Global justice and structural injustice: Theoretical and practical perspectives

Introduction

As this special issue on *Global Justice and Structural Injustice* goes to press in May 2021, the Covid-19 pandemic is raging on in many parts of the world. Hospitals in Delhi are desperately pleading for oxygen supply, more than 78,000 people died in Brazil within the last month from Covid-19, and in Africa only 2% of the population has received a vaccination. At the same time, vaccinated Germans are celebrating new freedoms, UK pubs announce beer shortage after their recent opening, the US averages over 2 million vaccine shots per day and is preparing to vaccinate children and adolescents. The Covid-19 pandemic exposes the massive inequities that shape our world. But we know: The current pandemic is still the smaller crisis in comparison to what is to be expected in relation to global warming and climate change. Global inequalities are bound to increase only further—and much will depend on how we, as human beings, react toward inequalities and on which actions and reforms we undertake to secure that life and living together on this planet can go well.

For a few decades now, philosophical, political, sociological, and economic analyses have increasingly exposed the existing global connections between the relative advantages of some and the relative disadvantages of others. The established political, social, and economic structures—in the form of laws, policies and regulations, justificatory narratives, and habits of individual and group behavior—continue to systematically support and uphold interactions that favor some groups at the expense of others. Areas within which numerous different dimensions of such systemic (dis-) advantaging have been explored are, for example, sex and gender, race, and the lasting influence of colonial rule, nationality, class, religion, disability, etc.

An important philosophical voice analyzing these local and global connections and their implications for ethics and justice, was Iris M. Young (1949–2006). Her "social connection model" of responsibility, one of the most influential relational conceptions of justice in moral and political philosophy, foregrounds the social norms, economic relations, and other institutional structures and processes that link people across time frames and places, and that generate and sustain injustice.[1] Young highlights the fact that these structures and processes are often widely accepted and part of what (privileged) people take for granted as everyday operations. And indeed it is the participation of the privileged ones in, or their contribution to these structures and processes, and the fact that they gain from them while others suffer under them that grounds responsibilities. The relationship to the suffering of others may be circuitous—across terrains and timeframes—with the consequences of actions and interactions slow to unfurl, and also unintended. But, using a social connection model, it is possible to see that fingerprints of those in high-income countries (HICs) can be found, for example, on the deaths of people in low-income countries (LICs) from HIV/AIDS for want of prohibitively priced yet essential medicines; just follow the connections to intellectual property regimes and patents that protect the profits of pharmaceutical companies operating in HICs. Or the global apparel industry, the example cited by Young to describe how "structural injustice" is created and sustained, provides affordable fast fashion to people with disposable incomes at the expense of the health (and sometimes lives) of

women doing the work in unsafe conditions in poor parts of the world. Defining structural injustice, Young writes:

> Structural injustice exists when social processes put large categories of persons under a systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities, at the same time as these processes enable others to dominate or have a wide range of opportunities for developing and exercising their capacities. Structural injustice is a kind of moral wrong distinct from the wrongful action of an individual agent or the willfully repressive policies of a state. Structural injustice occurs as a consequence of many individuals and institutions acting in pursuit of their particular goals and interests, within given institutional rules and accepted norms. (Young 2006, 114)[2]

Iris Marion Young died far too early. However, given the enormous and genuinely pressing challenges of today, and the urgency of action, theoretical and practical philosophical work that is committed to similar lines of thinking is needed more than ever. Following Young's insight that social structures are the place where injustice reigns and where attempts to remedy injustice have to focus on, the papers in the present collection—most of which were first discussed at a 2016 conference at LMU Munich, co-organized by the editors of the special issue, that commemorated the 10th anniversary of Iris M. Young's passing away—are committed to advancing the analysis of *global structural injustice* and informing measures to address it.

The primary motivation for this special issue is to underscore once more the need for a better understanding of and dealing with the many facets of global structural injustices. The special issue as a whole wishes to stimulate further much needed philosophical and transdisciplinary work on the pressing problems of our world of today and tomorrow. Scholars are also called upon to contribute to addressing the blatant global injustices that are shaping our planet. With its individual contributions, the special issue therefore aims at continuing the development of theoretical and normative approaches to global structural inequalities, and it covers various fields (e.g., housing of asylum-seekers, sex selection, health inequalities, beauty, economy).

Elizabeth Kahn, with her paper entitled *Beyond claimrights: Social structure, collectivization, and human rights*, opens the special issue with a contribution about the concept of human rights. Understanding human rights as Hohfeldian claim rights (i.e., as claims to action or omission owed by some agents to the right holder), however, comes with a number of difficulties that lead Kahn to reject this interpretation of human rights. Instead, she offers a novel understanding of human rights that does not tie them directly to duties owed to the rights holder. According to her account, recognizing certain requirements of justice to be a matter of human rights entails two things: First, that the importance of the individual interests that these requirements protect is sufficient to justify governing agencies prioritizing the social guarantee of these standards over most other concerns. Second, that the importance of meeting these standards equally for every contemporary person is sufficient to justify weighty pro-tanto duties on all moral agents to make considerable efforts to achieve and maintain a socio-political order in which they are socially guaranteed for everyone. Kahn further notes that this approach recognizes a subset of the requirements of structural justice as being required as a matter of human rights.

In his paper *Individual responsibility and global structural injustice: Toward an ethos of cosmopolitan responsibility*, **Jan-Christoph Heilinger** inquires into the role and the responsibility of advantaged individuals for global wrongs such as unfair trade, global poverty, or climate change, when political efforts to address them stall. The paper offers an account of global structural injustice as a distinctive moral wrong, highlighting the entanglement of individuals and its problematic underlying relational inequalities. Against important objections opposing individual responsibility for oversize,

structural wrongs, the paper proposes an ethos-based account of individual responsibility that does not primarily focus on possible duties to directly address the many symptoms of structural injustice. Instead, it embeds the call for action in a comprehensive call to develop an ethos, comprising a cognitive, emotional, and behavioral component, leading to a pervasive response in how agents feel and think, talk and act about structural injustice. Far from being sufficient to end such injustice in itself, the ethos-based account of global individual responsibility explains the—limited but nevertheless important—role individual agents realistically can and morally ought to play in addressing structural injustice: they have to see to it that they target, within their limited range of influence, the relational origins of structural injustice.

Ryoa Chung's paper *Structural health vulnerability: Health inequalities, structural and epistemic injustice* explores the causal mechanisms that expose specific individuals or social groups to an increased propensity of health risks. Through this analysis of health vulnerabilities, a structural rather than essentialist conception of vulnerability is privileged. Health inequalities must be considered unjust when they arise from the interaction of structural injustice and epistemic injustice. These two notions are not reducible to each other, but both phenomena participate in producing and perpetuating structural health vulnerabilities. The problem of structural racism in our societies is a glaring example of the interplay of structural and epistemic injustices that lead to health inequalities that affect some social groups more than others.

Sex selection and global gender justice is at the center of **Agomoni Ganguli-Mitra**'s paper. She argues for the need to resituate justice in debates on sex selection, such that the practice is addressed as a symptom of structural and global forms of gender-based injustice. The approach proposed is one of global justice, informed by the work of feminist scholars from the Global North and the Global South, and one which assumes that a universal normative approach is possible, that is attentive to the particularities of specific contexts. Ganguli-Mitra argues for a reframing of sex selection by exploring three prevalent but unsatisfactory framings: sex selection as a feature of specific cultures and traditions, sex selection as an issue of development, and sex selection as mostly a matter individual autonomy and reproductive choice. Finally, she explores a means of addressing this specific expression of gender injustice through Iris M. Young's social connection model of responsibility. Enacting global gender justice in relation to sex selection requires focusing our moral lens on actors who are in positions of privilege, and therefore have the responsibility to change the norms, structures and practices which contribute to injustice.

In their paper *Refugees and others enduring displacement: Structural injustice, health, and ethical placemaking*, **Lisa Eckenwiler and Verina Wild** highlight the structural injustice involved in the modern management of refugees, with special concern for threats to the capability to be healthy. The authors sketch an account of the injustice that flows from prolonged displacement drawing on Iris M. Young's work on the structural injustice of segregation, and from there, offer an argument about what is owed to asylum-seekers, especially people living in conditions of encampment but also those in deprived urban enclaves over long periods of time. Eckenwiler and Wild describe these responsibilities in terms of the ideal and practice of ethical place-making, an essential element of an enabling, or capabilities-oriented, conception of justice. The authors contrast this account of what is owed to asylum-seekers with the prevailing emphasis on promoting "livelihoods." From the perspective of policy making around refugee reception and resettlement, ethical place-making should serve as a guiding ideal and a principle for the policies and practices of international institutions, states, local government, and civil society.

In her article *Structural Injustice and the Requirements of Beauty*, **Heather Widdows** argues that the increasing demands of beauty constitute collective harms that must be analyzed in light of the Youngian notion of structural injustice. Beauty harms cause physical and psychological damage that

cannot be attributed solely to the individuals who engage in these harmful beauty practices. Instead, the notion of structural injustice allows us to understand how certain social processes produce and maintain standards of beauty that cut across all demographic groups and exert social constraints on some of the most vulnerable people who will suffer the most. Widdows's work sheds striking light on the real harms that arise from a global culture of beauty and how a multitude of actors participate in the complex and multifaceted structural conditions that produce them.

With his inquiry into *Economic contagion and a pro-poor social epidemiology*, **Darrel Moellendorf** closes the special issue. The global financial crisis in the years after 2008 serves him as an example of structural injustice. Moellendorf analyzes the contagion effects of the economic downturn that affected not only the developed but consequently also the developing countries through reduced capital investments, reduced demand for export products, and reduced remittances received. In developed countries, the crisis severely affected populations often already vulnerable to poverty. Exploring the dynamics of such economic contagion in terms of *absence* of suitable legislation, Moellendorf identifies challenges in attributing responsibility to specific agents for *failing* to have taken appropriate action to protect the vulnerable. Moellendorf deploys Iris M. Young's social connection model of responsibility to discuss these challenges and focuses on the beneficiary responsibility of those who have contributed to unjust structures.

As this assemblage of articles shows, the legacy of Iris M. Young will and should be a lasting one with wide scope and tremendous potential to inspire future research.

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ENDNOTES

[1] For a detailed analysis of the different forms of "connections" that can be distinguished in Young's work, cf. Maeve McKeown (2018). Iris Marion Young's "Social Connection Model" of Responsibility: Clarifying the Meaning of Connection. *Journal of Social Philosophy* 49 (3): 484–502.

[2] Iris M. Young (2006). Responsibility and Global Justice: A Social Connection Model. *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 23, 102–130.

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