²⁵ While the poor do suffer an injustice, Miller acknowledges, it cannot be identified with or assigned to the rich; the costs entailed cannot be justified in light of the indeterminacy that envelops such assignments.

Leave aside Miller's controversial claims about outcome responsibility for poverty, and ignore both the question of what it would cost to alleviate poverty and the undefended normative judgment that this cost is too great to impose upon the rich. Miller's identification of a "justice gap" seems to undermine his entire conceptual edifice, which was intended to determine responsibility precisely in cases where it was in question—that is, in uncertain and contentious cases like that of poverty.²⁶ This failure stems in part from Miller's continued conceptualization of outcome responsibility as a factual determination that can be gotten right. Since outcome responsibility can be correctly identified, and since only outcome responsibility provides sufficient justification for assigning significant costs and burdens, institutional assignments of responsibility on other grounds are fatally contentious. Notice that this failure reflects Miller's conflation of backward- and forward-looking responsibility. Remedial responsibility is supposed to be forward-looking, but Miller's

²³Ibid., pp. 238–47.

²⁴Ibid., pp. 247–54.

²⁵Ibid., pp. 273–4.

²⁶A more cynical view is that this argument is designed to bolster Miller's longstanding claim that justice is purely a domestic or "national" concern.

theoretical gaze continually turns to the past, since only there, in determinations of culpable causation, can we find adequate justification for the imposition of costs and burdens upon agents. Despite some valuable political insights, Miller's approach remains constrained by an underlying philosophical interpretation of responsibility.

II. YOUNG'S SOCIAL CONNECTION MODEL

Young's social connection model is specifically designed to address what she calls *structural* injustices, which exist when social processes place large categories of people under systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities.²⁷ This model of shared responsibility rests on three distinctive insights: that the liability model of backward-looking responsibility (culpable causation) is unworkable and inappropriate in cases of structural injustice; that responsibility for structural injustice is shared and forward-looking; and, that shared responsibility must be discharged politically.

Young rejects the liability model in cases of structural injustice. She finds it inappropriate to blame "connected but removed actors" for their role in producing structural injustice because it is frequently unintended; it is equally inappropriate, however, to absolve people who contribute by their actions to processes that result in injustice.²⁸ Young insists that the actions of individuals cannot be causally disentangled from structural processes in a way that would allow the tracing of specific aspects of the outcome for which those individuals might be blamed.²⁹

She focuses instead on the social processes out of which "obligations of justice" arise among people connected through them. "The 'social connection model' of responsibility says that all agents who contribute by their actions to the structural processes that produce injustice (including victims of injustice) have responsibilities to work to remedy these injustices."³⁰ Structures, according to Young, "denote the confluence of institutional rules and interactive routines"; they encompass resources and physical structures that create the relatively stable contexts in which individuals act, "presenting actors with options" and providing "channels" that both enable and constrain action.³¹ Structures define social positions and the relations among those positions; some people are positioned in ways that leave them vulnerable to the systematic threat of domination and deprivation—that is, they experience structural injustice.³²

Actions and interactions that transpire within structures "often have future effects beyond the immediate purposes and intentions of" actors, such that they "often have

²⁷Iris Marion Young, "Responsibility and global justice: a social connection model," *Justice and Global Politics*, ed. Ellen Frankel Paul, Fred D. Miller, Jr., and Jeffrey Paul (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 102–30, at p. 114.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 118.

²⁹Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, p. 100.

³⁰Young, "Responsibility and global justice," pp. 102–3.

³¹*Ibid.*, pp. 111–2.; cf. Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, pp. 52–64.

³²Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, pp. 56–7.

collective results that no one intends.”³³ “[M]any large-scale social processes in which masses of individuals believe that they are following the rules, minding their own business, and trying to accomplish their legitimate goals” can nonetheless produce structural injustice.³⁴ The ground of an individual’s shared responsibility for this injustice lies in the fact of her participation in structural processes that have unjust outcomes; she “shares with others the responsibility to transform these processes to reduce and eliminate the injustice they cause.”³⁵ Responsibility is shared because “the harms are produced by many of us acting together within accepted institutions and practices, and because it is not possible for any of us to identify just what in our own actions results in which aspects of the injustice that particular individuals suffer.”³⁶ Responsibility is assigned for recent and ongoing structural injustice to those whose actions contribute to its production.³⁷

On this structural view, shared responsibility can only be effectively discharged by joining with others in collective action. None of us can change social processes or institutions on our own; precisely because some injustices are structural, they require the intervention of many people acting in concert.³⁸ Shared responsibility is political, then, in that it requires “public communicative engagement with others for the sake of organizing our relationships and coordinating our actions most justly.”³⁹ “We call on one another to take responsibility *together* for sweatshop conditions, without blaming anyone in particular” for those conditions or the structures that encourage them.⁴⁰ Political responsibility is primarily a modality of *discharging* shared responsibility; using the example of homelessness, Young suggests that one way of discharging it might be “trying to persuade others that this threat to well-being is a matter of injustice rather than misfortune and that we participate together in the processes that cause it. We would then enjoin one another to work on our collective relationships and try to transform the necessary practices.”⁴¹

³³Young, “Responsibility and global justice,” p. 114.

³⁴Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, p. 63.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 110. For a recent discussion of this “many hands” problem, see Derrick Darby and Nyla R. Branscombe, “Beyond the sins of the fathers: responsibility for inequality,” *Midwest Studies In Philosophy*, 38 (2014), 121–37.

³⁶Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, p. 110.

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 109.

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 111.

³⁹Young, “Responsibility and global justice,” p. 123; Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, p. 112.

⁴⁰Young, “Responsibility and global justice,” p. 125.

⁴¹Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, p. 112. My discussion brackets Young’s earlier thinking about shared responsibility (which she sometimes called *political* responsibility) because her views evolved significantly. The earlier account was influenced strongly by Arendt’s conception of collective responsibility as responsibility that cannot be individuated to the self-conscious acts of individuals; it derives from membership in a collective that no individual’s voluntary actions can dissolve (Iris Marion Young, “Responsibility and global labor justice,” *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 12 (2004), 365–88, at p. 375. Young followed Onora O’Neill in thinking that we have responsibility to all those assumed by our actions; when we purchase cheap clothing, we make (perhaps unconscious) assumptions about the people who labor in sweatshops and about all of the others involved in the production and distribution of our garments, who constitute an undissolvable community (*ibid.*, pp. 370ff.). Young’s later view emphasizes actual (rather than assumed) social connections through which our behavior produces injustice. Nussbaum argues that, for Young, the “imperative of political responsibility” consists in watching social and governmental institutions, “monitoring their effects to make sure they are not grossly

Young outlines a compelling model of the political discharge of responsibility, one I shall build on in developing my own position, yet her broader account raises serious difficulties. Gould rightly observes that two distinct conceptions of responsibility operate in the social connection model: one is responsibility that arises from causing or contributing to some harmful action or process; the other is responsibility to or for someone—a sense of responsibility to do things for or with respect to others.⁴² Young often (con)fuses these two conceptions of responsibility. Shared responsibility is meant to be forward-looking, but the insistence that agents share responsibility because of their connection to injustice remains distinctly backward-looking, regardless of whether the agents are considered complicit or blameworthy.⁴³ Shared responsibility arising from a sense that we should do something for others, by contrast, is clearly forward-looking. The confusion of these two distinct notions causes significant problems in Young's account.

One way she tries to reconcile them is by giving up on the notion of blame in connection with structural injustice. She is happy enough to do so: as we've seen, Young finds blame inappropriate in such cases. In her view, responsibility arises solely from connection, so blame and redress must be dissociated—especially in cases where the connection consists in routine, accepted behavior (such as shopping for low-priced clothing). While Young intends to put blame and culpability aside, her model nonetheless *moralizes* connection; she calls the shared responsibility for structural injustice arising from connection an “[obligation] of justice.”⁴⁴ Seemingly, the *empirical* fact of connection suffices to establish *moral* responsibility: “we bear responsibility because we are part of the process” that produces injustice.⁴⁵

There are two difficulties with this moralization of connection. First, it forecloses the question of whether some presently accepted behavior shouldn't be questioned. If people's continual search for bargains foreseeably leads to the structural injustice of sweatshops, why shouldn't we consider it blameworthy—at least once the connection is understood—and hold them responsible for it? In her rush to set blame aside, Young never considers that it might be reconfigured; she simply reads shared responsibility for structural injustice as a social/moral fact of connection. The second difficulty is that determining responsibility based solely

harmful, and maintaining organized public space where such watching and monitoring can occur and citizens can speak publicly and support one another in their efforts to prevent suffering” (Martha C. Nussbaum, “Foreword,” *Responsibility for Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. ix–xxv, at p. xv. I think this reading overemphasizes Young's early work; it relies heavily on the chapter of Young's posthumously published book dealing with Arendt and German guilt, which remained unrevised at the time of Young's death (see *ibid.*).

⁴²Carol C. Gould, “Varieties of global responsibility: social connection, human rights and transnational solidarity,” *Dancing with Iris: The Philosophy of Iris Marion Young*, ed. Ann Ferguson and Mechthild Nagel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 199–211, at p. 204. These two conceptions track the later and earlier accounts, respectively.

⁴³Cf. Christopher Kutz, *Complicity: Ethics and Law for a Collective Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) and the critical discussion in Young, *Responsibility for Justice*.

⁴⁴Young, “Responsibility and global justice,” p. 102.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 119.

on connection and without reference to culpability or causation distorts the link between agency and redress. This is evident in Young's insistence that victims have as much (or more) responsibility for injustice as do others who are connected to it.⁴⁶ Workers are of course part of the system that exploits them, but to conflate their obvious interest in changing this exploitative system with a responsibility to do so—a responsibility shared with those who exploit them—is to get things badly wrong (and in a way that bolsters the neoliberal discourse of personal responsibility Young criticizes).⁴⁷ It doesn't help much to insist that calling the workers responsible does not amount to blaming them—the same holds for the owners and managers who do the exploiting!

Young recognizes the tension here, acknowledging that some of the injustice experienced by sweatshop workers “is properly the responsibility of specific culprits under a liability model”—she cites violations of labor laws by factory owners and managers and states' failure to punish them.⁴⁸ Yet she also insists that many of the actors who we might blame for the workers' exploitation can claim with some justification that they too operate under constraints beyond their control that make them vulnerable to economic and institutional pressures.⁴⁹ They too are caught up in the uncoordinated and largely unintentional social processes that ultimately give rise to structural injustice.⁵⁰ Young is deeply conflicted on this point: she does not want to ignore the objectionable behavior of factory owners, managers, and state regulators, but she is reluctant to blame them when larger structural factors are at work.

I want to highlight two problems with this model of shared responsibility without blame. First, blaming is a potent and valuable practice, one there is good normative and political reason to hold on to.⁵¹ Blame links agency to redress in the right way through the normative judgment that responsible agents' behavior is wrong; it requires them to make amends or put things right. As Miller showed, it is difficult to justify assigning responsibility to agents when this link is missing or tenuous; responsibility assigned on the basis of mere social connection might well provide insufficient motivation or justification for individuals to acknowledge and discharge their responsibility.

⁴⁶E.g., Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, p. 113.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 3–26. Briefly, neoliberalism is an economic doctrine that views markets as natural mechanisms for the fair allocation of benefits and burdens. Neoliberals regard public spending and governmental regulation as inefficient, distortional, and oppressive. The associated political ideology stresses individual freedom, property rights, and personal responsibility, doctrines that align with and uphold these economic views (though sometimes the economic and political projects clash). See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁴⁸Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, p. 131.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 132–3.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, p. 148.

⁵¹Nussbaum, “Foreword,” pp. xx–xxiv; cf. Martha C. Nussbaum, “Iris Young's last thoughts on responsibility for global justice,” *Dancing with Iris: The Philosophy of Iris Marion Young*, ed. Ann Ferguson and Mechthild Nagel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 133–45.

A second problem with this model is its treatment—or rather, neglect—of power. On Young’s account, it is difficult to generate a critique of how power creates and sustains structural injustice; because she abjures considerations of culpability and causation and treats all connections as generating moral responsibility, the distinctiveness of power relations gets lost. Put differently, the connection model erases important normative distinctions among different kinds of connection. This is clear in Young’s discussion of power and privilege as “parameters of reasoning” about responsibility that let us “[determine] what is required morally of agents in respect to rectifying structural injustice.”⁵² These parameters help us to “respond to the intuition that different agents properly have different kinds and degrees of forward-looking responsibility for injustice” deriving largely from their social positions.⁵³ Those with greater actual or potential power and influence over processes that produce injustice, those who enjoy relative privilege in relation to structures of injustice, those who have a particular interest in realizing justice (including the victims of the injustice), and those who are in a position to draw on existing resources to promote change should all take responsibility proportionate to their positions within structures that produce injustice.⁵⁴

To see why this matters, consider again Young’s example of conditions in the global garment industry. That discussion obscures that some people get quite rich as a direct result of the low wages and unsafe, oppressive working conditions that typify sweatshop production. Young ignores, that is, that some workers are exploited by capitalists. This is hardly a shocking revelation, I realize; my point is that there is a telling difference between regarding sweatshop laborers as *exploited* by capitalists and conceiving of workers as “put under systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities” by “social processes.”⁵⁵ Eliminating blame diminishes agency and dissociates it from redress in Young’s model; when all connections are morally equivalent, the responsibility of workers becomes identical to that of their exploiters.

Moreover, treating power merely as a factor in calibrating degrees of shared responsibility ignores how power *engenders* injustice by shaping structures and conditioning social norms and expectations, partly because it assumes that unjust outcomes are unintentional.⁵⁶ I’m referring not so much to individual owners and managers, who might be excused for bowing to competitive pressures, but rather to corporations and institutions that advocate policies facilitating the mobility of international financial capital, promoting hyper-competitive markets,

⁵²Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, p. 143.

⁵³*Ibid.*, p. 144.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 144–7; Young, “Responsibility and global justice,” pp. 127ff.

⁵⁵Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, p. 52.

⁵⁶This may be because, despite her attention to structures, Young seems primarily concerned with the ethical behavior and dilemmas of individuals.

encouraging “austerity policies” that cut corporate tax rates and slash social protections, and quashing worker organizations and solidarity, all of which systematically suppress wages and augment profits. Many of these same agents work actively to create standards of acceptable social behavior that normalize or excuse structural injustice. I shall have more to say on this important topic below; for now, my point is that Young’s account gives her no critical leverage on any of these problems because it moralizes all social connection and abandons blame. If Miller’s connection theory lets powerful actors off the hook for structural injustice, Young’s theory casts too wide a net of shared responsibility that catches minnows and big fish indiscriminately.

III. A POLITICAL INTERPRETATION OF RESPONSIBILITY

As I noted at the outset, political theorists and philosophers typically treat responsibility as a philosophical problem—that is, they treat it as a problem of determining the moral and empirical facts of a particular case. Interestingly, Miller’s attempt to assign remedial responsibility on political grounds results in a “justice gap” that seems to reaffirm the importance of clear factual determinations; Young’s effort to base responsibility on social connection effectively moralizes all connections in ways that are normatively and analytically troubling. Both theorists remain constrained by the philosophical interpretation of responsibility, despite their attempts to transcend it. The problem is not that the complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty surrounding structural injustice make factual determinations of the kind required by that interpretation difficult—at least, not directly. The problem is with the philosophical interpretation itself. Following the suggestion of Marion Smiley, I shall interpret responsibility differently, *politically*, in a way that transforms our understanding of the problem, its analysis, and its practical resolution.

According to Smiley, there are no objective or categorical bases for making attributions of responsibility; she conceives of it as a practical judgment based on the facts of the particular situation and on broader social norms, expectations, and practices that obtain in a particular socio-cultural context.⁵⁷ I shall refer to these norms, expectations, and practices collectively as *social conventions*. When we say that someone is or should be held responsible for some injustice, we are making a practical judgment that applies social conventions to the facts of a specific case. Crucially, for Smiley and for me, both the “facts” and our social conventions related to responsibility must always be interpreted.⁵⁸ Decisions about which “facts” to consider and how to weigh them always involve interpretation, as do the identification and application of the conventions salient in a particular case. Our judgments about responsibility are irreducibly interpretive, reflecting the values, beliefs, understandings, and worldviews

⁵⁷Smiley, *Moral Responsibility*, pp. 106ff., 227ff.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 144–5, 164.

through which we view the “facts” and our conventions. Together, these judgments constitute a social practice of making choices about whom to hold responsible for what, and why, in which cases. I prefer to think of responsibility as something we *ascribe* rather than *determine* (as the philosophical interpretation would have it) for this reason. Over time, accumulated judgments solidify into social norms, expectations, and practices; in this sense, conventions concerning responsibility both emerge from and reflect these iterated social choices.

I call this a political interpretation in part because it conceives of responsibility as socially constructed in these ways, as a matter of interpretation rather than factual determination, but the political implications are more expansive. Because our conventions on responsibility are socially constructed, they are necessarily contingent and therefore malleable. Conventions might evolve slowly, reflecting gradual shifts in shared attitudes, beliefs, and understandings, or they might change more rapidly, as a result of conscious efforts to revise them. Because conventions are socially constructed, they will typically reflect dominant perspectives, as powerful agents shape narratives and discourses through media, policy, and other forms of social influence. These dominant perspectives also shape prevailing interpretations of various facts, making those perspectives doubly influential in thinking about responsibility. Still, we should not expect agreement or uniformity. People occupying different social positions often see the world differently: competing value systems, beliefs, and worldviews support divergent interpretations of facts and conventions.

Different interpretations of the facts arise when people bring different values, beliefs, and experiences to their consideration of particular cases. For example, shared conventions condemn the use of excessive force by police while making allowances for the dangers that officers face and for the difficulty of making accurate split-second assessments of threats. People whose beliefs, values, or life experiences make them alive to structural racism might nonetheless see a police shooting of an unarmed black man very differently than people whose outlook or experience lets them imagine that society is colorblind. People may also see different conventions as relevant and appropriate in different contexts, again leading to differing judgments about responsibility. For example, people might agree that there is too much poverty and inequality in society but appeal to different conventions in thinking about who should be held responsible for it. Socialists might invoke the obligation to prevent foreseeable harm (poverty within a capitalist system) or argue that beneficiaries of a system should bear the costs it imposes on others, while neoliberals might excoriate a “culture of dependency” or blame the poor themselves as lazy or irresponsible.

As these examples suggest, the political interpretation remains concerned with causation and culpability, which are deeply embedded in our reasoning about responsibility. The crucial difference is that instead of seeing responsibility as a matter of getting the moral and empirical facts right, the political approach

acknowledges that ascriptions of cause and blame are themselves matters of interpretation and judgment. It's likely, on this view, that responsibility will be a terrain of disagreement and contestation rather than of consensus. Of course, many of our conventions *are* deeply settled; practical judgments applying them to familiar or clear-cut cases can take on the appearance of fact. In such instances, the two interpretations of responsibility appear to converge.

In cases involving systemic injustice, however, the philosophical and political interpretations diverge dramatically. As we have seen, philosophical interpretations founder on the complexity, uncertainty, and ambiguity surrounding questions of culpability and causation. On the political interpretation, by contrast, we should *expect* to find our thinking about responsibility in disarray in such cases because the facts are unfamiliar, particularly controversial, and thus wide open to interpretation; similarly, norms, expectations, and practices are embryonic, contested, or lacking altogether. This does not mean that "no one is to blame" or that ideas of causation and culpability are inapposite in such cases. It means rather that our understandings and conventions must be revised, or new ones developed, to make sense of responsibility in these new and evolving contexts.

I noted earlier that because responsibility is a social construct, the practice is malleable. It's now possible to see the full political implications of this idea. First, since the interpretations and conventions that inform our judgments are contestable (and contested), they can be targeted for transformation, made the subjects of explicit debate and persuasion. To shift collective thinking about responsibility requires collective action designed to change people's minds; only coordinated efforts to make people view the facts differently, reconsider or challenge prevailing norms, modify expectations, or reform practices are likely to reshape practical reasoning about responsibility. Young clearly saw a role for persuasive action of this kind in connection with responsibility: "Political contestation about structural injustice entails making arguments that some of the suffering of people is in fact injustice."⁵⁹ But because she interpreted responsibility philosophically, she could only conceive of political action as a means of *discharging* shared responsibility, a way of fulfilling the responsibility we already have by virtue of our connection to injustice. On my view, political action can be *constitutive* of responsibility, in that by influencing interpretations and conventions people can redefine responsibility (and thus injustice) by reshaping collective judgments about who has responsibility for what, and why, in which cases. Put differently, ascriptions of responsibility hinge on politics. This is not hair-splitting: the social connection model takes shared responsibility as a fact of agents' (moralized) connection to structural injustice and holds them responsible for addressing it; on the political interpretation, responsibility gets determined politically, through argument and contestation.

One might object that there is nothing particularly new in this interpretation: persuading people to change their views about responsibility is what political

⁵⁹Young, "Responsibility and global justice," p. 149.

theorists who write about this topic are trying to do. Of course, at one level there is no denying this: scholars are obviously engaged in attempting to persuade others to change their minds. But there is nothing in the recent literature on responsibility to suggest that scholars recognize it as socially constructed or appreciate the political significance of that fact, no indication—save perhaps in Young’s work—that the key tasks in persuading people are political and discursive rather than primarily philosophical. To put the point differently, the extant literature on responsibility is replete with analytic arguments that purport to determine, based on the moral and empirical facts, who has responsibility for injustice, and to persuade people by elucidating those facts. I have no desire to question the value or utility of such arguments, but—especially when couched in turgid disciplinary prose published in peer-reviewed journals and read (if at all) primarily in graduate seminars—they represent only a fraction of what’s necessary. Persuasion that seeks to (re)shape social conventions must also happen in bars, on social media, in the streets; it must rely on strikes, protests, petitions, education, electoral politics—on a broad range of strategies and tactics for changing people’s minds.

At a minimum, then, my argument highlights some extremely important aspects of responsibility that have been sorely neglected in recent debates. Yet my approach also challenges us to reconsider the very nature of responsibility itself. Doing so does not mean that there is no role for rigorous normative arguments about responsibility; it means placing those arguments into a much richer and more complex theoretical and political context. In fact, the approach proposed here need not conflict with any particular substantive account of responsibility. The political interpretation of responsibility doesn’t prescribe a substantive position at all; rather, it offers a way of making sense of the practice of responsibility, providing insight into the nature of responsibility and direction for those who might seek to challenge prevailing conventions. Whether one ought to initiate such a challenge will depend on one’s values, beliefs, and commitments.

The second important political implication of my approach concerns the insight it can provide into the role power plays in shaping practical judgments about responsibility. The political interpretation conceptualizes norms, expectations, and practices, as well as factual interpretations, as intersubjective understandings formed through social discourse and interaction. This makes it both possible and strategically essential to assess how power conditions those understandings, how it affects the conventions and the interpretations that inform judgments about responsibility. According to Barnett and Duvall, power is “the production, in and through social relations, of effects that shape the capacities of actors to determine their own circumstances and fate.”⁶⁰ Most theorists of responsibility consider power, if at all, in its *interactional* modalities;

⁶⁰Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, “Power in global governance,” *Power in Global Governance*, ed. Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 1–32, at p. 3. The conception of power outlined here belongs to them.

that is, they pay attention to the outcomes of compulsory or institutional power in the form of concrete injustices for which power-wielders might be responsible. *Constitutive* power, on the other hand, is power that produces effects manifest in “the identities of the occupants of social positions”—their self-understandings, subjectivities, frameworks of meaning, and so on.⁶¹ Constitutive power is pretty much ignored in most accounts of responsibility—I suspect because it doesn’t register in the familiar philosophical approach to the problem. That is, it doesn’t *cause* concrete injustices in any straightforward way. Constitutive power does figure into the political interpretation, however, since it can be used to mold interpretive frameworks and social conventions themselves, helping to shape “common sense” in ways that contribute to the maintenance of dominant views.

To see the significance of this, consider once more Young’s example of sweatshops. She views structural injustices like sweatshops as the result of unintended consequences arising from agents’ pursuit of their aims and interests “for the most part within the limits of accepted rules and norms,” behavior for which they should not be blamed.⁶² I pointed out in the previous section that by treating all connections as morally equivalent, Young seems to overlook some fairly obvious forms of interactional power, such as the direct oppression and exploitation of workers. The political interpretation also invites a consideration of constitutive power in relation to sweatshops. One might argue, for instance, that many of the social processes she characterizes as unintentional or as complex, compound consequences of seemingly insignificant or harmless individual behavior are actually products of constitutive power—specifically, of a carefully orchestrated, decades-long program of neoliberal economic policy designed to serve the interests of capital and to restore class power.⁶³ The race to the bottom in labor protections, the general lack of regulation and enforcement of human rights and workplace safety, states’ and workers’ vulnerability to the rapid removal of investment capital and other “social processes” were carefully designed and implemented as part of an explicit neoliberal agenda dating back at least to the infamous Powell Memorandum of 1971 and familiar today in the so-called Washington Consensus.⁶⁴

⁶¹Ibid., p. 10. Constitutive power is structural when it “concerns the constitution of social capacities and interests of actors in direct relation to one another”; it is productive when it refers to “the socially diffuse production of subjectivity in systems of meaning and signification” (Ibid., p. 3).

⁶²Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, p. 52.

⁶³David Harvey, “Neoliberalism as creative destruction,” *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, 88 (2006), 145–58; Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*; Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt, 2007); cf. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (New York: Octagon Books, 1975).

⁶⁴See “Powell Memorandum: attack on American free enterprise system,” Powell Archives, Washington and Lee University School of Law, available at <<http://law2.wlu.edu/powellarchives/page.asp?pageid=1251>>. On the Washington Consensus, see John Williamson, ed., *The Political Economy of Policy Reform* (Washington, DC: Institute for International Economics, 1994) and Williamson, “What Washington means by policy reform,” *Latin American Adjustment: How Much Has Happened?*, ed. Williamson (Washington, DC: Institute for International Economics, 1990), pp. 7–40.

Moreover, the political interpretation encourages us to acknowledge that “accepted rules and norms” are themselves produced through the operation of power. Neoliberalism’s stunning ascendance can be attributed in large part to its success in shaping norms, expectations, and practices and defining “common sense”—in shaping the conventions governing not just our judgments about responsibility but our political thinking (and thus our interpretations of social facts) more generally. Young might be correct that most people pursue their aims and interests innocently, as it were, but a political interpretation of responsibility highlights that it is precisely these rules and norms—this notion of innocence—that must be problematized, theorized, and changed if anyone is to be held responsible for the injustices instantiated in sweatshops. Smiley observed that we generally hold people to blame for negligence, but don’t blame states or the rich for failing to head off poverty.⁶⁵ Recognizing this as a practical judgment informed by prevailing social conventions and interpretations rather than simply as a matter of moral and empirical fact transforms our theoretical perspective and helps us to imagine a political response. Rather than accept neoliberal conventions as constraints on our thinking about responsibility, as Young’s approach effectively does, the conventions view invites a (counter-hegemonic) critique of them.

So, for instance, Young highlights the role of fashion tastes and trends in creating a demand for cheap apparel that contributes to the injustices of sweatshop labor. She is right to do so, but she never adequately theorizes how these tastes and trends are consciously constructed through pervasive (and very costly) advertising campaigns orchestrated by the corporations that benefit from the manufacture and sale of clothing—and thus from the exploitative conditions in which it is produced.⁶⁶ In addition, the promulgation of such campaigns occurs within a cultural and ideological context in which freedom and self-expression have become primarily modalities of consumption—or in which consumption is the primary modality of expressing freedom. Further, our (modern, Western) expectations about everything from work conditions and standards of living in core and peripheral economies to the nature of trade and development are structured by and saturated with neoliberal ideology (and by constructs of race and development, and so on).⁶⁷ Even what counts as “knowledge” about how the global economy works—about “rational” economic behavior, about the “laws” of the market and so on—reflects dominant configurations of power; neoliberalism has profoundly shaped popular thinking through the generation of specific knowledges and subjectivities that must themselves be interrogated and

⁶⁵Smiley, *Moral Responsibility*, p. 110.

⁶⁶Young uses the example to make a point about connections.

⁶⁷Margaret Kohn, “Postcolonialism and global justice,” *Journal of Global Ethics*, 9 (2013), 187–200; Thomas McCarthy, “Liberal imperialism and the dilemma of development,” *Domination and Global Political Justice: Conceptual, Historical, and Institutional Perspectives*, ed. Barbara Buckinx, Jonathan Trejo-Mathys, and Timothy Waligore (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 157–80.

challenged.⁶⁸ Mounting an effective critique of neoliberal hegemony is impossible unless we adopt a theoretical framework that allows us to conceptualize the dominant norms and expectations regulating the behavior of the relevant actors—in this case, including investors, executives, managers, state officials, individual consumers, and so on—as ideologically tinged.

These remarks can only be suggestive of the kind of critique of power and hegemony that a political interpretation of responsibility both enables and requires. Such a critique is vital for imagining effective political responses to questions about responsibility for injustice. That's because to change prevailing judgments is an inherently political task. If conventions and interpretations reflect and reproduce hegemony, albeit always imperfectly and incompletely, it becomes apparent that any attempt to change people's thinking about responsibility requires a critique of power and ideology (and simultaneously represents a challenge to them).

I wrote earlier that the political interpretation does not offer or recommend a substantive account of responsibility for structural injustice. It's important to clarify that my critique of Young's argument and of neoliberalism is not built into or entailed by the political interpretation (though again, some critique of existing conventions, and thus existing power structures, is necessary). Rather, my critique represents *one* interpretation of the relevant facts and conventions surrounding responsibility for sweatshops, deployed critically to illustrate some key features of this approach. It draws on a particular set of values and beliefs shared by many global justice activists—from the anti-sweatshop movement to the World Social Forum—who work to hold corporations, finance capitalists, and neoliberal politicians responsible for structural injustice. My arguments (and their activism) can be interpreted politically as attempts to challenge and reshape the prevailing interpretations and conventions that erase responsibility for the social, economic, and cultural ills of neoliberal globalization.⁶⁹

But, to reiterate: whether and how people should work to challenge particular interpretations and conventions is a question that my approach cannot answer. The political interpretation shows that *if* one's values and beliefs are in tension with the prevailing interpretations of facts or the dominant conventions regarding responsibility, one has recourse to critique and to political action in challenging prevailing thinking. Whether, in any particular case, one will be motivated to seek change depends on one's own values, beliefs, and understandings. It's because people do disagree—including with the substantive account I am using to illustrate my argument—that responsibility is best interpreted politically.

⁶⁸E.g., Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Boaventura de Sousa Santos, João Arriscado Nunes, and Maria Paula Meneses, "Introduction: opening up the canon of knowledge and recognition of difference," *Another Epistemology Is Possible: Beyond Northern Epistemologies*, ed. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (London: Verso, 2007), pp.xix–lxii.

⁶⁹Cf. Thomas J. Butko, "Gramsci and the 'Anti-globalization' movement: think before you act," *Socialism and Democracy*, 20 (2006), 79–102.

IV. TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR INJUSTICE

Collective political action for Young is always a way of *discharging* the responsibility that one *has* (morally) by virtue of one's factual connection to injustice. I worry that this view leaves us without a vocabulary for describing the actions of groups and individuals like Young's anti-sweatshop activists, who seek to address injustice even though they are not responsible for it, even though they have no obligation—on the prevailing view—to take action. The account I have offered of the work of social justice advocates builds and improves upon Young's discussions of the discharge of responsibility through public communicative engagement by showing how political activism can aim not just to ameliorate injustice and discharge responsibility but actually to change and constitute our norms, expectations, and practices, to redefine responsibility and injustice themselves.

Consider her example involving the Danes who rescued or protected Danish Jews from the Nazis: Young describes them as acting out of shared responsibility.⁷⁰ Recall that on her account, shared responsibility always arises out of a social connection to the processes that create injustice. To suggest that the Danes had shared responsibility for the plight of their Jewish neighbors on Young's connection model is to maintain that they somehow contributed to the injustice and were thus discharging their moral responsibility—even though their only connection to the arrests and deportations appears to be their joint subjection to the Nazi terror state. It seems strange, and frankly somewhat perverse, to allocate shared responsibility to the Danes, just as it is to attribute shared responsibility to sweatshop workers for their own exploitation and mistreatment.

To me, the point of these examples is (or should have been) that taking responsibility need not be related to having it in any *conventional* sense. Unfortunately, we use the term "taking responsibility" in two rather different ways, to mean "owning up to one's responsibility" (as when someone acknowledges her decisions and their consequences or accepts the costs and burdens imposed as a result of her behavior) and to mean "assuming responsibility when one has no obligation to do so" (as when someone volunteers or accepts responsibility for clearing up a mess she encounters). It's important to distinguish these meanings, because it's a mistake—it is analytically unhelpful and normatively inappropriate—to conflate the two notions. To do so is to miss the heroism of the Danes: in taking responsibility, they acted in a supererogatory way.⁷¹ I see Young's anti-sweatshop activists analogously: while their connection to injustice is different from that of the

⁷⁰Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, pp. 89ff.

⁷¹Young cannot argue, as Reader or Tronto might, that the fact of their being neighbors established a relation that entailed or amounted to responsibility (see footnote 6 and surrounding text); for Young, the connection must *contribute* to causing the injustice in some way. This is a good example of the conflation of the two different theories of responsibility that Gould observed. Young is probably thinking of the sense of responsibility to do things for or with respect to others when she thinks of the Danes, but that theory doesn't mesh with the primary emphasis on connections that produce injustice.

Danes, the prevailing neoliberal conventions and common sense tell these activists that they bear no responsibility for sweat-shops (and indeed, that there is no injustice in sweatshops to begin with!). Those conventions absolve them (and us) of responsibility by extolling markets as fair and efficient mechanisms for allocating benefits and burdens, by normalizing poverty-wage work in abhorrent conditions as consensual contractual labor that must (by definition) make workers better off, and by promoting an ethos of consumer sovereignty in which my individual consumption choices are constitutive of my own freedom and autonomy. Much more could be said about this “common sense,” but the point is to highlight that, at least on the dominant view, consumers *do not* have responsibility for sweatshops.

To me, what’s heroic about anti-sweatshop and other global justice activists is that they are taking responsibility for injustice even though they don’t, in either the philosophical sense or the prevailing conventional sense, have it. The very point of their activism is to educate people about the implications of their choices and habits, to try to change popular thinking so that consumers begin to regard themselves and others as responsible for the effects of their behavior. They are seeking to change conventions, not as a way of discharging responsibility but in hopes of pinning the blame where they believe it belongs. Their action is an example of *taking responsibility for injustice*, a particular kind of political action orientated toward the transformation of existing social conventions and the disruption of the reigning common sense, action always taken from a particular point of view, in light of the values, beliefs, and commitments of the activists themselves. I use the phrase *taking responsibility for injustice* to refer to collective political action undertaken to counteract injustice precisely in cases where people act not because they “have responsibility” (conventionally) to do so, but rather because they want to or feel they must. Some of these activists might articulate their sense of their need or desire to do something for others experiencing injustice in terms of responsibility; they might (also) be moved by anger, compassion, class solidarity, self-interest (in the case of sweatshop workers themselves), or a desire to alleviate suffering—to name just a few possibilities. We should not let this colloquial usage distract us: the language of responsibility is commonly used to express the feeling that one “must do something” about states of affairs that one finds intolerable. The key point is that none of these reasons why people might *take* responsibility for injustice has any necessary philosophical or conventional relation to whether they *have* it. My approach helps us to appreciate the meaning and significance of their action in an appropriately political way.

A skeptical reader has argued that, even assuming we know which conventions ought to change, and in what direction, the political interpretation of responsibility creates a dilemma: either there is no moral imperative to alter conventions, in which case there is no basis for cajoling others to change their views; or, there is a moral imperative to change them, in which case we need to know to whom this imperative applies and thus need a substantive account of responsibility of the type I have declined to provide.

The objection seems to assume that “moral imperatives” can only come from accounts of responsibility grounded in moral and empirical “facts.” The political interpretation, as we have seen, assumes that people adhere to different systems of values and beliefs and that they determine which conventions need to change, and how, with reference to those systems. Sincerely held values and beliefs certainly provide powerful guidance and motivation for how to behave: that there might be multiple and conflicting normative imperatives *among* value systems doesn’t constitute an interpretive or motivational problem *within* systems, which are sufficient to generate what philosophers like to call “action-guidance.” Furthermore, nothing about this view implies that there is no normative or empirical basis for the various accounts of responsibility to which people subscribe; on the contrary, their judgments about responsibility are informed by their interpretations of facts, by social conventions, and by their values and beliefs. Politically, their task is to get others to see things their way.

“But,” the skeptic might retort, “I concede that there may be *psychological* bases for cajoling people to change their views, but on this account there are no *moral* bases for doing so, no *moral* imperative for people to change their minds.” The skeptic has correctly understood my position: on the political interpretation, responsibility is not treated as a matter of moral or empirical fact; the political interpretation of responsibility is an *alternative to* the familiar philosophical interpretation. Perhaps the skeptic believes that using the word “moral” before terms like “bases” and “reasons” gives bases and reasons some magical force or power; if so, we simply disagree. But perhaps the skeptic instead worries that since, on my view, facts are interpreted and conventions socially constructed, they cannot supply adequate bases for “imperatives.” The assertions that facts are subject to interpretation and that social practices are constructed are hardly radical or unusual today, but the skeptic might fear that, given this contingency, there is no way to make rigorous or systematic arguments of the kind that might persuade others to change their views, to think and behave differently. This worry, I believe, is misplaced; in showing why, I shall draw on Ronald Dworkin’s idea of integrity in legal reasoning.⁷²

Dworkin understands legal reasoning as a social practice and argues that the interpretation of social practices and structures happens, as it were, from the inside. That is, interpretation involves a characterization of the practices themselves.⁷³ Dworkin introduces the idea of integrity⁷³ as a principle of legal interpretation that enjoins us to try to construe statutes and precedents (the practice itself) in the best possible light. He describes integrity as a virtue separate and distinct from justice and fairness, which can sometimes conflict; the principle of integrity guides our interpretation of the practice as a whole, enjoining us to

⁷²Ronald Dworkin, *Law’s Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986). I’m grateful to Bob Goodin for pointing out the relevance of this example for my argument.

⁷³*Ibid.*, pp. 63ff.

develop the best available account of past practice and to seek coherence and “sense” in it that can guide further interpretation.⁷⁴

Law as integrity is an interpretive approach; Dworkin characterizes it as “relentlessly interpretive,” by which he means that we must continually (re)interpret the law—of which integrity itself is already an interpretation—because, as an ongoing social practice, law is constantly evolving.⁷⁵ Of course, as Dworkin acknowledges, any conclusions we reach necessarily rely on the interpreter’s own opinion or judgment about what *is* the best interpretation, meaning that any conclusions will be controversial.⁷⁶ Dworkin’s heroic interpreter of the law, Hercules, avoids using words like “really” or “objective” to decorate his judgments and interpretations; these words don’t add anything much to the meaning or force of the judgments, and they invite (external) skepticism.⁷⁷ Besides, we have little choice but to rely on our best judgment when conflicting principles of substantive morality inform the various interpretations themselves.⁷⁸ Still, if someone objects to a specific interpretation, that person has not rejected the approach but rather joined it—that is, joined into the process of making sense of the law in its best light.⁷⁹

Despite some important differences between the social practices of legal reasoning and ascribing responsibility,⁸⁰ the analogues between Dworkin’s account and my own are striking. Responsibility, I have argued, is a social practice that demands interpretation. My political approach, like Dworkin’s account of integrity in the law, is both a characterization of the practice of responsibility and (when I engage in substantive critique of neoliberalism and sweatshop conditions) a specific substantive application of it. That people hold different substantive accounts of responsibility indicates that they disagree about the “facts” and conventions and in their judgments about responsibility; such disagreement poses no problem for the political interpretation; indeed, it is part of what the political interpretation is meant to explain. That people might characterize the practice of responsibility differently also doesn’t disprove the political interpretation of responsibility; it only shows that the nature of the practice (its aims and functioning) is itself contested.

Specifically, then, with respect to the objection: the principle and framework of integrity show that in the interpretation of a social practice like responsibility,

⁷⁴Ibid., pp. 138, *passim*.

⁷⁵Ibid., at p. 226.

⁷⁶Ibid., pp. 258–9.

⁷⁷Ibid., at p. 267; on skepticism, see pp. 77ff. and pp. 412ff. I have reservations about Dworkin’s model of “heroic” interpretation, but I can’t pursue them here.

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 260.

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 239.

⁸⁰The texts, statutes, and precedents that anchor the practice of legal reasoning are in some sense clearer and more definite than the interpretations and conventions central to the practice of responsibility. There might also be greater baseline consensus among participants in the former practice about the centrality of a principle like integrity to any coherent interpretation of it. Such differences, though significant, don’t invalidate the comparison.

people must rely on their (conflicting) values and beliefs and on their best interpretations of the facts and of social conventions in offering what they take to be the most appropriate accounts of responsibility. Such accounts can be coherent and principled and can provide strong normative and practical reasons for action. Far from undermining the possibility of argumentation and persuasion within the practice of responsibility, the political interpretation *enables* them by making explicit the relentlessly interpretive nature of our collective judgments about responsibility and clarifying how divergent substantive accounts of it might be effectively debated and contested publicly.

V. CONCLUSION

To recapitulate: I have tried to highlight the difficulties and limitations of interpreting responsibility philosophically, as a determination based on the moral and empirical “facts” of a particular case. These problems are especially acute in cases of systemic injustice, where empirical complexity, ethical ambiguity, and epistemological uncertainty make it difficult to determine what the “facts” are and require. I’ve proposed an alternative *political* interpretation of responsibility, one that conceptualizes responsibility as a practical judgment informed by values and beliefs, by interpretations of the “facts,” and by social conventions. These judgments can be altered: responsibility can be reshaped and redefined through coordinated public communicative engagement—through persuasive politics.

One final objection to consider comes from a friend who insisted (and I simplify) that my approach fails to take history properly into account, that it ignores the obvious historical responsibility of colonial powers for many enduring injustices in our world, such as poverty in the global South. The objection isn’t quite accurate: my position can accommodate blaming former colonial powers for poverty—or any other substantive position. It merely differentiates between the coherence of such a position and its social acceptance, which to me comes down to politics. What my friend really objects to, I think, is that the conventions model does not treat (her preferred account of) responsibility as a matter of moral and empirical fact. That, however, is not a failure of the model; *it is the key feature of the model*. Suppose, however, that my friend is right. Even if, as she and the skeptical reader hope, there is some correct view, some moral basis for determining responsibility, whether that view comes to be accepted and enacted depends on politics—on persuading enough people of its virtues to shift our conventions and change our present practices of blaming so that we can hold the “right” agents responsible. (To imagine otherwise is to imagine that morality is somehow self-enacting.) Put differently: my approach helps us to understand what must be done, politically, to establish proper (by our lights) responsibility for injustice.

The political interpretation preserves the link between agency, blame, and redress, but re-conceptualizes that link as a social choice or judgment; it calls for

the explicit theorization of the role that power plays in producing and sustaining different interpretations and conventions; and, it helps us to make sense of the work of activists who take responsibility for injustice. A further advantage of this approach, compared with Miller's, is that it allows for a coherent integration of backward- and forward-looking responsibility by clarifying that whether and how the past matters are questions subject to interpretation and debate. Another advantage, compared with Young's social connection model, is that my approach suggests a framework in which argumentation about responsibility can take place openly, showing how it might be practically possible to work out new understandings of responsibility.

The political interpretation suggests that the disarray into which our thinking about responsibility has fallen is not a result of some inherent indeterminacy brought on by globalization, nor is it an indication that we need to give up on blaming; rather, that disarray follows from our persistence in treating responsibility philosophically, as a factual determination. Interpreting responsibility politically reveals it as a different kind of problem altogether, one that requires us to develop new norms, set new expectations, and establish new practices. This approach provides an analytic framework in which to make sense of activism that seeks to effectuate such change; it situates normative and analytic arguments as elements in a broader effort to persuade people to think differently about responsibility. On this view, responsibility is something to be contested, an object of political struggle.