



# Political Responsibility and the Forms of Solidarity On Maeve McKeown's *With Power Comes Responsibility*

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## Abstract

This commentary argues that McKeown's use of examples draw out philosophical commitments of her account that are not explicitly thematized in that account. Developing this argument in relation to her reflections on solidarity, it is argued, illustrates how her account negotiates and overcomes a potential tension between two different conceptions of solidarity.

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## Introduction

Maeve McKeown's efforts to build on the work of Iris Young and others (notably Catherine Lu and Alasia Nuti) regarding structural injustice is richly illustrated with empirical examples. These are particularly salient to her discussions of solidarity and acting with political responsibility that draws on her insightful use of Wartenberg's situated concept of power. In this commentary, I want to focus on this part of McKeown's discussion in the context of her reflections on political solidarity and acting on political responsibility. I am less interested here in offering criticisms of McKeown's view than in trying to draw out and make explicit some philosophical commitments which I take not to be theoretically thematized in her argument.

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## I. Victims, Counter-Finalities and Decision-Making Power

There is one way in which McKeown's argument stays closer to the ground than Young's own more ambitious proposals. Let me briefly remind us of Young's position.

In her *Dissent* article 'From Guilt to Solidarity' (2003), Young concludes thus:

Laws and regulatory institutions are less a basis for political responsibility than a means of discharging it. Where it can be argued that a group shares responsibility for structural processes that produce injustice, but institutions for regulating those processes don't exist, we ought to try to create new institutions.

This discussion of political responsibility aligns with Young's previous work on self-determination and global democracy in which she advocates the following kind of arrangement:

I propose a global system of regulatory regimes in which locales and regions relate in a federated system. These regimes lay down rules regarding that small but vital set of issues around which peace and justice call for global co-operation. I envisage seven such regulatory regimes ...: (1) peace and security, (2) environment, (3) trade and finance, (4) direct investment and capital utilization, (5) communications and transportation, (6) human rights, including labor standards and welfare rights, (7) citizenship and migration. I imagine that each regulatory regime has a distinct functional jurisdiction, with some need for overlapping responsibility and coordination. Each provides a thin set of general rules that specify ways that individuals, organisations and governments are obliged to take account of the interests and circumstances of one another. (2000, 267).

Such a global system is directly concerned to address issues of structural injustice in relation to a global basic structure. It may seem that the establishment of such a global system would render redundant the need for the kind of political responsibility that Young theorises through the social connection model since, presumably, a tolerably just global regulatory regime of the kind that Young envisages as covering labour standards would enable the global apparel system to be brought within the ambit of applicability of the liability model in the same way that responsibility for labour standards with North American and European states are articulated within the terms of the liability model. Is the applicability of the social connection model of responsibility thus to be construed simply in terms of the responsibility to create the institutional conditions of application of the liability model?

In her late discussion of structural injustice within the state, Young characterises the subjection to structural injustice of social groups in terms of *positional difference* within social structures, using examples such as disability, gender, sexuality and race, and one of the reasons that Young (2001) defends the use of group categories in empirical research on inequalities is that group-based comparisons can make visible forms of structural injustice. For our current concerns, however, what is important about Young's discussions of positional difference with respect to social groups within a state emerges from her reflections on the *politics* of positional difference. Young's argument concerning the politics of positional difference is that it cannot be aligned simply with the laws and policies of the state:

Movements of African Americans, people with disabilities, feminists, gay men and lesbians, indigenous people, as well as many ethnic movements, realize that societal discrimination, processes of segregation and marginalization enacted through social networks and private institutions must be confronted in their own non-state institutional sites. While law can provide a framework for equality, and some remedy for egregious violations of rights and respect, the state and law cannot and should not reach into every capillary of everyday life. A politics of positional difference thus recommends that churches, universities, production and marketing enterprises, clubs and associations all examine their policies, practices and procedures to discover ways that they contribute to unjust structures and recommends changing them when they do. ... Numerous social changes brought about by these movements in the last thirty years have involved actions by many people that were voluntary in the sense that the state neither required them nor sanctioned agents who did not perform them. Indeed, state policy as often follows action with civil society directed at undermining structural injustice as leads it. (2007a, 85).

The implication of this passage is clear: although it is the case that bringing social processes – such as the global apparel system – under the authority of a regulatory regime would construct a framework of rights and obligations that allow 'egregious violations of rights and respect' to be handled under the liability model, the social connection model of responsibility retains salience in respect of forms of informal discrimination reproduced through, for example, entrenched societal norms concerning gender. The form of responsibility articulated through the social connection model is central to contexts of structural injustice in which the institutional conditions of applicability of the liability model do not apply and is focused in such contexts on instituting a regime of governance characterised by an impartial public authority. However,

it remains a significant mode of responsibility even in contexts where such an impartial public authority exists but is *refocused* in such contexts as a supplement to the liability model and, hence, as directed to forms of social interaction that cannot easily, while retaining liberal freedoms, be addressed directly through state policies and laws.

There is no reason to think that McKeown disagrees with Young's arguments concerning the need to build regulatory institutions; indeed, that she agrees is at least implicit in her critical remarks on the kind of hybrid global governance via public-private partnerships that have emerged in the international realm (208-212). However, McKeown's focus is much more clearly rooted in attention to current practices and contemporary struggles with respect to action in the here and now and can provide guidance for ordinary citizens in how to act. I will come back to this issue shortly, but I want first to take up a concern that arises in relation to Young's work and to suggest that it carries over into McKeown's but that her examples give her the resources to address it.

The issue is one that arises as arises as a direct implication of Young's invocation of Sartre's conception of counter-finalities. She writes:

The actions and interactions which take place among persons differently situated in social structures using rules and resources do not take place only on the basis of past actions whose collective effects mark the physical conditions of action. They also often have future effects beyond the immediate purposes and intentions of the actors. Structured social action and interaction often have collective results that no one intends and which may even be counter to the best intentions of the actors. Sartre calls such effects counter-finalities. (2007b, 170)

McKeown rejects the understanding of social structures in terms of 'rules and resources' that Young invokes here, preferring the critical realist view advanced by Archer, but this does not, I think, have any implications for the phenomenon that Sartre identifies. The reason that this Sartrean point matters is that it applies equally to any and all efforts to transform a set of social processes in a more just direction.

When we consider the question of how to address structural injustice, Young argues for the epistemic and efficacy benefits of including sweatshop workers in discussions about what to do:

Victims of injustice have the greatest interest in its elimination, and often have unique insights into its social sources and the probable effects of proposals for change. This point certainly applies in the case of labor conditions in the apparel

industry. ... Analysts of some strategies in the movement to improve conditions find that they have ineffectual or paternalistic because the workers point of view and active participation have not been properly included. (2006, 185)

McKeown also stresses this point (230) but she goes further, arguing that ‘successful interventions in structural injustice will be grounded in the concerns of the victims and potentially designed and shaped by them too ... The role of the privileged is to support them in an appropriate way’ (230-31). Earlier McKeown highlights the example of United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) noting:

It is through direct collaboration with sweatshop workers and local unions that they get their information, develop demands and design campaigns. For instance, it is due to worker empowerment that the US anti-sweatshop movement has generally avoided boycotts, since the workers were clear that they wanted to keep their jobs, and boycotts would undermine that. (215)

The importance of this example is that it points to the fact that acknowledging the problem of counter-finalities raises a crucial issue concerning decision-making power *in* the discharging of responsibility that is not simply epistemic or strategic, there is a further and more fundamental reason for those who are most dominated and disadvantaged by a given set of institutional practices and social processes to have a *pivotal* role in determining the courses of action to be taken in transforming these processes, namely, that they are most vulnerable to well-intentioned actions producing unintentional negative outcomes. In other words, we need to reflect on location of persons within structures of decision-making power with respect to social transformations. Thus, on this account, whereas we might argue that *responsibility for change* should be distributed on the basis of the degree of causal role, advantage accrued and power to transform, *decision-making power for (the direction of) change* should be arranged in terms of degree of subjection to structural injustice. To recall an earlier point from Young’s discussion of social groups subject to oppression in *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990), this might take the form of allowing sweatshop workers a (qualified) veto with respect to decisions of the anti-sweatshop movement: hence, no boycotts that might put the worker’s jobs at risk.

McKeown does not, I think, thematize this issue explicitly but her examples draw attention to it and, as we will see, it matters for how she construes political solidarity. But before we turn to the issue of political solidarity, let me return to the point of contrast between Young’s more ambitious project of

proposing a global system of regulatory regimes and McKeown's more local project of offering guidance concerning what to do here and now. The issue here is that systems of structural injustice interact; changes directed at, and successfully addressing some part of, one such system may have negative effects on another. This is salient for issues of political solidarity (as we'll see shortly) but arguably it also indicates the need to identify an overall end – such as a global system of regulatory regimes – at which specific reforms can be strategically directed.

## II. Political Responsibility as Political Solidarity

Drawing on Young, Dean, hooks and Medina, McKeown sketches an account of reflective political solidarity in which the work of solidarity entails learning ways of seeing others as equals that are attentive and responsive to difference, to working across difference. But different moments in McKeown's argument seem to point to different conceptions of solidarity across a fundamental distinction, namely, whether these are symmetrical or asymmetrical conceptions of solidarity. Thus, on the one hand, McKeown argues, following bell hooks' criticisms of the feminist movement for its condescending unequal treatment of black feminists that to 'engage in political solidarity means recognizing the oppressed as equal active participants in movements to undermine the injustice that affects them' (p.175) Here the concept of political solidarity is symmetrical in the sense sketched out by Sangiovanni (2015):

I act in solidarity with you when:

1. You and I each (a) share a normatively justified goal (b) to overcome some significant injustice;
2. You and I each individually recognize our responsibilities to do our part in achieving the shared goal in ways that mesh;
3. You and I are each individually committed (a) to the realisation of the shared goal and (b) to not bypassing each other's will in the achievement of the goal;
4. You and I acknowledge our obligation (a) to incur significant costs to realise our goal if necessary; and (b) to share one another's fates in ways relevant to the shared goal.
5. Facts 1.-4. need not be common knowledge.

On the other hand, McKeown also argues, as we noted earlier, 'successful interventions in structural injustice will be grounded in the concerns of the vic-

tims and potentially designed and shaped by them too ... The role of the privileged is to support them in an appropriate way' (230-31). Here the concept of solidarity is construed as asymmetrical. The first view of political solidarity as *shared action* grounded on a *shared goal* is contrasted with a different *shared action* conception of solidarity as '*reason-driven action on other's terms*.' (Kolars 2016: 57, see also Scholz 2015, 273) It is a notable feature of this account that it offers a direct challenge to Sangiovanni's symmetrical view:

Sangiovanni assumes that solidarity is a *symmetric* relation, such that S is in solidarity with G iff G is in solidarity with S. But solidarity is not a symmetric relation; it is deferential. ... Solidarity is therefore asymmetric ... (Kolars 2016, 61).

For Sangiovanni, solidarity is a symmetric relation because those in a relationship of solidarity have a shared goal and are committed to '(a) to the realisation of the shared goal and (b) to not bypassing each other's will in the achievement of the goal'. By contrast, Kolars argues that solidarity is an asymmetric relation in which S defers to G's specification of the goal and S is committed to not bypassing G's will.

McKeown's first example of the feminist movement seems to align with Sangiovanni's type of view, whereas her second example of the privileged supporting the victims of structural injustice appears to align with the Kolars' type of view. These different examples, however, point to a way of dissolving the apparent conflict between these views. Sangiovanni offers a conceptualisation of solidarity that addresses relations between members of a structural group (e.g., the feminist movement), hence the symmetrical character of his account, whereas Kolars offers a conceptualisation that address relations between members of a group who stand in relations of privilege to the structurally disadvantaged group and the members of the structurally disadvantaged group, hence the asymmetrical character of his account. Rather than seeing one of these as basic to the concept of solidarity in a way that excludes the other, we can sensibly be guided by our ordinary use of the word 'solidarity' to describe both types of relationship and that we see each view as picking out a distinct kind of solidarity: Sangiovanni's account captures the normative character of *solidarity between* members of an oppressed or disadvantaged group: *in-group solidarity*, while Koler's account addresses the normative character of *solidarity with* disadvantaged groups by those who occupy privileged positions as a result of structural injustice: *out-group solidarity*.

This set of distinctions matters for McKeown's argument for two reasons. The first is that, drawing on the work of Ackerley as well as hooks, she high-

lights the importance of intersectionality for theorizing solidarity, but to engage seriously with intersectionality requires engaging both symmetrical and asymmetrical conceptions of solidarity because individuals within a structural group occupy different positions relative to intersections with other structural groups such that they have responsibilities to stand in relations of *solidarity with* (out-group solidarity) and *solidarity between* (in-group solidarity) others within that group. Take the example of women. At its most general, this identifies a structural group ‘women’ who are disadvantaged relative to another structural group ‘men’ and in which members of the group ‘women’ have responsibilities of solidarity towards each other (in-group solidarity) and in which ‘men’ have obligations of solidarity towards ‘women’ as a structural group (out-group solidarity) not least as one key dimension of discharging what McKeown, following Nuti (2019), sees as their structural debt towards women. At the same time, however, there are many ‘women’ who are also members of the structural groups ‘Women of Color’, ‘LGBTQ women’, ‘Women with disabilities’, etc., who have specific *solidarity-between* responsibilities towards each other – in-(sub)group solidarity – and towards whom women who are not members of the relevant structural group have *solidarity-with* responsibilities – out-(sub)group solidarity – that are nested within the wider in-group solidarity responsibilities of women as a general group. This feature of social movements such as feminism that aim to be the self-conscious agency of a structural group, to represent that group as a “group-for-itself”, points to the responsibility of women who stand in positions of structural privilege with respect to other women along some dimension of privilege/disadvantage being willing to defer (within limits of justice) to the specific goals set by members of structural group in question. *But* it also points to the responsibility of the relevant sub-group of women being willing to articulate these goals in ways that mesh with the articulation of the wider goals of women as a general structural group and through this with the particular goals of other sub-groups who similarly engage in such articulation of meshing goals. This “dialectics” of solidarity – expressed in ethical concepts such as ‘sisterhood’ – mediates the relationship of general and particular interests and, to the extent that the relevant responsibilities of solidarity are acknowledged and acted on, disarms the potential for difference to become divisive that may threaten to undo the movement as a whole.

This last point helps to account for the importance of *ethos* in social movements, of the cultivation of an ethical culture of mutual responsiveness that is attuned to diverse structural standings within the group ‘women’ against the backdrop of a general in-group solidarity relation grounded in the

structural disadvantage of women as a group in society. It is important because ‘responsibilities’ of solidarity are such that they cannot be fully specified in terms of determinate obligations but require a dispositional relation to the other in and through which their responsibility is worked out in an ongoing and mutual supportive process. This is what underwrites bell hooks’ criticisms of white feminist’s condescending attitudes as failing to cultivate the egalitarian ethos of respectfulness, where this mode of relationship is not required merely as an instrumentally valuable means for achieving the goals of solidarity, rather it is a constitutive part of solidarity, of standing in a relationship of solidarity to others. This is the point that links the concept of solidarity and its expression through notions such as sisterhood or comradeship to the idea of friendship and, hence, to the centrality of ethos.

McKeown’s preferred view of solidarity as a “virtue” may be her way of registering this point and it is clear that her examples and the norms concerning how to engage in solidarity in ways that acknowledge intersectionality and the differential position of persons relative to a given structural injustice requires that we acknowledge the duality and dialectic of solidarity in something like the ways sketched out above. What I am offering here is thus not really a criticism of McKeown’s account so much as a supplement designed to make theoretically explicit features that are largely implicit in the practical norms of acting-in-solidarity she draws from Ackerley and the examples of solidarity in practice that she provides. It is part of the virtue of solidarity, we may say, that we know the kind of solidarity required of us in any given context of struggle.

## Conclusion

This commentary has tried to demonstrate that McKeown’s treatment of examples offers us more theoretically than she makes explicit in her argument. I have suggested first that her sweatshop example highlights a reason for privileging the victims of structural injustice with respect to decision-making power in collective action that is not merely epistemic or strategic. I have further proposed that the same example points to the salience of an asymmetrical conception of solidarity that sits alongside the symmetrical conception of solidarity that McKeown invokes in her earlier discussion of political solidarity as a virtue. This, I suggest, can be explicated in terms of the necessity of both symmetrical and asymmetrical views of solidarity for addressing what McKeown takes to be a central requirement of solidarity as a virtue, namely, its ability to be responsive to both intersectionality and positional difference. Perhaps

this reconstructive work on my part does not match with McKeown's intentions? Whether that is so or not, I hope that engaging in such reconstruction and offering it for comment can help to make explicit the theoretical account of political solidarity to which McKeown is committed.

## Works Cited

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