

---

---

## Symposia on Gender, Race and Philosophy

Volume 3, number 1. January 2007

<http://web.mit.edu/sgrp>

---

---

### Political Justice and Global Inequity: On Iris Marion Young's Concept of Political Responsibility

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

#### Eduardo Mendieta

Philosophy Department  
213 Harriman Hall  
Stony Brook University  
Stony Brook, NY 11794-3750  
[Eduardo.Mendieta@stonybrook.edu](mailto:Eduardo.Mendieta@stonybrook.edu)

Iris Marion Young begins her essay "Responsibility and Global Labor Justice" with an epigraph by Hans Jonas, who refers to Socrates' moral philosophy in order to make a point about collective responsibility for institutional harms. While Socrates thought that the truly moral person is never the cause of evils or injustices, and would rather be the target than the agent of moral harm, Jonas thought that this individualistic and atomistic way of thinking about morality precluded recognition of the ways in which we are always caught and implicated in webs of moral causation that require that we attend to the harm that we cause not by virtue of our individual acts, but by virtue of our membership in a

collectivity or polity. Jonas may be partly right about Socrates. Yet, attention to Plato's *Republic*, as well as other texts in which Socrates defends the interdependence between politics, ethics and justice, such as *Gorgias* and *Protagoras*, would reveal that neither Plato nor Socrates were either blind or deaf to the questions of collective responsibility. In fact, in the *Republic* Plato introduces the allegory of the ring of Gyges. This ring allows its wearer to become invisible and thus to evade moral censure and punishment for unjust acts. Invisibility here means impunity and unaccountability. Glaucon, who narrates this allegory in the *Republic*, in fact claims that if both the moral and immoral person had access to this power of invisibility, both would act similarly, i.e. even the moral person would do immoral acts so long as they were granted impunity and immunity. Distance, in fact, becomes a warrant for immorality, or if not outright injustice, then a warrant for inaction and benign neglect. One line of reflection entailed by this story is that if indeed it is difficult to be moral even towards our most proximate and intimate partners, then the more difficult it is to be moral towards nameless and faceless others.

The ring of Gyges is an allegory for moral distance and moral impunity. Indeed, why be moral when we do not have to face the consequences of our acts, when our distance from those who are affected by our actions, choices, and inactions, can never hold us accountable or make us assume responsibility? This question reveals to us why it is, and this is what Plato is after in the *Republic* as well as other of his moral texts, that morality has to be more than a calculus of the maximization of benefits and minimization of costs. Morality has also to be self-motivated, and not something we do out of fear of coercion, shame, or an external violent sanction. In short, implicit in Glaucon's allegory of the ring of Gyges, is a notion of morality that is above and beyond the threat of coercion, and which has no limits and boundaries, because it treats all moral agents as worthy of moral responsibility, regardless of

how close or far they are from where I am. What is missing, clearly, is an account of the relationship between individual moral responsibility and political responsibility, for the responsibility among strangers is mediated by political structures. It is one of the virtues of Young's wonderful essay to provide us not just with a synoptic overview of the ways that questions of global injustice have been addressed, but also with a fairly detailed and thought out proposal for an account of political responsibility that seeks to precisely bridge the moral at an individual level with the moral at a collective level.

Young is absolutely right that we need a different moral account of why we find political movements like the anti-sweatshop, in particular, and divestment movements in general, morally appealing and morally justifiable. In fact, Young goes further. In her views, these movements give expression to some fundamental moral intuitions about collective responsibility that we have failed to give proper accounts. It is Young's imputation that both political and moral philosophy have failed such movements and moral citizens when both have failed to give an account that explicates and elucidates why such movements and programs are the performance of both political and moral responsibilities that we all have vis-à-vis global inequities. Young argues that part of this failure has to do with the ways in which questions of global justice have been thought along the lines of legal liability, which are trailed not too far behind by restorative justice claims. Let me call this the legalistic model of global justice. In this model, questions of global justice can only be dealt with properly in terms of legal liability. This legal liability then allows us to localize, individualize, and quantify harms done by commission or omission. Evidently, here, there is only liability if there is on the books a legal prescription and description of what would constitute a violation of some contractual arrangement. One is not liable for that which is not specified in the law books.

Young points out the weaknesses with this way of thinking about global justice. It assumes that we can discern and make legible a chain of causation. It assumes that we can only make legible this causal chain if we are looking retrospectively to how, when, and where something was done or not done. And most importantly, the goal here is to localize and identify a culprit, or an agent of liability. Notably, this legalistic model that aims to address 'global' inequities, ends up diluting collective responsibility by individualizing the agent of liability. Perhaps one of the worst consequences of this legalistic model is that it shifts the burden of action away from social agents towards supra-national and government agencies, who are putatively in charge of monitoring and penalizing violators of already identified violations of global agreement. The legalization of global justice leads to its bureaucratization and quantification.

Young forcefully and eloquently lays out a position that circumvents all of the failings of the legalistic model of global justice. Her position can be called "political responsibility for global justice." Young appropriates Hannah Arendt's notion of collective responsibility in order to elucidate the ways in which we are responsible for the choices and acts of omission that we do collectively. In Young's view, collective responsibility is the soil on which political responsibility grows. There is no sense in which we can talk about the later without presupposing the former. Collective responsibility is the kind of responsibility that we all share by virtue of our being both beneficiaries and sometimes victims of collective systems, or social system that distribute social goods, in general. Collective responsibility, however, cannot be thought of at all in the model of corporate or individual liability. Political responsibility means we are all responsible, even if individually I am neither a beneficiary nor a victim of some collective decision. Young grants that within the model of collective responsibility, some of us are more responsible than others; yet, these are degrees of responsibility that are in no

way quantifiable in the way that liability can be discerned in accordance with some utilitarian calculus.

Young is at her most persuasive when she appropriates Onora O'Neill's arguments about moral obligation and moral agency. In O'Neill view, moral agents have obligations towards those other moral agents who are enabling conditions of any possible horizon of moral action that all moral agents presuppose in their moral agency. We have moral commitments to even distant others, not in some altruistic and moralistic way, but in a direct and always already presupposed way because these distant others are the very condition of my own moral acts. My moral agency is enabled by the moral agency of others. When I act, I am responsible to and for others, who are the very condition of my moral acts. Seyla Benhabib has argued that this co-determination and co-dependency of moral agents should be called "communicative freedom." I think that Young and O'Neill are articulating the same intuition using different language. Yet, what is central here is that individual moral agency entails a calendar of obligations, duties and responsibilities that are not secondary, appendages, or mere consequentialist considerations. Rather, these obligations, duties and responsibilities are the very *sine qua non* of moral agency. Moral agency entails reciprocity and symmetry. My moral freedom is mirrored in the freedom that I grant and assume in the other. Young, in my view, is arguing that such obligations, duties, and responsibilities have to be carried over onto the political realm, in such a way that they impact how we relate to foreign and distant others by means of the social and political structures through which we distribute social benefits and burdens.

It is not difficult to recognize the virtues of Young's proposal. Yet, notwithstanding the advances Young has made and the clarity she brings to these convoluted issue, we are still saddled with the same problem: how to address the growing

gap in global inequity. I think that Young has given us strong arguments for why we must be as citizens and moral agents morally responsible for the suffering and hunger of distant others. Yet, as politically and morally responsible agents, we act within frame-work conditions that dilute individual responsibility and that mask corporate accountability, while privatizing social wealth and making public the hazards and harms that such corporate practices entail. This is another way of saying that Young's proposal for an ethics of political responsibility must be complemented with what I called above a legalistic model of global justice. We must be able to use those chains of causality and trace legibly lines of liability so that at least we have recourse to the force of law when the "non-coercive coercion" of moral duty and responsibility do not incite to action. The laws that have instituted the global regime that is presided over by GATT, NAFTA, and the WTO, constitute a ring of Gyges behind which the affluent West conceals itself. But it is the chain of juridification that gave rise to this matrix of laws and legally binding agreements that will allow us to make such impunity and immunity accountable. It is through legal liability that we can make the framework conditions of the regime of global injustice visible. Glaucon's story was a way for Plato to say that the invisibility of ring of Gyges reveals how the truly moral would never conceal their injustice behind the mask of impunity. For the truly impious and unjust, there is at least the threat of the sanction of the force of the law.