
Review

Responsibility for justice

Iris Marion Young

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The position of the disadvantaged in society might seem like an issue that we, as individuals, have little ability to change and for which we do not bear responsibility. Many people are apt to think that the responsibility to redress social ills falls on government or charities. In her posthumously published *Responsibility for Justice*, Iris Marion Young wrestles with the question of how to conceive of responsibility for structural disadvantage and oppression even up to a global level. The book, which Young (2004, 2006) was working on during her last days, develops ideas she had already sketched in a number of articles published during her lifetime. She seeks to counter the reduction of the concept of responsibility to strictly *personal* responsibility for one's own actions and to animate a sense of responsibility that one bears purely in virtue of connections to others and that extends beyond one's actions and their direct effects. The work of two political scientists who made prominent contributions to policy discussion around welfare – Charles Murray and Lawrence Mead – provides a foil to Young's own account. Young counters their conception of personal responsibility as requiring that people are self-sufficient in meeting their own and their family's needs. She claims that this individualist discourse fails to accord with a more prevalent conception of responsibility according to which 'a responsible person tries to deliberate about options before acting, makes choices that seem to be the best for all affected, and worries about how the consequences of his or her actions may adversely affect others'. (p. 25) Young's project is to articulate what responsibility in this broad sense could mean at the societal level.

Young's illuminating discussion of the concept of social responsibility constitutes both a riposte to individualism and neo-liberal attacks on public services and welfare in developed countries and also a response to the moral dilemmas of globalisation. Her reflections on social responsibility are particularly vital given the ambivalent impact of technology and globalization, which – as much as they reduce geographical distance – often increase what might be termed the ethical distance between an agent and the effects of their

actions. This separation of effect from action generates serious problems (such as climate change) that are often not apparent to the agent and are not exactly anyone's 'fault', thus raising complex issues about determining responsibility.

Responsibility for Justice consists of seven essays that are largely self-contained though they do contain a conceptual progression. The first chapter is a critique of the discourse of personal responsibility exemplified by the work of Murray and Mead that developed in the United States in the 1980s and then spread to many European countries as well as Australia and New Zealand. Young's second chapter makes a case for how social structure should be considered as a subject of justice for which all people within that structure bear responsibility. She develops this point through a detailed narrative about a single mother who struggles to find adequate and affordable housing and is eventually reduced to homelessness. In Chapter 3, Young builds on Hannah Arendt's discussion of collective (and political) responsibility as distinct from collective guilt. According to Young, guilt is an inappropriate way to account for structural injustice because structural injustices may arise out of multitudinous individual and collective acts that are not in themselves unjust. This insight leads Young to develop her own 'social connection model' of responsibility in Chapter 4, which forms the heart of the book.

Young presents her social connection model as a counter to the predominant 'liability' model of responsibility that assigns 'guilt or fault for a harm' to particular actions of particular agents in the past (p. 97). By contrast:

The social connection model finds that all those who contribute by their actions to structural processes with some unjust outcomes share responsibility for the injustice. This responsibility is not primarily backward-looking, as the attribution of guilt or fault is, but rather primarily forward looking. Being responsible in relation to structural injustice means that one has an obligation to join with others in order to transform the structural processes to make their outcomes just. (p. 96)

Young uses the social connection model to examine the specific issues of global injustice that are involved in sweatshop labour. Chapter 5 proposes four parameters by which to assess the extent of a person's responsibility for such structural injustice: their power to influence the relevant social processes, the privilege they receive from the unjust structure, the interest they have in stopping the injustice (which applies, for example, to sweatshop workers themselves) and the ability to draw on existing organisations to affect change. In Chapter 6, Young enumerates a number of ways in which people seek to avoid their social responsibility: reifying social processes, denying that they are socially connected to the injustice, insisting that our responsibility is to those

who are closest to us and claiming that rectifying social injustice is someone else's job (such as that of the government). In the seventh and final chapter, Young turns to the issue of responsibility for historic injustice for which she takes the history of slavery in the United States as an example. Young criticises talk of 'blame, guilt, indebtedness or compensation' that Americans today owe towards the descendants of slaves (p. 174). Such moves assume a liability model of responsibility that runs aground on 'ontological and conceptual problems' (p. 175), such as identifying who in fact was the wrongdoer, who was wronged and who now owes recompense. Young argues instead that our social connection to the victims *and* the perpetrators of slavery (for example, some living Americans may have material disadvantages or benefits that are traceable back to slavery) demands that we seek both to redress the resulting social disadvantage and to 'do justice' to the history of slavery and of its continuing effects on society.

Although Young's book does not perform stunning conceptual or argumentative innovations (which, indeed, is not her aim), it does succeed in reclaiming the concept of responsibility for examining structural injustice, and that is no mean feat. There will undoubtedly be those who disagree with Young's basic assumptions as much as her final conclusions – utilitarians and libertarians, for example. Young simply does not engage with such well-rehearsed doctrinal debates, preferring to address the issues directly and in more vernacular terms. This should give the book a reach beyond academic philosophy – it certainly has great relevance for the social sciences, policy debate, as well as the general public.

Young's work, here as always, is fervently concerned with how to achieve social and political change. Indeed, the central thesis of the book could be phrased as an insistence that 'the political is personal', to reverse the feminist slogan. Her use of examples and storytelling shows how her theoretical tools can help us understand political phenomena and guide political action in concrete terms. *Responsibility for Justice* also displays Young's gift for working across diverse material and ideas. She manages to bring together Anglo-American and Continental philosophy, political science, sociology, public policy debates and legal philosophy.

Despite the persuasiveness of much of *Responsibility for Justice*, I would like to draw attention to two points where finer conceptual discrimination is needed. The first has to do with her interpretation of Arendt's notion of collective or political responsibility. Although Young is right that Arendt does not articulating an account of responsibility that can address structural injustice, this point is a dubious criticism, as that is not what Arendt is trying to do. Arendt (2003) aims to articulate an account of the responsibility that citizens bear for the actions of their political community and its government. For Arendt, citizens bear this responsibility equally in virtue of belonging to a

political community and not because of any chain of social connections to a specific wrong. By contrast, in Young's social connection model, responsibility is borne by each person to different degrees depending on their social connection (which consists, to some extent, in personal actions) to some wrong that is *not* perpetrated by a collective agent but by many agents acting without coordination. Although these two conceptions of responsibility do not conflict and each has its legitimate use, they are distinct and we should not conflate them as Young does.

The second issue concerns the question of responsibility for historic injustice. Although Young claims that historic injustice affects our social responsibility to others, it is hard to see how historic wrongs could give rise to any responsibilities (in terms of the distribution of social goods) over and above those responsibilities demanded by straightforward social justice, and Young does not provide an account of why it would be otherwise. The fact that a structural injustice is a result of a historic wrong should not make any difference (either in quality or degree) to our responsibility to remedy that injustice. The cases of those who are disadvantaged in society (from a local to a global level), who suffer oppression or unequal opportunity should be accounted for by a theory of *social* justice and should be remedied *whether or not* such disadvantage arises from historical wrongs. By Young's own account, our responsibility to redress social injustice seems to depend just on our *present* social connection to some structural injustice and should not be 'backward-looking' (which is not to deny that social structures are historical). I would suggest that, beyond what social justice requires, we fulfil our responsibility for historic injustices through the practice of *telling history*, and Young herself even suggests this at some points (see pp. 183–184). This responsibility to face up to the past and articulate our relation to past wrongs through narrative plays a significant role in helping communities and individuals come to terms with those wrongs. (This kind of responsibility to the past actually comes very close to Arendt's sense of collective responsibility for our past, but Young seems not to notice this.) Here again, there are two senses of responsibility that we should keep separate – we have a responsibility for social justice, but we also have a responsibility for and to history (which is, of course, 'social' in a more general sense as we fulfil it by engaging with others).

Responsibility for Justice stands as an important contribution to thinking about social justice and as a fitting legacy to one of the most luminous figures in political philosophy in the last 30 years. Young sets forth a conception of social responsibility that is certainly demanding, but also compelling. Her demand for social responsibility comes as a welcome tonic for the strand of petulant selfishness that currently pervades the public life of developed and supposedly democratic countries.



References

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