Injustice, Power and the Limits of Political Solidarity

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Introduction

Brooke Ackerly's *Just Responsibility* provides the most significant intervention in the scholarly debates about *political* responsibility for global justice since Iris Marion Young's posthumously published book *Responsibility for Justice* (2011). Like Young, she grapples with globally generated injustices with a focus on sweatshop labour. In sympathy with Young, she seeks to transcend a narrow focus on distributive justice and expose the less visible and more deep-seated, embedded injustices that prevent the realisation of human rights. Like Young, she is critical of a simple backward-looking liability model of responsibility that focuses on individual culpability in favour of a forward-looking approach that focuses on taking political responsibility for less visible, systemic injustices that are collectively produced. Ackerly's and Young's approaches are also both firmly anchored in the feminist tradition of critical, emancipatory inquiry that stands in political solidarity with those most affected by injustices, and they are interested in political transformation of injustices rather than merely the amelioration of the most harmful effects.

However, Ackerly pushes the idea of taking political responsibility for injustices to a whole new level. There are many ways in which this is done, but the most significant is her pioneering method of grounded normative theory which is put to work to reveal what she calls 'injustice itself', as distinct from the consequences of injustice. This is a non-

foundational, non-ideal approach to understanding injustice that is deeply informed by the human rights practices of activists and philanthropic supporters. Yet it is also distinguished from a practice-based theory because it starts not with the practice but rather the *politics of the practice* (Ackerly 2018a, 137, my emphasis), which entails contestation, struggle and resistance. As Ackerly puts it: "As feminists, we expect ourselves and each other to be attentive to politics all the way down to the level of data and all the way up to what constitutes a research question" (2018a, 149).

Ackerly's choice of cases studies is consistent with her normative orientation and method, which is to start with the first-hand experiences and struggles of those seeking to address injustices, in this case the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity. It is here that Ackerly shows how Young's account, while clearly sympathetic with those most affected, is "incompletely informed as to what those in struggle are actually doing in response to injustice itself" (2018a, 49). Whereas Young focused on what the more capable and privileged among us can do for those most affected by injustices, Ackerly focuses on how best to support the efforts, and build the political capabilities of, those most affected. And whereas Young developed some general rules of thumb to guide those seeking to show political solidarity with those most affected by injustices (e.g. meet, discuss, expose and publicise harm and hold powerful actors to account), Ackerly develops and illustrates a more grounded set of "principles-in-practice" for taking political responsibility: utilizing intersectional analysis, making cross-issue connections, building capacity for both self-advocacy and group advocacy, uncovering the complexity of forces that create obstacles to rights enjoyment through connected activism, and learning and making an ongoing commitment to taking political responsibility.

The fourth principle – uncovering the complex forces that prevent the enjoyment of human rights – is the most challenging for grounded normative theory. On the one hand, grounded normative theory is a highly situated approach that begins with the lived experiences of those most affected by injustices. On the other hand, tracking and exposing the social forces that prevent the enjoyment of human rights and thereby understanding injustice itself requires theoretical abstraction, including a critical theory of power and an epistemology that can deal with complex causality. Ackerly, like Young, wants to move beyond the liberal moral grammar of responsibility as culpability, which is confined to undeserved harms that can be causally traced to the faults of particular individuals. Yet she acknowledges that injustice itself is harder to discern; we can never have full knowledge of all of its dimensions due to unavoidable uncertainty and causal complexity and this can also blur the boundaries between injustice and misfortune. Liberal moral philosophy is based on an inappropriate social epistemology because it normalises and obscures injustice itself. She deals with the epistemological challenge by arguing that, in taking political responsibility for injustice, it is enough to have a general awareness of injustice itself; to insist on full causal knowledge and certainty would prevent taking political responsibility and thereby perpetuate injustices.

Just Responsibility is inspiring and provocative in opening up many new lines of inquiry in the theory and practice of global justice. In this response, I offer two sets of reflections that relate to the limits and new possibilities arising from Ackerly's theory and method. The first concern her concept of injustice itself, how it relates to power and whether both injustice itself and power itself can indeed be separated from their consequences. The second explores the possibilities and limits of grounded normative theory in relation to the climate injustices inflicted on communities, both human and nonhuman, which cannot share their experiences of injustice or mobilise politically against it.

Injustice Itself and Power

The concept of "injustice itself" (borrowed from J.S. Mill) plays a central role in *Just Responsibility*. For Ackerly, injustice itself refers to the *exploitable* power relations of injustice rather than the consequences of injustice, and it has a double quality insofar as it works to both generate and conceal injustices. Exploitable power inequalities typically travel with particular social epistemologies and processes of normalization that render injustice itself invisible (or else we see it but become desensitised) because it becomes part of the pattern of everyday life. The adjective "exploitable" acknowledges that power inequalities per se are not necessarily problematic (e.g. parent-child; teacher-student); they only become problematic when they are exploited to the disadvantage of the more vulnerable party. When the relationship between parent and child or teacher and student is nurturing and involves learning and capacity building then the effects are empowering on the more vulnerable party. Conversely, when the power inequalities in the relationship are abused, the effects can be disempowering and, in some cases, devastatingly so.

Ackerly defines injustice itself in terms of exploitable power relations but she does not define power itself, although it is clear that she understands it in dynamical, social and relational terms. However, this raises the question: can "power relations" be separated from their consequences? Following the above examples of good and bad power cast in terms of unequal relations we might paraphrase exploitable power relations (i.e. injustice itself) to mean the disempowering consequences of "bad power relations", but this means that power, and therefore injustice itself, cannot be separated from their consequences.

Barnett and Duvall define power in terms of its consequences: it is "the production, in and through social relations, of *effects* that shape the capacities of actors to determine their circumstances and fate" (Barnett and Duvall 2005, 42, my emphasis). Their taxonomy of power highlights the different ways in which power relations work: directly between agents, indirectly through rules that govern the social interaction, and constitutively through social structures and discourses that constitute social relationships. The latter include "structural power" and "productive" (i.e. discursive) power, both of which are crucial to *Just Responsibility* because they are the less obvious forms of power that constitute the social status, capacities, interests and subjectivities of actors in ways that are internally related. Key examples of structural power are slavery and capitalism, which constitute rather than merely regulate the relationship of master-slave and capital-labor respectively. Unlike the relationship between parent-child and teacher-student – which places those with greater decision-making power in a position of trust with responsibilities for the welfare of others – the master-slave relationship is widely regarded as inherently exploitative and abhorrent. Likewise, Marxists have long argued that the capital-labor relationship is not just potentially exploitative but inherently exploitative. Unlike slavery, this relationship is now normalised on a global scale while the membership and strength of trade unions has declined since the 1980s.

I read *Just Responsibility* as being about supporting the political empowerment of those who are disempowered so that they are better able to determine their circumstances and fate (which includes but it is not limited to the enjoyment of human rights). A situated response to labour exploitation in the garment industry that entails building political networks and capacities to strengthen unions and enable workers to move closer toward realising their

human rights of workers is a good place to start. But there are larger structural forces at work here, which demand not just the fulfilment of workers' rights but also the democratisation and transformation of the governance structures of the firm along with more political "joining-up" work along transnational commodity chains, from extraction to waste disposal to enabling the more systematic empowerment of workers. That said, Ackerly makes it clear that taking political responsibility for injustice itself is a permanent work in progress, that progress cannot happen without political mobilisation, and political mobilisation has to start somewhere.

In the next section I build on this implicit idea of empowerment as improving the capacity of communities most affected by injustices to determine their circumstances and fate while also adding a further element to taking political responsibility which might, at first blush, seem out of place for a grounded theory: trusteeship.

Climate injustice and the boundaries of political community

Just Responsibility offers a situated approach to understanding injustice itself as a practical pathway to the better enjoyment of human rights. Although the focus is on justice, not democracy, Ackerly's account is deeply democratic with its close attention to inclusive processes. It also seeks to avoid paternalism and second-guessing by demonstrating political solidarity with those suffering injustices in ways that respect their voices and experiences and their lead role in the political struggle against injustice.

But how can a situated approach respond to those most affected by injustices who are not in a position to talk about their experiences or participate in the political struggle to transform the social structures and discourses that produce and normalise such injustices? The injustices of climate change are not only concentrated upon many of the most vulnerable human communities today but also nonhuman communities and future generations of all communities. These cases present an awkward choice for grounded normative theory: should it be restricted to only those situations where it is possible to build upon the lived experiences and political struggles of those most affected by climate injustices in order to remain truly grounded? Or can it be expanded in ways that enable the practice of trusteeship or guardianship and therefore proxy representation for wider communities of all kinds in space and time that are expected to suffer injustices? If the latter, then how can taking political responsibility be grounded?

As it happens, Ackerly has already reflected on the problem of climate change and extended her theory of just responsibility to incorporate the climate injustices that will be visited upon future generations (Ackerly 2018b). She does this by expanding how we think about political community: "Crucial to addressing climate change injustice is the appreciation that we need to consider the human rights of future generations, that they are part of 'our' political community and that we need to attend to power inequalities across generations" (2018b, 110). Moreover, she argues that the political inequalities among existing generations today produce human rights violations today and that these violations will continue through time if left unaddressed (2018b, 104). In making this move, Ackerly reprises her argument from *Just Responsibility*: we have a political duty to inquire, understand and expose how injustices are produced, and how they are rendered normal or invisible, but only in a general sense. We

should not take uncertainty and complexity as reasons for postponing action since this would serve to paralyse political action and exacerbate injustices.

How, then, might this extension of political responsibility be "grounded"? One answer might be that it is no great imaginative leap to express political solidarity for future human communities who are presently destined to suffer climate injustices and associated human rights violations since the climate injustices suffered today provide a solid basis for extrapolation. But can the same be said for nonhuman communities today and in the future? Does it even make sense to stand in "political" solidarity with the most affected parts of the nonhuman world and take political responsibility for their present and future fate? Or does this require the return of moral responsibility in the form of a guardianship role and a duty of care for those who cannot mobilise to protect themselves? This would also entail making political representation on behalf of the most affected constituencies. Yet this requires knowledge of those affected that cannot be directly accessed as a basis for extrapolation; it also breaks the traditional democratic nexus that requires the political representative to be authorised by and accountable to those they represent (Whiteside 2013). Here we can add that nonhumans, by definition, cannot enjoy *human* rights and there is an ongoing debate in environmental ethics about whether the language of rights is the most suitable way of protecting the welfare and capacity to flourish of nonhuman species and ecological communities. Defining nonhumans only in ways that are commensurable with human experiences can work as an invidious form of comparison that excludes many life-forms.

Sally Scholz (2008) has argued that political solidarity is a relation between humans against an injustice that is human in origin, and therefore the more-than-human-world does not itself participate in political solidarity. However, more recently, she has qualified this position by

arguing that while we humans cannot stand in political solidarity *with* nonhuman communities we can nonetheless express "*political* solidarity *on behalf of* those who cannot speak for themselves in the political arena" and in ways that do not "assume any social and epistemological privilege on the part of humans" (Scholz 2013, 81).

Ackerly would be the first to acknowledge that the negative impacts of climate change on nonhuman communities are produced by the same or similar power relations (embedded in social structures and discourses) that generate negative impacts on present and future human communities. Moreover, these negative impacts are disempowering: they reduce the capacities of nonhuman communities to determine their circumstances and fate and therefore constitute injustices. Arresting this development demands taking political responsibility, as both moral and political trustees or guardians, on behalf of such communities in the absence of full knowledge of their situated experiences of injustice. While political guardians cannot be authorised or held directly accountability to those on whose behalf they act, they would nonetheless be answerable in the public sphere, and to those with specialised knowledge (including scientific, indigenous or vernacular/local knowledge of nonhuman species and communities) (e.g., O'Neill 2001; Eckersley 2011). These arguments certainly stretch the meaning of grounded normative theory but they run with the general grain of *Just Responsibility*, and represent a compatible extension of its normative impulse.

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