Iris Marion Young's "Social Connection Model" of Responsibility: Clarifying the Meaning of Connection

What responsibilities do individuals have for global injustices, such as sweatshop labour? Iris Marion Young sought to answer this question with her "social connection model" of responsibility. She argues that all individuals "connected" to structural injustice share political responsibility (as opposed to moral or legal responsibility) to collectively struggle against it. The theory was inspired by the anti-sweatshop movement, which recognised that consumers felt responsible for the working conditions of distant garment workers, even though they do nothing morally wrong when purchasing clothes. The social connection model is intuitively appealing and popular because it can explain why there is a responsibility for structural injustices like sweatshop labour, which falls short of guilt and blame, and takes structure seriously. However, Young left several gaps in the theory. One such gap is that she does not explain what she means by "connection" to structural injustice. She does not explicitly tell us what *kind* of connection to structural injustice generates political responsibility for it.

Three potential definitions of connection arise in Young's work – what I call existential, dependent and causal connection – but Young does not unpack or defend any version in detail. In this paper, I aim to clarify these different meanings of connection and assess their plausibility within Young's own framework. I argue that existential connection, while serving as inspiration for the "social connection model," does not fit the framework in which *social connections* give rise to responsibility for injustice and individuals reproduce structural injustice through their *actions*. I claim that dependent connection is problematic because if *all* agents bear responsibility for structural injustice, including the victims, then it is not only those who are dependent on structural injustice that bear political responsibility for it. I argue that causal connection is problematic because individuals cannot be said to *cause* structural injustice, if we take the legal and common-sense interpretation of causation to mean the human intervention that 'makes a

difference' to cause a particular effect. The most appropriate and consistent way to understand connection to structural injustice is that individuals *reproduce the background conditions in which they act*. Young's conception of *reproduction* of background conditions is thus elaborated and defended as the relevant form of connection that generates political responsibility. This is not intended as the last word on the subject, because it is possible that there are other forms of connection that generate political responsibility that Young has not thought of. For the purposes of this paper I restrict the discussion to an immanent critique.

1. Responsibility for Structural Injustice

Young argues that when we ordinarily think about responsibility we assume a "liability model". On this model, specific individuals or collectivities are identified as legally or morally responsible for an isolated instance of wrongdoing. The agent must have directly caused the harm with intent and knowledge.[i] The liability model is backward-looking and isolating, seeking to attribute blame or liability to particular agents for harm that has already occurred. Young claims that this cannot help us attribute responsibility for structural injustice, because structural injustice is not an isolated instance of wrongdoing, perpetrated by particular agents. For Young, structural injustice is distinct from intentional individual and institutional wrongdoing.[ii] It is the outcome of multiple actions and processes, enacted by diverse agents, occurring at different times in different places, all for the most part acting within accepted rules and norms. Structural injustice is the unintended, cumulative result of everyday, accepted behaviour.[iii]

Young develops the social connection model to supplement the liability model in order to describe individuals' responsibility for structural injustice. On the social connection model, individuals do not have to directly cause a particular harm with intent and knowledge, or bear legal liability for the harm caused; *mere connection* to structural injustice generates a non-blameworthy, shared and forward-looking political responsibility to collectively undermine the injustice. The social connection model generates a different *kind* of responsibility to the liability

model. It is different to moral responsibility, which would blame individuals for their causal contribution to injustice. It is also different to remedial responsibility, which would prompt individuals to compensate those who are harmed by the structures. Instead, political responsibility is a responsibility without guilt to collectively transform the background structural injustice within which we live our lives.[iv] The question is *what kind of connection* to structural injustice generates political responsibility?

2. Existential Connection

The social connection model is inspired by three existential theories of responsibility, from Hannah Arendt, Hans Jonas and Emmanuel Levinas.[v] It is helpful, therefore, to briefly show how and why these theories have influenced the model.[vi]

Firstly, Young's distinction between legal and moral responsibility (the liability model) and political responsibility (the social connection model) derives from Hannah Arendt's work on responsibility for Nazi crimes.[vii] For Arendt there are important practical reasons for distinguishing political responsibility from guilt. Arguing that all German citizens of the time were morally responsible for the Nazis' crimes was harmful because it obscured where guilt truly lies – with the people who actually committed immoral and illegal acts. Extending the concept of moral responsibility to all Germans undermines its practical strength and obfuscates legal process. Arendt argued that ordinary German citizens were not morally responsible, but they bore political responsibility for the crimes, because citizens had failed to maintain the public-political world for which they were all collectively responsible. On Arendt's theory, one bears political responsibility by virtue of existence within a political community.

Secondly, Hans Jonas's theory of responsibility was also influential on Young.[viii] Jonas argues that ethics has been thrown into disarray by the onset of the technological age, and that the main ethical imperative, which we have by virtue of our existence within this age, is to take responsibility for the preservation of humankind. Jonas argues that in traditional ethics only the

proximate effects of action in time and space are of ethical concern. Technology, however, has rendered this implausible – 'The containment of nearness and contemporaneity is gone, swept away by the spatial spread and time span of the cause-effect trains which technological practice sets afoot, even when undertaken for proximate ends'. [ix] Traditional ethics was also anthropocentric and treated the non-human earth as ethically neutral. However, technology is now so powerful that nature is no longer invulnerable. Instead, human projects are harming nature irreparably and in unknowable ways. And what is especially troubling is their cumulative effect.[x] The new nature of our relationship to technology and its effects on the natural world also changes the nature of knowledge in relation to ethics. Traditionally, 'ordinary intelligence' could determine whether or not an act was unethical. Now we need to know the effects of our actions and yet we cannot know all the effects of our actions: 'The gap between the ability to foretell and the power to act creates a novel moral problem'.[xi] These changes in the relationship between humankind and the natural world mean that ethics must be based on a new imperative: the imperative of responsibility. Young undoubtedly is influenced by these insights and the call to develop a new ethics for our peculiar age. Three Jonasian themes consistently recur in her treatment of the social connection model: the cumulative effect of millions of distinct actions by particular individuals, the unknowableness of the harm being caused, and the sweeping away of the conditions of containment and proximity for ethics.

Thirdly, Young is inspired by the idea that 'responsibility is prior to and ground for freedom', which is central to Levinasian ethics.[xii] For Levinas, the self's responsibility for the Other exists prior to any actual interaction with another; we are always already responsible. As Michael Morgan puts it, 'in the everyday, I am always many things in addition to responsible at any given moment. But this is what I am primordially and fundamentally, in a sense before I am anything else. Hence, ethics comes first'.[xiii] Levinas's theory of "ethics as first philosophy" refers to this idea that an individual is responsible for the Other prior to anything else.[xiv] The self's responsibility for the Other is transcendent; it exists prior to the self's acts or the self's being.

For Levinas, in our present interactions we are faced with a new problem – how to balance this over-riding, existential, radical responsibility for the Other with the demands of the present. It is at this point that questions of social justice emerge. Young interprets Levinas's theory of responsibility as explaining the tension between the responsibilities we have for proximate others – the person in front of us, such as the student, the child or the friend – and the responsibility we have to all the others to whom we are connected through unjust structures – our responsibility for justice.[xv] She writes, 'As I read Levinas, this is an irreducible, even tragic, tension in moral life. We must both pay attention to justice and pay attention to the immediate and potentially infinite claims of each individual person'.[xvi] This tension, for Young, signifies the irreducibility of our interactional and our structural responsibilities; that is between the responsibilities to the proximate other and our responsibilities for structural injustice.

Levinas, Arendt and Jonas argue that *simply by existing we can have responsibilities towards others*. Young has taken inspiration from these theories because, like her, they attempt to think about a different kind of responsibility to the traditional theories of legal and moral responsibility. These theories also sever the link between responsibility and freedom. For these thinkers, even if individuals are not free to act as they wish, they still bear responsibilities toward others by virtue of existence, membership in a political community, or because of the nature of the technological age. One of the features of structural injustice, on Young's view, is that it is "objectively constraining".[xvii] We experience the material, institutional and social background conditions in which we live as imposing constraints on our options for action. Social structures also place individuals and groups in different *positions*, generating different kinds and ranges of options for action.[xviii] Despite these constraints and the fact that agents are placed in different social positions, thus enabling and constraining their actions in different ways and to different degrees, they can still bear some sort of responsibility for structural injustice. There may be ways in which individuals bear responsibility for structural injustice despite the fact that it is constraining.

Responsibility, then, can exist prior to (absolute) freedom, or perhaps more accurately, despite structural constraints.

However, there are two reasons why Young's social connection model is not an existential theory of responsibility. Firstly, Young rejects "cosmopolitan-utilitarian" theories of justice, which argue that we have the same duties towards all people based on our common humanity, because 'I believe that some account needs to be offered of the nature of social relationships that ground claims that people has obligations of justice to one another. It is not enough to say that the others are human'.[xix] Young argues that the need for systems of justice is generated by social connections. She sees this as 'the great insight of social contract theory' – that social connections give rise to inequalities in power, the potential for conflict, exploitation and domination, thus generating the need for social institutions and principles of justice.[xx] On the existential accounts, there is no link between social connection and responsibility for justice. For Levinas, the ethical relationship to the Other already exists prior to any interaction and it is a direct, not a mediated, responsibility. For Jonas, existence in the technological age has generated the imperative of responsibility, not social connections. For Arendt, membership in a political community, rather than connections to others, is what generates political responsibility. Young thinks Arendt has got it 'backwards'; social connections give rise to the need for political institutions, which are contingent.[xxi]

Secondly, Young rejects Arendt's existential approach on the grounds that, 'It is a mystification to say that people bear political responsibility simply because they are members of a political community, and not because of anything at all that they have done or not done'.[xxii] Young wants to ground political responsibility on something more than existence or membership in a political community – on action or inaction. This makes sense within Young's theory because another feature of structural injustice is that it is "reproduced through individuals' actions."[xxiii] She claims that 'social structure only exists in the action and interaction of persons; it

exists not as a state, but as a process.'[xxiv] Young's chosen example of global structural injustice is sweatshop labour.[xxv] Sweatshop labour is continuously *reproduced* due to a range of actions (and inactions) by many agents; by consumers continually demanding new clothes, transnational clothing companies profiting and expanding, governments failing to implement labour standards, and workers in Third World countries choosing these jobs because of the constant need for employment. It is not existence or membership in a political community that grounds individuals' political responsibility for sweatshop labour, but the fact that their *actions reproduce* it. We will return to this point later.

3. Dependent Connection

The second form of connection that Young suggests could ground political responsibility is dependent connection. This argument is inspired by Onora O'Neill's theory of the 'scope of ethical consideration'. Young interprets O'Neill's argument as follows: we have obligations towards others 'to the extent that we *depend* on them, as demonstrated by how we assume they are acting in specific ways as the basis of our actions'.[xxvi] Because we are dependent upon others, these others come within our scope of ethical consideration. Young applies this idea to sweatshop labour:

> By the simple act of buying a shirt I presuppose the actions of all those people who are involved in growing the cotton, making the cloth, gathering the cutters and sewers to turn it into garments, the cutters and sewers themselves, and all the agents involved in shipping the garments and making them easily available to me… When I look for less expensive shirts, I presuppose all those practices of pressure and competition that minimize labour costs, as well as those that purportedly increase productivity of production and distribution.[xxvii]

When applied to the specific case of sweatshop labour, this approach to connection seems somewhat convincing; because I depend on the labour of all these people, and on

structural practices like economic competitiveness, in order to buy a shirt, all these people objectively come into my scope of ethical consideration. There are three immediate objections to the dependency conception of connection, however. Firstly, consider on this view the number of people that come into my scope of ethical consideration in order to do anything in the contemporary world. Take a simple example, like my coming to the library today to research. Not only are all the people who were part of the process of creating my clothing and getting it to the shops where I purchased it involved (and consider that each item of clothing comes from a different source, so each garment – jeans, shoes, coat etc. – will involve a completely different set of people), but I also rely on numerous other processes. The fruit and cereal I have eaten for breakfast have been grown, picked, processed, distributed etc. by countless individuals in different countries. The water I drank from the tap has been cleaned and purified by processes involving not just those who do the filtration, but by the people who built the equipment to do that, the administrators who keep these sites running, the sewer operators etc. All of this is before I get on the bus, where I am dependent not only on the bus driver, but the people who made the bus itself – the seats, the fabric on the seats, the engine, the bodywork etc.; not to mention those involved in the oil extraction process, those who convert it into petrol for the bus and those who distribute the petrol. I arrive at the library, which is staffed by many people, air-conditioned by machines developed and built by other individuals, the electricity used is generated and distributed by countless numbers of people, and my computer on which I am typing has had its raw materials, probably, dug from a mine in Africa and shipped to China where it is converted into usable materials, other computer parts built by others, the product put together by many people in a factory chain, the design and internal systems decided upon by whole other teams of people in another country.

And so, what looks like a simple act – my going to the library to research – which seems to be dependent only upon my own admirable self-discipline, turns out to be dependent on potentially tens of thousands of other acts by other people. Some of their acts will have

contributed more or less, e.g. the bus driver's driving the bus may be more significant than the computer designer's labour. While it is impossible to determine which acts counted the most in this process, we can ask, what counts as enough of a contribution to generate a duty of justice towards those others? Every mundane and negligible thing that an individual does everyday, from turning on the light to drinking water, to watching TV or using a computer, is dependent on the efforts of thousands of other people. And some of their contributions will be intangible or negligible and yet still contribute to my ability to turn on the light or use a computer. So where does the scope of ethical consideration actually begin and end on this view? In the global economy we have no idea who the agents are upon whom we depend. Young argues that these 'presuppositions of activity do not need to be present to an agent's consciousness in order to hold as assumptions. These relationships are objective'.[xxviii] But even objectively, how do we know what these relationships are?

The second objection is that the paradigm examples of dependents in ethical debates are children, the severely disabled and the severely mentally impaired.[xxix] These persons depend upon others for their survival, and yet we ordinarily exempt them from moral responsibilities on the assumption that they do not have the capacity to make informed beliefs about the world and to cohere their actions to those beliefs, and thus do not have the capacity to bear moral responsibility. Presumably they also do not have the capacity to take up political responsibility, which presupposes at least the ability to recognise structural injustice and to participate in collective political action. If the paradigm examples of dependency do not generate responsibilities on the part of the dependent, why would dependency create responsibilities in other cases?

Thirdly, while sweatshop labour seems to be a clear-cut case of dependency, it is not actually so straightforward. As Young argues, sweatshop workers do not necessarily want consumers to boycott the goods they produce.[xxx] This is because they are dependent upon

demand for those goods in order to have jobs. The relationship is, therefore, not one-way. Instead it seems to be a case of mutual dependency. How does this affect the theory of dependent connection? Does it mean that the sweatshop workers bear responsibilities towards consumers because they are dependent upon them?

One way of addressing all three of these objections is to argue that it is not mere dependency on others that generates political responsibility, but *dependency on their exploitation*. My being able to purchase cheap clothing does not signal merely that I am dependent on sweatshop labourers, but that I am dependent upon them being exploited. Young does not discuss her conception of exploitation in her work on responsibility for justice, but she does discuss it in *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. There she argues that exploitation is the forced transfer of energies from groups positioned as socially inferior to groups positioned as socially superior.[xxxi] This describes transfers not only along the lines of class, but also gender and race. Exploitation is an injustice, for Young, because it inhibits the self-development of the exploited, whose time, energy and resources are siphoned off to promote, enable and serve the exploiters.[xxxii] Exploitation leads to the perpetuation of unjust distributions of resources but also to status inequality. We could argue that on the social connection model of responsibility, if I am connected to a structural injustice by virtue of being dependent on the exploitation of less privileged social groups, I bear political responsibility for this injustice. I am not blameworthy, as I am not directly causing the exploitation, I may not know I am dependent on it, and I might have no choice but to participate in it because I am objectively constrained by the structures myself. Yet the fact of my dependency on the exploitation of others generates political responsibility to struggle against it.

This addresses all three objections. Firstly, it distinguishes between those we are dependent upon in a relevant way to generate political responsibility – those who are exploited, e.g. sweatshop labourers – and those who are not, e.g. computer designers. Secondly, sweatshop

labourers may be dependent on affluent consumers for their jobs, but they are not dependent on the exploitation of consumers, thus they do not bear the same responsibilities towards them. Thirdly, this also explains why the paradigm examples of dependents – children and the severely mentally impaired – do not bear these responsibilities; they are not dependent on the *exploitation* of their carers. This seems like a neat solution, however, it is still problematic.

There is a further objection against this approach: the falling-through-the-gaps objection. I may be dependent upon the exploitation of sweatshop labourers for my clothing, but am I dependent upon all those suffering from structural injustice? Consider the world's poorest people – the "bottom billion" – who make little or no contribution to the global economy, living subsistence lives. If nobody is dependent upon them, does nobody have moral or political responsibilities towards them on the social connection model of responsibility? This is why some argue that it preferable to exploit people than to neglect them.[xxxiii]

Onora O'Neill's view of connection is more expansive than Young's. She argues that if we act based on mere assumptions about others' behaviour then those others come into our scope of ethical consideration. For instance, citizens of affluent countries assume that 'poor and distant foreigners will not attack or be permitted to settle in their part of the world, and more generally that outsiders will not be permitted to undercut local wages'.[xxxiv] For O'Neill, the fact that the affluent make these assumptions about the behaviour of the poor means that these people come within their scope of ethical consideration. This is still problematic when we consider the "bottom billion", however, since they are not the ones with the resources to emigrate. O'Neill argues further, however, that all that matters is the *possibility* of connection to others. If, for instance, there is an isolated remote tribe that can be contacted even if no interactivity takes place, these people come into the scope of ethical consideration for those who could contact them, as they act based on assumptions about those tribes people.[xxxv] On O'Neill's very weak view of connection then, which requires only the possibility of connection or

assumption about the activities of others, presumably there are no people on earth who fall without the scope of ethical consideration of at least some others.

We could tie political responsibility to O'Neill's weaker or more expansive view, then, but this reminds us of the objection to the existential models, where we found that Young thinks duties of justice arise through social connections, not the possibility of connection. An alternative is to retain the concept of actual dependency and expand it to all forms of oppression. Exploitation is one form of oppression for Young; the others are marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence, and there may be other forms of oppression within the international or global spheres.[xxxvi] The argument could extend that if I am dependent on the *oppression* of others, in the other forms of oppression, I would bear political responsibility to struggle against that oppression. For instance, the "bottom billion" are experiencing marginalisation from the global economy and as O'Neill points out, we depend on their marginalisation insofar as it allows us to assume they will not attack, move to affluent countries, or undercut our jobs. Our dependency on their marginalisation generates our political responsibility for this injustice.

Two problems remain with the dependency conception of connection, however. Firstly, this discussion revolves around responsibility towards others; responsibility of consumers to garment workers, responsibility of the affluent to the economically marginalised. Political responsibility, however, is a responsibility towards structures. It is a responsibility to ensure that the structures in which we act are just, not a direct responsibility for the well-being of particular others.

Secondly, recall that *all* individuals connected to structural injustice are politically responsible for it. This undermines the claim that it is dependency on the oppression of others that is the relevant form of connection, because the oppressed are not dependent on their own oppression, yet they still bear political responsibility for it. Carol Gould objects that this aspect

of Young's theory verges on victim-blaming. Absolving the victims of any responsibility for the structures is not to deny their agency, 'Indeed, it is because of our recognition of the importance of their agency that normatively it is necessary to rectify these exploitative systems'.[xxxvii] Young responds successfully to the victim-blaming objection. She argues that on the liability model of responsibility, arguing that the victims bear responsibility for their plight would be victim-blaming and would absolve the other participants in the processes, because it isolates specific agents for blame or liability.[xxxviii] On the social connection model, however, there is no blame. Political responsibility is not like moral or legal responsibility; it does not entail blame. Instead, the victims along with all the other participants in the processes 'can be called to a responsibility they share with others in the structures to engage in actions directed at transforming the structures'.[xxxix] Political responsibility is non-blameworthy and non-isolating; it is shared and distributed among all those who are implicated in the processes. In the case of global labour injustice, Young argues that sweatshop workers can be expected to bear some responsibility because they have the greatest interest in combating the injustice.[xl] Garment workers can, and do, collectively organise to demand better pay and working conditions.[xli]

Young includes the victims of structural injustice within the remit of political responsibility, I assume, in order to recognise their agency and their potential to collectively rise up and challenge structural injustice. Adopting the dependency conception of connection moves the theory back to the familiar way of thinking about global injustice; that the rich have obligations towards the poor. This does not spell the end for the concept of dependency on oppression as relevant to the social connection model, but it does change the way in which it is relevant. Young argues that agents bear different *degrees* of political responsibility depending on their social position.[xlii] Agents with power, privilege, interest or collective ability in relation to a particular structural injustice ought to focus their attention there.[xliii] It is the exploited who have most interest in overcoming their exploitation. But it is those who are dependent on the exploitation who are in a privileged relationship in relation to it, and this generates a higher

degree of political responsibility. The dependents, in the sweatshop labour case consumers, also potentially have the collective ability to organise to challenge exploitative working conditions. If, then, dependent connection generates a different degree of political responsibility, but not the political responsibility itself, what form of connection does generate the responsibility in the first place?

4. Causal Connection

Young invokes causal connection throughout her work on the social connection model, and it seems to be her preferred interpretation. She writes, 'All the persons who participate by their actions in the ongoing schemes of cooperation that constitute these structures are responsible for them, in the sense that *they are part of the process that causes them*'.[xliv] She argues that the social connection model of responsibility shares with the liability model 'a reference to the causes of wrongs – here in the form of structural processes that produce injustice'.[xlv] Young interchangeably uses the words participation[xlvi] and contribution[xlvii], to refer to individuals' causal connections to structural processes. Young, however, does not elaborate on why she thinks causation is the normatively significant factor in the generation of political responsibility.

It is not straightforward to argue that individuals are *causing* structural injustices, such as sweatshop labour. It depends on the definition of causation. Indeed as Hart and Honoré point out, causation refers to a family of concepts.[xlviii] When different people talk about causation, they mean different things. The scientist tries to understand normal occurrences, such as the growth of plants or the movement of the tides, and regards all the necessary factors for these phenomena to occur as causes; when the lawyer, the historian or the layperson asks about the cause of something, however, they are interested in a departure from the norm.[xlix] The common-sense understanding of causation assumes that left alone objects would persist in a certain state; the human intervention that 'makes the difference' is the 'cause' of any particular 'effect'.[l] In

ordinary usage, a cause 'is a *difference* from the normal course which accounts for the difference in outcome'.[li]

In common-sense understandings of causation, then, there is a distinction between 'mere conditions' and 'causes'.[lii] When looking for the cause of a fire, the presence of oxygen in the air or the dryness of the building will be considered as mere conditions; these factors would be present whether accidents occur or not, and so we reject them as the cause of the accident.[liii] It is the dropping of a lit cigarette that will be considered the 'cause' of the fire.

This is the distinction between *explanatory* causal factors and *attributive* causal factors.[liv] Even if a causal factor is necessary to *explain* a phenomenon (e.g. oxygen), it does not follow that we can *attribute* causal responsibility to the presence of oxygen. When assigning moral or criminal responsibility we think that further conditions need to be met for a cause to be attributive rather than merely explanatory. We cite the cause of the fire as the dropping of the lit cigarette because the agent displayed culpable negligence – that is the attributive cause because it was *faulty*. This implies that the agent had some control over this behaviour. By contrast, the presence of oxygen and the dryness of the building are explanatory causal factors or mere conditions.

This understanding of causation accords with the liability model of responsibility in which we seek, as does the lawyer and the layperson, the cause of the deviation from the norm. We assign moral or criminal responsibility to the agent who 'directly caused' this deviation, and who did so with voluntariness and knowledge of what they were doing.[lv] In the cases of moral and criminal responsibility we are interested in whether or not an agent's controllable act 'made the difference' against a normal set of background conditions.

The social connection model of responsibility, by contrast, relates to the 'mere conditions' – the background conditions that constitute structural injustice. Young writes,

> a model of responsibility derived from understanding the mediated connection that agents have to structural injustices does not evaluate the harm that deviates from the

normal and the acceptable; rather, it often brings into question precisely the background conditions that ascriptions of blame or fault assume as normal.[lvi]

The social connection model, then, does not seek the attributive cause of a particular effect; rather it seeks to assign responsibility to all agents involved in creating the background conditions. Young seems to be arguing that if human agency is involved in creating any background conditions then those human agents are politically responsible. The kind (intentional/unintentional, voluntary/nonvoluntary) and degree of causal contribution does not make any difference; all causal contributions are equivalent when it comes to assigning political responsibility for causing background conditions. No further conditions need to be met. However, if on common-sense understandings of causation, the 'cause' is understood as the 'attributive cause', rather than the 'explanatory causes', it is not clear that individual consumers are 'causing' sweatshop labour. Their individual acts are not equivalent to the dropping of a lit cigarette; they are more akin to the oxygen or dryness of the building. It goes against the grain of common-sense understandings of causation to hold individuals responsible for contributing to background conditions, rather than causing an identifiable deviation from the norm.

Therefore, arguing that individuals are 'causally' connected to sweatshop labour, and that this is what generates their political responsibility, is more problematic than it appears. Young herself points out that many people found the claims of the anti-sweatshop movement 'absurd' because ordinary individuals, or even bulk buyers of clothing like universities, had no control over conditions in garment factories.[lvii] In other words, even if consuming the clothing was an explanatory causal factor in perpetuating sweatshop labour, a common viewpoint was that it did not constitute an attributive cause because buyers have no control over it.

But Young wants to make a different claim anyway; she claims that individual agents are not morally or legally responsible for sweatshop labour, but they bear political responsibility for the reproduction of the background conditions. She writes, 'Having understood that structural

processes cause some injustices, those participating in the production and reproduction of the structures should recognize that their actions contribute along with those of others to this injustice, and take responsibility for altering the processes to avoid or reduce injustice.'[lviii] What Young is getting at, then, is that when the 'explanatory causal factors' are human-made, that we need to take political responsibility for them. This is a causal claim, in a sense, but not one that coheres with the common-sense understanding of causation. It requires us to bring the conditions in which harm can occur into the remit of what we can be considered responsible for. Young writes, 'Taking political responsibility thus often entails bringing what is normal and acceptable into question, to the extent that it produces or reproduces injustice.'[lix] So what does it mean to reproduce injustice?

5. Reproduction of Structural Injustice

Young describes social structures as 'the accumulated outcomes of the actions of masses of individuals enacting their own projects, often uncoordinated with many others. The combination of actions affects the conditions of the actions of others, often producing outcomes not intended by any of the participating agents.'[lx] The actions of millions of humans going about their daily lives produce unjust outcomes that are continuously reproduced through habitual actions. Young does not want to blame individuals for the production of the unjust structures in the first place because this was not intentional – 'sometimes these unintended outcomes even run counter to the intentions of most of the actors.'[lxi] Also the structures often preceded the birth of many participants and will outlast their death – 'Most of the conditions under which people act are socio-historical: they are the products of previous actions, usually products of many coordinated and uncoordinated but mutually influencing actions.'[lxii] And, as already discussed, actors are themselves constrained by the structures, to different degrees depending on social position.

Nevertheless, one of the constitutive features of structural injustice is that it is *reproduced through individuals' actions*. What does it mean to *reproduce* structural injustice rather than to *cause* or produce it? Young draws on the sociologists Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu for some preliminary answers.

As Young understands Giddens' theory of "structuration": 'when individuals act, they are doing two things at once: (1) They are trying to bring about a state of affairs that they intend, and (2) they are reproducing the structural properties, the positional relations of rules and resources, on which they draw for these actions.'[lxiii] For Giddens, the reproduction of structure is the unintended consequence of an individual's action, e.g. when I speak English I unintentionally 'contribute to the reproduction of the English language as a whole.'[lxiv] The English language already exists, but when I use it I contribute to its reproduction. Similarly, when I go to a high-street shop, the structural injustice of sweatshop labour already exists, but when I purchase clothes I reproduce the practice. Structures are the preconditions for our actions, but we also reproduce unjust structures when we act.

Of course, speaking English and participating in sweatshop labour are different in the sense that the latter is an injustice, and it might be objected that individuals could choose to opt out of this practice by purchasing only fair-trade or second-hand clothing, or not shopping at all. This underestimates, however, the degree to which sweatshop labour is *structural*. Workers in Third World countries 'stand in a certain class position in relation to the small entrepreneurs who employ them.'[lxv] The factory owners and managers are situated in relation to the multinational clothing companies that contract them to produce their products. The MNCs are locked into competition with each other in the competitive global garment industry. Consumers are situated in relation to the fashion industry that manufactures the "need" for new clothes. The desire for up-to-date clothes becomes internalized and reproduced through habitual behaviour, or the "habitus." [lxvi] These structural forces of production and consumption in the global capitalist

economy are not going to be overcome by altering individuals' consumer choices. The underlying economic relationships and power relations will continue to exist. Moreover, these structural processes are taken for granted by the majority of the participants. Bourdieu describes this as "doxa"– the arbitrary social world that we perceive as natural:

> When, owing to the quasi-perfect fit between the objective structures and the internalized structures which results from the logic of simple reproduction, the established cosmological and political order is perceived not as arbitrary, i.e. as one possible order among others, but as a self-evident and natural order which goes without saying and therefore goes unquestioned, the agents' aspirations have the same limits as the objective conditions of which they are the product.[lxvii]

This structure of the global garment industry functions as the oxygen and dryness in the fire example. It creates the conditions that enable harm to particular workers in particular factories to occur. But the difference is that this structure is not a natural physical fact, it is human-made. Young is asking us to bring these human-made conditions out of the sphere of what is taken for granted and into the realm of conscious awareness. When we are conscious that these conditions are human-made and continually reproduced through our actions, we can work together towards changing them. We should ask 'what actions would need to be taken by a self-conscious collective in order to change these processes.'[lxviii]

The concept of political responsibility, which is generated through the reproduction of unjust social structures, is not designed to usurp or displace the liability model of responsibility. As Young argues, the injustice of sweatshop labour should be analysed on 'two levels.'[lxix] On the liability model, we find the factory managers and owners morally or criminally responsible for particular violations of labour laws or human rights violations.[lxx] On the social connection model, we find all agents who reproduce the practice through their actions politically responsible to change the structures. They are not blameworthy or liable for things that have happened in

the past (the production of the structures in the first place). Instead they share a forward-looking responsibility to engage in collective action to change the practices.

It could be objected that we do not need to engage in these philosophical gymnastics trying to define structural injustice and individuals' responsibilities in relation to it. It could be argued that individuals who contribute to the background conditions are, in fact, causally and morally responsible on the liability model. Derek Parfit argues that even though our individual acts have imperceptible effects on others, some of our acts are wrong because *together* they make large numbers of people worse off.[lxxi] This can explain why *we think* our actions in the global economy are not causally and morally significant (because the effects are trivial or imperceptible) but why this is a mistaken attitude.[lxxii] Parfit uses the example of the Harmless Torturers: a thousand torturers flick a switch that inflicts an imperceptible amount of pain on a thousand victims. At the start of each day the victims are suffering mild pain, but by the end of the day, when each torturer has flicked the switch, they are suffering severe pain.[lxxiii] He writes,

> It is not enough to ask, 'Will my act harm other people?' Even if the answer is No, my act may still be wrong because of its effects. The effects that it will have when it is considered on its own may not be its only relevant effects. I should ask, 'Will my act be one of a set of acts that will *together* harm other people?' The answer may be Yes. And the harm to others may be great. If this is so, I may be acting *very* wrongly, like the Harmless Torturers.[lxxiv]

This argument, however, cannot generalize to global structural injustices like sweatshop labour, for three reasons. Firstly, in the Harmless Torturers case, even though the harm caused by each torturer is imperceptible, the harm is direct. There is a direct linear connection between the torturer's act and the pain suffered by the victim. In structural injustice there is no such linear causal connection. Global supply chains are extremely complex; the harm is brought about by the interactions and behaviour of multiple agents of different kinds, doing different things and

with different degrees of power. Young herself points out this difference as a reason for needing the social connection model of responsibility: 'I have developed a social connection model of responsibility as distinct from responsibility as liability precisely because there are good reasons to distinguish such direct connections from more mediated connections'.[lxxv]

Secondly, the acts of consumers do not add up to an aggregate harm because the acts of *intermediary agents* change the nature of the harm and could alleviate it. For instance, the world's major clothing companies could collectively decide to pay garment workers a global minimum wage and to implement legally binding safety agreements.[lxxvi] In the Harmless Torturers case, the individuals themselves must stop flicking the switch. In the case of sweatshop labour, if consumers collectively boycott then corporations could move their production or output elsewhere and the practice would continue. The problems do not have the same structure because of the role of intermediary agents.

A third reason why the Harmless Torturers example is dis-analogous with global structural injustice is that there are no clear-cut implications as to what consumers should do. In the Harmless Torturers example, there is a clear implication – the torturers should not flick the switch and if they do they are doing something wrong. But there is not an analogous act for consumers. Consumers could ask themselves when purchasing cheap clothing, "Will my act be one of a set of acts that together harm other people?" And the answer may be yes, but the solution may not be to not buy the clothing. As Young points out, sweatshop workers do not want consumer boycotts because they will lose their jobs. Instead the appropriate response will be something like to encourage other consumers to complain to, or publically shame, the company into paying the garment workers better wages and providing safer working conditions. This is less of a "do or don't situation", and more of an "act in a certain way" situation – act in a politically savvy way that involves gathering knowledge about the victims' needs and encouraging others to act on it. This implies using one's discretion, on-going commitment, and looking for

forward-looking solutions. This is Young's point – being politically responsible for structural injustice is an on-going way of being, not a question of whether each particular act one does is "right" or "wrong" in and of itself, because in reality there is no easy or obvious answer to whether or not many of our everyday acts are "right" or "wrong" in the current context.

Thus, Parfit's argument from imperceptible difference, where refraining from doing the act in question will make a difference either over time or in conjunction with others, is not applicable in relation to structural injustice. This is because there is no direct connection between the consumer's act and sweatshop labour, there are intermediary agents who could intervene and make a difference in the processes, and there are no clear-cut implications as to what consumers ought to do. My suggestion, then, is that the liability model, broadly conceived, cannot help us understand responsibility for structural injustice. Instead, on Young's model, we find a way of conceptualising responsibility for background conditions that normally escape our assessment of 'causation' and moral or legal responsibility.

The concept of political responsibility classifies a way of relating to structural injustice, which is to reproduce unjust background conditions through acceptable actions. An individual may not contribute in any significant way to the background structure, but simply by acting within it, one is reproducing those structures. This generates a political responsibility to struggle against these unjust structures, which recognises that *all* agents connected to structural injustice, in the sense that they reproduce the injustice through their actions, share a forward-looking responsibility to work together solidaristically to try to change the structures.

6. Conclusion

I have suggested that we should conceive of connection to structural injustice as *the reproduction of unjust structures through individuals' actions*. Perhaps there are other contenders for defining the kind of connection to structural injustice that generates political responsibility for it, but within Young's framework, this is the most plausible interpretation. It fits better than

existential connection, which cannot accommodate Young's claim that responsibilities for justice arise through social connections and depend on individuals' actions. It avoids the problem with dependent connection, which excludes the victims of structural injustice, whom Young explicitly wants to include. It also bypasses the problem that the common-sense conception of causation seeks an attributive cause for injustice, rather than explanatory causes.

One objection is how do we know where do our political responsibilities begin and end on this interpretation? I suggest that in the contemporary world our political responsibility is limitless. As Young puts it, 'It is nearly impossible in the contemporary world for a person to remove herself from implication through her actions in structures that produce injustice.'[lxxvii] Hans Jonas argued that we need to think of ethics in terms of responsibility specifically in this age because of humankind's newfound ability to affect the natural world in irreversible ways due to advances in technology and rapid industrialisation. But it is not only the rise of technology and industry and their effects on the environment that we need to be concerned about. The highly interdependent, globalised economy means that cumulative human activities can impact millions of geographically dispersed people in deeply harmful ways by creating unjust structures (such as sweatshop labour). It is because of these new conditions that the need for political responsibility arises – the imperative to "act responsibly" to minimise the reproduction of unjust structures and to try to act with others to contribute to the improvement of structures. This necessity to pay attention to the global background conditions in which we act is a result of the contemporary conditions of advanced capitalism; if we continued to live in self-sustaining, self-contained political and economic communities with minimal environmental impact, it would not be necessary, or at least the scope would be limited. Political responsibility is a burden placed on every individual by virtue of acting in these new conditions, because we cannot help but reproduce structural injustice.

[i] Young recognises that legal liability does not necessarily depend on causation of harm with intent and knowledge. Negligence can ground legal responsibility in the absence of intent or knowledge, and strict liability can ground legal responsibility when the harm was caused by another agent. Young groups all of these forms of responsibility together, however, on the grounds that they are backward-looking and isolating. Iris Marion Young, "Responsibility and Global Labor Justice," *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 12, no. 4 (2004): 368; Iris Marion Young, "Responsibility and Global Justice: A Social Connection Model," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 23, no. 1 (2006): 116; Iris Marion Young, *Responsibility for Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 98.

[ii] Young, *Responsibility for Justice*: 45.

[iii] Young, *Responsibility for Justice*: 52.

[iv] The focus of this paper is possible definitions of connection in the social connection model, rather than a detailed defence of the concept of responsibility without guilt, which requires a separate analysis.

[v] Despite their significant differences, I group together Arendt, Jonas and Levinas as existentialist theories on the grounds that these theorists claim that one can have a responsibility by virtue of one's existence. For Arendt, it is existence within a political community that generates political responsibility, whereas for Jonas and Levinas it is existence itself.

[vi] Young talks about the 'existentialist' paradigm of moral responsibility in Young, "Responsibility and Global Labor Justice," 383., but discusses these ideas more fully in Young, *Responsibility for Justice*: 118-20, 161-65.

[vii] Hannah Arendt, "Collective Responsibility," in *Amor Mundi: Explorations in the Faith and Thought of Hannah Arendt*, ed. James W. Bernauer (Dordrecht: Martinue Nijoff Publishers, 1987); Hannah Arendt, "Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility," in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, ed. Peter Baehr (London: Penguin Books, 2000); Young, "Responsibility and Global Labor Justice," 375; Young, *Responsibility for Justice*: Chapter 3.

[viii] Young opens her 2004 essay with an extended quote from Jonas's book *The Imperative of Responsibility*, and he is referenced in all her essays on the topic.

[ix] Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), 7.

[x] Ibid.

[xi] Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*: 8.

[xii] Young, *Responsibility for Justice*: 119.

[xiii] Michael L. Morgan, *Discovering Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 75.

[xiv] Emmanuel Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1989).

[xv] Young, *Responsibility for Justice*: 161.

[xvi] Young, *Responsibility for Justice*: 163.

[xvii] Young, *Responsibility for Justice*: 52-64.

[xviii] Young, *Responsibility for Justice*: 56-59.

[xix] Young, "Responsibility and Global Justice: A Social Connection Model," 105.

[xx] Ibid.

[xxi] Young, "Responsibility and Global Labor Justice," 376.

[xxii] Young, *Responsibility for Justice*: 79.

[xxiii] Young, *Responsibility for Justice*: 59-62.

[xxiv] Young, "Responsibility and Global Justice: A Social Connection Model," 112.

[xxv] Young discusses sweatshop labour as a structural injustice in Young, "Responsibility and Global Justice: A Social Connection Model," 107-11; Young, *Responsibility for Justice*: 125-34. It has been objected that sweatshop labour is not a structural injustice, see Matt Zwolinski, "Structural Exploitation," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 29, no. 1 (2012). For the purposes of this paper I assume, following Young, that it is and I defend this idea in detail elsewhere (see "Sweatshop Labour as Structural Injustice" conference paper – available on request).

[xxvi] Young, *Responsibility for Justice*: 160.

[xxvii] Young, *Responsibility for Justice*: 159-60.

[xxviii] Young, "Responsibility and Global Labor Justice," 371.

[xxix] Eva Feder Kittay, *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson, Thinking Gender (London: Routledge, 1999), 33.

[xxx] Young, *Responsibility for Justice*: 134.

[xxxi] Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 48-53.

[xxxii] I discuss in more detail and build on Young's ideas about exploitation in [citation removed for blind review].

[xxxiii] Zwolinski, "Structural Exploitation," 167.

[xxxiv] Onora O'Neill, *Toward Justice and Virtue: A Constructive Account of Practical Reasoning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 114.

[xxxv] Ibid.

[xxxvi] Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*: Chapter 2 and Epilogue.

[xxxvii] Carol C. Gould, "Varieties of Global Responsibility: Social Connection, Human Rights, and Transnational Solidarity," in *Dancing with Iris: The Philosophy of Iris Marion Young*, ed. Ann Ferguson and Mechthild Nagel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 203.
[xxxviii] Young, "Responsibility and Global Labor Justice," 381.
[xxxix] Ibid.
[xl] Iris Marion Young, "Political Responsibility and Structural Injustice," in *The Lindley Lecture* (University of Kansas2003), 18; Iris Marion Young, *Global Challenges: War, Self-Determination and Responsibility for Justice* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 185; Young, *Responsibility for Justice*: 113.
[xli] Ashok Kumar and Jack Mahoney, "Stitching Together: How Workers are Hemming Down Transnational Capital in the Hyper-Global Apparel Industry," *Working USA: The Journal of Labor & Society* 17(2014).
[xlii] Young, "Responsibility and Global Labor Justice," 385.
[xliii] Young, "Responsibility and Global Justice: A Social Connection Model," 127-30; Young, *Responsibility for Justice*: 142-51.
[xliv] Young, "Responsibility and Global Labor Justice," 114, my emphasis.
[xlv]Young, "Responsibility and Global Labor Justice," 119.
[xlvi] Young, "Responsibility and Global Labor Justice," 374, 77; Young, "Responsibility and Global Justice: A Social Connection Model," 115, 18; Young, *Responsibility for Justice*: 161.
[xlvii] Young, "Responsibility and Global Labor Justice," 371, 82; Young, "Responsibility and Global Justice: A Social Connection Model," 102, 19.
[xlviii] HLA Hart and Tony Honoré, *Causation in the Law*, Second Edition ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 27.
[xlix] HLA Hart and Tony Honoré, *Causation in the Law*, Second Edition ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 34.
[l] Hart and Honoré, *Causation in the Law*: 31.
[li] Hart and Honoré, *Causation in the Law*: 29.
[lii] Hart and Honoré, *Causation in the Law*: 33.
[liii] Hart and Honoré, *Causation in the Law*: 34.
[liv] Hart and Honoré, *Causation in the Law*: 24.
[lv] It may be too strong to suggest that voluntariness is a necessary condition for moral or criminal responsibility, because in the case of the dropped lit cigarette, culpable negligence is sufficient grounds for attributing fault to the individual. This leads to complex questions regarding both negligence and 'tracing' when the voluntary or controllable act occurred, which I cannot attend to here. See Manuel Vargas, "The Trouble with Tracing," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XXIV(2005).
[lvi] Young, "Responsibility and Global Justice: A Social Connection Model," 120.
[lvii] Young, "Responsibility and Global Labor Justice," 367.
[lviii] Young, "Responsibility and Global Labor Justice," 379.
[lix] Young, "Responsibility and Global Labor Justice," 383.
[lx] Young, *Responsibility for Justice*: 62-63.
[lxi] Young, *Responsibility for Justice*: 63.
[lxii] Young, "Responsibility and Global Justice: A Social Connection Model," 113.
[lxiii] Young, *Responsibility for Justice*: 60.
[lxiv] Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (London: MacMillan Press Ltd, 1979), 77.
[lxv] Young, "Responsibility and Global Justice: A Social Connection Model," 112.
[lxvi] Young, *Responsibility for Justice*: 61.
[lxvii] Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 166.
[lxviii] Young, *Responsibility for Justice*: 157.
[lxix] Young, "Responsibility and Global Labor Justice," 377.
[lxx] Young, "Responsibility and Global Justice: A Social Connection Model," 116.
[lxxi] Derek Parfit, "Five Mistakes in Moral Mathematics," in *Reasons and Persons*, ed. Derek Parfit (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 83.
[lxxii] Derek Parfit, "Five Mistakes in Moral Mathematics," in *Reasons and Persons*, ed. Derek Parfit (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 75.
[lxxiii] Parfit, "Five Mistakes in Moral Mathematics," 80.
[lxxiv] Parfit, "Five Mistakes in Moral Mathematics," 86.
[lxxv] Young, *Responsibility for Justice*: 158.
[lxxvi] An example is the recent Bangladesh Fire and Building Safety Accord, which is a legally-binding agreement over five years, which 190 brands have signed-up to. http://bangladeshaccord.org/
[lxxvii] Young, "Responsibility and Global Labor Justice," 386.