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Iris Marion Young's Conception of Political Responsibility

Comments on Iris M. Young 's "Responsibility and Global Labor Justice"

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It is an honor to comment on Iris Marion Young's article, "Responsibility and Global Labor Justice" (Journal of Political Philosophy 12:4 (2004) 365-88). The present invitation actually provides my second opportunity for comment on the article, since I responded to an earlier version at the Central Division meetings of the American Philosophical Association in 2002. Most of the questions I posed to Young at that time are answered in her published version, leaving me in the somewhat awkward position of having few critical comments. Partly for this reason and partly because I am writing only a short time after Young's untimely death, which

occurred when she was at the height of her philosophical powers, I will use this space to explain the usefulness of Young's conception of political responsibility and then point out how it exemplifies the contributions of Young's exceptional body of work.

I. Young's achievement in "Responsibility and Global Labor Justice" (RGLJ)

The goal of Young's article is to articulate a philosophical conception of political responsibility that makes sense of the claim that ordinary people in relatively free and prosperous countries bear some responsibility for improving the situations of people in other parts of the world. Young focuses on affluent consumers' responsibilities for the conditions of workers in apparel industry sweatshops but she makes it clear that such sweatshops are only one example of the abuses with which she is concerned. She intends that her conception of political responsibility should illuminate the responsibilities of political morality borne by large numbers of people in situations of structural injustice.

Faced with claims that they bear responsibility for injustices suffered on the other side of the world, many people make one or another familiar response:

1. One response is *dissociation*. Surely it is other peoples' responsibility to get their own lives in order. How can I be responsible for the problems of people I'll never know in places I've never heard of?
2. A second response is self-justification or *smugness*. Surely by buying the cheap products that others make, I'm helping them in exactly the way they may be presumed to want. Buying goods produced by people in the Third World supports the producers' independence and self-reliance, just as buying their cookies supports Girl Scouts.

3. A third response is to appeal to *individual powerlessness*. Well certainly millions of other people have terrible problems but I'm only one person and I can't do more than help those close to me and keep my own nose clean.
4. A fourth and related response is *despair*. Wrongs are everywhere. I was born into systems of injustice that I did not choose to enter and from which it is impossible to extricate myself. No matter what I do, my hands will never be clean.

Young's conception of political responsibility addresses these understandable responses in a clear, measured and powerful way. Political responsibility, in her view, is only one species of moral responsibility and it differs from legal responsibility, liability, or fault in several characteristic respects:

1. First, political responsibility differs from legal responsibility in that it is not limited to specified individuals or discrete collectives, separated out from others presumed exempt from responsibility. In the apparel sweatshop example, those who are legally responsible for the inhumane working conditions are all the individuals or collectives whose actions or inactions have a direct causal relation to those conditions; they include the owners and managers and probably also state officials, who are culpable for failing to establish decent conditions of work. In addition to the legal liability borne by these specific agents, however, Young claims that an indeterminate number of other individuals and collectives bear political responsibility for the apparel industry's inhumane conditions, even when their action (or inaction) has only a very indirect causal relation to those conditions. Following Onora O'Neill and Thomas Pogge, Young contends that participating in any social institution carries with it a moral responsibility toward all those whose existence one assumes through one's participation. When institutions are unjust, all participants share

political responsibility for reducing that injustice. Affluent consumers who buy cheap clothes involve themselves in a system of global production in which they know innumerable others participate. However, the global apparel industry is one of many systems in which relations among participants are institutionally structured so as to render some especially vulnerable to coercion, domination or deprivation, while placing others in situations that provide opportunities for alleviating these institutional injustices. Young concludes that affluent consumers who purchase apparel made in inhumane working conditions are not liable for those conditions but they do bear political responsibility for changing them.

2. A second distinctive feature of political responsibility is that, in an unjust world, it may require challenging accepted ideas about normal moral circumstances or standing moral operating procedures. Legal responsibility—like day-to-day morality in general—assumes an acceptable moral background against which individuals or groups occasionally do or neglect to do things that create harm. The goal of punishing an individual or a group is to make the situation “whole” again, relative to the accepted moral background. By contrast, political responsibility may require challenging the justice of the institutional framework that forms the accepted moral background against which particular harms occur.
3. Unlike legal responsibility, political responsibility is not directed primarily towards blaming or punishing. Young accepts that most people in wealthy countries are only dimly aware of the plight of those who produce the goods they consume. Political responsibility is forward- rather than backward-looking, aiming not to reckon debts but produce results.

4. Political responsibility is different from duty in that its mandate is less specific. It does not prescribe precisely what actions individuals or collectives ought to undertake to discharge their responsibility; it mandates only that they should find some effective way of making the institutions in which they are involved more just.
5. In her 2002 draft of RGLJ, Young spoke of political responsibility as collective and my earlier comments inquired whether that responsibility was distributed or undistributed. When collective responsibility is distributed, each member of the collective bears a distinct individual responsibility and the collective responsibility is the aggregate or sum of these; so a distributed collective responsibility can be completely analyzed in terms of individual responsibilities. By contrast, non-distributed collective responsibility refers to the responsibility of a group as an indissoluble unit and cannot be broken down into the component responsibilities of individuals.¹ In the present paper, Young describes political responsibility as shared rather than collective, adopting a distinction made by Larry May. Shared responsibility is distributed in the sense that each member of the collective has some individual responsibility for the outcome but Young considers that discharging political responsibility requires individuals to engage collectively with others through public debate and political action.

¹ In 2002, it seemed to me that each interpretation of collective responsibility carried characteristic benefits and costs. Construing political responsibility as distributed might better respect the fact that all consumers in the global economy are not similarly situated, so that individuals' responsibilities vary according their situations. However, I thought that a possible cost of construing political responsibility as distributed was that some people might seek to discharge their responsibilities by the individualist strategy of dissociating themselves from unjust structures, thereby keeping their own hands clean while leaving the structures intact.

6. The final way in which political responsibility differs from legal responsibility is that victims of legal harm bear no responsibility for remedying their situation whereas victims of injustice share some political responsibility for changing unjust institutions.

Because political responsibility is open-ended—it simply enjoins us to increase the justice of the institutions that frame our lives—Young offers practical guidelines for people deciding how to expend their time and energy. She suggests that we should give priority to the worst injustices, which involve widespread violations of basic rights over a long period, and that we should focus on institutional connections that can be discerned clearly—despite the risk that severe injustices may pass unnoticed. Young also advises that people should reflect not so much on our common humanity as on the specific positions we occupy within particular institutional orders and on the ways in which that order grants us privileges; these privileges bring with them particular responsibilities and particular opportunities. Additionally, Young notes that most individuals have little influence when we act alone and asserts that the existence of a movement against a specific injustice provides some reason for prioritizing activity against that injustice. Finally, she states that those who suffer injustice, such as sweatshop workers, have special responsibilities to organize as workers against inhumane conditions.

Young's nuanced conception of political responsibility enables her to answer those who respond to the anti-sweatshop and similar movements with dissociation, smugness, professions of powerlessness, and despair.

1. To those who seek to dissociate themselves from far-away injustices, Young would respond that consciously participating in structural processes that condition the

- lives of people far away inevitably carries some moral responsibility for the justice of those processes. However, her contrast between responsibility and fault enables Young to reassure such objectors that they are not necessarily culpable for the injustices they are responsible for changing. She emphasizes that individual actions often have unintended consequences and that the institutions that create a background framework for individual action are not necessarily consciously designed.²
2. To those who smugly claim that they are helping the global poor by buying the cheap goods they produce, Young can point out that unregulated markets are not morally neutral mechanisms for producing and distributing goods. Without safeguards, they may cause extraordinary harm, including creating labor conditions comparable to slavery. Markets are morally defensible only when they operate within the constraints provided by human rights, including labor rights. The human rights situation of Third World sweatshop workers is far less favorable than that enjoyed by Girl Scouts in the United States.
 3. To objectors who plead powerlessness, Young concedes that individuals acting alone have little influence on global structural injustices but insists that they are capable of making a difference through collective action. She

² On this point, Young regards her conception of political responsibility as diverging from that of Thomas Pogge, whom she sees as slipping into the fault/liability model of responsibility. Young asserts that her conception of responsibility for global injustice differs from Pogge's both in being forward- rather than backward-looking and in presupposing a different understanding of institutions. Pogge explains institutions as "rules of the game," often deliberately designed by a global elite, whereas Young thinks they may evolve without conscious plan.

acknowledges that, in situations of pervasive injustice, the demands of political responsibility may be unwelcome in their stringency.

4. Finally, Young can remind those who agonize over their dirty hands that political responsibility requires us only to address particular kinds of problems and wrongs, namely structural injustices. Some of the world's problems are caused by accidents or natural disasters and even the world's wrongs are not all rooted in structural injustice. Not only are we not culpable for many of these problems and wrongs; we are not politically responsible for addressing them. This reminder may not provide much consolation to those who realize the pervasiveness of global networks of injustice but Young can remind them that injustice is a matter of degree and that individuals bear heavier or lighter burdens of political responsibility depending on their situation and power.

II. RGLJ as philosophical exemplar

I'd like to end by pointing to a few ways in which Young's conception of political responsibility is representative of her larger work and how it might serve as exemplary for those of us left to continue that work.

First of all, RGLJ, like many of Young's earlier writings, provides a fine example of sophisticated philosophizing inspired by political engagement. Young's lifelong political activism, joined with intellectual boldness and personal courage, enabled her to expand the boundaries of the discipline recognized as philosophy. For instance, Young's involvement with 1970s feminist activism enabled Young to pioneer feminist phenomenology of the body in classic articles such as "Throwing Like a Girl" and "Breasted Experience." I have always been awed not only by the insightfulness of these articles but also by Young's courage in presenting them when she was a very junior scholar without

a secure job. Young's work on the female body could not help being self-revelatory, it drew attention to stigmatized processes such as menstruation, and in many cases it flagrantly defied established conceptions of what philosophy even was. The present article is less outrageous to mainstream philosophical sensibilities but again it brings grassroots concerns into the philosophical spotlight, illuminating those concerns while broadening philosophy's sphere.

Young's primary political commitments were to justice, which was also the focus of her philosophical work. RGLJ follows her earlier work in expanding academic conceptions specifically of the domain of justice. In *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Young criticized most philosophical theories of justice for being overly preoccupied with distributive justice and she defined the concepts of domination and oppression to reveal "five faces of oppression" ignored by the distributive model. Influenced by the so-called "identity politics" of the 1980s, she also considered the salience of group membership to concerns about justice. In *Inclusion and Democracy*, Young argued that democracy was a central concern of justice, viewing justice as necessary for democracy and the goal of democracy as remedying injustice. Taken as a whole, Young's work teaches that philosophical concern for justice requires attention to far more than the restricted issues addressed by what Pogge has sardonically called the academic justice industry.

Third, Young's work shows us how to reflect philosophically about justice in a world that at present is discouragingly unjust. Her approach contrasts strikingly with the method of ideal theory used by Rawls in developing his classic theory of justice. For Rawls, engaging in ideal theory meant not only offering an ideal toward which existing societies should aspire; it also meant utilizing a number of idealizing and sometimes evidently counterfactual assumptions about

human society and human nature. Rawls recognized that many of his assumptions, such as the assumption that everyone will comply with just institutions, did not reflect real-world realities but he argued that philosophers should use the method of ideal theory because it provided the only basis for grasping more specific problems of justice systematically. However, Rawls's assertion is dubious. If systematic political philosophy is to be useful in guiding the design of contemporary societies, it must provide adequate moral guidance regarding the concerns of those societies' citizens. No political theory could address all possible concerns but a theory is incomplete if it fails to address issues of political morality that many citizens regard as urgent and it is defective if it obscures those concerns or rationalizes injustices. Rawls's overly idealized assumptions mean that his theory of justice fails to address many issues regarded as crucial by the citizens of contemporary liberal democracies; for instance, his reliance on counterfactual assumptions such as that societies are politically sovereign and economically self-sufficient disables his theory for dealing with issues such as fair trade and cross-border migration. On issues of race and gender, Rawls's theory is both incomplete and normatively defective, in part because his assumptions abstract away features of the real world that are central for those concerned with race and gender justice. For instance, Rawls assumes that individuals are normally adult, able-bodied, and independent in several senses, that the family is outside the sphere of justice, and that parties in the original position are heads of households. Rawls's feminist critics have argued that these overly idealized assumptions result in a theory that not only obscures important issues of gender justice but also permits gender injustices to be rationalized. The shortcomings of Rawls's prescriptive conclusions point to more general problems with the method of ideal theory. As Charles Mills observes, it is not at all clear why ignoring facts about present real-world injustices should be thought to help

in developing a prescriptive theory of justice for an attainable future (Mills 2004).

In contrast with Rawls, Young uses a method that is deliberately non-ideal and this enables her work on justice both to be more comprehensive than Rawls's and to offer better moral guidance. Young focuses directly on real-world injustices and derives her ideals not from a priori premises but rather by reflecting on what is actually valued by people struggling in unjust situations. Although Young inevitably makes simplifying assumptions, she does not bracket empirical information that she regards as relevant to injustice; partly in consequence, her writings help us to think about justice for a world in which non-compliance, inequality, and coercion are the norm rather than the exception. Young's conception of political responsibility is a fine example of this. She shows that, in today's world, individuals' political responsibilities go far beyond everyday injunctions to keep the law, pay taxes, and vote; they also include advancing the justice of the institutions that provide the frameworks within which individual ethical choices are made. Working to establish a global regime of human rights is central to fulfilling this political responsibility, since Young's work implies that the addressees of human rights are not only officials in formal national and international institutions. They are also ordinary people around the world.

To conclude, Young's distinctive approach to political philosophy enables her to address effectively real people's concerns about real injustices. All political philosophers make choices about topics, assumptions, and methods, and these choices are influenced both by their social locations and their moral commitments. Young's irreplaceable contributions were likely facilitated by her situation as a woman but they also required her rare philosophical creativity and political passion. The owl of Minerva normally flies at dusk but Young constantly prodded it into flight before the end of the day.

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