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What Kind of Responsibility Do We Have for Fighting Injustice? A Moral-Theoretic Perspective on the Social Connections Model

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ABSTRACT

Iris Marion Young's influential Social Connections Model (SCM) of responsibility offers a compelling approach to theorizing structural injustice. However, the precise nature of the kind of responsibility modelled by the SCM, along with its relationship to the liability model, has remained unclear. I offer a reading of Young that takes the difference between the liability model and the SCM to be an instance of a more longstanding distinction in the literature on moral responsibility: attributability vs. accountability. I show that interpreting the SCM as a conception of accountability resolves a number of objections, while also highlighting the SCM's distinctive stance on the relationship between ethics and politics.

KEYWORDS

Responsibility; structural injustice; attributability; accountability; social change; Iris Marion Young

Introduction

Responsibility is a notoriously variegated concept; it comes in different flavours, and is put to many purposes. Iris Marion Young's "social connections model" (SCM) of responsibility has with good reason been one of the most influential theories of responsibility of late.¹ Young develops the SCM through a series of contrasts against what she calls the "liability model" of responsibility. Unlike the liability model, the SCM does not isolate out particular responsible agents while exonerating all others, because it focuses on unjust background conditions rather than particular wrongdoings. It is forward- rather than backward-looking, and it is essentially shared with others.

Young's account, while powerful and suggestive, leaves many questions unanswered. Indeed, the contrasts she presents read more like *desiderata* for a theory of responsibility than a full-blown theory itself. The real question, at least from a theoretical perspective, is what *kind* of responsibility can successfully support all of these features? What makes the SCM genuinely a form of responsibility? Young's lack of clarity on these issues – due in no small part, no doubt, to the unfinished nature of her work – has landed her amidst a number of objections concerning the nature of the SCM and its relationship to the liability model. In this article, I offer a reading of Young that addresses these objections while integrating the SCM into a more longstanding

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literature on moral responsibility. In short, I argue that we can best read Young as providing a conception of responsibility as *accountability* – a form of individual moral responsibility that bridges ethics and politics, the individual and the collective, and structure and agency.

Making Sense of the SCM

I begin by reflecting on some possible ways we might map the difference between the liability model and the SCM onto existing distinctions in the literature.

Moral vs. Political

Young herself explicitly discusses Hannah Arendt's distinction between *moral* and *legal* responsibility, on the one hand, and *political* responsibility, on the other. As Young reads Arendt, the primary difference here is between private and public action. Responsibility in the moral/legal sense fundamentally concerns the relationship of individual persons to specific *acts* of wrongdoing – did she commit it or not? did she attempt to prevent or avoid it? with what attitude and under what circumstances? Thus, in the context of Nazi Germany, individuals were morally/legally responsible for either committing or distancing themselves from harmful acts against Jews: the former is blameworthy, while the latter is praiseworthy. That is, their actions reflect badly or well on them as ethical individuals – as a matter of conscience, and the individual self.² Arendt writes: "In the center of moral considerations of human conduct stands the self; in the center of political considerations of conduct stands the world".³

By contrast, responsibility in the political sense concerns the relationship between the individual and *others*, as a matter of politics: did she *publicly* resist, and did she attempt to change the social circumstances that generate such wrongs? Young writes that "to be political, action must be public, and aimed at the possibility or goal of collective action to respond to and intervene in historic events".⁴ By way of example, Young contrasts Italian vs. Danish resistance: although the Italians deferred, undermined, and refused to carry out Nazi directives, they did not *publicly* denounce them as did the Danish, rendering their resistance moral rather than political. The difference between these two types of responsibility, then, lies in whether actions are aimed at bringing about change in the world rather than merely preserving one's character.

Importantly, however, Young never states that the liability model is moral/legal while the SCM is political. Rather, she is careful to describe the liability model as "the conception usually applied in legal and moral discourse", leaving open the possibility for theories of moral responsibility that do not rely on it.⁵ Moreover, Young's characterization of the SCM as a form of political responsibility is not stipulated at the outset but arrived at as a *conclusion*, stemming from the contingent fact that it is not possible for social structures to be reformed by the acts of a single person.⁶ Thus the moral/legal vs. political distinction is not an inherent analytic difference between the liability model and the SCM, though empirically the SCM turns out to be political.

Retrospective vs. Prospective

The clearest expression of the distinction, in Young's own words, is this:

In ordinary language we use the term “responsible” in several ways. One I have already discussed as paradigmatic of the liability model: to be responsible is to be guilty or at fault for having caused a harm and without valid excuses. We also say, however, that people have certain responsibilities by virtue of their social roles or positions, as when we say that a teacher has specific responsibilities, or we appeal to our responsibilities as citizens. In this meaning, finding responsible does not imply finding at fault or liable for a past wrong; rather, it refers to agents’ carrying out activities in a morally appropriate way and seeing to it that certain outcomes obtain.⁷

This appears to suggest that the primary distinction is between *retrospective* and *prospective* responsibility. Retrospective responsibility is backward-looking: it concerns the moral evaluation of agents based on actions and events in the past. Prospective responsibility (sometimes called “role-responsibility”) is forward-looking: it specifies actions people are expected to carry out in the future; it is in this sense that we speak of people having various “responsibilities”. And Young herself takes one of the main distinguishing features of SCM to be that it is forward-looking while the liability model is backward-looking.⁸

I think we should be very careful, however, in interpreting the precise relationship between the backward- and forward-looking dimensions of the SCM, especially since Young also emphasizes that all forms of responsibility “refer both to the past and the future”.⁹ The distinctive difficulty raised by structural injustice is that injustice is *not* an “isolatable action or event that has reached a terminus”, but rather “has existed recently, is ongoing, and is likely to persist unless social processes change”.¹⁰ After all, Young’s concern is with the *unjust background conditions* against which ordinary actions occur, rather than specific actions. Underestimating the importance of this fact has, in my view, led a number of commentators astray. Martha Nussbaum, for instance, interprets the SCM as advocating “guilt being appropriate to past acts only, and responsibility to future acts only”, such that “people get a free pass indefinitely, since no task they have failed to shoulder goes onto the debit or guilt side of their ledger, and the new task always lies ahead of them”.¹¹ Similarly, Christian Barry and Laura Ferracioli criticize Young for “absolving” agents of responsibility because they read the SCM as continually advocating that “the slate be wiped clean” insofar as it does not, in assigning future responsibilities, consider whether agents have culpably failed to act in the past.¹²

What these commentators seem to miss is that it is simply *not possible* to keep track of the number of culpable failures to discharge responsibilities here. There exist so many structural injustices, and virtually every one of our everyday actions would need to be performed differently if we were trying to prevent them, that it is nonsensical to try and isolate a particular failure such that addressing it would count as “discharging” our duty. Homelessness, hunger, unemployment, exploitation, discrimination, marginalization, not to mention war, occupation, imperialism – all of these are structural injustices that command our moral attention. Each of us is causally implicated in these injustices through the ineluctable everyday actions we perform to provide for ourselves and others: the very acts of feeding, clothing, sheltering, and caring oblige us to participate in globally exploitative structural processes. Indeed, Young herself is far more worried about the *demandingness* of the SCM than the possibility that it could absolve us. Because justice is ongoing and ubiquitous – because it makes up the very fabric of the current social world in which we are all enmeshed – it is simply not possible for anyone to ever “clean” her slate. Thus it makes no sense¹³ to keep any kind of scoreboard

as to who is “in the clear” or not with respect to injustice: we must each give it our all, as far as we are able. I claim, then, that we need a better way of understanding the forward- and backward-looking dimensions of the SCM, one that spotlights our ongoing participation in continuing structures of injustice.

Relational vs. Virtue

Another possibility suggested by the passage above, taken up by Maeve McKeown,¹⁴ is that the distinction between the liability model and the SCM maps onto Ronald Dworkin’s distinction between *relational* responsibility, which holds between individuals and events or outcomes, and responsibility as a *virtue*, which are traits of character possessed by an individual. When a person bears relational responsibility for some event, she is related to it in one of the following ways: she may have been centrally involved in bringing it about (causal), it may be her duty to bring it about (assignment), she may be expected to repair or compensate for it (liability), or it may serve as a basis for praising or blaming her (judgmental). By contrast, a person who has responsibility as a virtue is someone who acts and makes decisions in accordance with reflectively endorsed values and ideals, while someone who lacks it acts without moral integrity and consistency.

While it is certainly true that we sometimes use “responsibility” in the virtue sense to describe someone as a “very responsible person” or as an “irresponsible person”, and Young herself does provide such a description,¹⁵ I do not think that Dworkin’s distinction captures what is really at stake between the liability model and the SCM. For it is clear that the object of Young’s analysis is really the *unjust outcomes* that are produced by structural processes, and not the moral quality of individual agents. She is primarily concerned – as the name “Social Connections Model” suggests – with theorizing a particular kind of relationship that *connects* people to unjust outcomes in such a way as to generate a moral demand on them to collectively organize. Of the four types of relational responsibility proposed by Dworkin, Young downplays two of them, judgmental and liability, insofar as she is uninterested in blame and compensation; but she relies heavily on the other two, causal and assignment, in order to build up the SCM. A person who has responsibility as a virtue *is* someone who will discharge the relational responsibility they bear, but the SCM is ultimately still a conception of relational rather than virtue responsibility.

Interactional vs. Structural

More helpfully, McKeown characterizes the liability model as *interactional*, that is, involving actions directed at other individuals, while the SCM is *structural*, that is, involving actions directed at wider social structures. Young states that because we must evaluate our actions from “two different irreducible points of view”, we need two different conceptions of responsibility appropriate for “individual interaction”, on the one hand, and “social-structural processes and their effects”, on the other.¹⁶ But again, this seems merely to assume what needs to be established – that there *are* two distinct types of responsibility, one which is interactional and one which is structural. Traditional models of responsibility are grounded in conditions that hold for specific acts of wrongdoing performed by (certain kinds of) individuals (under certain conditions) – that is, they are interactional. What theoretical reasons are there for thinking that there is indeed a



second, structural kind of responsibility? Can *individuals* really bear responsibility for *structures*?

Such a question brings to the fore a felt gap between ethics and politics, between the agential and the structural, the individual and the collective. Political theorists have argued that the very concept of “responsibility” depends on a particular metaphysical notion of individual agency, e.g. the Kantian subject, that is increasingly under pressure in an ever more globalized world,¹⁷ as well as a historically specific and non-neutral liberal conception of an individual person’s “ownership” over their actions.¹⁸ Insofar as this is the case, and given that injustice is structural rather than interactional, it may seem that the concept of *individual responsibility* is simply a non-starter. Indeed, some philosophical responses to injustice have tended to de-emphasize or lose sight of the individual altogether: to think of powerful collective agents as the bearers of responsibility (to which individuals are only indirectly related), or to shift away from agents to structures.¹⁹ As Young points out, however, such a move is dangerous: it is precisely such an (apparent) erasure of the individual that allowed conservative thinkers to insist that “sociological” explanations blaming the “the system” for injustice were guilty of erasing “personal responsibility”.²⁰ What I take to be most exciting about Young’s SCM is that it unapologetically focuses on the individual as the primary bearer of responsibility, but what it requires of them is collective organization with other individuals. In the rest of this article, I offer some theoretical underpinnings for the SCM that enable it to do so successfully.

On Responsibility

In this section I propose that the difference between the liability model and the SCM is an instance of a more venerable distinction in the moral responsibility literature between responsibility as *attributability* and responsibility as *accountability*. I start, however, by taking a step back to pose some more basic questions. In order to understand whether and what kind of responsibility the SCM represents, we should be clear on the nature, origins, and function of a concept of “responsibility” in the first place.

The Nature of Responsibility

I take it that a theory of responsibility has the following distinctive features. First, it differs from a first-order substantive ethical theory. That is, it does not itself put forward claims about what constitutes right or wrong, good or bad, virtuous or vicious actions in particular situations, or what constitutes just or unjust social arrangements. Thus a given theory of responsibility is in principle²¹ compatible with a range of different first-order ethical or political theories such as deontology, consequentialism, or virtue ethics; liberalism, communitarianism, or Marxism. Rather, a theory of responsibility is an *auxiliary* theory concerning the enforcement of conformity with some first-order norms, and responses to non-conformity. Hence, secondly, theories of responsibility always involve an agent’s being in a state where they are potentially subject to some kind of response from others – positive or negative sanctions, approving or disapproving judgements or attitudes, or some modification of the present state of affairs. (Note that blame, the paradigmatic

response licensed by an agent's bearing responsibility for some event or outcome, has been suggested by theorists to be all of these things.²²

Finally, in virtue of the above, responsibility is *specific* to a person and to an actual or future event or outcome. It is after all *response*-ability, toward something in particular. To say someone is responsible for something is not, in other words, to assign them a set of abstract freestanding ethical obligations, but instead to make a claim directed specifically at that individual with respect to that specific problem. This makes claims about responsibility particularly *strong* claims on a person. One cannot simply shrug off something for which one is responsible, because to be responsible is to *owe* something; it is for this reason that we speak of both past- and future-oriented responsibility being "discharged".

What we need from any account of some type of responsibility, then, are answers to the following questions:

- *What is the scope of the responsibility?* That is, what first-order norms govern someone's actions insofar as they bear responsibility?
- *What grounds the responsibility?* That is, what are the conditions in virtue of which someone bears or does not bear responsibility?
- *What kinds of response does the responsibility license?* That is, in the event that a person fails to do the above, what responses are appropriate from others (and herself)?

Different types of responsibility generate different answers to these questions, even though they share the general features outlined above. For a full understanding of the difference between the liability model and the SCM, then, we need their respective answers to these foundational questions.

The Origins of Responsibility

Why do we need a concept of responsibility at all? I have previously defended the view that there are two fundamentally distinct concepts of responsibility which arise from two separate philosophical problems. I draw on that account to answer the questions raised above.

The first concept of responsibility, responsibility as *attributability*, has its origins in the problem of action, that is, the problem of determining what makes a person's actions count as exercises of her own agency, rather than mere behaviour determined by "external" forces. It is thus closely related to the problem of free will, insofar as deterministic causal chains are viewed as "external" to an agent because she lacks the radical freedom to choose to do otherwise than she actually does. Whether or not something counts as a person's own action matters, given that ought implies can, because things that do not result from an individual's agency fall outside the purview of normative demands (e.g. it cannot be morally required for a person to grow taller than she is or metabolize food faster). Moreover, whether or not something counts as a person's own action matters more immediately to us because we as social beings are enmeshed in interpersonal relationships that necessitate practices of evaluating and reacting to each other's unique agential attitudes and traits.²³ We blame, punish, and feel resentment toward wrongdoers; we praise and are grateful to those who act well. But such evaluations and reactions are only warranted when they are based on actions that are properly attributable to an agent: behaviours caused by sheer accident, ignorance, and other excusing conditions



do not actually reflect an agent's attitudes or traits at all. The concept of attributability thus originates primarily from questions of metaphysics and philosophy of action, and it is what moral theorists usually have in mind when they refer to *retrospective* responsibility.

By contrast, the concept of accountability originates from the moral and political problem of organizing society. Chief among the goals of any moral community is preventing and repairing harms. Thus, different members are allocated different duties in accordance with a moral division of labour: some are expected to care for and educate children, others to ensure that buildings are constructed safely, and so on. This is what gives rise to notion of *prospective* responsibility. But when a member of a moral community suffers harm, the burdens of redress must be distributed somehow or other, even if no agent acted negligently or was otherwise at fault. For instance, in cases of natural disaster, harm may befall people without being caused by any agency at all, but it is still appropriate – morally, at the very least – for members of the community to be assigned the burdens of aiding victims.

The Functions of Responsibility

Because attributability and accountability arise from two very different philosophical problems, they represent two very different (albeit related) kinds of responsibility, which are grounded in and license different things. With this conceptual genealogy in hand, we can now answer the three foundational questions:

What is the Scope of the Responsibility?

This is the question of what first-order norms to which a theory of responsibility is attached. Those most discussed with respect to attributability have been moral norms concerning morally good or bad action: theories of *moral* responsibility thus concern cases of moral wrongdoing that can or cannot be properly attributed to agents (e.g. that can or cannot serve as the basis for praise, blame, punishment, and so on). But there are also non-moral prudential, aesthetic, and epistemic norms, and hence other kinds of (e.g. epistemic) responsibility. Rational agents can exercise their agency in ways that do or do not conform to these norms: they can gamble cautiously or recklessly, dance gracefully or awkwardly, and adopt beliefs in a balanced or biased way. In all of these cases, we can distinguish between actions and judgments that count as instances of the agent actively exercising her rational capacities, and those that do not; the former can be attributed to the agent as a basis for evaluation while the latter cannot.

By contrast, the norms governing accountability are the role-responsibilities that make up the moral division of labour. One might think of this in terms of general duties shared by all (e.g. help others, prevent harm) which are *specified* through particular roles (e.g. help children by educating them, prevent harm by ensuring access to food, shelter, or medical care), or else as sets of universal duties held by all which are *supplemented* by additional role-specific duties. There is thus some overlap with moral responsibility in the attributability sense. But the duties associated with attributability are assigned universally to agents *qua* agents, whereas the duties of accountability are assigned in accordance to each person's roles and social location: in virtue of her institutional roles, employment, familial relations, group identities, and so on. Hence the specific actions which a person is accountable for performing are context-sensitive and socially determined.

What Grounds the Responsibility?

Attributability is grounded in the fact that we are rational agents: since we are capable of responding to moral (and other) reasons, we are subject to moral norms that govern our behaviour, that is, we must behave morally. This means that the conditions for bearing responsibility are metaphysical or psychological, such as the ability to do otherwise or the possession of certain reasons-responsive capacities. When these are lacking with respect to some action, we lack responsibility as attributability for it.

Accountability, by contrast, is grounded in the fact that we are members of a moral community. While it does presuppose basic moral agency, that agency is not what determines whether someone is accountable or not for some event or outcome. Rather, the conditions for being accountable are the specific social relations or roles occupied by an agent.

What Kinds of Response are Licensed by the Responsibility?

Being responsible for an action or outcome makes it the case that certain responses from others are *warranted* or *justifiable*.²⁴ But the type of response that is licensed depends on the type of responsibility in question. In the case of attributability, ascribing responsibility for an action to a person amounts to establishing that the person's agency was genuinely reflected or manifested in that act. Hence, it is appropriate to engage in positive or negative evaluations such as praise, blame, punishment, or the reactive attitudes because these are fair, deserved, or otherwise appropriate responses to an agent who has exercised her agency badly or well in some way. In other words, an agent's being attributively responsible for some action means that that action counts as "fair game" – as legitimate grounds – for evaluating her quality as an agent according to the relevant norms. When an action does not count as an exercise of agency, it ceases to be a basis for justifying such sanctions.

In the case of accountability, however, the responses in question are different because they address the problem of harm rather than the problem of agency. Hence they consist in levying the burdens associated with rectifying some harm, and ascribing accountability need not imply anything about a person's agential quality, for these burdens may be appropriately laid even on agents who have in no way acted faultily. (After all, they must be distributed somehow or other if victims are to receive redress.) In cases of strict or vicarious liability, for instance, a person is assigned the burdens of certain harms even if she acted perfectly correctly, or even if a different actor produced the harm; such liability is typically restricted to a narrow range of conditions (e.g. a person's having sufficient opportunity to avoid it²⁵). Being accountable for harm in this way does not entail any type of bad character or ill will. But note in some cases it may be that the harm done cannot be fully rectified without further investigation into the motives, intentions, and character of those who caused the harm (e.g. some criminal cases²⁶). Thus, fully holding someone accountable for an act may eventually require ascribing them attributability for the act as well, though it *need not*.

In light of all the above, it follows that there are two distinct *functions* performed by the two distinct senses of responsibility: appraising agents vs. apportioning burdens. Stemming from the problem of agency, responsibility as attributability makes it possible to justifiably appraise an agent as good or bad in some way on the basis of her acting badly or well. Addressing the problem of harm, responsibility as accountability makes it possible for a moral community to appropriately distribute the burdens of harms that befall its members.



The SCM as a Conception of Accountability

It is important to note that the two senses of responsibility I have just described represent general *concepts* rather than particular *conceptions* of responsibility. Different theories of attributability, for instance, give different accounts of the grounding conditions under which a person is responsible for her action: when she had the ability to do otherwise, when it expresses her deep self,²⁷ when it reflects a judgment-sensitive attitude,²⁸ and so on.

I propose, then, that we understand the fundamental difference between the liability model and the SCM this way: the former is a conception of attributability, while the latter is a conception of accountability. The liability model is recognizably an account of attributability given both its grounding conditions and the responses it licenses. According to Young, the conditions required for an agent to be responsible for an act or outcome on the liability model are that she performed the act voluntarily and with adequate knowledge. Moreover: “To say that an agent is responsible means that they are blameworthy for an act or its outcome”.²⁹ Young thus includes under the liability model “all practices of assigning responsibility under the law and in moral judgment that seek to identify liable parties for the purposes of sanctioning, punishing, or exacting compensation or redress”.³⁰ In other words, the liability model seeks essentially to identify guilty parties who are somehow at fault, and on which to pin the blame for some harmful outcome. But blame is only justified for genuinely bad exercises of agency, as ensured by the voluntariness and knowledge conditions. When these conditions are satisfied, we are warranted in appraising a person as having displayed faulty agency and applying negative sanctions on that basis.

By contrast, I claim, the SCM can be understood as a theory of accountability. It does not license blame,³¹ but instead assigns us a highly specific kind of burden: the burden of organizing with others. As a result of our causal participation in unjust structures, we must take steps to communicate with each other, coordinate our actions, and publicly advocate for structural transformation. Being assigned such a burden is not grounded in a person’s possessing the capacity to exhibit good or bad agency. Instead, it is grounded in the fact that oppressor, oppressed, and bystander all participate in social structural processes, albeit in different ways. *Whenever* our social structural processes are unjust, i.e. not only in cases where we have exercised our agency badly, we are consequently assigned the burdens of working to modify them.

The SCM, as Young states, is different from the liability model not only in degree but in kind: it is a conception of responsibility as accountability, not attributability. There is thus no need to impose conditions of voluntariness, knowledge, intentionality, ill will, the ability to do otherwise, or any of the other conditions that are needed for attributability. That, at least, is my proposed interpretation. In the next section I show that construing it this way defuses a number of key objections to Young’s account.

Answering Objections

That's Not “Responsibility”

An initial objection one might have³² against Young’s account is that the SCM merely changes the subject away from the real problem at hand. The idea here is to say that

the relevant kind of responsibility – indeed, the one of overwhelming interest to theorists especially in moral rather than political philosophy – is *retrospective* responsibility. If it is forward-looking, the objection runs, the SCM may be an adequate account of the prospective responsibilities individuals have for contributing to social change; it is quite uncontroversial to assert that we all have duties, if only imperfect ones, to make such contributions. But that in itself does not resolve the difficulties associated with demonstrating that individuals bear responsibility for present evils that they did not intend and which they could not prevent. The reason the liability model includes voluntariness and knowledge conditions is that these are the conditions under which it is appropriate to blame or punish them. But Young expressly states that the SCM does not license judgments of blameworthiness (and after all, practices of blame and the reactive attitudes are commonly thought to be constitutive of responsibility).

In short, the objection claims that the SCM might describe a set of first-order ethical duties that individuals have to fight injustices, but it does not show that individuals bear *responsibility* for those injustices. If it does not license blame, and if it does not depend on conditions such as voluntariness and knowledge, how is it an account of responsibility at all?

The best way to answer this objection, I believe, is to emphasize that the SCM *does* have significant backward-looking dimensions. Young herself, concerned with the practical requirements of social change, discusses only the instrumental importance of studying the past in order to modify causal processes. But there is another, theoretically indispensable backward-looking dimension. The SCM is indeed grounded in a distribution of forward-looking prospective responsibilities, and it licenses forward-looking burdens aimed at bringing about future change; this is what makes it a conception of accountability. But, crucially, these burdens are *justified* – and claims are made on individuals to take them up – through a backward-looking relation that holds between individuals and unjust outcomes. What the SCM does is establish this *connection* between an individual and an unjust outcome: it asserts that the individual must take up a portion of the collective burden of social transformation *because* the individual has, in the past, causally contributed to that unjust outcome. This makes it genuinely a form of retrospective responsibility as well, albeit one of accountability rather than the blame-levying responsibility of attributability.

Relatedly, recall that holding a person accountable for some action or outcome *does* license certain critical moral responses, but not sanctions like blame that require some appraisal of an agent's quality in order to be justified. Young writes:

[W]e should not be blamed or found at fault for the injustice we contribute to, and we should not be blamed or found at fault for what we do to try and rectify injustice, even if we do not succeed ... [H]owever, we can and should be *criticized* for not taking action, not taking enough action, taking ineffective action, or taking action that is counterproductive.³³

James Bourke notes critically that this distinction between “blaming” and “criticizing” is of great practical importance, but not at all elaborated on by Young.³⁴ I suggest that interpreting the SCM as a conception of accountability can help us flesh out this distinction. While eschewing sanctions like blame that are licensed by attributability, we can still appeal to accountability practices that consist of assigning individuals the burdens associated with rectifying harm. I do not claim that there is a bright line between these in

practice, nor that it is always easy to implement them successfully. But I propose that the key is to recall that blame (etc.) is only *justified* when we have in hand some appraisal of a person on the basis of her exercise of individual agency, while such appraisal is *not* needed to justify criticism aimed at holding a person accountable. It is for this reason that Young insists that blaming requires “clear rules of evidence, not only for demonstrating the causal connection between this agent and a harm, but also for evaluating the intentions, motives, and consequences of the actions”.³⁵ By contrast, criticism can aptly be levelled at almost everyone. As Young writes in her discussion of common excuses people give for not taking up their transformative responsibilities:

I have tried to articulate these excuses in a way that makes them recognizable as our own, as common, and perhaps even as aspects of moral social consciousness that are almost unavoidable ... If practices of blaming do distinguish those more and less righteous, and the excuses I have articulated are common, then it seems inappropriate to level blame at persons who voice these excuses. Once more I am inclined to distinguish blaming from criticizing and holding accountable.³⁶

Young writes that such criticism “entails exposing one another’s bad faith” as manifest in these common excuses. But I think we should not read this bad faith as an indictment of flawed agency that renders an individual blameworthy, but rather as something that can be equally ascribed to all of us limited beings who struggle to navigate the complexities and demands of a deeply unjust world. What holding a person accountable amounts to, then, is (re-)assigning her a portion of our shared burden of social transformation, by dislodging the excuses that act as barriers. Such criticism need not constitute or depend on some appraisal of her flawed agency: it is instead a *reminder*³⁷ that she as an agent *is* capable of (together with others) taking steps to alter her social conditions.

Wiping the Slate Clean

As described earlier, commentators have interpreted the SCM to mean that individuals are only responsible in a forward-looking way for tasks to be done in the future, and never for tasks omitted in the past. I argued against this interpretation on the grounds that since structural injustice is ongoing and not isolatable in time, and since we all continually participate in it, there is no sense in which anyone could ever have a “clean slate”. But if the SCM is a conception of accountability, we can map out a more detailed picture of the relationship between the SCM’s forward- and backward-looking dimensions. To reiterate the main claim of the previous sub-section, responsibility for injustice on the SCM is fundamentally grounded in a distribution of forward-looking responsibilities, but it assigns burdens to individuals on the backward-looking basis that they have causally contributed to unjust structural processes – that is, that they have failed to live up to their prospective responsibilities.

This affords more pointed replies to commentators’ objections. Barry and Ferracioli, in particular, charge that the SCM’s slate-wiping is both *unfair* and *de-incentivizing*.³⁸ They ask us to compare two countries, one that has fewer resources but spends them unwisely and wastefully, and another that spends its greater resources prudently and to the benefit of workers. To expect the latter country to shoulder a greater burden of improving working conditions merely because it has greater resources, they argue, is unfair. Moreover, they claim, powerful agents have no incentives to improve working conditions if

they know that twenty years from now they will not be held responsible for their failure to do so. Nussbaum also argues that backward-looking blame is necessary for moral learning and motivation.³⁹

Both of these objections rest on misunderstandings of the SCM. First, as I argued earlier, every agent (individual or collective) is deeply and inextricably entwined in numerous structural injustices. Even if a country devotes tremendous resources to policies benefiting workers, it is unlikely to do the same for women, immigrants, homeless, non-white, LGBTQ, and disabled people – yet all of these people suffer from distinct structural injustices as well. The sheer enormity of structural injustice, in which we *all* continually participate, demands that we all contribute as much as we can. Under such conditions, bean-counting of the sort imagined is simply misguided.

Second, and for similar reasons, it is not the case that agents are simply “absolved” for their failures to work toward structural transformation. That is not the reason that the SCM eschews any attempt to attribute a particular harmful outcome back to some *particular* agent(s). Rather, it is because *every* agent is so deeply responsible that trying to keep track of every harm is pointless. And again, none of this means that powerful agents should not be on the receiving end of criticism. Rather, it means that (in the absence of circumstances calling for the application of the liability model⁴⁰) the *type* of criticism directed toward powerful agents for ongoing structural injustice should function to assign them forward-looking burdens – to remind them of what they are capable of contributing – rather than backward-looking blame that attributes bad intentions or ill will. Such criticism can certainly enable moral learning and motivation, and indeed may be more effective by preventing the feelings of threat and hostility that so often prevent uptake.

Pragmatic, Not Philosophical

A third criticism commentators have made is that the bulk of Young’s arguments against the liability model are not genuinely philosophical in nature. Nussbaum⁴¹ argues that it is an empirical question that “all depends on the causal analysis” whether and under what conditions blame has the counterproductive effects that Young claims it does, and Barry and Ferracioli⁴² add that if the point is “strategic” rather than philosophical, it could be argued that the anti-sweatshop movement demonstrates the effectiveness of blame in mobilizing ordinary people to action. According to Jeffrey Reiman: “The simple fact, however, is that these are rhetorical matters, not philosophical ones (as Young recognizes). It’s about what we should say to people to bring about good effects, not about what is true”.⁴³ In effect, the objection is that the distinction between the liability model and the SCM does not mark a philosophical difference in kind, but merely a pragmatic difference in strategy.

Even granting a substantial divide between the empirical and the philosophical,⁴⁴ however, there *is* still a distinct and compelling philosophical difference between the liability model and the SCM that appears to have largely gone unnoticed. If Young is correct that the liability model does not apply to structural injustice, then it is not merely that blaming agents for injustice is *ineffective*, but that blaming agents is *unwarranted* and *unfair*. It is for this reason that Young takes great pains to highlight the ways in which even powerful agents are structurally constrained. She points out that garment factories

operate under highly competitive conditions, and that poor states must compete with other poor states for foreign investment while simultaneously being pressured by international institutions to diminish public spending:

When these agents claim that they operate under constraints beyond their control and must submit to the pressures of more powerful institutions, and that these leave them few options to operate factories differently, there is some basis for their excuses.⁴⁵

Similarly, Young writes of the common excuses – that immediate moral demands crowd out wider social considerations, that dealing with injustice is not part of their ordinary moral duties, that prevailing structural processes can be so entrenched as to appear inevitable – that “each excuse offered as a reason has a truthful basis”.⁴⁶

When agents have excuses for their actions, such as the inability to do otherwise, they do not bear responsibility as attributability for their actions. We cannot attribute those actions to them as exercises of their agency, and it is unjustifiable to blame them. After all, many or most agents who contribute to injustice – even powerful ones – are morally decent people who do not intend harmful consequences and would act differently if they had better alternatives. Hence their actions often do not reflect important aspects of their agency: their intentions, values, and reflectively-endorsed ends. What Young is advocating is a genuinely *structural* approach that takes seriously the constraints under which agents act. And though Young is rightly reluctant to go so far as to deny that individuals exercise any agency at all, she clearly wants to insist that structural constraints really are excuses, or quasi-excuses, that function to make blame inappropriate. Those who defend the liability model are in effect rejecting the claim that structural constraints constitute genuine excuses. But this disagreement is deeply philosophical, not merely pragmatic.

For Young, this is precisely where the SCM comes in, because it is an entirely distinct concept of responsibility that does not look to the quality of individual agency for justifying critical responses. As a conception of accountability, the SCM ascribes responsibility to individuals on the basis of the fact that they are members of the moral community, and that they participate in the structural processes that collectively determine their shared social conditions. Hence the burdens of structural transformation that it assigns to individuals are justified even when they are excused from blame. Indeed, they are justified completely independently of the question whether blame is pragmatically effective. Once we see that the liability model and the SCM represent different concepts of responsibility, the *philosophical* difference between them becomes eminently clear.

Responsibility Requires Guilt

Finally, I consider an objection put forth by Reiman (inspired by Nussbaum) that responsibility requires guilt, and hence that if individuals are not in some way *guilty* for injustice then they do not bear responsibility for rectifying it. Recall that claims about responsibility are *strong* claims made on a *specific* person. Reiman argues that such claims cannot be sustained unless some person has engaged in wrongdoing, because without an agent’s wrongdoing the victims of structural harm are merely unfortunate, rather than entitled to remedy. In other words, they ought to be helped as a matter of benevolence, but not as a requirement of justice.

Reiman proposes to fix this problem by thinking of social structures as *coercive*; people who participate in them, then, are guilty in virtue of committing (at least potentially) wrongful coercion. He then submits a strong and a weak version of responsibility for injustice on this view. On the strong version, people are guilty for failing to uphold a prior prospective responsibility to monitor and correct their social institutions; hence, they are blameworthy for the resulting injustice even if they did not voluntarily or knowingly bring it about. In effect, this is culpable negligence. On the weak version, people are not guilty until the moment they learn that their actions contribute to harm, whereupon they are “henceforth guilty and blamable [for the same reasons as above] if they continue in those actions”.⁴⁷

Reiman’s objection gets us to the heart of the matter. Is it really the case that I can be *responsible* in the specific, strong sense that someone else has an *entitlement* claim on me – for something over which I as an individual have no control and to which I likely contributed unintentionally and unknowingly? Young’s answer is yes, on the grounds that I participate in social structures that, following Reiman, we can understand as wrongly coercive.⁴⁸ Moreover, I agree with Reiman that individuals are responsible on the SCM in virtue of their prior prospective responsibilities. But Reiman’s insistence that responsibility requires guilt leads him into implausible – or at least unpalatable – views of responsibility for injustice. Again, the trouble here is failing to see that the attributability is not the only kind of responsibility.

On both the weak and strong versions of Reiman’s view, people are blameworthy for failing to monitor and correct their social institutions. As I argued earlier, however, the ongoing and ubiquitous nature of injustice makes this impossible. Even though I now know that my everyday actions contribute to structural injustice, it is not possible for me (short of exiting the social world altogether, to the extent that that is even possible) to stop working, eating, wearing clothing, and otherwise participating in ongoing injustice. In the previous sub-section I showed that the structural constraints to which people are subject and their lack of other options give them (quasi-)excuses for not acting otherwise. It is therefore *unfair* and *unwarranted* to blame them for injustice, absent other conditions under which the liability model might apply. So even though guilt is indeed a necessary condition of responsibility as attributability, because attributability licenses critical responses that are only justified by faulty exercises of agency, guilt is *not* a necessary condition of responsibility as *accountability*.

Instead, what the SCM (understood as a conception of accountability) says is the following. Because present social structures are wrongly coercive, they are unjust and must be transformed; the remedial burdens of undertaking such a colossal task must be distributed somehow, and they are appropriately distributed to all those who causally participate in maintaining these structures. Such a claim is pressing because the rectification of injustice is owed to its victims, and individuals are rightly subject to criticism that reminds them of these burdens. But none of this need imply that individuals are blameworthy for faulty agency, since they – as we all – act always under the structural constraints of an unjust world. In terms of attributability, then, it might be said that no agent is really responsible.⁴⁹ But by offering the SCM as a conception of accountability, Young is able to say rather that *every* agent is really responsible.



Conclusion

In this article I have defended a theoretical interpretation of the SCM as a *conception* of responsibility as accountability, to be contrasted with the liability model as a conception of responsibility as attributability. This reading of the distinction avoids the problems encountered by other proposed construals of the difference between the liability model and the SCM, furnishes resources for rebutting several objections, and grounds the SCM in a more longstanding literature on moral responsibility.

Most importantly, this reading of the SCM sheds light on the innovativeness and power of Young's proposal. By adopting a structural approach, Young preserves tight focus on the enormity of the real problem, curbing in the always-easy temptation to finger certain agents as the source of the problem.⁵⁰ Rectifying injustice calls for political transformation of the world, not moral condemnation of individual actors, for we are all constrained by our social structural conditions. At the same time, by arguing that individuals are each directly responsible for injustice, Young places the moral demand to act squarely on individuals, keeping the spotlight on the agency that we all possess, and that can be harnessed toward social change so long as we wield it collectively.

If we read the SCM as a conception of responsibility as accountability, the picture that emerges is one in which ethics *entails* politics. In a structurally unjust world, too complex to be fixed by the actions of any individual (however powerful), it turns out that communicating, coordinating, and working with others is built into one's duties as a moral individual. Put differently, moral responsibility *is* political responsibility in our world. As a result of our causal participation in unjust processes, we are each assigned backward-looking burdens, but these burdens consist precisely of the forward-looking task of collectively organizing to transform social structures.⁵¹ Retrospective responsibility for injustice *begets* prospective responsibility. And what I am individually responsible for is joining in *collective* action. On the SCM, being a moral individual means doing politics. This vision of political responsibility is the antithesis of "personal responsibility"; it is the antidote to political despair.⁵² And it is an exciting way of reconciling ethics and politics.

Notes

1. Young, *Responsibility for Justice*.
2. McKeown, "Responsibility Without Guilt."
3. Arendt, "Collective Responsibility," 47.
4. Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, 89.
5. Ibid., 96.
6. Young writes: "These processes can be altered only if many actors from diverse positions within the social structures work together to intervene in them to try to produce other outcomes. Thus we can come around to Arendt's idea that this is a specifically political responsibility, as distinct from privately moral or juridical," Ibid., 112. And: "Responsibility based in social connection is ultimately political responsibility inasmuch as discharging the responsibility involves joining with others," Ibid., 113.
7. Ibid., 104.
8. Ibid., 109.
9. Ibid., 108.
10. Ibid., 108–9.
11. Ibid., xxi.
12. Barry and Ferracioli, "Young on Responsibility and Structural Injustice," 256.

13. “[T]here is no point in trying to seek redress from only and all those who have contributed to the outcome, and in proportion to their contribution,” says Young, *Ibid*, 109.
14. McKeown “Responsibility Without Guilt,” 64–6.
15. She writes that “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 action may adversely affect others.” *Ibid*, 25.
16. *Ibid*, 73–4.
17. Scheffler, “Individual Responsibility in a Global Age,” 219–36, Norrie, *Punishment, Responsibility, and Justice*.
18. Lavin, *The Politics of Responsibility*.
19. Cf. May and Hoffman, *Collective Responsibility*, Haslanger, “Oppressions Racial and Other.”
20. For Young, “personal responsibility” is the idea that “each must self-sufficiently bear the costs of its choices and has no moral right to expect help from others.” *Ibid.*, 10.
21. It might not be wholly modular such that it is compatible with all such first-order theories, but it will normally not be completely tied to a single one. For some discussion, see Springer, *Communicating Moral Concern*.
22. For a review, see Coates and Tognazzini, *Blame: Its Nature and Norms*.
23. Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment,” 45–66.
24. Here I do not distinguish between what might be called “fittingness” and “fairness” accounts of this justificatory relation. Fittingness accounts take the relation to be akin to aesthetic fittingness relations: it is *fitting* to blame someone’s bad action just as it is fitting to feel disgust at a repulsive object, whether or not this is morally desirable. Fairness accounts conceive of blame and other critical responses as a negative sanction that it is only morally *fair* to levy under certain conditions. See, e.g. Hieronymi, “The Force and Fairness of Blame,” and Wallace, *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments*.
25. Scanlon, *What We Owe Each Other*.
26. Cf. Duff, *Answering for Crime*, 88–9.
27. Wolf, *Freedom within Reason*.
28. Scanlon, *What We Owe Each Other*.
29. Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, 96.
30. *Ibid.*, 98.
31. Can we also *attribute* structural injustice to individuals, in addition to holding them accountable for them? Perhaps – at the very least, we can certainly hold certain actors attributively responsible for particular egregious acts of injustice, i.e. for local regions of structural injustice (see also fn. 40). However, the driving motivation behind the SCM is precisely to avoid the problem of attributing unjust outcomes to individuals, because – as Young repeatedly notes – there are strong reasons to think that individuals genuinely are not blameworthy for them. See also pp. 12–13 of this article. For further arguments, see also Zheng, “Bias, Structure, and Injustice,” Article 4. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for urging me to clarify these points.
32. I am indebted to Sarah Buss for discussion of this point.
33. *Ibid.*, 144.
34. Bourke, “Responsibility for Justice,” 950.
35. Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, 98–9.
36. *Ibid.*, 170.
37. Note that reminders are generally appropriate even when an agent is acting perfectly as she should (as when automatic emails are sent to entire mailing lists) and thus need not be justified by some appraisal of how she is exercising her agency. Zheng, “Bias, Structure, and Injustice,” 23.
38. Barry and Ferracioli, “Young on Responsibility and Structural Injustice,” 255–6.
39. Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, xxii–iii.
40. Recall that Young does not seek to *replace* the liability model, but only to supplement it. In cases where clear rules of evidence apply, and there may be many of these involving powerful agents, we *can* still hold them attributively responsible (and hence blame, punish, etc.).

41. Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, xxiii.
42. Barry and Ferracioli, "Young on Responsibility and Structural Injustice," 254.
43. Reiman, "The Structure of Structural Injustice," 747.
44. Matthias Risse raises a similar criticism against Chapter 1 of *Responsibility for Justice*, which Young devotes to excavating and rejecting certain normative assumptions held by conservative proponents of welfare reform. Risse claims:

[O]ne must wonder then whether the debate about Mead and Murray's work can depend much on these claims. And I am afraid it does not. As Young is aware, much of that debate was, and continues to be, about empirical matters, questions about the origins of social problems and about how effectively to remedy them ... and these are not philosophical questions.

Risse, "Iris Marion Young". I doubt, however, that such a firm distinction can be maintained. Oftentimes what appear to be empirical debates about causes and interventions can be exposed at bottom to be irreducibly political and moral disagreements over who bears responsibility for preventing harm. Young's analysis thus serves to locate precisely the normative expectations at stake which themselves tend to generate different causal explanations. For further discussion, see Zheng, "A Job for Philosophers," 323–35.

45. Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, 129–33.
46. Ibid., 170.
47. Reiman, "The Structure of Structural Injustice," 750–1.
48. As Reiman points out, this needs elaboration. It is not the coercion that is the problem, since all social structures are in some sense coercive, but that present structure are coercive in accordance with unjust principles. One might spell out the unjust principles as "the benefit of the few at the expense of the many," or "distribution out of alignment with desert," and so on.
49. Indeed, Sally Haslanger has used the structural approach to argue for two distinct notions of oppression, "agent-oppression" and "structural oppression," precisely to accommodate the idea that there may be cases in which *no* agent is blameworthy for some injustice. Haslanger, "Oppressions Racial and Other," 102–3.
50. bell hooks writes:

Perhaps it is the knowledge that everyone must change, not just those we label enemies or oppressors, that has so far served to check our revolutionary impulses. Those revolutionary impulses must freely inform our theory and practice ... if we are to transform our present reality. hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*.

51. Along similar lines, José Medina reads the SCM as having the implication that "the actions through which shared responsibilities are discharged are always individual and collective at the same time." Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, 123–4.
52. Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, 40.

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