
Original Article

Systemic evil and the international political imagination

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Abstract In light of the persistence of discourses of atrocity in the post-Holocaust era, and with the resurgence of talk of evil that followed 11 September 2001, it is clear that the idea of evil still possesses a powerful hold upon the modern imagination. Yet, the interplay of evil and the political imagination – in particular, how different images of evil have shaped the discourses and practices of international politics – remains neglected. This article suggests that evil is depicted through three contending images within international politics – evil as individualistic, as statist and as systemic – and their corresponding forms of collective imagination – the juridical, the humanitarian and the political. It argues further that the dominance of the juridical and, to a lesser extent, the humanitarian imagination obscures our ability to imagine and respond to political evils of structural or systemic violence. Drawing on the example of global poverty, this article contends that the ability to portray and critically judge systemic evils in international politics today depends upon enriching our narratives about indefensible atrocities and reimagining our shared political responsibilities for them.

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If the misery of our poor be caused not by the laws of nature, but by our institutions, great is our sin. (Darwin, 1909–1914, Chapter 21)

Introduction

When Arendt (1994) wrote, in 1945, that ‘the problem of evil will be *the* fundamental question of postwar intellectual life in Europe’ (p. 134, emphasis added), she was one of the few intellectuals to take this claim seriously. As Judt (2008) recounts, ‘Far from



reflecting upon the problem of evil in the years that followed the end of World War II, most Europeans turned their heads resolutely away from it ... Indeed, most people – intellectuals and others – ignored it as much as they could'. The challenge to modern intellectual life of imagining the 'unimaginable' is one of the enduring effects of the Nazi conquest of Europe. As historian and Holocaust scholar Friedländer (1993) remarks, the Nazi extermination camps serve as 'the indelible reference point of the Western imagination' (p. 62). For the past 60 years philosophers, historians, jurists and international theorists have sought to make evil imaginable in the post-Second World War international order. Yet, the problem of what we do and do not discursively frame as evil and why – and whether our modes of imagining and understanding evil can adequately address atrocities beyond the reference point of the *Shoah* – remains as troubling today as it was for Arendt in 1945.

In light of the resurgence of talk of evil in the wake of 9/11, it is clear that the idea of evil still possesses a powerful hold upon the modern imagination. This article takes up Arendt's characterization of the challenge posed by the problem of evil as a point of entry for thinking about how narratives and images are employed to convey, reflect upon and interpret the sources, processes and consequences of evil within contemporary international political discourse. Of particular interest are three contending images of evil within international political discourse – evil as individualistic, as statist and as systemic – and how these images correspond to forms of collective imagination that embody different models to identify, judge and confront the spectre of evil. Do the images of evil invoked discursively and materially in international politics adequately address the modalities of evil that appear on today's political landscape? Can the paradigmatic individualistic and statist images of evil provide the resources to rescue the image of systemic evil from political oblivion? I argue that the notion of systemic evil, when placed within the conceptual frame of structural violence, is an important corrective to the unnecessarily atrophied sense of inexcusable suffering that characterizes contemporary international political discourse. In appreciating that systemic evils – in particular the existential evil of global poverty – should be understood as one of the central problems of humanly induced evil, it is possible to enrich our narratives about indefensible atrocities and to reimagine our shared political responsibilities for them.

Three Images of Evil in International Political Discourse

Following the 11 September 2001 assault on the World Trade Center, the language of evil has (re)captured our imagination. But despite its recent prominence, the presuppositions and limits of the political imagination of evil and its relationship to other idioms of gross atrocities have been subject to little scrutiny. In such a global political climate as ours, however, where talk of evil frequently has been condensed to the 'metaphysical essence' of terrorism, it is necessary both to question this

specific condensation and to explore how the language of evil has the capacity to speak to other pathologies of the modern human condition.

Before beginning, brief clarification of what I mean by the phrase ‘political imagination’ is in order. The political imagination refers to the ways that various agents envision and give sense to their political existence, including the means and ends of the political communities they inhabit, the relations they have to each other and to power, and the expectations they have of one another and for what they can accomplish in the world. The political imagination is both broader and deeper than formal theories or doctrines of political reality, as it is often conveyed in images, metaphors and narratives that are shared by many people. The political imagination therefore can be seen as an intersubjective ‘background’ understanding that makes possible collective political practices and a widely shared sense of a common world as a basis for taking our moral and political bearings.¹

Ultimately, the political imagination has both active and contemplative dimensions that reflect our efforts to intervene in, make sense of and respond to events affecting our sense of political reality (Taylor, 2004). Such interventions illustrate the possibility of moving from one political imagination to another, where the established contents of these imaginations can be questioned and redefined in light of predicaments that affect our collective moral and political existence. As when we confront evil the first thing we encounter in most cases is a narrative about what happened and what it meant, the reflective capacity of the imagination is particularly well suited to translating the idea of evil into collectively shared ‘stories in the public sphere’. The narrative reconstruction of human cruelty and wrongdoing can, in Lara’s (2007) view, ‘recover the ineffable into a moral understanding of what has happened’, how it affects us and how it may be prevented in future (p. 59). In this sense, the political imagination is a practice we employ to represent who we were, who we have become and who we will be with regard to collectively suffered atrocities. The imagination therefore is a crucial force not only for understanding evil and for reflective self-definition in light of that understanding, but consequently for shaping whatever sense of responsibility we may have towards our world in which evil appears.

How then do we imagine the unimaginable in the realm of international politics? I suggest that we can formulate a rough yet useful answer to this question by drawing on the three-levels-of-analysis approach, and its reference to three different ‘images’ of international relations (IR) theories, proffered by Waltz (1959). Waltz’s influential images of ‘man, the state, and war’ offer an ‘all-pervasive’ model of explaining phenomena of international politics in terms of ‘levels of analysis’ (Walker, 1993, p. 131). Yet, the purpose in using Waltz’s theory here is quite limited and is also considerably different from the methodological debates surrounding his work within IR scholarship. Setting aside the neorealist and positivistic commitments of Waltz’s theory, the interpretive concern rather is with how the schematic concept of discursive ‘images’ can reveal how evil typically is *depicted or made visible* within international affairs and, conversely, how other forms of evil then may *not appear* as



such. In other words, the main point for consideration is ontological and hermeneutical, that is, it is interested with *what* we see as well as *how* we see in terms of our intersubjective background understandings. Facing the problem of evil in terms of what and how we *see* is useful because, according to Arendt (2003b), the 'sense' that corresponds with thinking is that of 'sight' (p. 793); it is on the back of 'sight', 'representation', 'appearance' – in short, of the 'disclosing' vision of imagination – that the activities of thinking, understanding and judging rest, inasmuch as the imagination creates openings in thought for critical reflection and debate about what is and what should not be.

I suggest that there are three contending narratives within international politics that imagine diverse forms of evil circulating at slightly different levels: the first narrative links to imagery of individual persons and 'human nature' (first image); the second narrative to imagery of states and their internal social processes (second image); and the third narrative to imagery of the interstate (or, more recently, global) system (third image). Narratives of evil in modern international political discourse correspondingly are expressed by the symbolic and institutional forms of the malevolent individual, the corrupt regime and the malfunctioning international order.

The first image calls for a focus on the attributes of individuals. Within this individualistic image, evil often is seen as emerging from an intrinsic possibility of human nature or behaviour itself. Following in the tradition of Christian theology as well as Hobbesian realism, the first image holds that the root of all evil is the corruption inherent in the individual – 'the same fatal weakness in human nature', as Arendt (2003a, p. 108) summarizes this view. Bluntly put, the great social or political evils, refracted through the images of such cruelties as torture, massacre and genocide, are reducible to some malevolent individuals and their reprehensible inclinations. In Augustinian terms evil is the 'lack' of being (goodness), while in Kantian terms it is the perverse denial of the moral law through an impurity of will (Neiman, 2002). Projected onto the international realm, the first image presents a catalogue of paradigmatic 'diabolical' individuals, including Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, Idi Amin, Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden.

The second statist image focuses on the corruption inherent in certain types of domestic political orders rather than in individuals *per se*. Here, evil is mediated endogenously by the specific means and ends adopted by a particular regime, with or without popular support. At times, a state's evil acts may be the unintended result of the pursuit of 'the good', as exemplified in the just war principle of double effect (Walzer, 1977, pp. 151–159). More radically, a state may strive to do evil for evil's sake, such as abducting, torturing and 'disappearing' political opponents, gratuitously targeting 'enemies of the state', and viciously repressing or exterminating innocent segments of the civilian population. International (and comparative) politics, following in the Aristotelian and Kantian traditions, has seized upon a typology of regimes formulated to distinguish between 'good' and 'evil' states. Over the past half-century the second image has coalesced around the typological

dichotomy of democratic and non-democratic regimes (Huntington, 1991), or ‘first-class’ and ‘second-class’ regimes (Geis, 2013). The former is thought to represent if not goodness itself, then at least a more reliable bulwark against political evils, while the latter (whether despotic, tyrannical, totalitarian or, in Rawlsian terminology, ‘outlaw’) signifies the wrongdoings that contaminate a body politic from within (Rawls, 1999).

Finally, the third image shifts focus to attributes or conditions that underlie the interstate system as a whole. Combining historical experience with diverse insights drawn from theories of realism, liberalism and constructivism, this image posits a correspondence between evil and various factors such as aggressive desire for power, defection from the rules of international cooperation and failure to internalize modern international norms given the arrangement of the international system. Whether portrayed in terms of the violation of order or peace, the third image superimposes evil upon the anarchic character and endemic uncertainties and frailties that make transgressions within the international sphere much more likely to occur systemically. Perhaps the most consistently great evil projected by the third image is the institutionalized condition of war, which perpetually threatens and regularly destroys the ‘peace and security’ of all nations. In general terms, the very operation of the interstate system is prone to unleashing destructive actions that gravely harm humanity or the international community.

The first two narratives have materialized powerfully in the collective imagination via the discursive registers of ‘crimes against humanity’ (first image) and ‘state crimes’ (second image). While crimes against humanity denote the types of severe human rights violations committed by individual perpetrators, state crimes refer to those committed by ‘self-contained’ (Rawls, 1971) sovereign polities. In both cases, the concept of ‘crime’ has come to resignify the types of morally abhorrent harms that often appear as ‘evil’. The popular post-Second World War turn towards human rights-based conceptions of evil has both focused attention on protecting individuals from governmental abuse, and given evil a ‘regulatory’ face by demarcating legal criteria and boundaries for the legitimate powers of states and the claims of their citizens.² As Campbell (1999, p. 18) points out, the now-familiar *juridical paradigm* of evil, inclusive of the first and second images, ‘connects human rights with a shared perception of totally unacceptable evils which are never justified and undermine the claims to political legitimacy of any system of government’.

Structural Violence and Systemic Evil

Meanwhile, what is foreclosed in the juridical paradigm is a correspondingly powerful translation for the third image of evil, that is, there is no similarly thriving narrative of systemic evils that effectively result from the arrangements of the international system itself. While the first and second images of evil have done much



to expand our view of the types of unacceptable harms that people suffer, they simultaneously restrict our vision in crucial ways. Most importantly, the legal model of human rights violations shared by the first and second images has fostered a *juridical* imagination that overshadows the *political* imagination. The juridical imagination makes sense of inhuman wrongs by portraying these as familiar types of discrete harms that result directly from the actions or omissions of specific agents (Vernon, 2002). These harms are correlated to violations of the standardly recognized (typically civil and political) rights of particular victims. Those responsible for such violations, and therefore capable of being held legally accountable, are particular agents who can be singled out in a clear causal chain of intentional (or reasonably foreseeable) action or omission (Ainley, 2011). What falls beyond the field of vision of the juridical imagination, however, are the more complex causal chains and social relationships constitutive of systemic orders that may indirectly inflict intolerably severe harms on a vast number of people. As the juridical paradigm elides such indirect harms, one of the ways that we can contribute to challenging its assumptions about the nature of 'good and evil' is by broadening our field of vision to include the systemic evils of the global institutional order and placing an emphasis on the evil of such wrongs at the epicentre of the political imagination. The challenge is to remedy the neglect of systemic wrongs within the international political imagination, without adopting such a broad definition of 'evil' that it loses all coherence or meaning. This can best be achieved by drawing upon the concept of structural violence.

Structural violence refers to systemic exploitation, discrimination, marginalization and domination that avoidably impairs the capabilities of some to live a properly human life on a daily basis (Galtung, 1990). Within the international system, examples of structural violence include contemporary forms of slavery and human bondage, racist and sexist migration and asylum policy, and chronic global poverty. While each of these social forces can be brought to bear on the political imagination of evil, the focus here is the harm of severe global poverty. Structural violence should be understood in light of the socially transmitted beliefs, values, behaviours and norms that are more or less sedimented in the 'basic structure of society', in something like the broad Rawlsian sense (Rawls, 1971), and which manifest in grossly unequal life chances that strike at the capability of some people to live a fully human life. I take for granted that this basic structure is composed *within* as well as *between* plural societies globally. Young (2011) maintains that such violence – what she calls 'structural injustice' – is systemic as well in the sense that it lacks a direct and discrete causal chain of responsibility; rather it is the result of multiple interrelated structures of belief and organization. Unlike standard human rights violations, which connote discrete actions intentionally committed by specific agents against specific victims, structural violence arises from the norms and practices embedded in the rules and processes of everyday life (both public and private). Thus, structural violence is largely indirect, typically resulting from socially condoned discourses, patterns of learned behaviour, normalized collective actions and widely accepted routines of socially, economically

and politically organized life. We may also say that rather than being overtly coercive, structural violence is a more subtle process that acquires a normalcy that makes it difficult to recognize or detect. As part of routine social processes, structural violence inhabits the background conditions of our decisions, interactions and projects, underpins our expectations about the world, and reinforces how and what we see in certain ways rather than others.

Structural violence is relatively imperceptible – at least to those who are less susceptible to its effects – compared with the juridically transparent image of evil as discrete harms inflicted by the circumscribed acts of specific agents against specific victims. The large-scale and widespread harms of structural violence are not easily traced to a single source, and they largely are sustained by the routine assumptions and actions of a vast number of people, very few of whom can be described as evil. For this reason, structural violence escapes the juridical field of vision, inasmuch as its scale and complexity are virtually unimaginable from the perspective of the more familiar paradigm of legal culpability. Despite the relative opacity of structural violence, it is nevertheless the product of human agency: human beings create, perpetuate, occupy and deploy the structures and institutions of socio-political life that have a dehumanizing impact. For this reason we need to ‘stretch’ our imagination in ways that make it possible to see that it has become increasingly easy for persons around the world to contribute to grave global harms – even if our personal contribution to the overall harm may be unintentional, indirect and marginal (as, for example, when considering the impact of our individual actions on the environment in the case of climate change).

In *The Law of Peoples*, Rawls (1999) states that the ‘great evils of human history’ – which he takes to include not only unjust war, religious persecution and genocide but also ‘starvation and poverty’ – follow from the conditions sustained by unjust institutions within the social and political structure (pp. 6–7, 9, 109). This perspective challenges us, as Rawls states, to perceive how severe global poverty constitutes one form of reasonably foreseeable systemic evil to which human agents around the world can effectively contribute. The interrelated elements and organizational structures of the political-economic global order together give rise to systemic conditions within which intolerably harmful poverty is produced and sustained. Consider in this regard that severe poverty causes at least 18 million deaths each year and drastically stunts the lives of millions more (Pogge, 2007, p. 13). Approximately one-third of all deaths each year are because of poverty-related maternal, perinatal and nutritional conditions (malnutrition, unsafe water, poor sanitation and hygiene) and preventable and treatable communicable diseases (HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis) (UNDP, 2005, pp. 21–24). What is more, the ‘excess morbidity’ caused by poverty-related conditions is exacerbated by social discrimination and political exclusion on the grounds of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion and language (Farmer, 2010).

In *The Atrocity Paradigm*, Card (2002) suggests that evil can be conceived as wrongful ruinous suffering, that is, as egregious suffering that foreseeably and indefensibly ruins lives. Conduct ‘*becomes evil*’, she writes, when it ‘foreseeably



deprives others of basics needed for their lives ... to be tolerable and decent' (p. 102, emphasis added).³Refining this definition further, systemic evils can be conceptualized as intolerable harms that indirectly yet foreseeably and avoidably degrade and destroy *the humanity* of vast numbers of people. I believe the structural violence of global poverty satisfies this definition. The structural nature of global poverty occurs in at least three pertinent ways. First, the global economic system functions specifically through the generation of exorbitant material inequality in both the developed and developing worlds. This inequality persists through time: historically speaking it was created in the (fairly recent) past, it is recreated in the present and it is meant to be reproduced into the future. Under the principles of this system, the type of inequality that consigns many to severe poverty results from distributional policies and decisions taken within and between countries. Second, the historical pattern of global economic inequality largely has been replicated within the structural composition of the international political system. This system constitutes a political hierarchy formed around the relative advantages and disadvantages in the material status of different countries, and reflects longstanding processes of social discrimination, (re)colonization and exclusion that concentrate wealth and power in the hands of the favoured few (Hurrell, 2001). Past inequities support contemporary inequities that in turn foster often vast political-economic inequalities. Third, global poverty also is born out of the intersubjective norms, ideologies, prejudices and negative stereotypes – including the alleged torpor, incompetence, fecklessness or innate victimhood of the poor – that are socially learned and latent in everyday life, contributing to a poverty-making ideational process that goes virtually unnoticed. These norms and beliefs often are combined with cognate essentialist stereotypes, such as those ascribed to race, gender, ethnicity and nationality. All of these social codings help create and sustain the perception that the poor and non-poor are fundamentally different in human terms, and that such difference seems natural and necessary. Taken together, these structural dimensions of violence demonstrate that discrete, individual actions with observable and measurable consequences for particular individuals, can no longer in the era of globalization solely or sufficiently explain how our behaviour impinges harmfully on the lives of other people.

Although most people do not 'want' or 'intend' to cause the suffering and death of the world's poorest, these are precisely the general effects of their ordinary practices when seen systemically rather than discretely. The systemic evil of global poverty gives rise to a kind of severe harm that differs from the lesser wrongs of injustice in that it destroys the basis for a properly *human* life, literally *dehumanizing* the vast numbers that it affects on a massive scale. This dehumanization has a specifically political character because 'humanity' refers to a category of relational status – that of being socially and politically recognized by others as someone who 'counts' as an equal and dignified human person. The perspective of structural violence helps to shift our view towards collective behaviours and institutional patterns that unjustifiably inflict ruinous conditions which negate the human status of millions of people. The world's poorest

are regarded *as if* they do not, or ought not to exist as equals. This situation, I argue, reveals the evil of *existential violence* at work. Existential violence is properly regarded as evil because it reduces the human to what is less than human.

Again, it is difficult to attribute the systemic evil of global poverty to the strict intentions of the many agents involved directly and indirectly in the global economy. It is deeply embedded in the structure and operation of the global economy as a whole, and of the international bodies primarily responsible for establishing and conducting the ‘governance’ of the global economy, such as the World Trade Organization, World Bank and International Monetary Fund (Hulme, 2010). This difficulty arises in large part from the fact that the contemporary political imagination is greatly influenced by the juridical paradigm of culpable wrongdoing. On that paradigm, wrongdoing is seen only when discrete actions can be causally isolated to a specific agent who is, moreover, institutionally allocated specific duties not to cause certain types of harm. Therefore, although the global institutional order breeds dehumanizing poverty as one of its normal functions and outcomes, we generally fail to view it as inexcusable wrongdoing because we cannot single out a specific perpetrator who is explicitly liable for causing (and remedying) harm. As we can witness from the global ‘economic’ crisis since 2008, it is notable that the world presently is depicted as immersed in a ‘financial’ rather than a poverty crisis, even though the World Bank (2009) estimates that the crisis likely will ‘push’ 200 million more people into extreme poverty and contribute to 2 million additional child deaths by 2015.

As global poverty is supported by structural background conditions, it may elicit some moral condemnation but not the political outrage regularly evoked by the ‘official’ harms of torture, armed attacks on civilians and genocide. However, as the work of Arendt (2003a) demonstrates, when expanding our vision from the juridical to the political, it is possible to perceive the factual, experiential phenomenon of evil ‘committed on a giant scale’ that nonetheless cannot be traced either to a discrete intent or ‘to any particularity of wickedness, pathology, or ideological conviction in the doer’ (p. 159). Evil does not always speak the language of law. The ‘banality’ of the evil of global poverty stems from the fact that its ruinous destruction of humanity results from the conventional, everyday and shallow (what Arendt termed ‘thoughtless’) behaviour of millions of agents – behaviour considered tolerable if not wholly ‘innocent’. Yet, the failure to see global poverty as evil because it is not (yet) a ‘crime’ is largely attributable to the failure of political imagination. In order to challenge the invisibility of the evil of global poverty, we must widen the scope of the political imagination to satisfactorily include ‘third image’ systemic harms.

Systemic Evil and Political Responsibility

Card (2010, p. 237) proposes the vivid image of ‘social death’ to convey the sense of foreseeable, wrongful and intolerable evils that lead persons to suffer a profound loss



of meaningful social relations and status. Social death may or may not be accompanied by physical death but, as noted above, such violence is existential insofar as it destroys a person's ability to have and enjoy equal human status alongside others. The harm of social death short of killing someone is not captured well by the standard first and second images of evil, which remain fixed on the direct harms of 'extraordinary' human rights violations and crimes against humanity. Following from Card, I suggest that the systemic evil of global poverty is a form of social and even more specifically political death. Beyond narrow debates about whether the global economic system is 'the' causal agent of the suffering endured by the world's poorest, and whether poverty 'technically' means to live below US \$1.25 Purchasing power parity per day or some other figure, the global poor suffer a social-political death in the sense that the avoidable degradation of their humanity *fails to appear* as such within the political imagination of evil. The failure to see the grave harm of global poverty as evil is linked to the way that many relinquish their responsibility to make judgements about dehumanizing systemic political conditions.

Why do we still find it so difficult to see poverty as a systemic evil? One clue might be gleaned from Žižek's (2008) analysis of the cultural and symbolic dimensions of systemic violence; systemic violence, he notes, refers to the 'often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems' (p. 1). Žižek argues that language, symbolism and imagery can both display suffering that calls for our attention and also deaden our ability to be receptive to and think about the history and institutional source of that suffering. Representing poverty through the abstract technical figure of '\$1.25 per day', for example, derealizes the traumatic reality of bloated bellies, shrunken limbs and children foraging for scraps in rubbish heaps. It functions inherently to project a 'neutral' data that obviates the imagining of demeaning conditions of extreme poverty. Therefore the inability or unwillingness of many to judge that the dehumanizing existential violence of extreme poverty is a type of evil may be reinforced not only by the way the juridical imagination obscures recognition of systemic evils; the framing of poverty and the poor within an ambivalent *humanitarian* imagination may contribute as well. Graphic images of malnourished and diseased children, which are projected through media as the master signifier of the concept 'poverty' by well-meaning NGOs, paradoxically can deflect our attention away from the political-economic arrangements that reproduce the antecedent conditions for poverty in the concrete. Such 'humanitarian' images can appear in the place of the reality of a dehumanized, impoverished existence, and block our ability to think critically about the history and institutional source of that violence (see Boltanski, 2004; Chouliaraki, 2010). The humanitarian imagination exhibits a profound ambivalence towards poverty and the poor: while we often are drawn to the poor as objects of pity, charity or 'humanitarian aid', we also reject and even despise them for intimating that something may not be quite right with business (and politics) as usual. The humanitarian imagination thus vacillates between contradictory representations of the affluent as 'benevolent

saviours' of the 'helpless poor', and as 'burdened rescuers' of the 'incompetent poor'; in either case the poor are located as peripheral objects of a depoliticized humanitarian narrative. Crucially, this amounts to a symbolic, cultural and political *disavowal* of shared responsibility with and for the poor.

One of Arendt's major contributions to theorizing about responsibility was her focus on the political role of imagination in judgement, both in regard to the political subject and within the political realm. But what are the implications of a focus on imagination and judgement with regard to poverty? Arendt (2003b) herself observed that poverty cannot 'become visible' as a 'human phenomenon' unless it provokes a sense of 'moral indignation' that situates the occurrence of poverty within its political context (p. 89). Indeed, 'to arouse indignation', she tells us, 'is one of the qualities of excessive poverty insofar as poverty occurs among human beings' (Arendt, 1994, p. 403). Yet indignation is distinct from the 'sentimentality or moralizing' pity of humanitarianism (Arendt, 1963, pp. 75–85). By regarding poverty only as an 'objective fact' that exists independently of its modes of (re)production in the common political realm, Arendt (2003b) insists, we further 'dehumanize' the poor by reinforcing the notion that they do not belong as political equals and fail to reach a genuinely political judgement as to why poverty is such an evil (p. 89). Making poverty visible would mean that we see how the poor are overdetermined by their association with the imagery of biological life or death, behind which no politically relevant person can be discerned. While poverty is a type of material insufficiency, it is correspondingly a kind of political deprivation that withdraws and conceals the poor from a public, worldly realm.⁴

To make poverty truly visible for those who do not experience it directly requires relating to it in such a way that it appears within a common world, that is, a shared space within which the affluent and the poor appear together in their worldly plurality. This connecting together of diverse people and their experiences points to the representational function of the imagination, which sets the stage for the political work of judgement and understanding. For Arendt, imagination keeps experiences that are too close to us from falling easily into bias or prejudice, and those that are remote from us from becoming alien and unfathomable. Only the imagination, as Arendt (1994) puts it, 'enables us to see things in their proper perspective'; it breaks through the sterility of abstract categorizations and bridges the experiences of those differently situated (p. 323). Thoughtlessness here then refers to a kind of unimaginative remoteness from the miseries of poverty compounded by the complacent repetition of trivial and empty 'truths' about the poor themselves. In this respect, thoughtlessness is an impoverishment of the imagination that contributes to neutralizing judgement and responsibility.

Arendt views judgement through at least three related lenses (Benhabib, 1988). The first is that of the moral faculty of distinguishing good from evil. The second is that of a retrospective faculty that we use to view the past, to evaluate what was and to derive meaning that informs our present understanding. The third is that of our ability to think representatively, which appeals to an 'enlarged mentality' or *sensus*



communis. The political character of judgement Arendt invokes acknowledges that imagination makes possible an ‘enlarged mentality’ that allows us to question and reshape a common sensibility and frame of reference about what is evil among and between different individuals, communities and countries. Whereas determinant judgements occur when a particular is subsumed under a universal concept or a *priori* rule, reflective judgements arise from the imaginative process of ascending from a given particular to a general claim by appealing to specific examples in order to draw or reveal previously unseen connections (Arendt, 1992, pp. 83–85). Appealing to particular examples supports our ability to imagine what it is like to be in someone else’s place, makes present the standpoint of others, breaks through established opinions and prejudices, and ensures our judgements are not merely expressions of our own beliefs and experiences. Reflective judgement thereby acquires an exemplary validity by appealing to, imagining and relating the plural experiences and viewpoints of others (Arendt, 1992, pp. 70–77).

What difference can reflective judgement make when judging whether the structural violence of global poverty is evil? There are two crucial ways it matters. First, it brings us at least one small step nearer to the sorts of factual truth necessary to manifest political judgement. Political judgement is representative inasmuch as it comes from considering the different viewpoints of others as well as our own; one forms a judgement by ‘making present to [one’s] mind the standpoints’ of others, especially those whose lives may be otherwise remote from our own (Arendt, 1968, p. 241). The more people’s standpoints a person has present in her mind the better that person can imagine how she would think and feel about a given issue, such as chronic poverty, if she were in their place. These standpoints embody both factual truths of others’ lives and opinions as to the moral meaning and political implications of such truths. By way of illustration, consider the following example described by Arendt (2003a, p. 140):

[S]uppose I look at a specific slum dwelling and I perceive in this particular building the general notion which it does not exhibit directly, the notion of poverty and misery. I arrive at this notion by representing to myself how I would feel if I had to live there, that is, I try to think in the place of the slum-dweller. The judgement I shall come up with will by no means necessarily be the same as that of the inhabitants whom time and hopelessness may have dulled to the outrage of their condition, but it will become an outstanding example for my further judging of these matters.

Understanding poverty thus requires ways of imagining where we can proceed to the generalized through reflective attention to the concrete and particular. One puts oneself into the position of the slum dweller not only in order to better understand one’s own position – through a kind of situated impartiality or ‘disinterestedness’ from one’s own private interests – but to better understand from the other’s point of view the reality of a life lived in poverty. Reflective judgement raises precisely such

questions of what we see when we encounter images of poverty. Are we able to see the world not just through staggering statistics, but through the eyes of a child in Brazil or the Philippines, whose father has been murdered or mother has been the victim of sexual violence, and who spends her days picking through rubbish and collecting contaminated water, while caring for siblings suffering from malaria and tuberculosis? Can we envision this child's concrete history, needs, wishes and rights and link them to our own? Can we see and think 'this is what the making of a less than human existence entails; this is what evil looks like'? This kind of representative thinking activity becomes political by separating us from our own personal concerns and enabling us to encounter the lived realities of the differently situated. Clearly reflective judgement is not itself sufficient to remedy the problem of poverty, but it is necessary if the concealed political conditions of dehumanizing poverty are to be brought into meaningful public light. The reflective enrichment of our sense of reality through guiding examples of lived deprivation is an indispensable pathway towards sharpening the judgement that global poverty is indeed an inexcusable evil.

The second way that the political imagination of reflective judgement matters is that, if one were to judge global poverty as an intolerable evil, then one would be in a better position to recognize the nature of political responsibility for avoiding or eliminating such structural harm. Arendt again is helpful here. Judgement from an enlarged mentality differs from judgement from an abstract Archimedean point. Rather than seeing a situation from an objective and external position, one both imagines how one would think and feel if placed in that situation, and how others might view the same situation from different perspectives. Judging from an Archimedean point corresponds well to the juridical imagination and its characterization of liability arising from discrete harms that result directly from the actions or omissions of specific agents. The juridical imagination assumes a position of obtaining transparent knowledge of strict causality and a specific purpose- or aim-based intent, in order to assign guilt or innocence according to a legal model of responsibility. On this model, responsibility arises only when a causal relationship is clearly visible between specific acts committed for purposes of bringing about prohibited results and the discrete harms themselves; responsibility and harms remain invisible in the absence of such strict causal transparency. The legal model of responsibility has become part of our conventional image and everyday understanding of evil – evil is because of specific isolatable actions and responsibility for evil is assigned only to those who can be causally connected to standard types of harm arising from them. This model allows us to 'quarantine' evil from its wider structural mooring.

Yet, the legal model is inadequate to understanding the shared nature of our responsibility for systemic evils, however indirectly or unintentionally we may have contributed to them. Arendt's position in contrast emphasizes a situated political notion of responsibility. By political responsibility, she means assuming the burden of acting in order to care for a shared world where we organize ourselves collectively and each person's fate is situated in relation to a plurality of others; in political



coexistence we are responsible both for our own actions as well as for the actions of others that we did not commit, by virtue of our participation in the collective activities themselves (Arendt, 2003a, p. 149). Political responsibility is strictly *political* insofar as it emphasizes the social connectedness of individuals and their complicity in shared socio-political conditions and arrangements that may give rise to harms (as well as to benefits) caused by those conditions and arrangements. Political responsibility is 'vicarious' in that we are mutually liable for things done in the name of our collective projects, the foreseeable outcomes of which are the result of everyday institutional structures and actions. This 'taking upon ourselves' the consequences for harms we have not directly caused individually is, Arendt (2003a) stresses, the political 'price we pay for the fact that we live our lives not by ourselves but among our fellow men' (pp. 157–158).

From the viewpoint of shared political responsibility, we imagine ourselves as responsible not only for our own actions and their effects on those directly connected to us, but also for intolerably harmful structures or institutions that we did not obviously cause or intend to sustain. We see such harmful structures as evil because of the existential violence they do to those who suffer from their foreseeable yet avoidable effects. Unlike the juridical imagination and its legal model of responsibility, the political imagination and its model of shared responsibility are more adequate for making large-scale structural violence visible. While it may not be possible to map transparently the totality of chains of causation that generate global poverty, it is possible to imagine how the cumulative norms, beliefs and practices of millions of people create and sustain it. And while it may not be possible to assign responsibility for global poverty to a single individual or agent, it is possible to imagine that we have a collective responsibility to transform the systemic conditions that perpetuate global poverty. But this political responsibility needs a properly political imagination to invest our past, present and future images of evil with an enlarged mentality oriented towards what Arendt (1968) describes as a 'world of universal interdependence' (p. 242). Such an enlarged mentality would require that we ask questions about, rather than look away from, the historical and social antecedents that facilitate entrenched poverty, interrogating our own implication in what has taken place. Alongside this quest for understanding, it also requires a willingness to deploy our power to imagine and exercise judgement about the possibility of a world in which systemic evils are no longer tolerated politically.

Conclusion

This article has argued that international politics has fixated on an unduly narrow discourse and image of evil. The individualistic and statist images of evil concentrate almost exclusively on identifying liability rather than on the appearance of intolerable harms that arise from complex collective actions. A broader and more critical

vision would see severe poverty as an evil outcome of global political-economic processes that both enable domination by those who hold economic power and reproduce political inequality between persons. Indeed, severe inequality and exclusion have grown alongside the privileges of global interdependence; recent estimates suggest that the richest 1 per cent of the global population own 40 per cent of the global wealth (the top 10 per cent own nearly 85 per cent of global wealth) while the poorest 40 per cent get only 3 per cent, a scandalous disparity that has increased since 1990 (UNICEF, 2011). In this way our interconnected and interdependent political spaces are systemically segregated by dehumanizing conditions whose combined effects expose the worst-off to disastrous existential violence, even though many of us have no direct causal link to that outcome.

As this broader vision also suggests, the collective imagination is an indispensable stimulus of our moral and political universe. Without rekindling that universe through reworking our political imagination to make visible the structural conditions under which people are living, it becomes sterile and unreal, supporting an existentially violent world in which systemic evil is self-making. The juridical and humanitarian imaginations have their roles to play in international politics, but they do not necessarily help us to better see the background conditions and systemic norms that underpin the abject status of the world's poor. The international politics of evil remains, unimaginatively, too tightly identified with stock images of causally discrete exceptional crimes and *ad hoc* humanitarian crises. There are drawbacks to this decontextualized myopia; as Arendt (1968, p. 242) observes, a 'lack of imagination and failure to judge' go hand in hand. While the juridical imagination can diminish our vision of harmful political processes and arrangements, the humanitarian imagination can blind us to political responsibility and judgement. Conversely, the political imagination can kindle an awareness of deep and pervasive systemic evil as part of our shared world and for which responsibility needs to be assumed. It can advance acknowledgement that political responsibility arises from partaking in the collective actions of a global system that bring about inexcusable wrongs. In this sense, refashioning the image of evil through the alternative narrative of structural violence may well challenge the paradigmatic – and curiously reassuring – first and second images of 'self-contained' individualistic and statist evil, although of course it too remains open to challenge. Yet, this alternative narrative about evil can provide some measure of direction towards assuming responsibility for altering our collective imagination of what is indefensible suffering in a world meant to be shared with others.

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Notes

- 1 The topic of the imagination, whether in politics or elsewhere, is fraught with conceptual and methodological complexities that are beyond the scope of this article to address. One problem is that the imagination or the ‘imaginary’ is often contrasted with what is ‘real’. But it is a mistake to suppose that the imagination means merely ‘illusory’, since of course the imagination can have very real effects and virtually all political actions must be interpreted in terms of how the ‘the political’ itself is imaginatively framed. Thus, although the argument here takes evil to be a really existing phenomenon, this phenomenon is always portrayed and understood in varying ways through discursive interpretations and symbolic representations; *what* is considered evil and *why* is a deeply meaningful yet also contested aspect of the human condition. In contrast to many contemporary works on evil in IR, then, I focus on the interplay of the idea and the reality of evil in the political imagination and not merely on the discourse of evil as a rhetorical device.
- 2 This tendency is reflected most prominently in the recent discourse (and purported practice) of ‘the responsibility to protect’; see for example Hehir (2010).
- 3 In *The Atrocity Paradigm*, Card (2010) focuses on harms produced by ‘culpable wrongdoing’, while she revises her view in *Confronting Evils* to focus on harms produced by ‘inexcusable wrongs’. The latter view is, I believe, better able to accommodate the notion of systemic evil.
- 4 To avoid confusion, then, what is being suggested is that liberation from *coercively imposed* systemic material deprivation is a necessary though not sufficient condition for acquiring and exercising effective political status and agency; it is a precondition for the creation of the properly human political condition. Stated otherwise, my concern is not with economic inequality *per se*, but with how global poverty destroys political status and agency.

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