

Collective Responsibility and the Responsibility to Protect

Introduction

Sovereignty has long been identified as central to the question of moral action in international politics. Many human rights thinkers consider it as to be the primary obstacle to international moral action. By invoking the sovereign right of self-determination, states can, and frequently do, exempt themselves from international moral standards.

The idea of the *Responsibility to Protect*, conceived by the Canadian Government sponsored *International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty* in 2001, was proposed to address the relationship between the institution of sovereignty and the demands for intervention raised in incidents of genocide and ethnic cleansing. The Commission's report sought to change the language surrounding sovereignty from the idea of a *right to intervene* to a *responsibility to protect* (ICISS 2001: 2.4) The logic of the approach was to alter the understanding of state sovereignty itself. According to the logic of previous discussions of interventions, the state was considered to be the final arbiter for the citizens that belonged to it and therefore immune from legitimate intervention into its affairs by other states. This made it difficult to respond to extreme situations, such as genocide and ethnic cleansing, without breaking the central principle that governed international relations. Under the proposed formulation, in order to be sovereign, a state must assume a responsibility to protect its citizens and, in extreme cases, it should act to protect the citizens of other states. In the words of ICISS co-chair Gareth Evans, “We sought to turn the whole weary debate about the right to intervene on its head and re-characterize it not as an argument about any *right* at all but rather about a *responsibility* – one to protect people at grave risk – with the relevant perspective being not that of the prospective interveners but, more appropriately, of those needing support.” (Evans 2006: 708)

This paper does not propose to evaluate the ***Responsibility to Protect*** as a norm, but rather to examine the idea of collective responsibility that the document raises. I argue that, surprisingly, the responsibility to protect only looks at those responsibilities the state and state agents (politicians, office holders etc.) have in the exercise of political authority. It does not consider the responsibilities that citizens may have for the actions of the collectivity to which they belong. In a sense, it breaks from the liberal tradition of deriving sovereignty from the real or tacit consent of the individuals that make up the state. This paper argues that if we are to say that the exercise of legitimate political power is ultimately a question of assuming responsibility, then it is important to fully understand the two-way relationship of responsibility between the state and the citizen.

By looking at various liberal conceptions of collective responsibility, I will argue that the ***Responsibility to Protect*** points to the difficulties that emerges when the rights and responsibilities of states are derived from rights and responsibilities of individuals. I then draw on Hannah Arendt's conception of collective responsibility – a conception which is not derived from the personal responsibilities of the individuals that make up the political entity – as a possible way to avoid some of these difficulties. The state may be indeed be responsible to protect the rights of its citizens, but the responsibility for the actions of the state falls not only on state decision-makers, but also on the citizens in whose name they act. Arendt's approach also separates out personal responsibility and

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Greg Dinsmore

Ph D. Candidate – Cornell University

collective responsibility, anchoring political action in the latter rather than the former. The *Responsibility to Protect*, on the other hand, by refusing to consider questions of collective responsibility at all, further reinforces a Leviathan-like conception of sovereignty in which the state acts as guardian of its subjects rather than the agent of its citizens.

Sovereignty and Collective Responsibility in the *Responsibility to Protect*.

The co-chair of *International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty*, Gareth Evans described their approach as trying to change the language around sovereignty and intervention away from the language of rights towards that of responsibility and from the interests of states to the needs of the people who require protection. The principles guiding intervention would then be based on the responsibility of states for the protection of their own citizens and, failing that, for the protection of citizens of other states. The considerations at work in the Commission's description of what it means to think of sovereignty as responsibility are outlined in paragraph 2.15

2.15 Thinking of sovereignty as responsibility, in a way that is being increasingly recognized in state practice, has a threefold significance. First, it implies that the state authorities are responsible for the functions of protecting the safety and lives of citizens and promotion of their welfare. Secondly, it suggests that the national political authorities are responsible to the citizens internally and to the international community through the UN. And thirdly, it means that the agents of state are responsible for their actions; that is to say, they are accountable for their acts of commission and omission. The case for thinking of sovereignty in these terms is strengthened by the ever-increasing impact of international human rights norms, and the increasing impact in international discourse of the concept of human security. (ICISS: 2001)

The shift in language allowed for three changes to the way that sovereignty was previously discussed. Besides the shift from the language of rights, the use of responsibility was intended to shift the focus from the state actors asserting their rights to the people who require protection. Second, it expresses that relationship in terms of protection. The joining of international human rights norms with the discourse around human security means that the role of the state is not to provide a space for political action but is rather “protecting the safety and lives of citizens and promotion of their welfare.

The *Responsibility to Protect* is also broken out into various different components in order to ensure that intervention is not simply a matter of military action in crises. These components are the Responsibility to React, the Responsibility of Prevent and the Responsibility to Rebuild (par. 2.29). Thus, in addition to putting a stop to genocides, there is a responsibility to attempt to anticipate atrocities in order to prevent them without the need for military intervention and failing that, there is a responsibility to help to rebuild the state in the aftermath. Moreover, multilateralism is advocated (preferably through the UN) in order to prevent the principle being used as an excuse for offensive military action. The underlying idea is that part of being a part of the international community is recognising not just one's responsibilities to one's own population but to others as well.

However, though the shift from understanding sovereignty as related to a *right* to a *responsibility*

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seems significant, it is not immediately evident what changes in this linguistic revision. Though many examples of responsibilities are listed (governments to other governments, governments for their citizens, government for the citizens of other states), there is no clear theory of political responsibility outlined in the report. Nor is there any indication that one might be needed. There is an extensive description of the responsibilities that states have towards their people and even towards those of other states, but the document does not provide a theoretical justification for adopting the language of responsibility nor any account of what might ground that responsibility.

It is not hard to imagine why. A thorough account of the theoretical grounding of responsibility. Political responsibility demands an account of the relationship – the mutual responsibilities – that obtain between citizens and the state institutions that have jurisdiction over them. Fleshing out that relationship would likely have exposed differences in political opinion that might have made it difficult to gain wide agreement within the commission and beyond. In effect the Commission is engaged in a practical experiment in what Joshua Cohen has called 'justificatory minimalism.' (Cohen 2002) Since there are likely to be disagreements about the philosophical justification for normative principles, it may be preferable to strive to attain agreement on the principles and not worry about potential disagreements about the philosophical justification. Indeed the Universal Declaration of Human rights has been described as just such an endeavour (Beitz: 2001).

However, by consciously re-conceiving the justification of state sovereignty, it is not so simple to avoid confronting a theory of responsibility. After all, states are collective entities and if states have responsibilities, then these are, in some sense, collective responsibilities. As a component of an international social system based on the mutual recognition of various collective entities, sovereignty already implies a theory of collective responsibility. This already raises flags for liberal thinkers. Liberals are wary of the idea of collective responsibility, seeing in it the seeds of the kind of collective scape-goating that animates precisely the types of ethnic conflicts that creates the demand for intervention in the first place.

Though the the name of the report highlights the change in language from a *right* to intervene to a *responsibility* to protect, I would argue that the shift in emphasis from the relationship between states to the perspective of people in need of *protection* is more important. It is this that governs the understanding of *responsibility* at work in the document. Under the new conception, the responsibility is owed by the state to individuals living in its territory. By contrast, in the right to intervene, the relevant relationship is between states. States have a right to non-intervention, which, under certain circumstances, can be overridden. Under those circumstances, other states or international organisations may acquire a right to intervene. The right to intervene then stands in a symmetrical relationship to the sovereign right to non-intervention. One starts where the other ends. This mutuality exists exclusively at the state level. Though states were seen as representing the people over whom they had authority, there was no mechanism for making judgements about whether, in fact, the state actually did represent its people.

Under the responsibility to protect, a third element is added: that of the *protection* of people. States are responsible for the well-being of their people. The justification for political authority is related to whether a state protects its citizens. "What is at stake here is not making the world safe for big powers, or trampling over the sovereign rights of small ones, but delivering practical protection for ordinary people, at risk of their lives, because their states are unwilling or unable to protect them."

(ICISS: 2.1) Sovereignty is therefore a function of a state's ability (as well as its willingness) to protect its citizens. More than anything, *state capacity* – a strong police force, a disciplined military etc – is required in order to be able to protect one's population. Since self-determination has itself been described as a human right, sovereignty has frequently been associated with the expression of the rights of the people. Indeed, the commission itself refers positively to the importance of sovereignty to decolonization. However, as we move towards human security in addition to human rights as a motivation for intervention, the issue of state capacity takes on a greater role than state violence. Non-intervention is a privilege that only applies to those capable of protecting their population.

The paradox is that measures designed to put human beings at the centre of the responsibility to protect has the consequence of denying the importance of individual political agency to state legitimacy. State capacity becomes the way we determine political authority. Connecting state sovereignty to individual rights raises more questions than it solves.

Secretary-General Annan's own initial solution to this problem was to say that in these situations national sovereignty had to be weighed and balanced against individual sovereignty. But this formulation, in truth, did little more than restate the basic dilemma: When exactly did individual sovereignty claims take primacy over state-sovereignty? (Evans 707)

The *Responsibility to Protect* avoided this question by dropping the relationship between individual rights and collective political legitimacy. The problem is that it, in the place of language of political agency, it adopts a language of protection. The state is no longer an expression of the political life of its members but simply a protector against physical insecurity. Sovereignty is equally compromised regardless of whether the danger to people comes from an unwillingness or an inability on the part of the state to protect them. State capacity becomes the primary measure by which sovereignty is judged. Despite the fact that this approach was explicitly adopted with the best interest of populations in mind, the shift amounts to the adoption of a Hobbesian view – which sees the state as legitimate only and so long as it is capable of protecting the physical security of the people. “*The obligation of subjects to the sovereign is understood to last as long, and no longer, than the power lasteth by which he is able to protect them. For the right men have by nature to protect themselves, when none else can protect them, can by no covenant be relinquished.*” (Hobbes 144 italics mine).

The danger is that the responsibility to protect further separates the institutions that wield political power from the society in which they exist and the people in whose name they operate. It envisions a world in which political authorities exist, as it were, on a different plane than the people that they rule over. Under these circumstances, the trick is to create a situation where these political authorities are beneficial or, at least, as harmless as possible to the people under their control. As such, the *Responsibility to Protect* reads like a code of conduct for Greek Gods – a set of guidelines that attempts to ensure that people don't overly suffer from the whims of these powerful, unpredictable states or state actors. In order to understand how a report designed to produce a conception of sovereignty more responsive to individuals could produce (what I argue is) the opposite effect, we need to look at the way that collective responsibility is conceived in liberal thought. I will then argue that Hannah Arendt's conception of collective presents a possible way out

of this difficulty.

The question of collective responsibility

That collective responsibility is important to the question of sovereignty is made evident by the numerous recent attempts to develop a theory of collective responsibility that could be applied internationally. Most of these, inspired by the liberal tradition, attempt to ground collective responsibility in some form of individual consent or choice. For example, Farid Abdel-Nour argues that our collective responsibility can be grounded in the satisfaction that we derive from collective pride. If we derive such satisfaction from the actions of our nation, then we establish a connection between our choice (to claim collective actions as ours) and the actions of the state. By suggesting that one might legitimately be proud of one's nation, one establishes that causal path which, as it turns out, cuts both ways, generating, with same act of will, our responsibility for bad states of affairs caused by our nation. *“National responsibility is actively incurred by individuals with every proud thought they have and every proud statement they make about the achievements of their nation. This, however, is also the limit of their national responsibility, which only extends to the actions that have historically brought about the objects of their national pride.”* (Abdel Nour 2003: 703)

In a different vein, George Klosko (2005), attempts to ground collective responsibility in the fact that, in order to have satisfactory lives, we rely on the availability of certain public goods that only a state can provide. If the state provides these goods and distributes them according to principles of fairness, that can generate obligations for us to support that state. In effect, our need for collective goods generates a collective responsibility for the institution that provides those goods. Similarly, John Parrish argues for a state authorization model of collective responsibility. His argument is derived directly from the logic that underpins state action both domestically and internationally. The state provides goods to its population and claims to act on their behalf.

The state claims to pursue certain necessary social functions (such as protection and provision of public goods) through powerful and effective means (such as violence and coercion exercised under unitary control), and claims further that its citizens authorize it to pursue such functions by such means. So where these conditions obtain – where the state does pursue such functions through such means – it is there that the authorized state model of collective responsibility will best apply. (Parrish 2009: 130)

Parrish takes the authorisation to be generated by some form of representation in government. Because we can partake in the decision-making and because we derive benefits from the public good provided by the state, we can acquire some responsibility for the actions of the state, even if we happened to personally disagree with that action and even if we may have voted the administration that engaged in the action in question (Parrish's example is the US led war in Iraq). Someone who voted against the Bush administration may have been less responsible than those who voted for it, but they were more responsible than a citizen of France, even one who may have personally supported the war.

However, because we cannot control the actions of the state, liberal-inspired conceptions of

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responsibility insist that their theories don't allow for collective responsibility to be treated the same as personal responsibility. We can be *morally* responsible for actions of our state but not *legally* liable. Parrish makes the distinction between *assignment* responsibility and *attributive* responsibility (Parrish 2009: 121). The latter concerns states of affairs that we have brought about ourselves, whereas the former is meant to cover those responsibilities that we acquire as a member of a group. We can legally responsible for attributive responsibilities but not for assignment responsibilities. Blame is much less straightforward in the case of assignment responsibilities. Since the state works in our name, we are responsible for its actions even if we personally opposed them. We may be more responsible if we supported the measure but we remain responsible even if we didn't.

The difficulty that arises with these, broadly speaking, liberal approaches is that by basing collective responsibility on individual responsibility, they find themselves back in the midst of the problem that the Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty was trying to solve: how do you weigh the collective claims of sovereign states against the individual claims of citizens? We are unlikely to be able to make judgements in each case as to whether the state can be said to be properly authorised in each case. In practice, we treat the state as the presumptive representative of the people's political will. This situation seems to recall Hannah Arendt's perplexities surrounding human rights in the *Origins of Totalitarianism*.

The people's sovereignty... was not proclaimed by the grace of God but in the name of Man, so that it seemed only natural that the 'inalienable' rights of man would find their guarantee and become an inalienable part of the right of the people to sovereign self-government.

In other words, man had hardly appeared as a completely emancipated, completely isolated being who carried his dignity within himself without reference to some larger encompassing order, when he disappeared again into a member of a people (OT 291)

This passage, though almost 60 years old, describes the current problem very well. Even though state legitimacy is justified on the grounds of individual rights, in practice it becomes an absolute that nullifies any attempt to limit sovereignty on individual grounds.

One possible way out of this conundrum can be found in Arendt's later writings on responsibility. For Arendt, the collective responsibility that we have for the actions of our political entity, set the terms of political action that she famously espoused. *Political* or *collective* responsibility (Arendt uses the terms interchangeably) is derived from political actors' relationship to our shared world. It is an acknowledgement of the demands that our collective life makes upon us – whether we like it or not. Unlike many liberal thinkers, Arendt does not attribute political obligation to a consequence of individual choice or consent, be it actual or tacit. When a person acts politically, he or she acts within the context of his/her responsibility for his/her shared world. It is not a passive reception of the burdens of collective life but rather an active assumption of those burdens. By contrast, liberalism places consent or choice at the centre of the political relationship between the citizen and the state. The state derives its power and legitimacy from the consent of the individuals that make up the state. For Arendt, the relationship is more complicated, stemming from the relationship between people and their shared world.

The immediate consequence of understanding rights as relying on a connection to a shared world is that the political entity acquires a moral content that is distinct from the claims of the human beings who belong to it. As such, it establishes the basis for political as opposed to individual claims. Liberalism, on the other hand, views human rights as the basis of international morality. Arendt's approach challenges this in two ways. First, it distinguishes between individual morality and political concerns. Second, to the extent that Arendt is concerned with rights, she sees them as related to the latter rather than the former. Thus, for Arendt, it isn't that rights aren't important, but she doesn't see them as foundational in the way that liberalism tends to. However, while Arendt's conception of the world points to a political claim that stands outside individuals, that claim is also not a form of subjection to the sovereign or collective will. Arendt's thought is an attempt to allow an individual to exist as a part of a world that is shared with others. While Arendt herself was more than a little ambivalent about the modern state as the kind of political entity that could allow for the emergence of political action, she nevertheless did believe that citizens were politically responsible for the actions of their state. "Every government assumes responsibility for the deeds and misdeeds of its predecessors and every nation for the deeds and misdeeds of the past." (Arendt 2003: 149) All that is required for collective responsibility is belonging to a political entity that exists in relations with other such entities.

1) Personal and Collective Responsibility

Responsibility takes two primary forms in Arendt's thought – personal and collective. Personal responsibility concerns the obligations that I incur through my actions. Collective responsibility concerns obligations that I come to have as part of a group and therefore derives from things that I have *not* done. Both are important to Arendt's conception of politics because they are intimately related to human plurality. Personal responsibility is a consequence of *individual plurality*. Since I live in the world with others, I incur responsibility for the results of those actions on the world that I share with them. Ultimately it relates to questions of legal or moral blame or guilt. Because it related primarily to the self (*my* responsibility) Arendt considers it to have political implications (in the sense that individual actions can have effects on the group) but that it is not itself political. Collective responsibility is a consequence of the *plurality of political groups*. As such, it is political through and through. Since I live in the world as a part of a collectivity, I acquire a responsibility for the actions of that group, regardless of the part I may have played in those actions (ie. even if I personally opposed them). Responsibility is, I argue, along with worldliness, a condition of free political action – as such it is intimately related with the human faculties of promising and forgiveness. Without responsibility, an actor would not be able to remain connected to his/her actions. In that sense, responsibility is a condition for Arendt's conception of agency.

Personal Responsibility

Arendt has many examples of *personal* responsibility. Adolf Eichmann is the most well-known of these. Eichmann's self-understanding as a cog in the Nazi machinery appeared to Arendt as an unwillingness to accept responsibility for the consequences of his participation. Arendt famously argued that Eichmann must account for why he allowed himself to become such a cog (Arendt 2003: 31-32). Similarly, her critique of violence as a means to advance political ends is based on the idea that we cannot control the effects of our actions. The human condition of plurality, the fact

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that we live together with other human beings, is such that the effects of our actions always escape us. The only possible remedy for this aspect of the human condition is the faculty of forgiveness. Forgiveness allows us to clean the slate and be relieved of a responsibility which might otherwise be overwhelming.

Arendt identifies personal responsibility with legal and moral, as opposed to political, accountability. Laws, both moral and legal, serve to hold us accountable for our actions. In so doing, they recognise us as free, responsible beings. For Arendt, morality concerns the two-in-one relationship that each of us has with ourselves. Because we are thinking beings, we have the capacity to engage in a dialogue with ourselves. Conscience, for Arendt is an effect of our internal duality. It is because I don't want to live with a murderer that I don't commit murder. Arendt believed that it is this experience of living with oneself that led Socrates to identify the moral code with being in harmony (consistent) with oneself. "If I do wrong I am condemned to live together with a wrongdoer in an unbearable intimacy; I can never get rid of him." (Arendt 2003: 90) According to Arendt, Kant took this principle of non-contradiction and formalised it into the categorical imperative (Arendt 1977 (LoM II): 63). However, this duality remains *internal*. Moral responsibility is individualising. Similarly, in the legal context, though a defendant in court may claim that he or she did what she did because of membership in a group – that he/she was merely a cog in a giant machine (as Eichmann did), "(i)t is the grandeur of court proceedings that even a cog can become a person again." (RJ 148) It is the function of the court to pass judgement and assign responsibility.

Both conscience and the law serve to assign personal responsibility for our individual conduct. However, for Arendt, politics concerns the world rather than the self (Arendt: 2005: 106). Personal responsibility becomes political only in extreme cases, such as Nazi Germany, when continuing to obey the laws might actually constitute support of a criminal regime. In those circumstances, conscientious withdrawal from political life becomes political, possibly even heroic. "At these moments, thinking ceases to be a marginal affair in political matters. When everybody is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes in, those who think are drawn out of hiding because their refusal to join is conspicuous and thereby becomes a kind of action." (RJ 188)

The political aspect of individual (personal) responsibility emerges because of what Arendt calls 'action's predicaments.' (HC 236) The predicaments of the other aspects of the *Human Condition*, the lack of durability inherent in *labour* and the meaningless inherent in *work*, are resolved by appealing to other aspects of the *vita activa* (*work* creates a durable world for the repetitive activity of *labour*, *action* confers meaning on the world built by human being's instrumental *work*). The predicaments raised by *action* can only be addressed with other forms of *action*. Specifically, the *irreversibility* of human action can be dispelled by the faculty of forgiveness which releases the actor from responsibility for his/her actions. Since we cannot undo what we have done, forgiveness is required in order for us to start anew – so that we are not trapped in the endless consequences of each and every one of our actions. Similarly, the *unpredictability* of action can be dispelled (again, only partially) through the faculty of promising. By promising, human beings can create zones of relative stability in the flux of time.

Thus, despite the fact that Arendt generally tries to divide political from moral considerations, promising and forgiving represent, for her, a form of morality that is also political. This is true for

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three related reasons: because it is tied up with plurality (we cannot promise or forgive ourselves (HC 237)), because it is a form of action and because, ultimately it allows for a stable political realm to emerge between us in the world that we have built for ourselves. Arendt goes so far as to say that the only strictly moral duties of the citizen is that they make and keep promises (CR 92). Promising has different forms though. There is the general day-to-day promising that occurs between people. This helps to stabilise our identities through time and to establish the basis for our actions as responsible agents. This is not necessarily political action in the purist sense of performance in a public space; it is simply the day-to-day stabilisation that makes possible our collective existence, even in the instrumental sense described last chapter. There is also the idea of the foundational promise – the original agreement that establishes a political community and the authority that goes with it. Arendt has several examples of these, from the Mayflower compact to the United States Constitution.

Collective Responsibility

But while personal responsibility – the responsibility we have for our actions - can have political consequences for Arendt, it is not the same as collective responsibility, which refers precisely to those things that we have not done. It is the world rather than the self that is at issue in Arendt's understanding of collective responsibility. It refers to an obligation we have to take care of the world that we inherit with other members of our political community. Unlike personal responsibility, it is not incurred through our action and it is not a feature of a good will or a clear conscience. Rather it is based on our relationship to an objective thing – a world – that we share with others. The distinction between personal and collective responsibility turns on the existence of a world which stands outside of us and in which all our collective affairs take place. We enter into this responsibility either through our birth into that community (what Arendt calls internal immigration) (CR 88) or by leaving another community – in effect, trading one collective responsibility for another.

Two conditions have to be present for collective responsibility: I must be held responsible for something I have not done, and the reason for my responsibility must be my membership in a group (a collective) which no *voluntary* act of mine can dissolve, that is, a membership which is utterly unlike a business partnership which I can dissolve at will. (Arendt 2003: 149)

For Arendt, human plurality is constituted by our different perspectives on a shared world. In an important sense, *collective* responsibility is a misnomer. Arendt is not referring to the responsibilities of a collective in a communitarian sense. Rather, she refers to the responsibilities imposed by our belonging to a shared world – a belonging is independent of an individual or collective will. It is independent of the individual will in that we bear it regardless of any voluntary choice we might have made. We are responsible for our political world whether or not we have chosen to be a part of it (in fact, it is accurate to say that we are responsible, as opposed to guilty, *because* our membership is not a matter of choice). It is independent of anything like collective will because it is mediated by the shared, objective world that exists between us. The world is a shared responsibility because our different place in the world means that we each have a different perspective on it. These perspectives, for Arendt, can never be reduced to one 'collective' perspective, without sacrificing the freedom of the people who make up the community.

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Political responsibility is related to the question of plurality, and it highlights an important distinction between the plurality of human beings and the plurality of human groups. The importance of the existence of plural groups to our political life is revealed in Arendt's condemnation of the crime of genocide.

If a people of a nation, or even just some specific human group, which offers a unique view of the world arising from its particular position in the world – a position that, however it came about, cannot be readily duplicated – is annihilated, it is not merely that a people or a nation or a given number of individuals perishes, but rather that a portion of our common world is destroyed, an aspect of the world that has revealed itself to us until now but can never reveal itself again. (Arendt 2005: 175)

This means that it is not simply the plurality of individuals which stands in relation to the world but also a plurality of collective groupings. For Arendt, each of these groupings constitutes a perspective on the world. Furthermore, they represent an enduring political constitution that aspires to immortality. “Violence is applied here not only to things that have been produced... but also to a historical and political reality housed in this world of products, a reality that cannot be rebuilt.” (Arendt 2005: 161) The plurality of political units implies that political obligation, for Arendt, shouldn't be understood in general terms. It is always the result of a specific relationship to a specific political entity.

Common Responsibility

Between these two versions of responsibility is the idea of *common* responsibility. It relates to collective responsibility because it concerns our existing in what has become ‘one world’. Since the imperialist era, we have *inherited* a world where an action on one side of the world can have an effect anywhere else in the world (OT 297). This creates a ‘common present’ and a ‘negative’ responsibility to prevent the destruction of the space in between all of us (MDT 83). It is connected to the problem of personal responsibility in that the *irreversibility* and *unpredictability* inherent in human action now extend to the entire planet. It is related to personal responsibility in that it concerns the (potential) effects of our actions. It is related to collective responsibility in that it concerns our membership in an externally constituted group – a group constituted by the historical emergence of a global world.

Peg Birmingham's reading of Arendt's thoughts on rights is based on our acceptance of our common responsibility for the world (Birmingham 2006). Since we now inhabit 'one world', our actions are capable of affecting everyone, everywhere. As such we all have acquired a common responsibility for the common world we all inhabit. Arendt feared that this might be too much for most to bear. The most frequent reaction was to retreat in horror at the idea of humanity, a reaction that revealed itself in modern nationalist movements (OT 235-236). But it is clear that Arendt believed that this was a responsibility that we had no choice but to assume. To attempt to ground human rights in Arendt's ideas of common responsibility, as Birmingham does, is a tempting interpretive position because it allows us to see the problem of humanity in terms that can be aligned with the individualizing character of rights discourse. Common responsibility is personal responsibility writ large. We are all born into this world. All our actions can potentially affect every single person in the world. Therefore we all assume responsibility for everything that goes on within that world.

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“The ideal of humanity purged of all sentimentality, demands that human beings assume political responsibility for all crimes and evils committed by human beings.” (Birmingham 2006).

Birmingham can then look to the situation of common responsibility for the entire human world as part of the grounding for a human rights discourse consistent with Arendt’s thought.

Collective vs Common Responsibility

However, common responsibility differs from collective responsibility in that it does not take into account the *collective* plurality of the human condition. Human beings belong to limited political communities which themselves constitute the plurality of the human species. There is a temptation to associate rights with common responsibility, which would allow for something like universal human rights, instead of with collective responsibility which is always located within a specific limited community. My contention is that this is inconsistent with Arendt’s thought. She is clear that, though collective responsibility is not determined by my actions or my will, it can nevertheless be repudiated. One can leave a community and join another. “We can escape this political and strictly collective responsibility only by leaving the community, and since no man can live without belonging to some community, this would simply mean to exchange one community for another, and hence one kind of responsibility for another.” (CR 150). Political responsibility refers to a specific place in the world – a specific set of obligations.. This means that collective responsibility cannot be extended to the entire planet simply because we happen to share a common interest in its well-being and the capacity to affect almost all aspects of it.

A further reason that common responsibility cannot simply be a form of collective responsibility for the entire planet is that there is no one to whom we, as humankind, could be responsible. There is no one to whom we can make promises, no one to forgive. Humankind cannot be a political agent because it has no peers. Common responsibility ultimately turns human beings back upon themselves. It again grounds politics in morality and therefore does not take our concern for the world seriously enough. Though after the Eichmann trial, Arendt was more open to the importance of truly moral thinking in allowing people to inoculate themselves against a moral breakdown on a large scale like the one that occurred in Nazi Germany, it remains ultimately concerned with the self and not with the world. The consequence of making common responsibility the basis for international political action is that without the plurality of human groupings, it is again possible to see global politics on the model of a relationship to the self. This is why common responsibility cannot serve as an anchor for human rights in the way Birmingham would like. It does not recognise the limited and spatial and multiple character of Arendt's understanding of the world. In short, it does not preserve the plurality which is central to Arendt's conception of politics. It is our concern for the shared, *limited* world that we inherit, that makes it possible for us to act politically.

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Examining the *Responsibility to Protect* in light of Arendt's thoughts, as well as those of others, it is clear that much turns on how political responsibility is conceived. Looking at liberal conceptions of political responsibility, we can see that they all have in common a desire to ground collective responsibility in individual claims. In Arendtian terms, they attempt to ground collective responsibility in the personal responsibility of individuals. Given the difficulties that this approach entails, notably, the expression of the norm of sovereignty in the language of rights, the ICISS

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attempted to conceive of collective responsibility independently of the political claims of individuals. The difficulty here is that since it is no longer an expression of the political claims of individuals, the state can only base its legitimacy on its ability to protect its citizens. In short, it reverts to the Hobbesian idea that political claims are only generated by the need of human beings for protection of self and property. In short, the ICISS denied states the ability to ground their claim to non-intervention in the political rights of its people, but in so doing, effectively denied that the political claims of individuals have any weight at all.

If Arendt is correct that rights are best understood as the result, rather than the grounding, of our political existence, then we must try to understand how political responsibility is generated independent of rights. Her conception of collective responsibility accomplishes this in two ways.. In the first place, it avoids the difficulties, so common to liberal human rights thinkers, of trying to ground collective claims in individual rights. Second, by tying responsibility directly to political agency, it avoids the temptation, so evident in this document (and in Hobbes), to view politics simply as a means of protecting the lives otherwise helpless individuals. For Arendt, collective responsibility is a crucial element in political action. Politics is a form of collective agency and collective agency only makes sense in relation to a conception of collective responsibility. By trying to escape the conundrums of individualist conceptions of political agency, the commission effectively denied political agency altogether.

Arendt herself does not pronounce on the question of military intervention, but her comments quoted above on the crime of genocide does suggest that even military intervention might be more than simply the protection of people but also the protection of a political entity. The crime of genocide is not simply the killing of people but also the destruction of the political existence that a group of people has built for itself. It may turn out that if we fully flesh out the concept of responsibility in the responsibility to protect, there may also be an obligation to protect more than just the physical safety of people at risk but the political institutions as well. In some ways, the condemnation of ethnic cleansing testifies to the intuition that it is not just the lives of people that may, at times, require protection.

Conclusion

Despite the criticisms put forth in this paper, I do think that the ICISS is on the right track in their characterisation of the problems of international morality as having to do with responsibility. The spirit that animated it – the idea that the norms governing international intervention ought to be developed with the people who require protection in mind – is clearly a step in the right direction. The idea that sovereignty as unlimited and unquestionable mastery over the territory of a state is not a morally or even politically acceptable approach to international politics. The international sphere is an arena of colliding responsibilities: state responsibilities to citizens and to other states, citizen responsibilities to states and to citizens of other states. The trouble is with its characterisation of that responsibility solely in terms of protection. Most problematically, I have argued, the lack of a conception of collective responsibility paradoxically leads to a version of sovereignty that is even further disconnected from the political agency of people than the version it was designed to replace. Under the *Responsibility to Protect*, citizens are understood as charges of the states to which they belong, rather than as active participants in their political life. I believe that an Arendtian conception of collective responsibility in which the political responsibilities for the actions of the

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state are assumed by the citizens by virtue of their citizenship could possibly fill that gap.

To be fair, the problems of the international system may require that we see responsibility solely in terms of protection. In many countries, state institutions are so radically separated from the society they are supposed to govern, that they seem whimsical and sometimes predatory. Even apparently benevolent states undertake misguided adventures that end up causing unintended destruction and loss of life. Perhaps international morality is best understood as a code of ethics for Olympian Gods. Perhaps that is the best we can do. However, one side-effect of shifting to this particular conception of responsibility is that states are less likely to be seen as representing the political decisions and conversation of its populace. So while the responsibility to protect puts the lives of individuals at the centre of the discussion, it does so at the expense of their political voices.

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