

## Environmental and Ethical Responsibilities

According to Iris Marion Young, structural injustice manifests when individuals, engaging blamelessly in one or more schemes of social coordination, find their capacities systematically hindered and rights unfulfilled due to the interaction between those schemes, norms, and background conditions. The concept of structures, as Young explains, delves into the intricate relations of social positions, which dictate the opportunities and life prospects of those situated within these positions as well as solidify the rules and resources available for individuals. The conventional, individualist theories of responsibility, fail to adequately address this form of injustice. Conventional individualist theories of responsibility are traditional moral and ethical frameworks that emphasize individual agency and accountability. These theories often derive from a more individualistic understanding of human action, where responsibility is assigned to individuals based on their intentional and voluntary actions. This blame-centered approach holds individuals accountable for the foreseeable consequences of their actions. One of the central critiques of individualist theories, as highlighted by Young, is their inadequacy in addressing structural injustice. These theories are ill-equipped to tackle the relationship between social structures, norms, and background conditions that systematically disadvantage certain groups of people. Young's alternative, the social connection theory of responsibility, seeks to overcome the collective nature of responsibility and promote forward-looking, systematic approaches to justice. She suggests that participants in structural injustice should bear these forward-looking responsibilities to rectify injustices through actions like organizing, voting, protesting, and pressuring institutions.

In an era where technological advancements enable global social coordination, the interconnectedness of states and interdependency of supply chains present both opportunities and

risks. These consequences include unjust global wars, economic inequality, exploitation, and climate change. In facing the challenges that collectively confront us, it has been increasingly easy to notice that a significant portion of these issues extends beyond national borders; global phenomena, such as the instability of financial systems, widespread unemployment, and climate change. Despite the magnitude of these problems, the prevailing concept of responsibility, conventional individualist theory, is rooted in frameworks that are designed primarily for smaller-scale interactions that prioritize immediate effects over distant consequences and individual impacts over collective influences. As individualist moral theories struggle to attribute blame for such social wrongs, new conceptual frameworks, like that of Young, are necessary to grapple with the complexities of these large-scale social structures underlying our societal and environmental issues. Young advocates for these new frameworks specifically in the realm of political responsibility as opposed to legal responsibility, asserting that individuals participating blamelessly within social coordination schemes bear the responsibility of advocating for change. This shift is essential for addressing structural injustices that stem from intricate social systems. The concept of political responsibility asserts that individuals involved in these expansive processes should collectively shoulder responsibility for the resulting structural injustices, even when the direct causal links to specific actions cannot be precisely traced. Unlike the conventional blame-centric approach, political responsibility is not concerned with assigning individual blame but rather emphasizes shared responsibility within the collective that contributes to these structural injustices. In this context, political responsibility becomes a collective endeavor, which is best fulfilled through coordinated and united action. Although it is a shared responsibility, the transformation of structures perpetuating injustice requires the active participation of numerous individuals. This approach recognizes the necessity for a distributed

yet collective effort to effect meaningful change in the systems that generate or perpetuate societal and natural problems.

Environmental protection is widely acknowledged as a public good and the task of preventing environmental degradation is understood as a collective responsibility. However, the question of how this responsibility should be distributed among states, corporations, and citizens in an increasingly globalized world remains a source of considerable disagreement. Within the realm of environmental justice, there is an ongoing debate surrounding climate responsibility, ranging from issues of social recognition to corporate accountability. The pressing concern, however, arises from the disproportionate impact of climate change on the world's most vulnerable communities. The primary injustice, therefore, lies in the fact that many of the world's poorest and least developed communities will bear the burden of climate change impacts, despite contributing the least to the problem. Their marginal social structural position within the economy not only exposes them to the most risks and the least benefits generated by these structures but also leaves them in a particularly vulnerable position to influence their transformation in ways that could reduce their vulnerability.

Expanding on Young's distinctive perspective, it becomes evident that while the majority of climate ethics discussions have centered on moral responsibility, Young directs her focus on the political responsibility concerning these structural injustices. It is crucial to acknowledge that political responsibility cannot be dissociated from moral responsibility. However, not all manifestations of moral responsibility relate directly to structural injustices, and therefore Young's contribution lies in refining our conceptualization of responsibility to provide the tools needed to engage and act politically in the pursuit of environmental protection.

Young emphasizes the need for shared responsibility while acknowledging the variability in the capacity of individuals to exercise political agency. To explain this, Young introduces “parameters of reasoning”, which provide a framework for contemplating how differently positioned actors might interact with political responsibility in addressing structural injustices. This consideration centers on reflections such as the extent of power or privilege an individual possesses, their vested interests, and the presence of “collective ability”. According to Young, power is construed as the capacity to influence the social structural interactions that yield unjust outcomes. Hence, an individual’s capacity to act is conditional on their social structural position, which shapes the options they have available. For instance, those who own capital have a greater influence in deciding to invest in renewable energy initiatives or divest from the fossil fuel industry compared to wage laborers or the unemployed.

Additionally, the concept of “collective ability” seeks to determine whether actors are affiliated with large membership organizations, such as unions or civic and religious groups, which inherently possess greater potential for collective action than individuals or smaller groups. In essence, exercising political responsibility requires leveraging our affiliations with organizations, our roles in the workforce and society, and any other civic capabilities we possess in order to actively contribute to driving the essential structural transformations required for a transition to a low-carbon, sustainable society. Young’s framework not only emphasizes the diversity in capacities among individuals but also provides a guide for harnessing collective and individual agency toward achieving necessary social changes.

To add further nuance, I will introduce the fundamental challenge; the often-inverse relationship between power, privilege, and the motivation to transform social structures. This is especially prevalent in the context of climate change, where the most dependent on fossil fuel

extraction and consumption, namely executives and states, possess significant power but exhibit little interest in transformative efforts. In the recurrent narrative of corporate priorities, the fossil fuel industry, or “Big Oil”, persists in prioritizing shareholder returns over the well-being of our planet. In 2023, the industry once again earned billions of dollars at the cost of our air and water. Despite the alarming escalation of the global climate crisis, exemplified by record-high ocean temperatures and pervasive heat waves in the past 6 months, the fossil fuel industry remains determined in its profit-driven pursuits. This reality stresses the persistent disconnection between the profitability of the industry and the urgent need for sustainable, environmentally conscious practices. Following this truth, we can conclude that the communities most vulnerable to climate change lack comparable power but are deeply invested in the urgency of structural transformation. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), climate change is superimposed on existing vulnerabilities; further reducing access to drinking water, affecting the health of poor people, and posing a real threat to food security in many countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. As stated, “the macroeconomic costs of the impacts of climate change are highly uncertain, but very likely have the potential to threaten development in many countries”, (OECD, IX).

With this understanding, we can define climate change as a structural rather than a mere interactional injustice. This structural injustice encompasses the unjust power relations in fossil fuel energy production and consumption and its intersection with other structural constraints like class, race, and gender. Further, in applying Young’s parameters of reasoning, we come to understand that the obligation falls on governments, diplomats, and citizens of influential states to take the lead due to their power, privilege, and capacity for action. Responsibility entails working to empower marginalized groups and ensure that they are not excluded from the critical

decisions made. Across all parties, it is citizens who hold the potential to raise awareness and advocate for alternative decision-making processes. Through collective action, we can foster a more inclusive and equitable approach to addressing the structural injustices of climate change.

## References

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