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Eric S. Godoy

Illinois State University, [esgodoy@ilstu.edu](mailto:esgodoy@ilstu.edu)

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# Reconceiving responsibility: A review of Iris Marion Young's *Responsibility for Justice*<sup>1</sup>

**Eric S. Godoy**

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In *Responsibility for Justice*, published five years after her untimely death, Iris Marion Young addresses the difficulties of thinking about responsibility in our complex, globally interconnected world. Our everyday errands, such as shopping for food, clothing, and even light bulbs now raise questions about our connection to grave injustices that occur around the world. Yet the limits of our ability to think seriously about these connections are evident. Even tracking responsibility within localized events is difficult when multiple layers of agency are involved. For instance, is BP, Transocean, or Halliburton responsible for the Deepwater debacle?<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, Young began working on these questions—so pressing in our time—just a few years before she passed away. Yet the fruits of her labors are promising. Her recent book is a serious development of her *social connection model of responsibility*, a way of thinking about and deriving responsibility from “belonging together with others in a system of interdependent processes of cooperation and competition through which we seek benefits and aim to realize projects” (105). This model received attention in the final chapter of her previous book.<sup>3</sup> Those who have been following her work will recognize that *Responsibility for Justice* continues along these lines, but that it offers a number of new and newly reinforced arguments. It is a concentrated and focused effort to think through the complex relationship between individual responsibility and structural injustice, a distinct form of injustice that results from “large

numbers of people acting according to normally accepted rules and practices,” which “cannot be traced directly to any particular contributors to the process” (100). Her premise is that we lack the conceptual tools for understanding this relationship and her task is to reconceive responsibility in light of this shortcoming (26-7).

The first two chapters lay the ground for her social connection model detailed in the following three chapters. In the remainder of the book, Young traces the implications of this model and deals with possible objections. I will highlight the unique and useful features of her approach to group responsibility established in the first three chapters, and, afterwards, offer a few criticisms.

Chapter one opens by discussing the “seismic shift” (3) that occurred in political and academic discourse on responsibility beginning in the early 1980s and leading to the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 under US President Bill Clinton. During this time, the source of poverty was relocated from larger political-economic structures to a perceived deficit of personal responsibility in poor citizens. This “discourse of personal responsibility” proclaims that social welfare only discourages the poor from being accountable for their bad decisions, thereby perpetuating the problem of poverty—a position summarized by the phrase “welfare dependency.” Young shows how policy writers, such as Lawrence Mead and Charles Murray, and liberal egalitarian philosophers, such as Ronald Dworkin, endorse this welfare ethics of personal accountability to the gross neglect of structural injustices. Most importantly, she highlights three assumptions made in the “discourse of personal responsibility” (4):

1. it poses a false dichotomy: poverty results from either structures or personal choice, but not both;

2. it presumes we can ignore the background conditions that contribute to poverty when focusing on personal choices; that the poor can improve their standing if they simply put forth the effort;
3. by focusing on the personal choices of only the poor, it overlooks the ways in which the rich and middle-class neglect their responsibilities. “Implicitly it assumes that everyone else properly discharges their responsibilities and that the poor in particular act in deviant ways that unfairly force others to incur costs” (ibid.).

Young makes it clear that she does not advocate for the abandonment of personal responsibility; her argument is that the dominant trend in discourse on responsibility is to overlook structural causes of injustice. Even Dworkin’s luck egalitarianism fails to uncover what is morally salient about this form of injustice. Dworkin argues that the arbitrary distribution of talents (e.g., good vision and intelligence) should not be the grounds for an unequal distribution of resources in society; only personal choice, not luck, should affect resource distribution.<sup>4</sup> However, Young claims his approach does not account for how background structures determine what we consider a talent or a disadvantage: “A person’s vision impairment impedes his ability to be a good civil engineer only in a society that fails to offer educational and employment opportunities that accommodate persons with different physical abilities” (31). We must keep in mind *both* personal choices *and* the structural backgrounds that frame those choices when thinking about responsibility.

Having diagnosed the bias toward personal responsibility, chapter two highlights some unique features of structural injustice. Although Young agrees with Rawls that structures are the subject of justice, she insists that they are not *part of* society: “instead they involve, or become visible in a certain *way of looking* at the whole society, one that sees patterns in relations among

people and the positions they occupy relative to one another” (70). A significant trait of structural injustice is therefore its invisibility at the level of individual actions; we can only observe it on the level of interconnected structural processes since its harms are not the result of any ill intentions or immoral actions. This invisibility explains part of our temptation to hold individuals, but not structures, responsible.

I find this turn to social-structural processes particularly insightful. Most writers on collective or shared responsibility focus on groups, organizations, or institutions. The trouble is explaining how these collectives bear resemblance to individual moral agents (i.e., whether they have intentions, freedom to act, deliberative processes for decision-making, etc.).<sup>5</sup> Processes, on the other hand, need not bear resemblance to individual agents; they are the result of many agents acting together. This focus is fitting since a) the harms of structural injustice are not reducible to individual intentional acts, and b) it bypasses the metaphysical sticking points that often plague discussions of group responsibility.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, by looking at how individuals are connected to unjust social processes, Young is able to offer a novel way of thinking about shared responsibility.

Chapter three offers two more useful distinctions arrived at via dialogue with Arendt’s thoughts on collective responsibility. First, our common notion of responsibility is often reduced to meaning guilt, shame, or fault—a hangover from the legalistic, liability model from which it derives (97-104). Arendt highlights an important limitation to a responsibility reduced to mere guilt: “Where all are guilty, nobody is. Guilt, unlike responsibility, always singles out; it is strictly personal” (76 [quoted]). In other words, the concept loses its grip when applied to collectives (77). Alternatively, “[m]any share responsibility without being guilty” (78). Shared responsibility is always political for Arendt and here Young agrees. Yet Young calls Arendt’s

derivation of such shared responsibility from political membership a “mystification”; one must be connected causally to injustice in order to be held responsible for it (79). Second, while Arendt only uses political responsibility to address past injustices, Young highlights the “forward-looking” potential of a responsibility disentangled from guilt. This kind of responsibility can direct us to change unjust structures for the better, speak out against them, mobilize opposition against them, or “act together to transform the institutions to promote better ends” (92).

Young’s social connection model is therefore comprised of a unique amalgam of thoughts about responsibility. She maintains that individuals who intentionally participate in unjust processes implicitly endorse them and explicitly sustain them through their participation (Giddens is indeed in the background here) (59-62). By singling out as morally salient *participation* in unjust processes rather than group *membership*, she preserves causal connection, typically important for holding any type of agent responsible. This feature of agency is often obscured in more hyperbolized breeds of existentialist responsibility—e.g., whether we are responsible for our attitudes.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, it resists the reduction of responsibility to a practice (based on utility or precedent) that claims the metaphysical features of agency are irrelevant to responsibility.<sup>8</sup> She expands responsibility beyond its usual individualistic focus without losing site of the individual, and thus without needing to delve into the metaphysics of group agency (where the boundaries of one group end and another begin), and without needing to pinpoint a single (guilty) agent who caused the harm.

Where Young’s model begins to break down is in its practical application—though, to be fair, she does admit that the shared responsibility resulting from social connection is political, and as such, messy (148). Chapter five suggests that social connection responsibility is relative to

one's power, privilege, interest, and collective ability (144-7). Sweatshop laborers, for instance, have a greater interest in correcting the injustice they suffer than do western consumers of sweatshop products; because wealthy and middle class consumers occupy a privileged position within the connected processes, they have different responsibilities than poorer consumers (145-6). Although those suffering injustice have the greatest interest in ending it, it is not clear who gets to identify the presence of an injustice (or privilege). It seems that her model assumes a democratic method by which sufferers of injustice can voice their grievances in a clear way to those with whom they are socially connected. The proposition that western, affluent consumers should simply take responsibility for workers in the developing world without this dialogue smacks of paternalism. One should never presume to have a responsibility for an injustice unless all involved parties acknowledged that responsibility as well; deciding how to discharge such responsibility requires a similar discussion. Organizations that have a great deal of experience implementing policy often make dangerous errors without meaningful input from those affected. For instance, in the 1990s, the UN backed International Labour Organization's banning of "unjust" child labor in farms and textile factories left many children without income overnight, forcing them to resort to sex work or employment in less regulated, more dangerous workplaces.<sup>9</sup> Young is wary of the possibility of paternalism here (146), and suggests that part of political responsibility "is to figure out how to align one's own interest with those of agents that suffer injustice" (ibid.). But it remains unclear how this can happen across national boundaries sans a democratic institutional framework.

Despite these shortcomings, Young reworks, in an extremely useful way, some basic intuitions about shared responsibility, while happily avoiding many of the obstacles that come with the territory. Recognizing that moral responsibility can follow from social connection

means taking those connections more seriously, critically examining them, and finding ways to respond collectively to the injustices within them. Young states that this is indeed how we discharge our shared responsibility: “[by] watching these institutions, monitoring their effects to make sure that they are not grossly harmful, and maintaining organized public spaces where such watching and monitoring can occur and citizens can speak publicly and support one another in their efforts to prevent suffering” (88). And certainly, part of this effort can involve developing reliable means of including, in our collective efforts, more voices of those to whom we are socially connected.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Iris Marion Young, *Responsibility for Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Recall that in a tragically comic way, each company pointed fingers at the other in order to protect their public image. Matt Daily, “BP, Other Oil Spill Companies Start the Blame Game” in *Reuters*, May 6, 2010 at <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE64578H20100506> (accessed October 10, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Iris Marion Young, *Global Challenges* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> For a recent account of the metaphysics of group agency, see Christian List and Philip Pettit, *Group Agency: The Possibility, Design, and Status of Corporate Agents* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> For an example of an attempt to bypass these sticking points, see Virginia Held, “Group Responsibility for Ethnic Conflict” in *Journal of Ethics* 6 (2002): 157-78.

<sup>7</sup> Larry May, *Sharing Responsibility* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), p. 24.

<sup>8</sup> Held, “Group Responsibility for Ethnic Conflict,” p. 159-60.

<sup>9</sup> Neil Howard, “More of the Same in the Fight Against Child Labor,” *Dissent Magazine* (September 6, 2011) at <http://www.dissentmagazine.org/online.php?id=530> (accessed October 11, 2011).