

**RESPONSIBILITY FOR TECHNOLOGY SWEATSHOPS AND THE POLITICS OF  
HUMAN RIGHTS**

by

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B.Phil., Politics & Philosophy, University of Pittsburgh, 2012

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
Arts and Sciences in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Philosophy

University of Pittsburgh

2012

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

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# **RESPONSIBILITY FOR TECHNOLOGY SWEATSHOPS AND THE POLITICS OF HUMAN RIGHTS**

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Since the early 1970s, political theorists have slowly moved away from meta-ethical debates about how human rights are grounded toward more pragmatic questions about who is obligated to protect them. This debate about responsibility for protecting human rights promises to address pressing questions about who must respond to the worst global injustices and why. Human rights are not particularly useful unless it is possible to specify which agents bear an obligation to protect them and how they ought to discharge this obligation. This thesis enters the responsibilities debate by addressing an important gap in the global justice literature. Too often, theories of responsibility are evaluated in abstract terms without consideration of actual instances of injustice. A closer look at specific injustices is needed to effectively evaluate whether these theoretical models are useful in addressing messy real world human rights deprivations. Without an assessment of how theoretical frameworks can motivate feasible reforms, it is unclear what practical work theories of responsibility can do.

This study evaluates the frameworks offered by Thomas Pogge, David Miller, and Iris Marion Young in relation to a pressing global injustice: technology sweatshops in China. Migrant workers in technology sweatshops represent a critical test case because these workers are frequently unable to live minimally decent lives and it is not at all clear who is responsible for intervening. Each of the three frameworks is evaluated based on the plausibility of their responses. The analysis shows that neither Pogge nor Miller take the politics of human rights

seriously enough. That is, they both seem to assume that a convincing ethical perspective will inevitably lead to political action. The analysis of Young shows that this assumption about the inevitability of political action is misguided, and that without the proper analytic tools, the responsibilities debate is unlikely to motivate political action.

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## PREFACE

I never imagined I would find a home at a major public research university. Coming from a small Quaker high school where everyone was on a first name basis with their teachers and classes were never larger than twenty students, I thought large universities were places where professors and graduate students do research and undergraduate education comes as an afterthought. I kept telling myself that the only reason I enrolled at Pitt was because it didn't make sense to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on an undergraduate education—that you can really get an education anywhere if you're willing to put the effort in to find it. I was not happy upon arrival. My Arts and Sciences advisor who I later found out was responsible for hundreds of freshman promptly greeted me with a warm “what's your peoplesoft number?” Fifteen minutes on campus, and my fear of being in an entirely overwhelming impersonal institution were already being confirmed. He enrolled me in the grab bag of courses one might imagine a college freshman taking: introduction to psychology, seminar in composition, and world politics. Completely by chance, the only section that was left open of the required freshman seminar in composition was an Honors College (UHC) course. I knew nothing about the UHC, but I assumed that if there was any chance of finding an intellectual home at Pitt, that was probably the place to start.

Like any freshman with even a vague interest in government, economics, or politics, I wound up in Dave Hornyak's office. Dave is the advisor of Politics and Philosophy (P&P)—the only non-research based degree offered through the UHC. Unlike any other degree I have ever

encountered at Pitt, P&P was cleverly designed by someone who wanted motivated students to take advantage of the breadth of study available at a big university without having to commit to the “tracking” represented in typical undergraduate majors. Instead of taking foundational courses, P&P majors could take whatever courses they wanted as long as four courses in Political Science and four courses in Philosophy were upper-level. This intellectual free-for-all landed me in classes ranging from transatlantic security to problems in the philosophy of religion. Taking only small courses that were taught by professors I thought were interesting became my religion: I preached it to whoever would listen. Although there were times I got carried away (one semester I enrolled in more than fifteen classes in the drop/add period to see if I could stack my schedule so that I would never have to take a class with more than thirty students), I ultimately found a way to make Pitt the small liberal arts college I wanted to go to in the first place.

Why does any of this matter? Well, partly because my early connection to the UHC instilled in me the value of undergraduate research. For instance, I have participated in the Brackenridge Fellowship program in which I was given money and pizza each week to think about problems related to global justice—not coincidentally the subject of this thesis. I was thrust into a research community of other undergraduates who studied everything from Wittgenstein’s therapeutic philosophy to the neurological mechanisms of vomiting in musk shrews. We each gave “TED” style talks to the other research fellows where we were consistently asked to justify the foundations of our research. I hope the spirit of Brackenridge echoes through these pages. This thesis is as much for the curious non-specialist as it is for those already familiar with the debates about responsibility for protecting human rights. But this story also matters because it shows that the research project represented in the following pages was almost entirely fortuitous. I got connected with Michael Goodhart—a faculty member in the

Political Science department—by perusing the department’s website. It was clear Dr. Goodhart’s interests in both the theoretical and practical aspects of our global politics matched up well with me own. Although this broad program of study in political theory interested me, I knew I would only want to pursue research if I found a faculty member who was both interested in undergraduate education and would be a helpful mentor in crafting a manageable research project. Even though it went against my religion, I enrolled in Dr. Goodhart’s fifty-seat political theory course. From the opening moments of the class, it became clear that Michael Goodhart is a faithful believer in undergraduate teaching and mentorship. I owe a great deal to Michael for his insight and encouragement.

## **1.0 HUMAN RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITY**

It wasn't until I began preparing to write this thesis that I spent much time thinking about where the electronics I use every day come from. I had a vague understanding that many of them were made in large factories, and that some of them were probably awful places to work. When confronted with isolated reports of worker unrest or unsafe conditions, I felt some degree of responsibility. I knew that my dollars funded companies that treated these workers poorly, but the thought of doing anything about it quickly faded. This is one of the consequences of industrialization in the developed world coupled with growth in technologies that make global supply chains common features of our world: we are not frequently confronted with the social circumstances of the people who make our products.

Some argue that despite poor factory conditions in the developing world, workers are being lifted out of poverty. The Asian "tigers" are evidence that developing countries can compete with established industrialized West, and global trade has given the developing world a fighting chance of seeing significant raises in their standard of living. But with these changes come new responsibilities. As Thomas Friedman aptly pointed out more than ten years ago, the symbol of globalization is the Internet - "a symbol that we are all connected but nobody is in charge." Indeed, there is no real global governance. Little sovereignty is forfeited to organizations like the United Nations in favor of an international system in which states have only limited authority. So what should be done when these new global institutions infringe on

the human rights of distant others? To get a handle on this guiding question, a quick look at the history of human rights is in order.

In the wake of World War II, the vast majority of the United Nations General Assembly agreed that to effectively combat the kinds of large scale systematic injustices represented in the Holocaust, there needed to be a universal commitment to human rights. The United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights gave rise to our modern conception of "human rights." Though there was general consensus that every single human being ought to be afforded a certain set of rights, there was little agreement on its theoretical basis. Instead of the lofty notion of "natural rights" like liberty or property, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was meant to delineate specific rights that would obviously infringe on one's ability to live a minimally decent life (Nickel 7). Most of the rights expressed in the Universal Declaration are specific, not abstract. Jacques Maritain, a member of the UN committee designed to assess the feasibility of a cross cultural list of human rights famously said, "Yes, we agree about the rights, but on the condition no one asks why" (Glendon). Thus, an affirmation of the Declaration need not be based on a particular philosophical outlook or ideology—it is simply based on the idea that we can all agree that certain rights ought to be guaranteed because without them, the violation of human rights would not necessarily be a pressing international problem.

There are several features of human rights that are worth mentioning here. First, human rights are global. It makes no difference what culture, community, or nation one belongs to; all human beings have available the claim that their human rights were/are violated. Second, because these rights are of the highest priority, they ought to apply everywhere. To build international consensus around human rights, it is important that the most basic protections are consistently provided. Since human rights are of a high priority, they should be able to resist

relativistic claims that human rights infringe on particular cultural practices. Although there is certainly a spectrum of the seriousness or severity of human rights violations, any violation should be a high priority international problem because the ability of the people whose rights have been violated to enjoy an even minimal standard of decent life has been put in jeopardy. Charles Beitz makes this point, “Everyone has human rights, and responsibilities to respect and protect these rights may, in principle, extend across political and social boundaries” (1).

Within this broad framework of human rights, which are conceived as minimal standards designed to protect against the worst forms of injustice, it is common to classify rights as being either civil/political or economic/social. The former class of rights is typically aimed at guaranteeing participation in civil and political society by ensuring people are free from discrimination, arbitrary arrest, torture, and that everyone is equal before the law, has the right to own private property, get married, and generally participate as free and equal citizens. The latter class of rights involves guaranteeing an adequate standard of living, employment without discrimination, and basic income security (Hertel and Minkler 4). According to the Universal Declaration:

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control (Assembly).

I focus my attention on responsibility for social and economic rights because the magnitude of human rights deprivations on this category of rights is shocking and systemic. For instance, in 2001 alone, it is estimated that “twenty-two million people died preventable deaths due to deprivation” (Hertel and Minkler 1). Indeed, it is hard to imagine that there could be more at stake in developing an understanding whose responsibility it is to ensure that such massive suffering is prevented.

Although the statistics on global poverty are quite sobering, my aim in this thesis is to address the specific injustice of technology sweatshops in China. I argue in chapter two that these sweatshops do not allow many migrant workers to enjoy even a minimal standard of living. Although there is a rich conceptual debate about whether economic human rights ought to be grounded *inter alia* in a conception of human dignity, basic human needs, or the ability to pursue purposeful action, I do not wish to flesh out a fully defended position on which of these theoretical groundings is best. Instead, I think it is enough to show (as I do in chapters three, four, and five) that technology sweatshops in China clearly violate basic human rights according to the frameworks offered by Thomas Pogge, David Miller, and Iris Young. If technology sweatshops are considered violations of fundamental rights on these theoretically diverse accounts of responsibility for protecting human rights, there is good reason to think that it is the kind of deprivation that any theory of responsibility ought to take seriously.

## **1.1 THEORY AND PRACTICE: A GAP IN THE LITERATURE**

Historically, the moral philosophy in relation to rights has been ‘foundationalist’ in nature. I borrow Richard Rorty’s language in describing the epistemic debates characterized by thinkers like Plato and Kant. The debates spurred in the foundationalist context have to do with justifying the morality of rights in relation to particular conceptions of human nature. In fact, this is where my research began. I was initially interested in these epistemic debates because I thought they would nicely integrate my interests in philosophy and political science. What I found, however, was that the epistemic debates raised largely intractable questions about how we can know there are rights at all. These broader philosophical debates didn’t connect with my interest in

understanding human rights as a way of navigating the political world. In a convincing argument against the usefulness of asking foundational questions about human nature as a way of making progress as a world civilization, Rorty writes:

As I see it, one important intellectual advance made in our century is the steady decline in interest in the quarrel between Plato and Nietzsche. There is a growing willingness to neglect the question “What is our nature?” and to substitute the question “What can we make of ourselves?” We are much less inclined to take ontology or history as a guide to life. We have come to see that the only lesson of either history or anthropology is our extraordinary malleability. We are coming to think of ourselves as the flexible, protean, self-shaping animal rather than as the rational animal or the cruel animal (Rorty 69).

In a complete affirmation of the pragmatist tradition, it seems to me that Rorty is exactly right in his claim that asking the question “do human beings really have rights as articulated in The Universal Declaration?” is not helpful. One of the reasons it is important to discard these outmoded debates is because there is already international consensus that everyone has a certain set of fundamental rights. Thus, engaging in foundational debates about how it is exactly we “know” people have rights in the first place is in no way suggestive of solutions when human rights are actually violated. Moreover, revisiting these epistemic questions puts undue pressure on the logic behind the Universal Declaration; it was quite purposeful that the Declaration not have any epistemic ideological baggage because this is precisely the content Maritain pointed out no one could agree to.

The project that follows explicitly rejects the kind of moral philosophy that remains stuck on epistemic questions in the face of pressing practical challenges. In this vein, theorists who are interested in questions about global justice have become increasingly interested in addressing ethical problems that might be of use to people who suffer. The salient theoretical debate has moved toward ethical concerns about how various moral agents (states or otherwise) ought to respond to those who claim human rights.



This shift toward understanding rights as demanding obligations of specific agents marks a productive way of thinking about what critical work political scientists and philosophers can do to address massive injustices. But it is only a recent phenomenon that academics began asking what responsibilities taking human rights seriously implies. Indeed, as Andrew Kuper convincingly argues, human rights have been devalued because the people who claim them are unable to identify an agent that is ultimately responsible for their protection. Kuper writes, “the proliferating language and politics of rights has often obscured the need to specify *who bears the counterpart obligations to deliver on those rights*” (ix). This has led thinkers like Thomas Pogge, David Miller, and Iris Young to construct theories of responsibility that allow those who suffer from violations of their human rights to make claims against other agents.

One of the primary goals of my research is to offer a new way of assessing theories of responsibility by seeing how they would respond to an important and common injustice: technology sweatshops in China. I use the case of Chinese technology sweatshops to rigorously test these conceptual frameworks designed to help us think about who might be responsible for various instances of global injustice. Instead of relying entirely on abstract ethical considerations, my approach shows that complex normative theories of responsibility for human rights are enhanced by thinking about how they might respond to actual instances of injustice. Since responsibility implies a requirement that a particular agent *do* something, it is important to evaluate how effectively these frameworks enable us to take action. If these theories have trouble being applied to an important example of global injustice, then there is a strong justification to develop analytical tools that allow us to generate political responses to injustices like technology sweatshops.

But even within this new debate on responsibility for human rights, too little attention is devoted to what practical remedies these theoretical frameworks might offer. There is an unfortunate assumption in much of the responsibilities literature that once a group of agents have been assigned responsibility, it is obvious how these individuals or institutions are supposed to operate politically in order to relieve injustice. I challenge this assumption by demonstrating that when confronted by a problem like technology sweatshops, it is crucial to theorize not only about the kinds of agents that might be implicated, but also about the political strategies that might be required to make a difference to people whose rights are violated.

This is the most serious objection to the responsibilities debate I raise within the pages that follow. Without analytic tools to understand how ethical frameworks are supposed to interact with the contentious political realities connected to technology sweatshops, it is not clear how abstract ethical responsibilities translate into feasible solutions. Pogge and Miller make this mistake by assuming that once responsibility is assigned based on their theoretical orientations, people will simply change their behavior to reduce or eliminate injustice. This does not mean their frameworks are necessarily unconvincing from an ethical perspective; I find Pogge's institutional understanding of injustice quite powerful. It simply means that the responsibilities debate would be more suggestive of practical remedies if political theorists explored how people can mobilize politically to respond to injustices that are transnational in scope.

I ultimately argue Iris Young's approach to sweatshops illustrates at least an outline of a politically aware framework of responsibility. By upending standard notions of blame and liability, Young is able to argue that our attention should be focused on finding ways to counter injustices to which we are socially connected. Although I find her commitment to reasoning through the contentious politics of sweatshop labor quite appealing as a general strategy, her

ultimate suggestion that our political responsibilities are discretionary in nature is problematic. Importantly, my criticism of Young is categorically different from Pogge and Miller. Against Pogge and Miller, I claim that they do not offer an analytic framework for sorting out the political implications of their own theories. In contrast with Young, who *does* offer a political framework, I argue that she assumes too much of people by thinking they will self-assign responsibilities.

This thesis is divided into six chapters. The first (current) chapter establishes the central concern of this project: an evaluation of Pogge, Miller, and Young in relation to technology sweatshops in China. The second chapter introduces Chinese technology sweatshops as the case study I will use to test the frameworks offered by Pogge, Miller, and Young. Chapters three, four, and five all follow the same three-part pattern. First, I offer an analytic summary of the most important features of the theory under review. Second, I ask whether the theory should be applied to sweatshops and put it through its paces by seeing how it would respond to them. I ask what agents are implicated and what responsibilities they have. Even though Pogge and Miller don't explicitly write about sweatshop labor, I argue that their theories must take technology sweatshops seriously based on the conceptions of human rights they each offer. Third, I offer an assessment of the advantages and limitations of the theory in question based on the responsibilities implied in part two. In chapter six I conclude by arguing theories of responsibility ought to do more to take the politics of human rights seriously.

## **2.0 TECHNOLOGY SWEATSHOPS IN CHINA**

This chapter introduces the empirical dimension of the project. Since the purpose of this thesis is to understand how the values articulated by Pogge, Miller, and Young translate into institutional reforms, it is useful to understand these reforms in relation to a particular injustice instead of remaining focused solely on abstract conceptualizations of general or hypothetical injustices. The following is meant to familiarize readers with technology sweatshops in China, a pressing contemporary problem that raises important questions about responsibility for protecting human rights.

### **2.1 CHINESE INDUSTRIALIZATION: A BREIF HISTORY**

China's rise as an economic superpower and manufacturing center is a relatively recent phenomenon. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries China was choked with civil wars, foreign invasion, and the folly of the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution perpetrated by Mao Zedong. Though Mao was arguably the first Chinese leader to see the value and necessity of mobilizing the masses to achieve economic modernization and development, he advocated for constant revolution and radical equality that undermined specialization and caused Deng Xiaopeng (the

leader of the People's Republic of China after Mao in the late 1970s) to call the Maoist era 'wasted years.' The Great Leap Forward was Mao's attempt to launch China into economic prosperity on the slogan "More, better, faster, cheaper" (Dreyer 99). Mao thought that China could literally 'leap' from its imperial tradition to industrialization. The policies he deployed to achieve this rapid economic growth were disastrous. The Great Leap included the proviso that intellectuals and 'experts' be purged from the Chinese Communist Party because they were suspected of having anti-Marxist bourgeois inclinations (Lieberthal 103). An example of the 'ideological fervor' Mao created took the form of backyard steel refineries in which peasants were encouraged to melt down utensils and other household instruments with the idea that increased production would lead to greater prosperity through national self-sufficiency (Ibid 104). There is little doubt that this program of leaping past slow and technical industrial growth all while purging intellectuals, ignoring the international system, and creating a framework in which there was virtually no incentive for peasants to do their work well was devastating. This led to a substantial decrease in agricultural output, which launched China into one of the greatest famines in modern history (Shirk 18). Indeed, it comes as little surprise that Deng Xiaoping readily called the period between 1950-1970 'wasted years.'

As a response to these radical economic and political programs, in 1979 Deng rolled out the welcome mat for foreign investors, which Mao had been reluctant to do because of China's history with foreign invasion (Ibid 19). International competition made Chinese businesses stronger and raised the quality of Chinese products such that around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) and opened its domestic markets (Ibid). This newfound openness to the international economy gave rise to unprecedented economic growth. The opening of its domestic markets and vast labor resources has made production in

China an incredibly lucrative enterprise. As Susan Shirk (former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State responsible for China) argues, “From China’s perspective, globalization is a game it can win” (Ibid).

China’s economic success and integration has been fueled in large part by its manufacturing sector. Foreign companies have increasingly set up factories in China because the government has created incentives that allow the flow of relatively cheap and flexible labor into manufacturing centers. Through Special Economic Zones (SEZs) like Shenzhen, foreign investors are attracted by favorable tax incentives, minimal interference by governmental regulation, and an incredible supply of labor resources (Chan). In Shenzhen alone—an important hub for technology manufacturing—its population of workers has increased from fewer than 30,000 before 1980 to 3.09 million in 2000 (Ngai 29). Industrial centers like Shenzhen illustrate China’s comparative advantage in terms of quantity and cost of labor. Migrant workers are paid significantly less than their American counterparts and often work longer hours. According the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, American factory workers earn approximately \$23.32/hour compared to \$1.36/hour on average in Chinese factories according to 2008 data (U.S.).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Though the numbers reported by the Chinese government should be met with some skepticism, both official and anecdotal evidence at specific factories suggests that, if anything, the reported hourly Chinese wages are probably overestimated.

## 2.2 APPLE, FOXCONN, AND TECHNOLOGY SWEATSHOPS

It is no secret that companies all over the world contract with Chinese suppliers to produce goods. For many firms, China represents an opportunity to cheaply and quickly generate products on a scale unmatched anywhere else in the world. Industrial growth has not simply translated into low cost supply chains; it has had a dramatic impact on domestic employment. Industrial centers have virtually guaranteed employment for an estimated 100 million migrant workers, many of whom brave cross-country journeys to live “on the fringes of urban society with limited access to housing, education, medical care and the courts” (Kahn). Foxconn alone—a major supplier that produces some 40 percent of the world’s consumer electronics—employs 1.2 million workers, roughly half of whom work in either Shenzhen or Chengdu (Times Topics). In the electronics industry alone, major brands such as HP, Dell, and Amazon have taken advantage of this flexible and efficient labor source. Foxconn is capable of rolling out products virtually as soon as developers can think them up. While none of this is a secret, companies that want to keep up with our insatiable desire for a new smartphone launch every six months often obscure the working conditions that enable such a dynamic, effective, and cheap supply chain.

Migrant labor mobilization in China has come at an identifiable human cost. In the process of ensuring foreign investment and global access to Chinese workers, the government has allowed exploitative conditions to persist. For instance, the government does not typically grant full residency status to migrant workers in SEZs. Workers, then, have little choice but to live in factory controlled dormitories. Dr. Pun Ngai, who has taken on the challenge of systematically explaining the lives of assembly line workers, describes how the government ensures that employers have overwhelming authority:

In our studies in garment and electronics plants in Shenzhen, we found that more than 90 percent of the total labour force in the light manufacturing industries was young, female, and under 25 years of age. [...] No matter how long they had worked in Shenzhen, they could never be classified as formal workers. Lacking the right to stay in the city, most were accommodated in the workers' dormitories provided by their employers (Ngai 30).

Dr. Ngai explains how this arrangement of transient temporary workers pits local governments against each other. Local officials have an incentive to undercut each other when it comes to enforcing labor standards, quashing labor unions, or providing healthcare and education to workers because every additional labor cost reduces competitiveness (Ibid).

Forced dormitory life is one of the results of this minimally regulated approach where supplier companies (which are often at least one level removed from firms like Apple) have near complete authority. There are some clear economic benefits to this approach. Factories can squeeze every unit of economic productivity out of their workers if they can't collectively bargain for higher wages, and waste valuable time commuting to work or socializing. Migrant workers often have little choice but to comply since leaving the factory often entails forfeiting unpaid wages and a long journey home. Although there are identifiable social costs associated with sweatshop labor, economic and political costs are beginning to be imposed by workers with greater frequency. Increasingly, workers hold protests and strikes in an attempt to draw attention to substandard factory conditions and destabilize the regimes that contribute to their oppression (Barboza and Bradsher).

Apple has certainly taken advantage of China's ready supply of migrant workers as a way of meeting insatiable demand for new gadgets. Since June 2007, Apple has sold over 350 million iPhones, iPads, and iPod Touch's. That represents five distinct models of its iPhone, three distinct models of its iPad, and four models of the iPod Touch (Reisinger). The scale and flexibility of production offered by companies like Foxconn is partly what makes Apple such a profitable company.



In recent months, Apple has been at the forefront of debates about working conditions in China after a series of reports were released that documented specific and systemic violations of its own supplier code of conduct as well as domestic labor laws and internationally recognized labor standards. Although some of the reporting on conditions in Foxconn's facilities has been exaggerated, it is definitively true that Apple's suppliers routinely underpay and overwork factory workers, employ teenagers, and ignore health and safety hazards. According to the New York Times' breakdown of Apple's "Supplier Responsibility Progress Report" which documents hundreds of audits Apple conducted between 2008-2011:

[...] about half or more showed evidence of large numbers of employees laboring more than six days a week as well as working extended overtime. Some workers received less than minimum wage or had pay withheld as punishment. Apple found 70 core violations over that period, including cases of involuntary labor, under-age workers, record falsifications, improper disposal of hazardous waste and over a hundred workers injured by toxic chemical exposures. Last year, the company conducted 229 audits. There were slight improvements in some categories and the detected rate of core violations declined. However, within 93 facilities, at least half of workers exceeded the 60-hours-a-week work limit. At a similar number, employees worked more than six days a week. There were incidents of discrimination, improper safety precautions, failure to pay required overtime rates and other violations. That year, four employees were killed and 77 injured in workplace explosions (Duhigg).

While Apple's audits do not reflect the pervasiveness of sweatshops across the electronics industry, extended overtime, involuntary labor, under-age workers, and withholding pay as a means of keeping people on the assembly line have been widely reported as common practice.

Although there is some debate among economists about the benefits of sweatshops in developing countries, it is fairly uncontroversial to point out that the conditions that persist significantly reduce the ability of many workers to live minimally decent, autonomous lives. Not only are wages often below subsistence level, many factories strategically enforce rules that make workers entirely dependent on their employers. For instance, KYE Systems, a company that supplies Microsoft, created a system of penalties that achieve this objective. There is a comprehensive system of monetary penalties for violating a variety of factory policies. These

range from docking three days' wages (\$14.67) for losing a time card (which costs 73 cents) to being fined 5 and ½ days wages for missing a single day of work. Workers are paid 65 cents an hour, which falls down to 52 cents after factory food costs are deducted. Moreover, entire production lines can be fined for not satisfying their production quotas. In the KYE factory there have also been reports that mistakes are punished by humiliation and being forced to clean the bathrooms. Reports of sexual harassment and abuse are common (Kernaghan).

Physical hazards often stem from poor or non-existent efforts to protect workers from dangerous conditions. One high profile and dramatic example of this problem is the use of n-hexane, a chemical used to clean iPhone screens in a Chinese supplier. N-hexane evaporates slightly faster than other cleaning agents (like rubbing alcohol), so it helps assembly lines move more quickly and profitably. N-hexane is also a well-known toxin that causes nerve damage and paralysis. Apple admitted to its use on assembly lines in its supplier responsibility report (Duhigg and Barboza). Explosions at iPad factories in Chengdu have also attracted widespread media attention, especially since it became clear that Apple was warned of dangerous factory conditions that might lead to explosions in advance (SACOM).

While these incidents are disturbing, they point to a larger pattern of disregarding basic safety precautions. It is difficult to establish with any certainty the prevalence of these incidents because there is no robust system of external auditing in place, though Apple has recently promised to ramp up its efforts. Apple, for instance, makes its suppliers sign confidentiality agreements to maintain secrecy around its latest products. This secrecy can make it difficult to know exactly what is going on in any given factory. "That lack of transparency gives Apple an edge at keeping its plans secret. But it also has been a barrier to improving working conditions, according to advocates and former Apple executives" (Duhigg and Barboza). It is clear that

companies like Apple have control over conditions in their factories, even if other companies operate them. After widespread public scrutiny over wage and safety issues, Foxconn has agreed to sharply increase wages for many of its workers (Barboza). Although the true impact of this decision remains to be seen, it indicates that companies like Apple and Foxconn are responsive to public shaming.

The supply chain that puts massive quantities of consumer electronics in our hands is more complicated than Apple's relationship with Foxconn might initially suggest. It is often true that networks of suppliers obscure each other. One product might draw components from several factories that supply larger factories responsible for ultimately producing a final product. In some cases it might be more efficient for Foxconn to contract certain pieces of production to smaller companies in order to generate as many units as possible. It is not even the case that a single factory only supplies one electronics firm. Companies like Foxconn often work with a variety of electronics companies interested in producing a range of products.

The complexity of this supply network makes it difficult to pinpoint one factory or company that might be responsible for working conditions. Each entity operates as one piece of a large and organizationally complex production process. Moreover, each supplier is often carefully evaluated to determine exactly how much it costs to produce a particular product. Larger electronics firms then have the ability to leave their suppliers with razor thin profit margins:

Apple typically asks suppliers to specify how much every part costs, how many workers are needed and the size of their salaries. Executives want to know every financial detail. Afterward, Apple calculates how much it will pay for a part. Most suppliers are allowed only the slimmest of profits (Barboza).

Given that factories often operate at the brink of solvency—and this is not just true of Apple's suppliers—companies like Foxconn have an incentive to save as much as possible on labor costs.

Suppliers can convincingly argue that they operate in highly competitive environments in which any increase in labor standards and wages could represent the loss of a competitive advantage. In the context of increasingly globalized and competitive supply networks, it is often in the interests of governments and technology firms to ignore international labor standards in favor of cost efficiency.

To be sure, poor labor standards in the context of industrialization and development are not new—nor are they specific to China or the electronics industry. Indeed, the United States, along with many other industrialized countries, promoted similarly troubling human rights abuses. What is new, however, is the extent to which these violations occur within a global institutional framework that potentially triggers obligations for a diverse set of actors. Mike Daisey, a captivating performance artist, put together a monologue on a trip he took to China in which he claimed to witness many of the abuses reported at Foxconn factories. Though crucial elements of his story were fabricated and embellished, his narrative captured one of the largest podcast audiences in NPR history (Glass). We are riveted by these stories because on some level we feel connected to people who needlessly suffer so that we can enjoy new and inexpensive consumer electronics.

### **2.3 THE RESPONSIBILITY PROBLEM**

Powerful narrative accounts that reveal sweatshop conditions connected to our favorite brands make us feel responsible on a gut level. When I heard Mike Daisey’s Pittsburgh performance of “The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs” people gasped when he described teenage girls who work 14-hour shifts at Foxconn factories. After the show, when the audience powered their

iPhones back on, there was a profound sense of discomfort. I overheard dozens of conversations about how awful it is that big technology firms, national governments, and consumers look the other way. Yet few conversations emerged about what to do about sweatshops in China because the problem is distant and abstract—we are only occasionally aware of the plight of factory workers halfway around the world. But even if sweatshops garnered more media attention, there are no obvious solutions.

One typical response is to mobilize boycotts of companies that are known to exploit their workers. There is some evidence that big technology firms with ‘cool’ brand recognition like Apple respond to precisely this kind of negative media attention. After a rash of worker suicides in 2010, which prompted criticism of Foxconn in Western media outlets, Apple submitted to audits conducted by the Fair Labor Association (FLA) (Times Topics). It appears that at the very least, Foxconn has agreed to reduce overtime and raise wages. Symbolic victories certainly have value, but it is not entirely clear that conditions will improve substantially as previously outraged consumer demands have, at least rhetorically, been met. Moreover, for the boycott model to have the desired impact, consumers must have access to information about the dense network of suppliers that produce their products. It does not seem realistic to think that most people have the time or energy to pay attention to how their shoes or phones are made or how their coffee is grown—or are willing to pay higher prices for a clearer conscience. As more of our products are made in developing countries, people are also likely to grow complacent about the latest sweatshop campaign or NGO report that tells them that children are making their products.

At the other end of the spectrum of typical responses, some argue there should be robust institutional arrangements that are primarily responsible for standard setting, monitoring, and

shaming governments and transnational businesses, or imposing economic penalties. Internationally oriented mechanisms have the advantage of taking responsibility out of the hands of individual consumers by institutionalizing the obligation to make working conditions better. National governments could participate in designing new accountability mechanisms for trade regimes and transnational businesses through already existing monitoring NGOs, or propose institutional reforms to entities like the WTO and International Labor Organization (ILO). This could both standardize the quality of international response and make it clear that everyone has the same set of obligations to support core institutional regimes. Thus, individuals need only support these broad institutions that are ultimately responsible for holding companies and governments accountable instead of being directly responsible for taking action whenever Foxconn commits a labor violation.

While a commitment to basic labor standards guaranteed by robust international organizations might be theoretically appealing, there is good reason to think that such an approach is a political non-starter. Both China and the United States have vested economic interests in the status quo. The United States has little interest in democratizing the WTO such that developing countries or labor groups have more influence. China's 'economic miracle' is predicated on outcompeting other developing countries by offering attractive incentives for foreign investment; it certainly does not want international organizations mandating higher wages or imposing sanctions.

Even if the United States and China agreed to get more serious about including robust mechanisms for enforcing labor standards in trade agreements, it is not clear that this would be the best way of ensuring better outcomes on the ground. Empirically, there is some evidence that

free trade is a more effective in raising labor standards than trade agreements themselves.

According to Layna Mosley, a professor of political science at UNC:

Our research demonstrates that when a developing country with low labor standards trades with higher-standards countries like the United States and those in Europe, it comes under influences from the market itself that improve its labor standards. And this has far greater impact on developing nations than including labor conditions in trade agreements (Mosley).

This analysis suggests a view that some economists promote: the best way to achieve better labor standards is to promote the free flow of capital around the globe. As markets in developing countries are opened to foreign investment, not only will wealth be imported, but so will labor standards. On this view, it makes little sense to worry about sweatshop conditions in economies like China's that have embraced open international markets as fuel for its economic engine.

These free-trade oriented arguments are partially supported by the reality that many migrant workers seem to choose factory life. Despite the fact that many electronics factories in SEZs essentially control all aspects of their workers lives, withhold weeks of wages to discourage workers from unionizing or walking off the line, and disregard basic health and safety safeguards, migrant workers continue to supply their labor. There is anecdotal evidence that many migrant workers know what to expect from life in a factory. In an interview with Dong, a young female migrant worker, Dr. Ngai anecdotally illustrates the logic of abandoning a local village to work in a factory:

I thought I could earn more money in the Special Economic Zone. I knew quite well what the working conditions might be, and how much I could earn before I went out to work. I know it was not easy to work in a big city which was a totally strange place to me. But I thought it was still worth it to try, and it was a chance for me to look at the outside world (Ngai 31).

If migrant workers are electing to work for companies like Foxconn, then is it plausible to argue that they are being coerced? Even though the conditions might be less than ideal, they are certainly better than potential alternatives. Why else would people agree to work long hours on an assembly line?

Onora O’Neill has contributed valuable insights about what constitutes coercive practices or “offers you can’t refuse” (81). According to O’Neill, the mere existence of options is not enough to guarantee that a decision is being rendered in a non-coercive fashion. For instance, if migrant workers essentially have to choose between a rural life of extreme poverty or else submit to a life defined by near total control by an employer, this may not actually represent a genuine non-coercive option. O’Neill writes:

What would make a particular ‘offer’ unrefusable is not simply the level of the wage, or its legal form, or the propositional content of the wage bargain, but the fact that acceptance of specific work has been made the sole alternative to an unsustainable residual option, secured by the vulnerable life situation of those to whom the ‘offer’ is made (95).

The life of a migrant worker may very well represent the kind of ‘vulnerable life situation’ that is especially susceptible to coercion. Young, poor female migrant workers are arguably not given a real choice because their alternative to factory life is not a livable option. Factory managers use this to their advantage in hiring practices and structuring regulations that keep workers both physically and financially dependent on the factory for which they work. Indeed, the argument that workers are given a genuine choice seems to be in trouble.

This discussion of sweatshop conditions in China and who might be held responsible for them is meant to illustrate the complexity of labor abuses in the context of globalization. National governments, NGOs, individual consumers, multinational corporations, independent suppliers, and trade regimes all play a role in creating the conditions that make sweatshops an all too common reality. We should not be surprised that many of these actors want to shift blame on one another. The Chinese government can credibly claim that it is hypocritical for the international community to accuse them of violating labor standards, since the industrial revolution in the West certainly saw its share of labor abuses. Suppliers like Foxconn often argue that they operate in a highly competitive environment driven by market forces—it would



be economic suicide to raise wages or invest in health and safety improvements. Individual consumers can understandably say that it is not at all obvious how they ought to respond to these problems, especially given the fact that there is little consensus on the ‘right’ solution.

Theories of responsibility that are meant to help us sort out what our obligations might be or how we should reason about them have quite a high hurdle to clear. They must make sense of an incredibly complicated network of institutional and individual actors and messy and sometimes contradictory empirical assessments of how economic incentives work. Fundamentally, these theories address a problem that is not reducible to a single culture or political community. As I move on to critically assess the work of Thomas Pogge, David Miller, and Iris Young, I hope to make some sense of what some of the leading theories of responsibility tell us about our responsibilities to migrant workers in China. By imagining how each of these thinkers would respond to electronics sweatshops, I will test the limits of their theories.

### 3.0 THOMAS POGGE

In selecting thinkers from the vast and rich literature on global justice, I have attempted to showcase three distinct approaches that could plausibly be extended to labor abuses in China. Instead of wading into purely ideal approaches that tend to tell us little about what are obligations actually are on a practical level, I have included thinkers whose work can give us principled reasons to re-think our attitudes toward sweatshop workers, and perhaps ultimately, change our behavior. Including Thomas Pogge is a no-brainer. His approach to the responsibility question (who is responsible for human rights violations and why?) is meant to convince affluent citizens that they are complicit in institutional arrangements that harm the global poor. Though our world is both highly unjust and institutionally complex, Pogge thinks that if he can convince us that we are responsible for imposing injustices on disadvantaged citizens in the third world, we are likely to mobilize politically to do something about it.

Section one of this chapter is devoted to an exposition of Pogge's framework for thinking about responsibility for global injustices. In section two, I explain how Pogge's institutional understanding of responsibility for harming the global poor could be applied to Chinese technology sweatshops. Pogge does not offer a full explanation of how affluent citizens can realistically discharge their responsibilities, so the application of Pogge's framework to technology sweatshops is inherently speculative. I will evaluate the attractiveness of his theoretical response to sweatshop labor in the final section.

### 3.1 AN INSTITUTIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF RESPONSIBILITY

Thomas Pogge's way of thinking about our responsibilities to poor people in far away countries is based on an intuitive moral claim: it is wrong to uphold institutions that harm others, regardless of citizenship or proximity. This proposition is meant to have broad appeal; it is difficult to imagine that we have no ethical responsibilities to those who are harmed by institutions we help support—even if these harms occur in a transnational context. Thus, when we *do* cause harms through the institutions in which we participate, we have a duty to do something about it. In other words, my support of a specific institution can implicate me as a cause of another person's suffering.

Pogge imagines that governments, trade organizations, multinational corporations, etc. all represent institutions people in affluent developed countries help support. Through our tax dollars, elected officials, and purchasing decisions, we all, in varying degrees, participate in institutions that frequently impact people who fall outside of our immediate political and national communities. To the extent that these institutions impose an unjust global order that causes significant deprivation, all participants have a duty to reform these institutions so they no longer harm others, even if they are thousands of miles away.

To illustrate Pogge's institutional understanding of injustice, imagine a hypothetical world where the University of Pittsburgh announced that female students must pay double tuition so that male students can earn degrees at no cost. On Pogge's view this would represent a harm that all members of the University community help support. Even if I did not make the decision to increase female tuition, I clearly participate in the institution through my tuition dollars and participation in classes and other activities. Moreover, I benefit from this unjust institutional order because I can earn a degree at no cost while my fellow female students must endure

additional unfair monetary burdens. Although I have not directly acted to hurt undergraduate female students, I have an obligation to collectively act with other students and staff to withdraw my support of the university or else contribute to reforms that would end the injustices being perpetrated against my fellow students. I have this obligation precisely because of the moral requirement that I not uphold unjust institutional arrangements. While Pogge would not classify this hypothetical as a grave injustice on par with other human rights violations, it illustrates Pogge's particular formulation of our *negative duties*—that is, a duty not to uphold unjust institutions, rather than a less stringent freestanding positive duty to offer assistance to the needy.

It is easy to imagine that an argument like this could be applied to every conceivable harm perpetrated by institutions we help support, but Pogge is very clear in setting out criteria that limit the scope of his framework:

1. We are harming the global poor only if our conduct sets back their most basic interests
2. I am focusing exclusively on human rights deficits that are *causally traceable to social institutions*
3. I am assigning moral responsibility for such a human rights deficit only to those who *actively cooperate* in designing or imposing the relevant social institutions—and only to them am I then ascribing compensatory obligations to do their share toward reforming these social institutions or toward protecting its victims
4. I allow that our active cooperation is harming the global poor only if it is *foreseeable* that this order gives rise to substantial deficits
5. I require that these human rights deficits be *reasonably avoidable*
6. This avoidability must be knowable (Pogge 26).

Notice the main concern here is the most 'basic interests' of the global poor. Pogge's approach to human rights is not about ensuring that everyone lead the best life possible—he just wants to ensure that affluent citizens are not imposing a global order that limits the ability of others to live minimally decent lives. Pogge imagines that these basic human rights are necessary but not sufficient conditions to live a fulfilling and meaningful life. Without these limits, it would be easy to reject this institutional approach to the responsibility question because it would give rise to endless requirements that we respond to all avoidable harms.

Pogge is careful to argue that citizens in affluent countries may only be held responsible when basic human rights are in question and when they are actively involved in causing an injustice. These limiting conditions are meant to satisfy the libertarian concern that global justice might require endless positive obligations to relieve all forms of suffering. Unlike utilitarian frameworks, which in Peter Singer's formulation demand that the affluent respond to deprivations right up until doing so would create a comparable moral harm, Pogge's framework is meant to strike a balance between bottomless and sparse obligations:

The institutional understanding thus occupies an appealing middle ground: it goes beyond (minimalist interactional) libertarianism, which disconnects us from any deprivations we do not directly bring about, without falling into a (maximalist interactional) utilitarianism of rights, which holds each of us responsible for all deprivations whatever, regardless of the nature of our causal relation to them (Pogge 72).

Pogge is arguing against the view that we are only responsible for harms that we directly cause, but he thinks that libertarians ought to find his institutional approach appealing because it specifies significant limits on the circumstances that could conceivably require that we attempt to compensate the global poor or mobilize politically to reform oppressive institutions. Even the strict libertarian should worry if he or she is responsible for massive hunger and the premature death of thousands of children every day.

Once libertarians, utilitarians, and everyone in between become convinced that we participate in harming the global poor, what is the appropriate response? Pogge thinks that we have a duty to compensate the poor. If we fail to compensate them, then we would continue to benefit from a set of rules that are fundamentally rigged in our favor. Unlike moral obligations to offer charitable assistance to those in need, this compensatory obligation stems from unfair advantages the affluent have avoidably gained at the expense of the disadvantaged. In other words, the obligation to compensate the poor is directly connected to our weighty negative duty not to exploit others. Importantly, Pogge does not imagine that it would take an unreasonable

effort to reform global institutions that distribute resources and wealth in an unfair fashion, “Clearly, we could eradicate severe poverty—through a reform of the global order or through other initiatives designed to compensate for its effects on the global poor—without ‘sacrificing’ the fulfillment of our own needs or even mildly serious interests” (Pogge *Assisting* 554).

To this point, I have outlined Pogge’s theoretical claim that we have a negative obligation not to participate in institutions that cause human rights deprivations, and that when we do, we have the responsibility to compensate those we have harmed and reform the institutions that cause them. All of this hinges, however, on an empirical argument about the *cause* of suffering among the global poor. If it were not the case that we can draw causal lines from individuals to institutions they help support to oppressed people in third world countries, Pogge’s theoretical framework would have no practical relevance. For instance, if it were true that poverty in developing countries is caused by corrupt or oppressive authoritarian regimes, demanding that affluent citizens mobilize in reform movements would make little difference. Pogge rejects these national explanations for poverty because he believes that there are almost always international background conditions that have overriding explanatory force. (Pogge 118).

If we think carefully about our common violent history as well as the rules that govern trade relationships between countries, then we must reject the thesis that oppression in the developing world has only national causes. For instance, Pogge cites the WTO as an example of an institution that has clearly been rigged in favor the affluent. Since developed countries have negotiating power several orders of magnitude greater than many developing countries, it is unsurprising that the poor have been denied access to generic versions of lifesaving medications, equal access to sell their products to developed countries, and are functionally denied a seat at the table by not having the money to send delegates to trade negotiations that affect them (Ibid).

Moreover, if we consider the fact that affluent countries are willing to do business with brutal authoritarian regimes, it comes as little surprise that resource rich countries see a negative relationship between size of natural resource reserves and economic growth (Pogge 120).

To be clear, Pogge does not want to absolve warlords, dictators, and other oppressors that operate largely within poorer countries of responsibility; he thinks that they help perpetrate massive injustices too. However, the larger problem is that affluent countries extend resource privileges to whoever happens to be in power irrespective of the regime's human rights record (Pogge 120). Resource rich developing countries are often subjected to brutal regimes that violently take power because there are economic incentives to do so. After all, if I can topple a relatively weak government and sell that country's oil to the United States, there is a huge monetary incentive to ensure that I do everything I can to take power. Pogge would argue that this is a perfect example of how developed countries have institutionalized coup attempts and oppressive behavior in developing countries by agreeing to trade and loan money to whatever regime happens to be in power.

When confronted with this information, citizens in affluent countries ought to recognize that they are complicit in the plight of poverty stricken countries like Nigeria, Kenya, Brazil, and Venezuela. Though indirectly, through regimes like the WTO and extension of resource and borrowing privileges, we support national governments that monetarily and even militarily prop up oppressive regimes. Although it is not as if American citizens are directly repressing the global poor themselves, we are nonetheless institutionally complicit. We must, then, reform our national government and offer compensation by exerting pressure on our leaders, supporting NGO reform efforts, and genuinely make an effort to withdraw support for this practice.

Although this is just one example of how Pogge's theoretical framework might move from identifying a grave injustice to assigning obligations to a particular set agents, it illustrates the general features of his institutionally based theory of responsibility. Pogge's framework certainly raises questions and difficulties—are the affluent really *causally* responsible for global injustices? Are we all supposed to discharge our responsibilities in the same way? How can I withdraw support or significantly reform transnational trade regimes and governments? These questions will be addressed in greater detail in the following section, but it is worth noting that despite some potential shortcomings, it is worthwhile to think critically about why so many people do not currently live minimally decent, dignified lives.

### 3.2 POGGE AND SWEATSHOPS

Now that I have explained what Pogge's theory of responsibility looks like in general, it is time to put it through its paces by seeing how it might respond to a specific injustice. There are three steps to this task. The first is to see whether Pogge's theory should apply to sweatshops. The second step is to think carefully about what the application of Pogge's framework looks like in relation to sweatshops. Since Pogge does not offer explicit answers to questions about how we are supposed to act in accordance with our negative duty to not uphold unjust institutions, or what our more positive obligations might look like, this analysis is largely speculative. Whether or not Pogge owes us better answers to questions about how his framework can be operationalized will be left to the third part of this section where I will zoom out and evaluate more generally whether Pogge's framework offers us a useful way of approaching the problem of sweatshops both according to the plausibility of the implied solution and the attractiveness of



the principles it aims to defend. This is the basic strategy I will use to evaluate all three thinkers (Pogge, Miller, and Young).

In applying Pogge's thinking about responsibility for protecting human rights, it is necessary to sort out whether he would consider the example of technology sweatshops a violation to which his theory should apply. Although his primary focus is severe and systemic poverty, technology sweatshops are a useful test case for Pogge because they represent a concrete injustice that has clear institutional dimensions. Even though Pogge does not explicitly talk about sweatshops, by applying his model to a different and specific institutional injustice, we may glean useful insights about what our responsibilities to migrant sweatshop workers are. After all, Pogge clearly does not want his model to apply only to world poverty and hunger; he wants it to apply to all cases in which the affluent impose unjust institutions. This analysis can also reveal important theoretical flaws. Indeed, the goal of this project is to use the case of technology sweatshops as a way of evaluating theoretical models like Pogge's based on their practical implications.

There are three broad reasons that Pogge's model should apply to technology sweatshops. First, technology sweatshops infringe upon the basic human rights of their workers. The primary concern for Pogge is whether some institutional arrangement "foreseeably produces an avoidable human rights deficit" (Pogge 25). Technology sweatshops certainly fall into this category. As explored more fully above, technology sweatshop workers are frequently subject to degrading and inhumane treatment. It is beyond doubt that these workers are treated in a way that falls below a minimum human rights threshold. While there are people whose rights are arguably in greater jeopardy than sweatshop workers (LRA child soldiers, for example), that many sweatshops impose avoidable harms indicates that Pogge's framework might be of use.

Second, the human rights deprivations that can be found in technology sweatshops are (at least potentially) traceable to broader transnational institutional arrangements. Multinational technology firms, trade organizations, national governments, and contractors like Foxconn are each pieces of a larger institutional network that connects people of disparate social, political, and economic communities. Though each of these institutions operate in complex and often diffuse ways, they clearly support the existence of factories in which basic human rights are routinely violated.

Third, many affluent citizens help support these institutions, which impose injustices on migrant workers in China. A quick walk down the street of any major U.S. city will quickly reveal the extent to which the global rich participate in the consumer electronics industry. At any given moment, almost everyone has at least one (and often more) inexpensively made piece of electronics including cell phones, laptops, and MP3 players. It is clearly true that most of us benefit from the widespread availability of affordable electronics.

I must begin this extension of Pogge's framework to technology sweatshops with a disclaimer. While Pogge does imagine his framework nicely identifies the affluent as complicit in an institutional order that imposes on the global poor, he does not explicitly articulate how we are supposed to act with respect to this negative obligation beyond a general call to reform these institutions, compensate the poor, or refrain from participating altogether. This makes the task of applying his framework especially difficult, since there is no roadmap to serve as a guide. However, I do believe that Pogge would support the reforms I suggest below and that it is nonetheless useful to think about his ideas through the lens of technology sweatshops. The analysis that follows sets up an important discussion about whether theories of responsibility

owe us an explanation of how we are supposed to act in political contexts to discharge our obligations.

Since Pogge's general theoretical approach is based on an analysis of institutional regimes that allow the affluent to impose injustices on others, it is necessary to unpack the institutional forces that support technology sweatshops before explaining what this might imply about our responsibilities. Once I have described some of the mechanisms that harm sweatshop workers, it will be possible to flesh out what Pogge might think the affluent ought to do about it.

Sweatshop conditions have been institutionalized in part by widespread market liberalization without a strong commitment to labor protections. The creation of Special Economic Zones and accession to the WTO as part of China's increasingly open door policy to foreign investment lead to an incredibly competitive environment—China attracted more foreign direct investment than any country in the world other than the United States in 2009 (Chan). Interestingly, the government recognized the need to create some social safety nets, especially for workers who were laid off from state run enterprises (a condition of joining the WTO was rolling back support for state enterprises). In 2007, the government passed a labor contract law, which gave “trade unions and employee representatives the right to negotiate with employers for collective contracts covering a company, industry or region” (Chan 427).

These labor protections and welfare guarantees are largely ignored because enforcing them would represent an added cost for companies that want to set up factories in China. Thus, migrant workers don't have full citizenship rights in urban SEZs<sup>2</sup> (which excludes them from welfare benefits), factory managers are often the heads of ‘employee’ labor unions, and local

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<sup>2</sup> This refers to the hukou system of registration in China, which effectively denies full citizenship rights to migrant workers in urban areas. The hukou system does not just apply to migrant workers, but it has particularly pernicious effects on their ability to escape rural poverty.

officials refuse to enforce labor laws because they depend on attracting foreign contracts to secure tax revenue (Ibid). The result, as I described in greater detail above, are factories in which workers are subjected to sub-human conditions.

Initially, this might seem like China's problem. After all, how is China's poor labor law enforcement or corruption of local officials the fault of average citizens in affluent countries? Pogge's answer to this question hinges on the empirical claim that there is a broader international framework that is responsible for imposing an unjust order on migrant workers. For instance, even though China joined the WTO voluntarily, it cooperated with the United States in constructing trade agreements that do not require serious labor protections or a system of monitoring violations of local and internationally recognized standards. Moreover, the companies that are responsible for directly contracting with regional suppliers, that in turn operate sweatshops, have implicitly endorsed an economic environment where it is acceptable to treat workers poorly. Companies like Apple routinely violate even their own supplier code of conduct, and are perfectly comfortable giving suppliers razor thin profit margins, which incentivize cutting labor costs wherever possible.

Even institutionalized NGOs like the Fair Labor Association (FLA), which is the organization that conducted audits of Apple factories in the wake increased media coverage of Foxconn, is widely criticized for being too close to the companies it is supposed to regulate (Greenhouse Critics). Moreover, it has been found that while corporate social responsibility programs like the FLA do a reasonable job of finding violations of health and safety standards and minimum wage and hour requirements, they tend to underreport violations of freedom of association rights (Anner). It is not surprising that corporate influenced programs are less

effective at giving workers the right to form unions, collectively bargain, and strike, because this would obviously limit corporate control of factories.

While this account of how trade regimes, multinational corporations, governments, and even monitoring groups can help support widespread injustices is certainly not exhaustive, it should illustrate the ways in which institutional arrangements can interact to impose unjust conditions on migrant workers. In Pogge's view it is not enough to simply find unjust institutional arrangements; the affluent must be implicated in supporting unjust institutions in order to be in violation of their negative duty not to impose injustices on others. The most direct ways the affluent help impose this unjust institutional order is through their support of technology firms as well as their participation in national governments that support trade regimes without strong labor protections in their name.

Up to this point I have established that sweatshops are an injustice Pogge should want his theory to cover and that there are important institutional relationships between affluent consumers and sweatshop workers. Next, my task is to say something more specific about how exactly we are supposed to discharge our responsibilities according to Pogge's theory of responsibility. In the final section I will evaluate the attractiveness of the theory more generally.

It is because we are in violation of our negative duty to not impose injustice on migrant workers that we have a collective responsibility to reform the institutions that harm them. Since it is partly the trade regime itself that is exploitive, we may need to rethink our commitment to unrestricted investment in China. United States citizens, for example, could exert pressure to create a better mechanism through the WTO to ensure that imported electronic devices are made in a humane fashion. While there would almost certainly be some political opposition to restricting trade that overwhelmingly benefits U.S. consumers and corporations in the form of

low prices for electronics and high profit margins for multinational firms, it is conceivable that public pressure on our elected officials would encourage them to engage in trade reforms.<sup>3</sup>

Even if these advocacy efforts did not immediately change the United States' trade agreements with China, the increased focus on sweatshops would undoubtedly have an impact on technology firms that must protect their brands from being tarnished by allegations of sweatshop labor. As Apple's response to the media coverage of Foxconn's abuse of workers demonstrates—even if imperfectly—companies are willing to enact changes if they think their profits and image will suffer because of greater consumer awareness of sweatshops through media and activist efforts. Although a relatively deinstitutionalized response is far from the comprehensive reform that would make a huge difference to sweatshop workers, it is possible to imagine that increased efforts to exert pressure on our government could help incentivize reforms even without a systemic shift in our trade regimes.

Greater public efforts at reform may also have the effect of creating new markets for humanely produced goods. Developing countries that were previously unable to compete with China on labor costs could suddenly be competitive on labor standards. In fact, this 'race to the top' has happened on a small scale with companies like Alta Gracia, which emerged out of the student anti-sweatshop movement and called attention to Universities that rely on sweatshops for their apparel (Greenhouse Factory Defies). Although slightly more costly than competitors (Alta Gracia pays its workers three times the normal minimum wage in the Dominican Republic), it is

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<sup>3</sup> It would take a great deal of political pressure to inject a robust social clause in the WTO. When the organization was formed in the mid 1990s, both developing and industrialized countries had incentives to exclude comprehensive labor protections. Industrialized countries did not want to ultimately exclude China from the trade regime (though it did not join the WTO for several years). Developing countries also had an incentive to argue against a social clause because it would lessen their comparative advantage in supplying cheap labor.

possible to imagine that the U.S. government could find ways to incentivize doing business with companies that are carefully monitored by groups like the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC), which unlike the FLA, is not funded by the corporations it monitors.

Initially, it might seem like evidence of China's complicity in promoting sweatshop labor makes it almost entirely responsible for the plight of workers within its borders. After all, underage workers, excessive overtime, and unprotected exposure to dangerous materials violate Chinese law (Barboza and Duhigg). Moreover, it is not as if Chinese officials are unaware of sweatshop conditions, or do not have the means to put pressure on suppliers to increase wages. Pogge would have us think about this injustice in another way. China might share some minimal responsibility to enact reforms that increase the welfare of workers who fall below certain human rights thresholds. Additionally, the workers themselves might have some responsibility to assert their rights and challenge the companies and governments that oppress them. Independent watchdogs like China Labor Watch have repeatedly pointed out that degrading working conditions are a foreseeable consequence of China's model for economic development.

Ultimately, however, a diverse set of institutional agents has contributed to an overarching unjust order that implicate the affluent in some kind of remedy. Perhaps we have responsibilities to promote the respect of fundamental labor standards in our trade agreements with other countries, shame corporations that promote sweatshop labor, support advocacy and monitoring groups, reform the WTO to give workers a larger stake in negotiations, promote complaints mechanisms that could effectively hold corporations and governments to account, put pressure on our political leaders to better promote international labor standards, and support awareness efforts to educate affluent citizens about their complicity in imposing injustice. While it is impossible to give an exhaustive account of all the ways in which we might have

responsibilities to reform our unjust global order, Pogge is committed to the view that we all have some obligation to participate in these reforms.

### **3.3 THE PRACTICAL LIMITS OF IDEALISM**

In the previous section I fleshed out what kinds of practical recommendations are implied by Pogge's view of responsibility for global injustice. Pogge would have us trace the harm of sweatshop labor directly to people who live in affluent countries. We are responsible insofar as we violate our negative duty not to support institutions that oppress people. I suggest that this could require a variety of reforms that range from dramatically changing our trade regimes to participating in activist movements designed to draw attention to sweatshop conditions. In what follows, I offer my own assessment of Pogge's framework based on the practical actions it requires of average affluent citizens. It is my hope that this analysis supports the value of my methodological approach, which assesses theories of justice through the lens of actual human rights violations for which we might be responsible.

There are some significant advantages to Pogge's way of conceptualizing our responsibilities to sweatshop workers. His institutional approach discourages the frequent conclusion that citizens in affluent countries aren't responsible because it is ultimately China's fault that it doesn't better protect its workers. Instead of blaming China for poverty, corruption, and an insatiable quest for economic growth supported by cheap and therefore exploitable labor, Pogge allows us to see that there is a complex set of interrelated actors that share responsibility for electronics sweatshops. It seems unlikely that sweatshops would persist if there were efforts to support reforms to our trade agreements that would require submission to independent



monitoring agencies, or if there was a substantial push to only buy products made under fair conditions. Pogge is right to problematize our relationships to our government and technology firms because these are institutions that we both help support and play a role in causing a significant injustice that keeps many migrant workers from leading minimally decent lives.

Pogge is quite convincing that we ought to be concerned about the predominant attitude that even if we could do something about these injustices to which we are connected, we don't have to. On an intuitive level, it just seems clear that we have some negative obligation not to harm others, and that when we do, we ought not stand idly by. By framing the moral dimension of his project in this way, he avoids intractable and unhelpful discussions about where rights are grounded, or how we know there are any rights at all.

If one accepts the underlying empirical claims of Pogge's argument, his theoretical framework seems quite strong. Morally, if the affluent are the *cause* of sweatshop conditions, then it is plausible to single them out as high on the list of those who should be held responsible. Moreover, they also tend to be capable of both the kind of compensation or reform Pogge has in mind. However, it is not obvious that the assumptions that underwrite this claim are correct, and the case of technology sweatshops shows that the empirical waters are muddy.

For example, China has incentivized the creation of technology sweatshops through its policies in Special Economic Zones. As I explained above, SEZs serve as special geographic areas where there are favorable tax and regulatory incentives for foreign firms to set up factories. SEZs help foster environments where workers are regularly abused because there is little government oversight, and many poor migrant workers are desperate to escape rural poverty. Chinese officials have largely either looked the other way when it comes to enforcing labor standards or actively promoted coercive conditions through the denial of full residency status for

migrant workers through the hukou system. It is not implausible to suggest that even if the affluent take advantage of these economic incentives to exploit workers, the Chinese ought to share some responsibility as well. Although Pogge's abstract account of the institutional causes of global poverty is superficially convincing, this particular case helps demonstrate that not all transnational institutional injustices can simply be tied only to the affluent.

This empirical generalization makes a difference because it downplays the role the workers themselves might play in changing the institutional structures that oppress them. It is too often assumed that responsibility for global problems should rest only with citizens in developed countries because the oppressed are incapable of mounting any serious resistance to their oppressors. While I do not want to dismiss the fact that the affluent certainly do play a role in institutions that oppress sweatshop workers, it doesn't make sense to discount the powerful role the workers themselves can play in creating change. Although the reporting is sketchy, there have been high profile instances of suicides and rioting that appear to be in protest of sweatshop working conditions. Theories of responsibility should not ignore the powerful influence that can sometimes be wielded by people who are demanding that they be given a living wage and freedom of association rights. Perhaps part our obligation is to find a way to give them a hand.

Despite the strength of his analytic framework, it is quite disappointing that his ultimate recommendation is that we need to reform our global institutions. It is unlikely, even armed with the knowledge that they are partially responsible for supporting technology sweatshops, that most affluent consumers will have the tools to fundamentally change transnational institutional arrangements. Even if most people acknowledged that it would be better if the United States imposed restrictions on imports of products that are known to be manufactured in technology

sweatshops, it is not obvious that they would be able to overcome the powerful economic incentives currently in place that allow us to enjoy low cost consumer electronics. Since Pogge does not distinguish between different levels of power and skills people have, it is difficult to know if he thinks responsibility falls on all of us equally, or if some of us have special responsibilities, or what mechanisms we are supposed to use to actualize reforms.

The biggest drawback in Pogge's thinking is that he ignores the political dimension of what it means to *take* responsibility. Even if one just focused on a small part of the problem—the fact that companies routinely violate their own supplier codes of conduct—it isn't obvious what the right way to approach the problem is, and even if the approach were intuitive, it isn't clear that most people would take it upon themselves to respond. For instance, if one accepts that companies are responsive to campaigns designed to shame them into following their own codes of conduct, it might be plausible to suggest that people participate in organizations that help spread the word. It is awfully idealistic to assume that most people will devote resources to discharge their responsibilities in such an active way.

Pogge seems to think that if only people were convinced that they are responsible for imposing an unjust order on sweatshop workers, the politics of challenging existing power structures would simply sort itself out. This strikes me as a wrongheaded way of approaching problems like technology sweatshops, because the problem is precisely that there is no fundamental conception of how transnational institutions ought to be reformed. The suggestion that these institutions ought to be reformed by 'us'—the global affluent—is at best a politically ambiguous way of framing our responsibilities to distant others.

#### 4.0 DAVID MILLER

David Miller deserves a place in this discussion of what our responsibilities might be to Chinese migrant sweatshop workers because his approach is quite different from the strategies developed by Thomas Pogge and Iris Young. Unlike Pogge, Miller believes that justice does not require that we treat compatriots and distant others equally. Instead, he argues that it is entirely reasonable for obligations of social justice (justice that applies to national political communities) to be distinct from obligations of global justice (justice that applies to all human beings) (Miller National 12). Global justice, in Miller's view, is a much thinner concept. When the scope of justice is global, nations can only be required to protect against the worst forms of human suffering. Thus, Miller is reluctant to conclude that the affluent necessarily have a responsibility to the global poor—he rejects Pogge's argument that it can straightforwardly be shown that global poverty is largely caused by injustices imposed by the affluent (Miller National 238). Although there is room for debate about whether or not Miller would think the affluent have responsibilities to sweatshop workers at all, I will argue that his framework ought to be concerned about technology sweatshops by his own criteria. I will spend most of my critical attention on his connection theory of remedial responsibility and what it might imply about our obligations to sweatshop workers. In this chapter, I follow the same structure as chapter two. I will start with an exposition of Miller's general approach, followed by an analysis of how his

theory would respond to sweatshops, and finally, an evaluation of the benefits and limitations of his approach.

#### **4.1 'REMEDIAL RESPONSIBILITY' AND HUMAN RIGHTS**

David Miller's framework for assigning responsibility is premised on the idea that where there is avoidable suffering and deprivation we ought to figure out which agents should be responsible and which agents should be off the hook. Miller calls this particular obligation to act in response to suffering "remedial responsibility"—a useful distinction from a more narrow conception of responsibility that might require an agent to respond purely on the basis of some moral or geographical relationship (Miller *Distributing* 482). The assignment of remedial responsibility is meant to utilize a variety of principles in such a way that there is an agent who we could say is obligated to respond when basic rights are violated. The theory is pluralistic because it does not rely on a single principle or a particular hierarchy of principles to arrive at the right recommendation; specific facts should dictate the strength of each principle in relation to the injustice at hand. Importantly, Miller's framework is meant to apply to a non-ideal international order where there may be few institutions that are formally charged with responding to severe suffering and deprivation. This exposition of David Miller's theory will proceed in two steps. First, I will describe the four basic principles that Miller thinks should be in play when assigning responsibility to a particular agent. These principles are meant to exhaustively apply to all cases in which a preventable injustice has occurred. Second, I will unpack Miller's 'connection theory,' which is meant to give us a framework for thinking about how responsibility might actually be determined based on these principles.

Four primary principles may be activated in assigning remedial responsibility: causal and moral responsibility, which are primarily backward looking, and capacity and community based responsibility, which are forward looking. Causal responsibility refers to the commonsense idea that, “[...] when we say C caused E we are singling out C as one among a potentially large number of antecedent conditions for E’s occurrence, distinguished from the conditions by virtue of its abnormality” (Ibid 484). This can’t explain the totality of our responsibilities because there might be cases in which there is no empirically convincing way to identify a causal agent, there might be too many agents who are causally responsible, or because even though a particular agent can be said to be causally responsible, we evaluate their conduct as being legitimate.

As soon as one adds Miller’s second principle—moral responsibility—to the mix, it becomes clear that causal responsibility is not sufficient by itself. Causal responsibility could not be the sole guiding principle because it could very well be the case that there is an overriding moral principle in play (Ibid 485). This tension is clear for situations in which negligent actor A could have foreseen the consequences of another actor B’s actions, but did nothing to prevent them. B may have caused the harm most directly, but A may have an overriding moral obligation to prevent B’s action. Though moral responsibility might seem like the kind of principle around which Miller could build his entire theory of remedial responsibility, there are a few reasons why such a single principle framework is problematic. For instance, Miller argues that there are cases in which a causal connection could activate some responsibility even in the absence of any moral connection. When A accidentally trips and causes B to fall over, we might say A has some responsibility to B even if we do not assign a negative moral judgment to A’s actions. Moral responsibility also seems inadequate in cases where there is some hurtful behavior that can be justified. But the most important reason moral responsibility and/or causal

responsibility taken together can't satisfy Miller's initial premise is because they are primarily backward looking. In other words, these two principles miss an opportunity to answer the question, "Who is best placed to put it right?" (Ibid 489). If Miller wants to take human rights violations seriously such that violations are treated as unacceptable threats to a minimally decent life, backward looking standards might yield agents who are in no position to actually intervene in a meaningful way.

This is precisely what motivates the introduction of the third principle—capacity—as a means of evaluating capabilities. Fairly straightforwardly, if one is serious about protecting against the worst forms of injustice, it may be necessary to assign responsibility regardless of which agent is causally or morally implicated. Otherwise, human rights may slip into inadequacy because our way of conceptualizing the protection of these rights has nothing to do with thinking through the relative strengths or weaknesses of strategies various responsible agents would have to employ to properly respond. Obviously, this could not be a standalone principle either because it is not suggestive of an evaluation of the costs of intervention versus effectiveness. For example, if A deliberately pushes B into a swimming pool and B begins to drown, for both causal and moral reasons, we might say that A is remedially responsible for saving B from drowning. But if A is a poor swimmer, we might call on C, who is a capable swimmer but has no other connection to the situation. Although issues like global poverty and technology sweatshops are much more complicated (there is rarely a single obvious innocent bystander who is ready, able, and willing to respond), this example illustrates Miller's reason for incorporating capacity as one of many principles within his connection theory. It is clear that the relative costs agents would experience as a result of a particular response should be a factor in appropriately distinguishing between capable agents. Merely relying on capacity might also

invoke the kind of utilitarian thinking that motivated Peter Singer to argue that our ability to relieve suffering should be the primary criterion in assessing responsibility for gross wrongs (Singer).

Along with capacity, Miller counts community as a forward-looking principle that ought to be in the evaluative mix. The commitment to community is another important forward-looking claim in that our mere social connections to others help ensure no one is left to suffer unacceptably. To Miller, “The claim is that when people are linked together by such ties, whether arising from shared activities and commitments, common identities, common histories, or other such sources, they also (justifiably) see themselves as having special responsibilities to one another [...]” (Miller Distributing 491). The attractiveness of such a principle partly rests in the reality that it squares with lots of our already existing practices. We often feel responsible for our families, friends, and countrymen. Although Miller believes that there are cases in which community could be the overriding principle that would allow the assignment of remedial responsibility, there are certainly cases in which A harms B, and in the absence of shared community, A might still be held remedially responsible. The community based principle is also less helpful in distributing responsibilities within a particular community (Ibid 492). It is unable to narrow a large pool of potential remedially responsible agents from a group of community members without appealing to some other principle.

Given Miller’s basic premise that there are convincing moral reasons to think we should always be able to find an agent remedially responsible when basic rights are violated, there needs to be some practical way of reasoning about how these four principles ought to be applied. We have already established that there are significant problems associated with trying to reason from one principle in all cases, so how are we supposed to evaluate our obligations in light of real



world scenarios in which many principles might be activated? Miller's answer to this question is essentially that we should appeal to the strength of the relationship between each principle and the particular case at hand. Although there might be cases in which a single principle can serve as the basis for activating an obligation to act, Miller thinks this is not likely to reflect the complexity of most examples of injustice. For instance, if there is a wrong that A is morally connected to, but B has a much stronger capacity to fix the situation, we might say that B is remedially responsible on the basis of the strength of this capacity. For Miller, "when connections have to be weighed against each other, we can do no more than appeal to shared moral intuitions about which is the stronger" (Ibid 501). This explanation, however open-ended, is consistent with the notion that it is impossible to algorithmically assign responsibility on the basis of a hierarchy of principles or some other sort of decision procedure.

This appeal to "shared moral intuitions" highlights Miller's commitment to an internally complex theory that is not algorithmic. Any attempt to gain traction on assigning responsibility that is much more specific than the four general principles Miller suggests is likely to get us in trouble because real world problems are too distinctly complex to work out ahead of time.

If there were a simple answer to questions such as who is responsible for the current plight of Iraqi children, we would not argue about it politically in the way that we do. The connection theory does not offer a mechanical answer to questions of that kind, but it provides a way of thinking about them—highlighting their complexity—that may in the end prove to be more illuminating (Ibid).

It might be appealing to think that there is no abstract decision procedure for assigning remedial responsibility. Since real world injustices are rarely clear cut, we may need theories of responsibility that outline general principles that can later be applied once the facts of a given human rights violation surface.

There is also a drawback that Miller acknowledges in relying on an intuitive sense of how his principles ought to be applied. Indeed, Miller seems to believe that in many real-world instances of injustice, disagreements will emerge:

[...] we do have principles for assigning remedial responsibility that presumably are widely accepted in the abstract. But in any concrete case, there has to be a judgment as to how these principles are to be applied, and there can be reasonable disagreement about judgments of this kind. Against this background, it will be hard, not only politically, but also ethically, to impose substantial costs on one section of the society in order to discharge remedial responsibilities whose proper distribution, as between nations, remains uncertain (Miller National 273).

There is a crucial tension here. On one hand, Miller seems to say that we can figure out who is responsible in his connection theory based on some intuitive sense of which principle ought to apply. On the other hand, actual human rights violations are often accompanied by disagreement on precisely these questions. No one *wants* to be held responsible for violating human rights, especially in circumstances in which there are a variety of agents who could plausibly be identified as having some remedial responsibility. It is not entirely clear how Miller would have us resolve this tension. He seems to conclude that the discrepancy between his reliance on intuition and the reality that our intuitions are often unhelpful when there is substantial disagreement will result in a “justice gap” (Ibid 274). Although I will reserve judgment for the moment on whether or not this significantly diminishes the explanatory power of his connection theory, this difficulty is worth pointing out because I aim to assess how Miller’s theory would apply in the case of technology sweatshops—a real-world problem in which responsibility is far from clear.

## 4.2 MILLER AND SWEATSHOPS

Now that I have unpacked the connection theory and its accompanying principles, I will evaluate it in relation to technology sweatshops. First, I will ask whether technology sweatshops represent an injustice to which Miller would want his framework to apply. Unlike Pogge and Young, this is not a straightforward exercise. Ultimately, I will argue his concept of rights as fulfilling “basic needs” ought to implicate his theory in responding to the case of technology sweatshops. In the second part of this section, I will apply Miller’s connection theory to the case of technology sweatshops. Finally, I will evaluate the benefits and drawbacks of the connection theory.

In David Miller’s understanding, the concept of human rights involves fulfilling basic human “needs” (Miller National 184). The idea of ‘needs’ represent necessary conditions of living a decent human life. For Miller, Basic human needs are:

[...] the conditions that must be met for a person to have a decent life given the environmental conditions he faces. The list of such needs will include (but not be exhausted by): food and water, clothing and shelter, physical security, health care, education, work and leisure, freedoms of movement, conscience, and expression (Ibid).

These are meant to serve as minimal standards that may require, as a matter of justice, some sort of intervention or response when violated. These basic human needs are of fundamental moral importance; they represent a baseline that should have global force. That these needs are meant to imply a global conception of responsibility is of particular importance to Miller because he wants to ultimately reject the idea that protecting human rights implies global equality of opportunity or equal outcomes. Instead, Miller argues that nations constitute enclosed communities that may impose or expect special obligations from its members that do not apply globally. Miller’s rejection of what he calls “strong cosmopolitanism” (the idea that global justice requires equal treatment, outcomes, or opportunities) is relevant to his conception of

human rights because he wants to avoid committing himself to a conception of rights that requires political communities to treat distant others in a fashion identical or nearly identical to that in which they treat compatriots.

It is important to distinguish here between needs and rights. Miller does not believe that every human need corresponds in a one-to-one fashion with a specific right (Ibid 186). Miller argues that there are practical considerations that might make it overly burdensome or infeasible to draw a right out of every basic need. Miller has four limiting criteria in mind: people can't have a right that cannot be provided by a human agent (right to a lifesaving cure that doesn't yet exist), a right to something that cannot be demanded of another human agent (obligation to show love to others), an obligation that would require that an agent's own rights would be violated, or a right to resources that are too scarce to be fulfilled across the board (Ibid 186-90). The basic deprivations and potential corresponding obligations associated with sweatshops do not fall under any of these limiting criteria. Thus, it is fair to argue that if physical security, food, shelter, health care, and freedom of conscience, movement, and expression are all basic human needs, then these should also be considered rights that ought to be protected on Miller's account.

Recall for a moment that even Apple's own audits (which, if anything, likely underreport human rights violations) reveal a startling degree of forced overtime, underage labor, exposure to hazardous materials, and scores of workplace injuries (Duhigg and Barboza). Workers are not allowed to form labor unions, go to the bathroom while working, or, in some cases, leave factory grounds. These are conditions that have caused workers to jump to their deaths because they were simply unwilling to brave factory conditions any longer. In relation to virtually every one of Miller's enumerated basic needs, it is doubtful that migrant workers in Chinese technology sweatshops live minimally decent lives.

Even given the plausibility that the lack of basic needs many migrant workers experience corresponds to violations of their rights, it is still not entirely clear that Miller would think that sweatshops are a matter of *global justice*. Consider this hypothetical Miller sets up:

B lacks some vital resource and A is uniquely in a position to supply it. Prima facie, then, A has a responsibility to supply the resource, and given that B's need a basic one, a duty of justice to do so. But suppose now that B, having been given the resource that he needs, chooses to destroy it or sell it to someone else. B is now responsible for not having the resource [...] Why is A required, *as a matter of justice*, to provide with the necessary resource a second time? [...] In these circumstances, it seems that although we may continue to hold A remedially responsible for B's plight, we cannot justifiably place him under a duty of justice to help B. If he has a duty at all, it must be a duty of lesser weight—a humanitarian duty, that is to say (Miller National 248-9).

Miller seems likely to argue that sweatshop conditions represent a case where China is ultimately responsible for ensuring that it doesn't operate sweatshops, even though the governments of affluent countries are complicit in promoting the use of sweatshop conditions.

I am skeptical of this argument, however, because there is a disanalogy between the hypothetical Miller offers and technology sweatshops. Even if China ought to share some responsibility, it is unconvincing to argue that companies like Apple or institutions like the WTO play no role in both incentivizing and causing human rights deprivations. In Miller's hypothetical, B is clearly responsible for squandering its resources, but it is not plausible to argue that China is solely responsible for the sweatshops within its borders. These sweatshops exist partly because there is high demand for consumer electronics and companies that are willing to exploit Chinese workers to meet this demand. This network of consumers, technology firms, and trade regimes are international in scope. It is not reasonable to suggest that China is the only responsible agent here. Of course, this incompatibility in cases is no fault of Miller's—he does not write with sweatshops in mind—but to the extent that it can be empirically shown that

sweatshops are partly a creation of those who live outside of China's borders, Miller should think of human rights violations in sweatshops as a pressing matter of justice.

Moreover, Miller affirmatively argues that when there are not "fair terms of international cooperation," the affluent can be held remedially responsible (Ibid). For Miller:

[...] a fair international order cannot simply mean a free market in which nations and corporations pursue their interests without regard to consequences for vulnerable poor people. The responsibility of citizens of rich countries is to ensure fairness in this sense—an international order whose rules allow poor societies adequate opportunities to develop (Ibid).

This suggests that the question of whether or not remedial responsibility should be applied to affluent countries in response to technology sweatshops is about whether the trade regime is fair. If trade regimes are structured so that poor countries are essentially coerced into agreements from which they do not benefit, then there is a duty of justice to reform the rules that allow for such one-sided bargaining. It is less clear how to apply this standard of fairness to the specific injustice of technology sweatshops because all of the negotiating parties would probably agree that they each benefit from trade. The unfairness of the cooperative agreements in the context of sweatshops is that the interests of migrant workers are not taken adequately into account. Even though the United States, China, technology firms, and suppliers all benefit in economic terms, Miller's standard of fairness must reckon with the unfair treatment of sweatshop workers that does not have purely domestic causes. Although Miller would place greater weight on China's responsibilities than Pogge, it is nonetheless reasonable to suggest that non-domestic factors play an important role in bringing about injustice in this context.

If these arguments seemed strained against Miller's commitment to national responsibility, it is partly because he does not offer a clear account of exactly what our obligations are even when human rights have been violated. The conclusion of his book,

*National Responsibility and Global Justice*, paints a bleak picture of the prospects of holding agents responsible. He suggests that there is a gap between what those who suffer from violations of their rights can claim as a matter of justice and what affluent nations are obligated to provide (Ibid 274). Against this backdrop, my extension of Miller presumes that the connection theory is meant to be applied to at least some cases of injustice, and that he ought to include sweatshops as an example of a preventable injustice that implicates the affluent.

On Miller's theory of remedial responsibility, we ought to think about the agents that are implicated on four basic principles: causal, moral, capacity, and community. Miller's framework should be well suited to the sweatshop problem because he is careful to set up principles that apply to specific cases. This is precisely why Miller rejects the thought that responsibility should be assigned based on a hierarchy of principles—such a framework would inevitably run into cases that render the decision procedure useless (Miller *Distributing* 501). Though Miller imagines the breadth of his principles to be an advantage, when it is applied to a case like technology sweatshops, it is difficult to figure out exactly which agents should be held responsible and for what reasons.

If it is correct to think that there are *both* domestic and transnational causes of sweatshop labor, then even just the causal principle is likely to implicate a number of agents. On a Poggean empirical analysis, it is possible to argue that the affluent are partly responsible for sweatshops because we help fund companies that contract with suppliers that exploit workers and participate in a government that looks the other way when it comes to enforcing labor standards. Miller is inclined to think causation should also be applied to domestic forces like the SEZs, which implicates the Chinese government as an actor that could help end the needless deprivation of its migrant workers.

Even if one rejects Pogge's argument that these violations ultimately have transnational causes, Miller's framework could still apply moral responsibility to the affluent. For instance, even if companies like HP, Dell, and Apple do not actively abuse workers themselves, they could be morally responsible because they are obligated to abide by local and international labor standards and fail to do so. Thus, even absent a clear causal connection, we could still say that the affluent technology firms and governments are remedially responsible for changing their behavior with respect to migrant workers.

On the principle of capacity (the idea that responsibility should at least partially be assigned based on ability to make the situation right) there is essentially an endless list of NGOs, national governments, philanthropists, and corporations that could be implicated. Evaluating the capacity principle relies on an argument about what it would take to ensure that technology sweatshop workers may have their basic needs met. This might involve exerting political pressure to create institutional reforms from the perspective of national governments or multinational corporations, changing purchasing decisions (voting with our feet), creating new international monitoring organizations, working to form labor organizations that put pressure on the Chinese government, etc. Each of these ways of addressing sweatshop conditions implies a different set of actors.

The last principle Miller defends is community, which implies that sweatshop workers themselves might have obligations to one another. Moreover, this communal criterion implicates a range of otherwise unconnected actors to become involved. Chinese citizens who share a common identity and history with their compatriots might have special responsibilities for their co-nationals. It should be clear at this point that Miller's connection theory captures a range of agents that are, in a variety of important ways, implicated in responding to situations in which



basic needs are consistently unfulfilled. However, when it comes to reducing the vast number and category of potentially responsible agents, Miller argues that “we can do no more than appeal to shared moral intuitions about which is the stronger. The strength of the connection theory, as I see it, is that it treats the obligation to relieve deprivation and suffering as of overriding concern” (Ibid).

It is difficult to spell out with much clarity exactly what our ‘shared moral intuitions’ are supposed to tell us about which agents are most strongly implicated by the connection theory. Part of the difficulty with human rights violations like technology sweatshops is that every potentially responsible agent can make the case that someone else is actually responsible. For example, it is not uncommon for suppliers like Foxconn to claim that it can’t afford to significantly improve working conditions because it operates at the edge of solvency. Foxconn’s profit margins are often razor thin (1-2 percent) compared with Apple’s (closer to 30 percent) (Culpan). Moreover, Apple often claims that the independent monitoring efforts it supports show that they care deeply about their supply chain. Chinese officials can plausibly argue that their efforts to attract foreign capital have led to an economic takeoff that has left many migrant workers in a better economic position than they would have otherwise enjoyed.

As a tool for practically thinking about what reforms could make a difference to migrant workers and which agents are ultimately responsible for them, Miller’s framework offers little guidance. Even though a commitment to a non-mechanistic theory that can accommodate a wide range of empirical cases is appealing in the abstract, in practice it does not produce a strong argument about which agent is actually responsible for taking action. Instead, we are left with the situation we started with: a series of potentially responsible agents with little political motive to take responsibility.

### 4.3 A THEORY OF RESPONSIBILITY?

One of the advantages of Miller's commitment to a model that does not rely on an algorithm to sort out which principle should be activated in absence of the specifics of an identifiable problem is that his framework is broadly applicable. Technology sweatshops represent one problem of many that could easily fit within the connection theory. Compared to Pogge's model, which could significantly limit our remedial responsibilities depending on differing empirical assessments of the causes of sweatshop labor, Miller recommends a broader framework that could fit a wider variety of global injustices. The broad quality of this framework, however, makes it extremely difficult to sort out exactly how the connection theory would respond to technology sweatshops.

It is puzzling that Miller appeals to a "shared moral intuition" to sort out our remedial responsibilities because this opens his framework to the mechanical moral decision procedures that are otherwise excluded. One of the most attractive features of the connection theory is that it acknowledges that it is not possible to simply uphold one standard for assigning an obligation to act that is justifiable in every possible situation. Where Pogge's framework fails to accommodate cases in which the affluent are not the only potentially responsible agents, Miller shows that we ought to think of remedial responsibility in a broader way. Workers themselves, for instance, could play a crucial role in changing the behavior of their oppressors. But without being able to prioritize the responsibilities of workers, corporations, and various governments, it is difficult to see how our intuitions are likely to be of much use.

Given these irreducibly complex situations created by human rights violations, it seems that a mere 'intuition' could not get us very far for at least three reasons. First, it is not clear what agent is invoked in these moral intuitions. Though Miller is up front in his argument that

responsibility for human rights may fall among a diverse range of individuals, states, and other organizations, *which* agents are involved in applying the connection theory makes a difference. It is not obvious who is responsible for applying the connection theory nor is it clear how the theory should be institutionalized. The United States government is likely to think very differently about its obligations to sweatshop workers than independent monitoring organizations, for example. It is precisely because we don't have shared intuitions about who is responsible for sweatshops that we need persuasive frameworks for thinking about responsibility for complicated injustices.

Second, Miller's dichotomy between mechanical decision procedures and shared moral intuitions precludes political considerations that could make his framework practically applicable. Even in the absence of a mechanism that requires ranking each principle, it is still possible to show *how* the connection theory should be applied. Miller would have to answer questions about who he imagines will use the connection theory or what institutions would benefit from incorporating it into their decision-making. For instance, it is possible to imagine some independent international organization that could be charged with adjudicating human rights disputes based on the principles Miller outlines. This could involve a multi-stakeholder approach in which representatives of various regions or countries are required to allocate responsibilities for ongoing human rights abuses.

Third, the door is left open to moral frameworks that undermine the idea of a model that appeals to a range of principles. Perhaps the most serious flaw in the connection theory is this idea that prevailing shared understandings should guide our decision-making. Indeed, implicit in the notion of *shared* intuition is the idea that somehow the conventional moral wisdom among responsible agents ought to override other considerations. This is inconsistent with the thrust of

the model because the crucial element of the connection theory is that serious obstacles arise when one is committed to just one or two principles of remedial responsibility. It seems plausible that the prevailing thought among the relevant agents might be to rely heavily on one or two of the principles Miller offers. Pogge seems to think that causal responsibility is enough, for example.

The most significant flaw in Miller's approach to global justice is that he does not take the politics of human rights seriously. Though I do not want to discount the importance of principled thinking in response to complicated real-world problems like technology sweatshops, if it is nearly impossible to understand how the connection theory is meant to interact with those who hold political power, it is politically useless. Theories that are meant to offer new ways of approaching our world must reckon with the difficult political reality that injustices persist there are no obvious or easy solutions. If there were, it seems unlikely that most reasonable people would be willing to sit idly by while Chinese migrant workers work tirelessly for little money in extremely harsh conditions to make their products. The problem is not a lack of intuitive understanding that this is a preventable state of affairs; the problem is that we lack political frameworks for understanding what should be done about it.

## **5.0 IRIS YOUNG**

Iris Young, unlike Pogge or Miller, is critical of the idea that we should ask who is causally responsible or blameworthy in relation to overarching structural injustices. Injustices like sweatshops implicate so many different institutions and individuals that it is both politically and philosophically misguided to conceptualize responsibility by trying to figure out which institutions or people ought to be singled out. Instead, Young proposes a social connection model that is meant to get us away from thinking about structural injustices in terms of blame and toward a conversation about how we can collectively change our behavior to address wrongs to which we are connected. My treatment of Young follows the same pattern as chapters two and three. I will briefly discuss her basic approach to the responsibilities question, extend her framework to technology sweatshops, and evaluate the benefits and limitations of her social connection model.

### **5.1 A SOCIAL CONNECTION MODEL**

Young begins her discussion of responsibility for human rights with a repudiation of the idea that people only have responsibilities to one another when they live under a “common political community” (103). Instead, our responsibilities for one another transcend national boundaries because people participate in institutions that are responsible for violating the human rights of

those who are outside of our immediate political or national community. To greater or lesser degrees people in developed countries are implicated in the harm of distant others even if it is impossible to draw causal arrows between affluent consumers and average factory workers. This is the central conclusion of Young's argument about the nature of structural injustice in the age of globalization: even though human rights violations often occur in far away places in completely different political contexts, our involvement in social processes that create this injustice places some kind of responsibility on us that must be discharged for moral reasons.

I will explain Young's argument by contrasting it with a liability model. I take this approach partly because Young does so herself and partly because the liability model is a familiar way of thinking about our responsibilities. According to Young, a liability model for assigning responsibility involves assigning "responsibility to a particular agent (or agents) whose actions can be shown to be causally connected to the circumstances for which responsibility is sought" (116). This is primarily a backward looking way of thinking about responsibility because the liability model harks back to past events to see who is responsible for a particular harm. While this might be a useful way of thinking about responsibility within a legal context in which clear standards of evidence could be deployed to connect an agent to a specific harm, this is not as helpful in relation to structural injustice because it is much less likely that such a clear causal connection could be drawn. This does not mean that the liability model should be entirely jettisoned—it just suggests that macro-level social processes are resistant to conceptual frameworks that rely on fairly clear causal connections. For instance, it is not at all obvious how someone who buys clothing in the United States as a result of brand new fashion trend is causally responsible for the workers who actually made the clothes. Although we are certainly participate in upholding cultural norms that demand a constant stream of cheap and new

clothing, Young does not think this means we are responsible in the same way we could be responsible for robbing a bank.

Instead of a liability model of responsibility, Young suggests we conceptualize structural injustice through her social connection model. Her model essentially holds that,

[...] individuals bear responsibility for structural injustice because they contribute by their actions to the processes that produce unjust outcomes. [...] Responsibility in relation to injustice thus derives not from living under a common constitution, but rather from participation in the diverse institutional processes that produce structural injustice (119).

There is a sense in which this might sound like a smoke and mirrors version of the liability model because it still seems to assign blame to those who participate in the social processes that lead to unjust outcomes. But Young is careful to differentiate between liability based responsibility and responsibility based on the principles associated with the social connection model. A main feature of the social connection model is that it asserts:

People have certain responsibilities by virtue of their social roles or positions [...] In this meaning, finding an agent responsible does not imply finding the agent at fault or liable for a past wrong, but rather refers to agents' carrying out activities in a morally appropriate way and aiming for certain outcomes (Ibid).

The focus here is shifted away from a causal and backward looking framework to a connection and more forward looking approach.

There are several other features of the social connection theory that separate it from a more traditional liability centered approach. In contrast with the liability model in which individuals are isolated for a specific wrong, the social connection model does not value singling out specific agents because the large scale social process that produce structural injustice implicate thousands if not millions of people. Even though it still remains important to hold individual agents accountable when they do something wrong (i.e. when a particular factory is not in compliance with domestic labor laws), this isolating feature is not helpful in the context of

more complicated and diffuse examples of injustice. Moreover, the social connection theory does not take baseline conditions as the yardstick against which injustice should be measured:

[...] a model of responsibility derived from understanding the mediated connection that agents have to structural injustices does not evaluate 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 (120).

In other words, whereas the liability model can only measure behavior against what is legally ‘normal,’ the social connection model calls into question the background conditions that might produce injustice in the first place.

Much of Young’s conception of responsibility for human rights violations hangs on the idea that social structures create opportunities for exploitation. For Young, social structures “denote the confluence of institutional rules and interactive routines, mobilization of resources, as well as physical structures such as buildings and roads” (111). It is fairly obvious that the complex relationship between people within various institutional contexts may create certain inequalities. For example, in most work environments employers and employees occupy distinct social positions that carry unequal responsibilities. Though this is obviously not a human rights violation, or even an inequality that is typically problematic, it demonstrates that our social interactions are often based on socio-historical practices that serve as the background conditions of socialization. Interestingly, Young’s theoretical model is offered through the lens of sweatshops in the apparel industry. This serves as an example of the kind of structural injustice that the social connection model is designed to help conceptualize. In contrast to the employer-employee example, the plight of sweatshop workers in the garment industry clearly represent human rights violations that result from these complicated social processes.

To this point I have clarified Young’s social connection model as importantly distinct from liability approaches to responsibility. But, I have not yet explained how it is that agents are



actually supposed to discharge their responsibility for structural injustice. For Young, this responsibility is political in nature; we are urged to collectively organize to change unjust social structures (123). Since none of us is capable of reforming the social structures that foster sweatshop conditions on our own, we each share responsibility to help change the institutions that contribute to oppression. Young does not see responsibility for structural injustice as a specific duty that the global rich have to poor people in other countries. The victims of injustice are also connected to social structures that perpetuate injustice and often have the strongest interest in meaningful reforms. The social connection model holds victims of injustice responsible, but it is often true that these victims “can discharge their responsibilities only with the support of others, often faraway and relatively privileged others, who make public the workers’ grievances, put pressure on the agents that would block their unionization, and give them material aid” (Young 124).

This concept of shared responsibility that can only be discharged through collective action is meant to have a significant political advantage in our public discourse. When we are confronted by activists who tell us that we are responsible for famine in Africa or sweatshop conditions in Shenzhen, we often react in a defensive fashion. This is a practical problem because people who react defensively are less likely to see themselves as agents who ought to engage with others in promoting reforms. The social connection model suggests that instead of assigning blame, we need only convince people that they are connected to social structures that help support certain injustices. The social connection model “allows us to call on one another to take responsibility *together* for sweatshop conditions, without blaming anyone in particular for the structures that encourage their proliferation” (126).

Assessing our obligations through the social connection model seems to suggest that everyone who participates in structures that ultimately connect to injustices are always implicated in organizing political movements to reform them. Young acknowledges that it is unrealistic to think about political responsibility in this way precisely because our obligations would become bottomless. Therefore, individuals must be left with a considerable degree of discretion in figuring out how to appropriately discharge their responsibilities (Ibid).

Young offers four ‘parameters of reasoning’ that are meant to guide individuals in their decisions about which injustices they should care about and what the content of their obligations might be. Each individual implicated in the social relationships that connect us to others has different levels of power, privilege, interest, and ability to participate in reducing global injustice. Although Young only offers sketches of how we are supposed to use these criteria to make discretionary choices about how to discharge our responsibilities, they are fairly intuitive. I will briefly address each of these criteria. Since we each occupy different positions of power within social structures, people should focus on reforming structures where they have the greatest amount of power. Tim Cook, the current CEO of Apple, could do a great deal to change sweatshop conditions in China. Young acknowledges that people with lots of power often respond to powerful incentives not to, however it is possible to organize politically to put pressure on companies like Apple that have a huge impact on working conditions in China. Differing positions of power are also likely to create differing amounts of privilege. In choosing which injustices to address, we should think about what structural injustices we benefit from. For instance, a rich citizen in the United States who buys a new iPhone every six months might have a different kind of responsibility than a low-income U.S. citizen struggling to get by.

We all have different interests in supporting or reforming unjust structures. On Young's view, for instance, sweatshop workers ought to be active in pushing for reforms both because they have the greatest interest in doing so, but also because they have "unique insights into its social sources and the probably effects of proposals for change" (128). Finally, Young thinks we should reason on the grounds of our collective abilities. This relates directly to attempting feasible reforms within institutions to which we are already connected. It makes more sense for me to participate in student organizations that try to put pressure on Pitt to partner with the WRC than it does for me to fly to China and try to organize mass protests. Since we all participate in different institutions with different connections to unjust social structures it makes the most sense to focus on reforms that coincide with our particular circumstances.

In explaining Young's theory of responsibility based on her social connection theory, I have highlighted two interrelated arguments. First, Young is critical of the idea that we ought to think about responsibility in terms of who is to blame for particular structural injustices or who caused them. Thus, liability models get both the political and empirical world wrong. Second, we should think about our responsibilities not as an abstract argument to reform every potential social structure that implicates us an injustice, but as a political problem that requires practical reasoning about how we can be most effective at mobilizing to discharge our unequal obligations. In what follows, I will relate the social connection theory to technology sweatshops, an example of injustice to which Young's theory is particularly applicable.

## 5.2 YOUNG AND SWEATSHOPS

Unlike David Miller, it is obvious that technology sweatshops represent an injustice to which Young would want her theory to respond. The connection theory is supposed to apply to all instances of structural injustice, so if it can be shown that technology sweatshops represent this kind of injustice, then on the basis of her own criteria, the social connection theory ought help us think about our responsibilities to migrant workers in China. According to Young:

Structural injustice exists when social processes put large categories of persons under a systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities, at the same time as these processes enable others to dominate or have a wide range of opportunities for developing and exercise their capacities. Structural injustice is a kind of moral wrong distinct from the wrongful action of an individual or a state. Structural injustice occurs as a consequence of many individuals and institutions acting in pursuit of their particular goals and interests, within given institutional rules and accepted norms (114).

Technology sweatshops clearly fall under this conception of structural injustice both because Chinese migrant workers frequently are unable to live minimally decent lives in which exercising their capacities is possible and because there is no single agent that causes these conditions. I will not rehearse all of the ways in which sweatshop workers are abused here, but it should be clear enough that those who are essentially forced to live under constant control of their employers, are not allowed to form unions, are frequently abused physically, experience forced overtime, and are unnecessarily exposed to health and safety hazards are not able to exercise their capacities as full human beings. Moreover, the structure that causes these abuses cannot be traced back to a single company, government, or individual—sweatshops are part of large-scale social processes that connect a diverse set of actors to one another.

It is also worth pointing out that Young formulates her social connection theory with garment industry sweatshops in mind. The similarities between the garment industry and electronics industry are striking and further demonstrate the relevance of the social connection

model to technology sweatshops. In both industries much of the actual production happens in undeveloped countries in which workers are subject to conditions that threaten their ability to live even minimally decent lives. There is a complex network of companies that go from big names to hundreds and thousands of smaller contractors. The companies that actually hire workers often are at the edge of solvency themselves because they operate in a highly competitive environment in which the only real way to cut costs is on the labor side of the equation. Suffice it to say that the comparisons between the industries make Young's social connection model clearly applicable to the human rights violations that exist in technology sweatshops.

One of the distinguishing features of Young's social connection model is that it should not be applied in the abstract. A contrast with Thomas Pogge helps illustrate this point. Recall Pogge's argument that 'we'—the global affluent—should be held responsible for reforming the unjust institutions we impose on others. He thinks the affluent are all similarly responsible for reforming trade regimes and our government to stop systematically oppressing sweatshop workers. Young, on the other hand, does not imagine that *specific* responsibilities can be allocated on the basis of social connection alone. While our involvement in oppressive social structures does implicate us, it does not tell us how we are supposed to discharge our individual responsibilities. The only general features of the social connection model are that it applies to everyone who contributes to structural injustice (not just the affluent) and we each share some responsibility to collectively reform these social structures. Young's theory is contingent on the particular powers, privileges, interests, and abilities of each individual to which the theory is applicable.

This complicates my task slightly because I cannot give anywhere close to a full account of the kinds of tangible actions individuals ought to take based on Young's model. Since our obligations are partly based on discretionary choices about how suited we are to address specific injustices, it is difficult to generalize across a diverse range of actors who would likely come to different conclusions about what to do. I will take two approaches in applying Young's theory to technology sweatshops. First, I will try to faithfully apply Young's model to my own position as a student who is convinced that I share some responsibility for technology sweatshops in China. Since Young wants *individuals* to reason about their own responsibilities in relation structural injustices like technology sweatshops, it is reasonable to evaluate the practicality of her framework in part by seeing what conclusions I reach about my own responsibilities to sweatshop workers. Although this meta-analysis in which I assess my own reasoning with respect to Young will not be entirely generalizable, it will allow me to put the social connection model to work by doing exactly what is prescribes. Second, I will evaluate how Tim Cook, the CEO of Apple, Dong, a migrant worker, and Wen Jiabao, the premier of China, might reason about their own responsibilities. All four of these agents (Alex Zimmerman, Tim Cook, Dong, and Wen Jiabao) are implicated in Young's theory of responsibility. By seeing how each might reason about their collective responsibility to take political action, we can get a sense of what the social connection model might look like in practice.

### 5.2.1 Alex Zimmerman

I am certainly implicated in the unjust social structures that help exploit migrant workers in China.<sup>4</sup> Not only do I contribute money to companies that exploit workers, but also I help uphold social norms that have made it acceptable to demand that my favorite technology companies pump out newer, faster, and less expensive products every six months. Although Young would not want to blame me for the sweatshops I help support (it is not as if these oppressive social structures would disappear if I simply stopped buying electronics), she would say that I am connected to the injustice and have an obligation to do something about it.

In assessing the power I have relative to the institutions that I am most directly connected to, it makes sense to focus on reforms that are possible in the Pitt community. One organization that can help discharge my shared responsibility to act collectively is the Pitt chapter of American's for Informed Democracy (AID) (Bradshaw). AID has been engaged in an effort to get the University to affiliate with the Worker Rights Consortium, an organization which tends to do better than the Fair Labor Association in ensuring that workers are afforded sustainable freedom of association rights, instead of just increases in wages (Anner). My participation in AID ought to be guided by the ways in which I can exert power in the University community. For instance, as a former Student Government Board Member, I ought to use the relationships I have with administrators to convince Pitt to sign on to the WRC instead of relying solely on the FLA.

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<sup>4</sup> After recently ordering an iPad, the FedEx tracking system confirmed that it was shipped from Shenzhen, China. Of course, one could be implicated in unjust social structures without evidence like this, but it made clear that a young migrant worker likely assembled at least one product I use every day.

Moreover, I ought to be involved in starting conversations among students about what role we can each play in addressing this problem and recruiting a wide range of student organizations to participate in signing letters urging University officials to join the WRC. While far from a comprehensive solution, these small steps represent political actions that are entirely consistent with Young's way of thinking about our individual responsibilities. Young explicitly acknowledges that participating in activities that help spread the word about injustices could be an important aspect of obligation to address sweatshop labor:

[...] discharging my responsibility in relation to sweatshop workers might involve trying to persuade others that the treatment of these workers is unacceptable and that we collectively can alter social practices and institutional rules and priorities to prevent such treatment (Young 123).

To be sure, this is not meant to be a self-congratulatory idealistic picture in which a single student encourages Pitt to lead a charge to remove all products made in sweatshops from universities across the world. However, it does suggest a local step that can be taken against a much larger injustice that is consistent with Young's way of thinking about our responsibilities to grapple with complicated structural injustices.

### **5.2.2 Tim Cook**

As the CEO of arguably the most powerful technology firm in the world, Tim Cook is in the unique position of being able to dramatically change the landscape of workers' rights in China. Cook is clearly implicated in the dense network of social arrangements that support sweatshops because he runs an institution that contracts with suppliers to produce Apple products at low cost, often at the expense of workers. There is good reason to focus on Tim Cook in particular, since it is arguably true that Apple's relationship with Foxconn helps set the industry standard for labor rights. As the producer of 40 percent of the world's consumer electronics for a range of



technology companies (including Amazon and Dell), its labor standards impact over a million workers (Times Topics). The sheer scale of its production capacities makes it difficult for large technology firms to simply move their manufacturing elsewhere, since few companies can match Foxconn's scale.

This speaks to the power Tim Cook could have if he decided to get serious about Apple's image as an abuser of migrant workers. Young aptly points out that people like Cook stand in positions of power and privilege, which makes sweeping changes unlikely because he benefits greatly from the status quo. After all, big technology CEOs are beholden to shareholders and consumers who demand high profits and inexpensive products. It would likely be difficult for Cook to upend the industry on his own.

Even though CEOs like Cook have large incentives to refrain from leading the charge against exploitation in sweatshops, there is some evidence that political mobilization of the sort Young has in mind does have an effect. In the wake of public outcry (including open letters sent to Apple from advocacy groups and increased media coverage), Apple agreed to inspections from the FLA and Foxconn pledged to raise wages and limit working hours (Duhigg and Greenhouse). According to the New York Times, however, Apple has a track record of promising improvements that do not make an impact on the lives of workers:

This is not the first time that independent monitors have criticized conditions at Foxconn — or that change has been promised. In 2006, Apple said that Foxconn 'has enacted a policy change to enforce the weekly overtime limits set by our Code of Conduct.' That change, however, did not bring Foxconn into line with the law or Apple's regulations (Ibid).

There is good reason to be skeptical that this latest round of criticism directed at the technology industry will actually make a difference. Yet, the political push that is being levied against Apple and Foxconn by a wide range of advocacy groups is precisely what Young has in mind when she tells us that we have a shared responsibility to sweatshop workers that must be

discharged collectively. It is telling that even if the changes are as small as Apple agreeing to disclose which suppliers it uses, there are important tangible effects of the kind of mobilization Young has in mind. Even if Cook is unlikely to act without being pressured, Young's model helps explain why it can make sense practically to conceive of sweatshops as a political problem that requires targeted battles against companies that are capable of making a significant difference.

### **5.2.3 Dong**

Dong is a young, female, migrant worker from a poor rural background who spent years of her adolescence in SEZ factories (Ngai 31). She is an important part of the picture of political reform on Young's social connection model because all agents who are connected to structural injustice are supposed to be responsible for discharging a shared responsibility to put the situation right. With respect to the responsibility workers have to mobilize politically to reform sweatshops, Young writes, "Victims of injustice have the greatest interest in its elimination, and often have unique insights into its social sources and the probable effects of proposals for change" (Young 128).

Unlike a liability model, which seeks to assign blame on a particular agent or set of agents, the social connection implicates all agents connected to the injustice, even those who are oppressed because of it. This might initially seem like a strange way of thinking about responsibility for an injustice like technology sweatshops, but even the most vulnerable sweatshop workers can make a difference. Dong might have a responsibility to join her fellow workers in demanding better wages, the right to unionize and collectively bargain, or even just the right to go to the bathroom during a shift. Relatively small-scale worker disputes can cause

disruptions in supply chains that ultimately ripple outward to bigger technology firms and consumers. When the media begins to cover supply chain disruptions, this often has political implications that range from shaming companies into allowing the FLA to conduct audits of factories, and generating consumer awareness that can indirectly lead to more political pressure.

There is at least anecdotal evidence that workers can participate in diffuse social networks that put pressure on unjust institutions. In the electronics industry alone, increases in worker protests, reports of suicides, and explosions at factories have forced big technology firms to submit to more rigorous auditing. Audits of factories that make Apple products alone have demonstrated that there is a staggering disregard for its own supplier code of conduct and local labor laws (FLA Report). These cases demonstrate the extent to which workers like Dong can impact political movements halfway around the world. Although there are inevitably hundreds if not thousands of worker protests that get little coverage and therefore generate little political pressure, Young imagines that those who occupy privileged positions may have some responsibility to amplify the voices of workers whose protests would otherwise not be heard.

#### **5.2.4 Wen Jiabao**

The Chinese government is certainly among the institutions that contribute to the oppression of migrant workers. There are a variety of ways in which the Chinese government could protect the rights of migrant workers: it could better enforce its own minimum wage requirements, allow workers to unionize and collectively bargain, relax the hukou registration system (which essentially keeps migrant workers from enjoying full citizenship benefits in SEZs), and allow the media to cover worker protests. As China's State Council Premier, Jiabao is in a position of relative power with respect to these domestic institutions that clearly have an adverse effect on

migrant workers. He has broad administrative control over a range of departments and ministries and is regarded as one of the most powerful officials in China.

On Young's social connection model of responsibility, Jiabao is clearly implicated in a social network that connects him to migrant workers. Young acknowledges that those who have the ability to enact widespread reform like Tim Cook and Wen Jiabao are often those who are least likely to be the source of reform. Jiabao operates within an authoritarian government that is constantly nervous that social unrest may totally upend the government (Shirk 52). There are powerful political incentives for Chinese officials like Jiabao to do everything possible to keep workers from seizing too much power, not to mention the economic benefits of the explosion of foreign investment in China.

Despite these powerful political reasons Jiabao has to ignore his responsibilities in favor of maintaining his own power, Young's theory does not suppose that individuals must reason in a static individual fashion. Instead, responsibilities are dynamic and can be affected by the ways in which others choose to discharge their own responsibilities. For instance, even if it is unlikely that Jiabao would simply read Young's theory and decide to take political action against technology sweatshops, workers like Dong can have a political impact on the ways in which top officials respond. It does not seem implausible to suggest that the dramatic increase in worker protests from roughly 8,700 in 1993 to 74,000 in 2004 is partly an effort by workers to force the government to take their interests seriously (Shirk 57).

Although the state apparatus often responds to these protests by keeping the media away and doing everything to quash the protestors, the rapid increase in protests could eventually force leaders like Jiabao to promise reforms for fear of widespread social unrest. Although Chinese officials are not democratically accountable to workers, this doesn't mean workers won't have an

impact, “Paradoxically, the fears of Communist autocrats make them hypersensitive to public attitudes. Because [China] lacks any institutions like elections to channel public opinion, a wave of discontent could sink the state” (Shirk 53). The advantage of Young’s dynamic approach to responsibility that is able to distinguish between different types of agents is it can provide a model for thinking about the ways in which sweatshop workers themselves can participate in a cascade of events that encourages others to take some responsibility, even if it is quite limited. Not only might worker protests have an impact on leaders like Jiabao, but when they’re covered by foreign media, protests can put varying amounts of political pressure on everyone from Tim Cook to Alex Zimmerman. Thinking about responsibility for Jiabao on Young’s model is not about ignoring the political realities that make him want to preserve his own power, it is about understanding how responsibility can reverberate and create political pressure between those who mobilize and act collectively.

### **5.3 WADING INTO THE SHALLOWS OF POLITICS**

These four potential responses to technology sweatshops in relation to Young’s social connection model demonstrate the ways in which she wants people to think about their own responsibilities for structural injustice. This account is far from exhaustive, but it illustrates that people with different connections to social structures that are responsible for injustices will inevitably have varied responsibilities. Flexibility in individual responses is created by Young’s focus on fulfilling human rights as a political problem. It is advantageous that responsibility is framed politically because it avoids the kind of idealizing that plagues Pogge’s conception of

responsibility. Instead of imagining that all affluent people must find ways to reform complex social structures, it is possible to think of our responsibilities as being contingent on our particular positions of power, interest, ability, and privilege.

Pogge and Miller do not give practical accounts of what people are actually supposed to do in order to discharge their responsibilities. Pogge would have the affluent, which are in violation of their negative duty not to impose injustices on others, reform these unjust institutions or compensate the poor in some way. Although Pogge does propose some mechanisms that could help better allocate resources to the global poor, he does not explain how individuals ought to conceptualize their particular obligations to actualize these reforms. He seems to just assume that the politics will work itself out once people are convinced that they are complicit in upholding ethically indefensible institutional arrangements. Miller, on the other hand, does not tell us if his connection theory is supposed to guide individual thinkers in a political context. Like Pogge, he seems to think that the politics of sorting out what each individual's obligations are will be settled by intuitive moral judgments about which of his four standards is supposed to apply.

Young avoids idealizing our response to either require that we reform the global order (Pogge) or that we figure out what to do with the chaotic range of agents who are likely implicated by Miller's connection theory. In asking people to pick their battles within the institutions to which they are most connected, Young (at least theoretically) ensures that no one will have to reorganize their lives in order to discharge their responsibilities to the slew of injustices in which most affluent citizens are likely implicated. By localizing our responses, it is possible to generate responsibilities that are specific and practical. While it is unlikely that most people could be convinced that they are capable of reforming the global order, it is much less

daunting to join an organization like AID and volunteer a few hours of time to spread awareness of sweatshops.

In jettisoning conceptions of responsibility that primarily look to the past to figure out who is responsible for creating sweatshop conditions, Young avoids this intractable empirical debate all together. In order to see that I have a responsibility, I don't have to be convinced that it is possible to say that any one set of institutions or individuals should be singled out as being responsible for sweatshops. In one sense, this might blunt the political urgency of our obligations if people are not convinced that they *cause* sweatshop conditions. But it also seems likely that even if Pogge is right that the affluent can be said to cause injustices like sweatshops or global poverty, people will not respond well to being blamed for massive injustices about which they barely are aware.

Despite the advantages of using a political framework that allows everyone to decide what their obligations are for themselves, the discretion she gives to individuals leads to a fairly large gap. That is, unless there is a radical change in attitudes toward sweatshops, most people are unlikely to alter their behavior in a way that supports institutional reforms. Young does not address this problem in the sweatshop movement—she seems to think that important gains can be made even if a relatively small minority engages in collective action. It is assumed that as more people become convinced that they share responsibility for structural injustices that they will find ways to use their positions of relative power to change the dominant way of thinking about sweatshops.

In an important respect, Young's theory only wades into the shallows of the waters of politics. She argues that our responsibilities are political in nature and require finding ways to reform institutions based on each of our individual circumstances, but she does not fully address

how her model is likely to convince more people to act. Though she argues that people will be less likely to blame-shift if responsibility is decoupled from blame, it is not entirely clear what mechanisms are supposed to convey the social connection model to those who are implicated in it. It's not obvious that we should simply assume people will take it upon themselves to educate each other on the injustices in which we are all implicated.

Even if Young's theory is idealistic around the edges, of the three thinkers evaluated in this thesis, she is the only one that frames her argument through the prism of politics as opposed to moral philosophy. She rightly thinks that it makes little difference if people are causally responsible for sweatshops both because this is an empirically mushy claim and it is likely to make people defensive and resistant to change. The significant differences between the approaches taken by Pogge, Miller, and Young leave me with a final question that I will reserve as a way of concluding this analysis: what should we want from a theory of responsibility for protecting human rights? A preliminary answer should be clear based on the methodological structure of this thesis. We should at least want them to provide analytical tools that allow responsible agents to find political avenues to remedy the injustices they seek to address. In what follows, I take stock of the three approaches evaluated in this thesis and argue that it is imperative to take the politics of human rights seriously.



## 6.0 MOVING TOWARD A POLITICAL CONCEPTION OF RESPONSIBILITY

This thesis has attempted to develop a new way of approaching the large and sometimes intractable questions surrounding our responsibilities to those who fall outside our own political boundaries. As industrialization and technological innovation make global supply chains a mainstay of our world economy, politically relevant thinking about our obligations to help fulfill the rights of distant others will only become more pressing. I have argued that sweatshops in China are a contemporary example of places where fundamental human rights often go unprotected. Because we are socially linked to these workers through countless institutional arrangements, we have to think carefully about who should respond and what exactly these agents should do. To take a responsibility to sweatshop workers seriously is to consider ways in which the structures that oppress them can be reformed.

The most consistent criticism I have levied against the theories of responsibility explored in chapters two, three, and four is that they often stop at the water's edge of politics. Pogge, for example, offers a compelling account of how global institutions can have a dramatic impact on poor and vulnerable citizens in developed countries without specifying how individuals are supposed to discharge their obligations in practice. Even though I find his argument about the fundamental unfairness of the rules that govern our interactions with the global poor quite appealing, I have little idea what I'm supposed to do to change my behavior. This is puzzling since one of the fundamental challenges of increasingly globalized institutions is that they don't

fall under the political auspices of any single government or accountability mechanism. The case of Chinese technology sweatshops helped me illustrate that instances of global institutional injustice rarely have intuitive political solutions. One of the dangers of these powerful and incredibly diffuse injustices is that there is rarely a road to reform that is obvious (at least to most of the people Pogge is trying to convince). I will reserve a fuller discussion of democratic accountability of transnational institutions for another day, but it should at least be clear that the power average citizens have with respect to these institutions is not obvious. Political questions about what can be reasonably expected of most people, whether we all have the same kinds of responsibility, and how transnational institutions that fall outside nation-centered accountability mechanisms can be reformed all go unaddressed.

Miller's theory of remedial responsibility suffers from a similar type of political deficit. His connection theory of remedial responsibility appears to be largely diagnostic—it is good at implicating lots of different agents for both forward and backward looking reasons. One of the distinct advantages of Miller's approach is that in cases where our ability to find responsible agents by asking who caused a certain state of affairs or who is morally responsible, we can look to agents who may have little to do with past injustices to respond. In relation to technology sweatshops, however, this leads to an incredibly unhelpful account of responsibility. Since the trouble with most structural examples of injustice is precisely that lots of people are institutionally connected, Miller's connection theory does little to help us reason even about who is ultimately responsible let alone what they are supposed to do. Miller's suggestion that we narrow the range of responsible agents by relying on our moral intuitions fundamentally misunderstands the political problem posed by technology sweatshops. If we had shared institutions about which agents are responsible for technology sweatshops, we would have little

use for a theory of responsibility in the first place. Moreover, Miller's discovery of a justice gap between what people who suffer from human rights violations can claim as a matter of justice and what the affluent are obligated to provide throws into question whether Miller actually thinks his theory of remedial responsibility applies to many contemporary human rights problems.

Unlike Miller and Pogge, Young's social connection model takes the politics of human rights seriously. She persuasively argues that liability centered frameworks that try to establish causal connections between injustices and those who cause them is virtually impossible with respect to structural injustices like sweatshops. While she would certainly agree with Pogge that social structures create obligations to sweatshop workers, she doesn't think this is because we are responsible for imposing an unjust world order. Young does not explicitly engage in the larger theoretical questions about justice that interest Pogge and Miller. She shows that problematic relationships can be created by overarching social structures and that we have individual responsibilities to take political action not because we are blameworthy, but because of our social connections. Young eschews the concept of blame partly because it is politically advantageous to do so. She does not want people to react defensively to the assertion that they have responsibilities that stem from their participation in social structures. Tracing a theory of responsibility by asking who is blameworthy also generally rules out political action on the part of the victims of injustice who often can make a significant practical contributions to reforming the structures that oppress them.

While Young's theory of responsibility certainly raises questions about how people should be convinced that they are responsible if they are not blameworthy and whether it is plausible to assume that people will actually discharge their responsibilities if the decision is discretionary, it moves the responsibilities debate in a useful direction. In suggesting that people

can discharge their responsibilities by taking local political action that can be as small as discussing these issues with others, Young correctly assumes one of the most important tasks is showing people they can make a difference without having to directly reform abstract transnational institutions.

In an important sense, Young's project moves the global justice literature forward by moving beyond highly contentious questions about what justice is or requires of us. She seems to think that most people will understand that technology sweatshops are an injustice, so the crucial problem becomes advocating for a practical strategy that might both convince people to mobilize and give them a clear way of reasoning about what their individual responsibilities are. It is telling that Young does not rely on broad conceptions of what 'the affluent' owe to oppressed people around the world. As a practical matter, it makes little sense to say that everyone has an identical negative duty not to oppress people because this is not suggestive of practical political remedies.

I have largely endorsed Young's focus on political responsibility as the most attractive way of thinking about global injustices like technology sweatshops. I argued that her rejection of liability centered models as well as the attention she gives to differentiating responsibilities among contextually specific agents begins to give us the analytic tools necessary to argue for politically relevant remedies. However, by Young's own admission, her social connection model is not a fully developed model of political responsibility. Important questions still need to be fleshed out: How will people be persuaded to mobilize politically around anti-sweatshop causes if they are not to blame for sweatshops? What specific mechanisms will allow people to discover the injustices to which they are socially connected and figure out which ones they ought to care about? Is there evidence that a political account that relies so heavily on the good will of

discretionary decisions won't just serve as an argument to maintain only a minimal commitment to reform? How does Young imagine her theory will escape the confines of academic debate and make it into the public discourse?

Although I do not aim to present a full theory of responsibility of my own that completely answers these questions, these are precisely the problems that political theorists must address in responding to global injustice. It is quite telling that my analysis of four different responsible agents in chapter five was the closest I got to specific recommendations that rely on familiar political mechanisms. One of the benefits of politically focused theories of responsibility is they can convince us that small, but tangible, responses to the world's biggest problems are within our grasp. It is too frequently assumed that there are no clear political responses to problems like technology sweatshops because they are transnational in scope, institutionally complex, and rest squarely outside out traditional modes of political power.

As my extension of Young's model suggests, it is entirely plausible to imagine that our individual political responsibilities should bubble up to the surface through the organizations to which we are closest and wield the most influence. Even just purely as a motivational tool, it makes much more sense to suggest people take action like joining an organization like AID, which lobbies the University of Pittsburgh, than it does to tell a room full of students they need to go out and reform unjust institutional structures. Though Pogge would certainly not object to these localized attempts at reform, he simply does not think he needs to explain injustice on a political level to give people the motivation to respond.

Young's framework provokes us to think not only about our individual political capacities, but also in terms of the mechanisms that people can use to actually discharge their responsibilities. Instead of a generic call directed at individuals to reform unjust institutions,

domestic elections, media organizations, businesses, and civic groups all turn into avenues through which responses to complex structural injustices can be operationalized. News organizations, for instance, can play an invaluable role in lending credibility to worker protests in China that catch the attention of leaders like Wen Jiabao. Once the U.S. press becomes engaged in the story, companies like Apple start to worry about their image and feel compelled to submit to audits, release the names of suppliers, and put pressure on Foxconn to adhere to better labor standards. Individual citizens are often directly affected by this coverage by demonstrating the extent to which the electronics they enjoy are made under oppressive conditions, which can in turn lead to pressure on domestic companies and politicians. Once elected officials can get votes by promising to put pressure on Apple to stop taking advantage of migrant workers and bring jobs back to the U.S. or lobby for tougher trade restrictions on China for products that are made in sweatshops, it is plausible that an important issue in global justice could be addressed through conventional domestic procedures.

I point this out to demonstrate that a consequence of thinking about global injustice as a political problem is that we can reflect not just on each of our relatively small roles in the global order, but also on broader institutions that can help facilitate reform. It is conceivable that the institutions themselves have certain political responsibilities that are independent (but certainly connected) of individual political requirements. For instance, the media may have a responsibility to cover instances of global injustice to which their readers are certainly connected. Corporations like Apple are obligated to act in ways that don't violate the human rights of those who make its products. Although it is easy to see how different accounts of political responsibility could quickly become tangled, this is hardly an argument to avoid the

debate. It is indicative of a field of research in political theory that could certainly use more attention.

More discussion is certainly needed to address broader disciplinary questions about what role political theory can play in generating frameworks for thinking about the people who suffer most amongst us. I have suggested that these thinkers should pay closer attention to contemporary political structures in formulating theories of responsibility for protecting human rights. Even if most of us demonstrate shocking levels of apathy toward egregious wrongs for which we are partly responsible, this should not signal that we should retreat into ideal speculation about a world that doesn't exist. We are stuck for the foreseeable future with significant and complicated global injustices that are perpetrated against some of the most vulnerable people on the planet. This is why we must bring the theory and politics of human rights together.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe a great deal to the friends, family, and teachers whose love, encouragement, gentle prodding, and conversations made this project possible. To Jake Robbins, Harry Jamison, Mike Giazzoni, and Nate Hilberg for challenging me to think more carefully about what I ‘mean’ by meaning. I thank the University Honors College for supporting this project financially, and for creating a community defined by curiosity and learning for its own sake. The Honors College community immeasurably enriched my undergraduate experience. I would like to thank each of my committee members for their time and diligence. Michael Goodhart’s thoughtful guidance and unwavering support over the past few years has helped make my undergraduate education meaningful and rewarding. Thank you all.