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Iris Marion Young on Political Responsibility: A Reading Through Jaspers and Fanon

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

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One of my favorite memories of Iris Marion Young is of a time we spent playing piano together in North Hampton, Massachusetts, during a meeting of the Society of Feminist Philosophers in Action (SOFPHIA). The tunes ranged from those by Monk to some by Duke Ellington. Iris had been taking jazz piano lessons and was delighted to meet someone with whom she could jam.¹

¹Since she was a good friend, I will refer to her as "Iris" for more informal reflections and "Young" when more formal. This might have been obvious to most readers, but protocol may demand my making this explicit.

She had much joy for life. Humor was one of her traits, and although her swing lacked soul, her enthusiasm more than made up for it. Echoing her famous essay on throwing like a girl, she swung like a middle-aged white lady. She did so, however, like one with a forever youthful soul. Iris was one of those scholars who reached out to others. At times, she reached out a little too far, to the point of losing sight of the distinctions necessary for the journey in the first place. But in all, the impulse was a noble one. While we differed on much thought—her sensitivity to any criticism of postmodernism being one of them—that never got in the way of our ability to groove as friends, as my memory of playing piano with her attests.

After devoting her earlier career to phenomenological social theory, Iris decided to explore questions of justice and difference through engaging the analytical liberal tradition. Such is the fate of so many scholars who decide to move more to the American academic philosophical mainstream. That path demands, in many ways, restating what has been said elsewhere but ignored because of hegemonic forces at many august American institutions. The extent to which Husserl and Merleau-Ponty enter such corridors through analytical philosophy of mind, although the latter often being more than half a century behind on such ideas, is well known as constitutional theories of perception and criticisms of efforts to view reality from nowhere make their way to print as if for the first time. The counsel seems to be that such people hold most of the cards, so whatever is thought must be written down in their terms, which means, then, that philosophy seems to depend these days on amnesia.

The article that occasions this tribute, "Responsibility and Global Labor Justice," takes such advice seriously and is a reflection of Iris's continuous efforts to reach out in the hope

of dialogue with so many points of view.² Her article is, in effect, an application of Karl Jaspers's *The Question of German Guilt* to the American and First World context.³ The original German text was entitled *Die Schuldfrage* ("The Guilt Question"). The connection between *Schuld* (blame) and *Schule* (school) is revealing here since guilt also offers the prospects of learning. Guilt for its own sake is pathological, as the plight of certain kinds of neurotics attests. The text has been titled in English as "German Guilt" since Jaspers was addressing what his fellow Germans should learn and understand as they faced accounting for their actions and those of the German government in World War II. A liberal-minded thinker in his own right, he was concerned with many issues that continue in recent First World political philosophy, especially those pertaining to the political philosopher's own society, with those who share her or his values. We could update this as the question of First World guilt.

Jaspers famously outlined four dimensions of guilt with correlative responsibilities. The first was political, the second legal, the third moral, and the fourth metaphysical. Jaspers argued that the first is held by citizens; the second by individuals or conspirators; the third by individuals toward themselves; and the fourth between each individual and God. Liability, properly understood, pertains to legal responsibility. Political responsibility, on the other hand, is not only held by citizens, but also faced by them in situations of defeat or being vanquished. In effect, Jaspers argues that a government should behave in a manner that provides a good

²Iris Marion Young, "Responsibility and Global Labor Justice," *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 12, no. 4 (2004): 365–388.

³Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, with a new introduction by Joseph W. Koerski, S.J., trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000).

argument for mercy from the victorious. A cruel and unjust government, one that tortures and destroys the vanquished, forfeits any *right* to a limit on force when the tides have turned. Since the citizens are responsible for their government, it is they who face the consequences of what it owes others at moments of defeat.

Young is not here concerned with war. But she is concerned with political and moral responsibility. The route she takes is that of bringing the case of preferred political theoretical argumentation to institutions and geopolitical zones of power. It is a view popular among analytical liberal political theorists from John Rawls to, more recently, his protégé Thomas Pogge.⁴ Implicit in this view is that there is something that, somehow, the people who run mighty institutions in powerful countries fail to see. That it is an *analytical* approach being presented suggests that there is somehow a *logical* problem involved in the considered judgments of such populations. Should the inconsistency of their position come to light, the force of rationality should compel a change in their actions.

Jaspers's response was that this is a naive approach. Although argumentation is useful, more is needed. That is because such populations accept logic the extent to which it is in their favor. A *diagnosis* is needed to understand what is going on. Without that, the theorist fails to see the extent to which he or she is accepted in such environments so long as the mode of critique presented solidifies legitimacy and faith in such institutions. Although she ultimately demands more, Young affirms such when she writes: "Because corporate executives, university administrations, retailers, and

⁴See, e.g., Thomas Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights: Cosmopolitan Responsibilities and Reforms* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2001).

consumers act within a set of structures that materially connect them to one another and to factory workers, they have responsibilities to concern themselves with the wellbeing of those workers."⁵ Young contends that she is not asking for every individual to right all wrongs but that each bears responsibility for making better institutions.⁶ Put differently, one can only be expected to do what is reasonable to make institutions more just. Young differs from Jaspers here in an important respect. Jaspers insisted on making political responsibility a function of citizenship. He also made sure to separate moral responsibility from political responsibility. Young, working within normative political theory, does not limit her analysis to citizens by extending it to "every individual." This is because citizenship could exist without citizens; there could also be citizens whose actions lack citizenship. The result of Young's expansion is the convergence of moral and political responsibility.

Young is able to do this since the liberal political theoretical framework is premised upon inner-reflection on the principles of justice. Recall that Rawls advocated such a thought experiment in *A Theory of Justice* with the model of the veil of ignorance and the advancement of moral persons as the founding agents of just institutions.⁷ Young adds, through the thought of Robert Goodin, the notion of "task responsibility."⁸ We see here, within the framework of contemporary American society, a version of the query,

⁵Young, *Op. cit.*, p. 282.

⁶*Ibid*, p. 284.

⁷John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

⁸Young, *op. cit.*, p. 384; Robert Goodin, "Apportioning Responsibilities," *Utilitarianism as a Public Philosophy*, pp. 100-118.

"What is to be done?" She argues that this concept offers a division of labor through which more just institutions can be developed. Yet, even where the tasks are done well, the continued injustice could be a function of the way the "institutions are defined, their power, purposes, and interactions with one another, as well as how they define tasks to fulfill those purposes."⁹ Although beginning with the normative liberal political theoretical model of self-reflective considerations, Young breaks from the pre-social dimensions of that concept by raising the agent's "institutional or social position."¹⁰ We do not all have the same degree of effect on the mechanisms by which institutions function. It would be ridiculous to hold us responsible for what we cannot do. The effect would be, in Jaspers's language, a metaphysical imposition on political reality. Metaphysical guilt, he argued, occurs through a sense of responsibility for that which one cannot, and often *could not*, change. Survivors suffer from metaphysical guilt. Think also of people whose hands are tied. Those who are at a sufficient, geographical distance as to be able to do nothing. In effect, it is born from the cry, "Why not take *me*?"

By placing the tasks of responsibility squarely within the realm of reasonable practice, Young brings it back to the political realm as well. This move enables her concluding recommendations for actions for the fight against structural injustice "along parameters of *connection, power, and privilege*."¹¹

Jaspers observed in Nazis Germany that people of conscience either emigrated or did so from within. The latter suffer from

⁹Young, *op. cit.*, pp. 384-385.

¹⁰*Ibid*, p. 385.

¹¹*Ibid*.

an emigration of the soul, or, as we see the same argument in Young's essay, they become disconnected. Disconnection with people suffering from structural exploitation under a violent totalitarian state is different from doing so under a regime that offers more liberty, including mechanisms for dissent. The disconnection here is one of a feeling of political impotence from one's protest falling upon proverbial deaf ears. Young recommends, in the fashion of Hegelian counseling of political appearance via estates, that masses should grow and become transformed into organized responses. Such responses should enlist the support of powerful agents. The privilege of those who benefit from the exploitation means, as well, that they incur responsibility by virtue of having had alternatives to begin with. But recall that Young premises her argument on *everyone* instead of a specific body of citizens. This means that even those who are exploited by the system must be involved:

From this point that privilege generates special responsibilities, however, it does not follow that victims of injustice do not share responsibility for contributing to the alteration of the circumstances that constrain their options. On the contrary. I pointed out earlier that one difference between a liability model of responsibility and the concept of political responsibility consists precisely in that those who suffer injustice share responsibility for helping to bring about change. Thus in the example of sweatshops, the specific position of the workers carries unique responsibilities. Their conditions are likely to improve only if they organize to demand and monitor such improvement. Victims of injustice, however, usually can only succeed in their own efforts to change the structural conditions of injustice if

others in a position to support them take responsibility to do so.¹²

Young concludes that although her essay focuses on political responsibility for labor conditions in a global industry, her argument is "generalizable and applies to any structural social injustice."

I should, at this point, like to make some criticisms that my friend Iris might have appreciated. As I raise these, they stimulate memories that make me miss her. I have a refrigerator magnet with the inscription: "I always wanted to be somebody, but now I realize that I should have been more specific." One of the criticisms often raised against liberal political theory, which simply presents itself as normative political theory, is that it offers a version of moral and political subjects that, although abstract and supposedly universal, privileges a particular group of people. In a racist and sexist society, that would be the hegemonic race and sex, and given the significance of power, the exclusion of both converges in the material advantages of the dominating group. Young's response to this concern was to expand the category, as we have seen, to "everyone." Where everyone has political responsibility, the gap between political and civil society disappears, and so, too, does that between political and moral guilt. Elided in such a model is a host of questions about who should bear such responsibility. The argument collapses, however, into brinksmanship, where we *all* lose if we are not *all* involved. Although Young differentiates scales of responsibility – e.g., the powerful and the privileged versus those less so – the expanded scope goes beyond even moral to metaphysical guilt.

¹²*Ibid*, p. 387.

In his analysis, Jaspers argued that it is citizens who must be responsible for the acts of their government for good reason. Without that or some similar constraint, the scope of responsibility would reach across all time to everyone in the universe to every-when to the point of a near Platonic Form of responsibility. The *metaphysical* in the ascription was thus not accidental. Yet, in contemporary society, the requirement of political responsibility pertaining only to the “citizen” need not be the model because there are countless ways in which non-citizens also benefit from the government in whose jurisdiction they live. The responsibility of non-citizens becomes flawed, however, when there are people who do not have options over where they live. There is, as Kevin Bales has shown, a proliferation of enslaved people on a global scale today, and although it will be important for them to fight against their enslavement, it would be odd to designate their efforts one of *political* instead of *moral* responsibility.¹³

Young would probably respond that her criterion of reasonableness protects her argument against such extremes. Although she does not mention them, very young children and people with extraordinarily limited mental capacities, although part of everyone, cannot bear responsibility in the same way everyone else does. But this is the point. As the scope of everyone becomes narrower because of the reasonability criterion, the argument begins to change shape. If it is at the level of moral and political responsibility—that is, keeping metaphysical guilt at bay—then the question of the relationship between moral and political criteria come to the fore. The political one involves being accountable for the actions of one’s government whether one endorsed them or not. Policies facilitated by our government means that we, too, pay when it is liable. One could argue that is what

¹³See, e.g., Kevin Bales, *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999).

justice demands. If our government wages war on others, then the reparations it will owe will come from its source of revenue: Its people. If, as Jaspers argued, it brings itself to total defeat, the people are at the mercy of the victors, and the questions of rights return, step by step, according to the spaces opened up at each stage of reconstruction, which is also affected by demands of restitution. A question that victors can raise, since they in such circumstances control nearly *all* the conditions of negotiation, is what the people “deserve.” Much of this depends on what they supported, resisted, tolerated, or were even capable of doing through the course of the indiscretions of their government. What is crucial here is the focus on *government*.

The contemporary global situation has institutions that cross borders and hence bring many governments into a web of actions that make responsibility for issues such as severe exploitation (near if not actual enslavement) a phenomenon without actual powerful opposition. In the case of war, the opposition is between states, the war on terror notwithstanding. But where there is no direct attack on states involved—in fact, many are profiting from the circumstances outlined by Young—the argument depends on making the site of politics the actual activities of opposition between the people and their governments instead of between governing agencies. This is a rich conception of political life, but does it require the collapse of moral and political responsibility?

Jaspers is resolute: “Right can only apply to guilt in the sense of crime and in the sense of political liability, not to moral and metaphysical guilt.”¹⁴ This is because Right is what must be

¹⁴Jaspers, *op. cit.*, p. 32. He is, by the way, in favor also of reparations where a government is found guilty (see p. 30). How that is to be meted out is one of the reasons Jaspers argues for serious engagements with such concepts as guilt and responsibility.

done even by force. Young clearly prefers discursive forms of persuasion.

Young's raising the responsibility of the dominated groups to do what they could finds support and criticism, however, in the thought of Frantz Fanon. Fanon, in agreement with Young, argued that dominated and oppressed people (whom he distinguished by arguing that the former can still have their humanity recognized but the latter suffer from its attempted erasure) become free only by seizing their freedom. They must be actively involved in their liberation.¹⁵ Fanon would commend Young for remembering that dominated and oppressed groups are also agents. He would, however, argue that where domination collapses into oppression, the appeal to normative liberal political theory fails to account for the possibility of its consistency with oppression. That is because dehumanization is the aim of oppression. In the case of slavery, its goal is the "happy slave," the being that is content with being (treated as) property. It is, in Hegelian language, an erasure of the Self-Other dialectic. As such, it is also a denial of ethical relations with such beings. There is no inconsistency in ignoring those (or perhaps most rigorously "that") with whom there is no human minimum.

Ethics demands the possibility of symmetry or reciprocal obligations between human beings as human beings. In short there is a self/other-other/self relation in which reciprocity lurks. But oppressive settings, especially racist ones as exemplified by the predominantly colored populations exploited by the industries Young examines, only recognize ethics between a limited set of peoples, namely, those who meet the criteria of connectedness, power, and privilege that

¹⁵This is one of the main theses in Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Gove Press, 1967) and *The Wretched of the Earth*, tans. Constance Farrington, preface by Jean-Paul Sartre (New York: Grove Press, 1963).

Young outlines. Young's criterion of connectedness is crucial here, since it requires seeing the humanity of people who live below the radar or phenomenological field of received moral and political perception. But the problem here is that the context of such inquiry is, at the level of lived reality, even with regard to denigrated populations living within First World borders, one of a pervading conviction that radically exploited people are *no one*, only "things." This is not to say that there are not those from the powerful and privileged groups who cannot see the humanity of dehumanized populations and thus conclude that the situation is unjust. It is that as a matter of initiating social change, struggles against such exploitation do not begin on ethical but peculiarly *political* premises of constructing a genuine Self-Other relationship through which ethical relations can become possible. A problem that emerges here is that politics also requires the elevation of those who are "nothings" to the level of "people." The *struggle* here, then, is a conflict with politics as an aim through which ethical relations can emerge. It is akin to what Søren Kierkegaard calls a teleological suspension of the ethical. The dialectic becomes one from war or violence to politics to ethics. A more stable, humane environment is needed, in other words, for ethical life to become the basis of politics.

Young was a highly ethical person with strong moral convictions. To her credit, she demanded such of others. This critique of presuming the presence of a Self-Other dialectic leads, however, to a critique of normative political theory. For such theory, most represented by modern liberalism, the claim is that it is about theorizing what should be, but the thought in fact presupposes the very political reality it needs to construct for its condition of possibility. To put it differently: For those who rule, they prefer ethics to precede politics since they presuppose an already just and humane, although often hidden, environment as the de facto context of their inquiry into what ought to be. For those who

are oppressed by such rule, they regard the appeal to ethics as begging the question of the relevance of good will and argue for the need to shift the conditions of rule, to engage in politics, before addressing an ethics. Failure to do so would have the conservative consequence of preserving the conditions that need to be changed. And worse, one may discover at the end of a political process that some oughts are no longer viable; they face no chance, in other words, of any longer becoming a lived reality.

Fanon and Young seem to converge since both argue for involvement in struggles at multiple levels for the sake of social change. Where they differ, however, is at the level of what Alfred Schutz would call an “in-order-to” motive. Young’s work argues that such action should be done for the sake of eradicating social injustice. Fanon argues that normative issues of injustice and justice are *ex post facto* concerns. The fight should simply be waged because there are few, if any, options available as human beings. Young argues for doing what is right; Fanon argues that one fights for the basis of determining what is right, namely, the human minimum. Both agree, against Jaspers, however, that the scope of political responsibility cannot be citizens alone, but Fanon leaves Young behind at the level of faith in the good will of those who benefit from structural injustice. For Fanon, the response is a wager in which one invests in necessary actions. There are things oppressed populations must do where the addition of privileged and powerful allies stand more as a welcomed aid instead of one that is relied upon.

The differences we find in Jaspers, Fanon, and Young, all three of whom now reside in our memory but continue in our work, bring to the fore the importance of defending and, where absent, creating the conditions for *political* activity in our time. Their difference at the level of diagnosis is, however, crucial. For a danger that lurks in efforts at social change in an age that has offered moral pretense as an excuse

for more rigorous exploitation is the possibility, at the end of the day, of ethical irrelevance. Morality could be propped up in an exact cohesion with laws the consequence of which is the eradication of the ethical soul and dissenting voice. Are such risks worth taking?

What is to be done today must be understood as holding no guarantees but is worth doing, as Young suggests, if but for the sake of justice. Like Jaspers and Fanon, she would also prefer that we remember that justice only makes sense to the extent to which it can be lived by flesh and blood people on a global scale.