

Collective guilt and political responsibility

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Practice essay on the IPO 2022 prompt

Developed sections only. Outline notes and unfinished sections have been omitted.

Quote 4.

Many people today agree that there is no such thing as collective guilt or, for that matter, collective innocence, and that if there were, no one person would ever be guilty or innocent. This, of course, is not to deny that there is such a thing as political responsibility which, however, exists quite apart from what the individual member of the group has done and therefore, can neither be judged in moral terms nor be brought before a criminal court.

Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A report on the Banality of Evil*. 1965.

One of the central messages of P. Pachpute's Exhibition Lone Runner's Laboratory can be said to be that a true citizen must "keep the politics alive." To be scrupulous of political rhetoric, to be aware of and engage in dialogue around issues plaguing the group, and to be ready to take action when needed all seem to be justifiable maxims for a citizen to live by. However, how broadly do these apply? How independent are these really of the individual's history? Of the existence of collective culpabilities (innocence or guilt)?

This short treatise on the existence of political responsibility and collective moral/legal culpabilities takes the quote by Hannah Arendt in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* to be its starting point. Arendt's argument in this excerpt is best understood in 2 inter-related parts (and that is how I will divide my essay).

Stating that the non-existence of collective culpabilities to be the popular belief, Arendt, on the side of the counter-factual, claims that (1.i.) if collective culpabilities were to exist, (1.ii.) there would be no person individually culpable. It is thus, understood that political responsibility would be binding on these individuals free of guilt. In the case when collective culpabilities exist, however, and (1.ii.) does not inherently hold true, Arendt presents another argument to ensure that political responsibility is universal: (2.i.) political responsibility exists quite separate from the individual's past actions and thus, (2.ii.) it cannot be judged legally nor morally.

I agree with Arendt's framing of political responsibility as being a universal ethic that applies independent of both (A) the existence of collective culpability frameworks and (B.1) historical allegiance to ethical or (B.2) legal rules. Through this essay, I will fulfill both of these burdens of proof and detailly analyze the relationship between the 2 argument structures Arendt advances, while showing how this universal responsibility transforms a (wo)man into a citizen.

Collective Culpabilities

Although the issue of whether collective guilt and innocence exist is present in the problem, it is clear that the issue of political responsibility's universality is the more important matter of clash, as it is the larger argument into which the former feeds.

On the matter of the former, however, Arendt doesn't ask us to pick a side; she merely suggests what the consensus of the majority is. Which is why it would be an injustice to the argumental structure for either case if it were to be ignored.

This is why this section will proceed to work through both cases so as to fulfil burden (A).

If collective culpabilities exist as a legal and metaphysical concept, it is implied that these are to be determined for a certain group through some mathematical operation on the culpabilities of the individuals that constitute the said group. Of course, it does not have to be limited to the mean of the group and can just as well be the $\max(n_1, n_2, n_3, \dots)$ where n_x is the value of intensity for x th individual of guilt as defined by some ethical framework or the minimum function or perhaps even the random function, through varying explanations so as to why. No matter which function is performed, the specific intensity for some (or even all in the case of the mean) guilts is misrepresented and thus ignored as an important factor in this judgement that is announced on the group. If this reasoning is extended by thinking about all individuals in all groups as independent ethical entities, this problem of misrepresenting the intensity of culpabilities lends itself to the idea that the severity of a breakage of moral or legal code is irrelevant, and only the fact that it is broken is relevant

If this is the case, then we do not have a scale to judge the offences relatively with respect to their significance to social order. But, since, within a group, the culpability must be judged relative to the average because, of course, not all members can be illegal, then, the judgement would lose all meaning. These legal judgments only make sense if they are made with the intention to punish specific behaviors that hurt certain social norms. Not all behaviors can be punished because then, what would set the norm?

In the moral context, cultural relativists tell us that morality shifts with temporal and spatial changes and we, indeed, see this in our present day. At some places, eating certain animals is no problem but in other places, the same may land you in hell (or equivalent) according to their ethical framework. Since these moral rules shift with context, it is sensible to assume that no society would evolve moral laws that make all members guilty because then, similar to the legal problem, where would these other-worldly concepts come from? And thus, we again, require tools for comparison within the group.

Since, we lack the tools to meaningfully judge offences, no one can be guilty nor, with a similar line of symmetric reasoning, innocent.

A possible counter-argument here could be that it is not necessary for the members within the collective group to have the same ethical frameworks for judgement and thus, the problem outlined above would not appear.

I would respond to this counter with the following argument:

In terms of the community members sharing a political responsibility or to be able to have any meaningful connection between the 2 arguments, it must be that the members share a political environment and thus, must also share the same temporal and spatial zones, which is the basis of the relativistic argument.