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**Patriarchal Bargains  
and Responsibility for  
Structural Injustice\***

*Abstract*

Iris Marion Young (2011) introduces a paradigm shift in the conceptualization of responsibility through the elaboration of her Social Connection Model (SCM) to combat structural injustice. This model offers a shared political understanding of responsibility, aiming to avoid victim-blaming and the imposition of supererogatory duties on the oppressed.

However, two objections emerge regarding the application of the SCM. First, Young's approach of assigning differentiated duties based on individual circumstances raises concerns about potential evasion by both oppressors and victims, leading to the phenomenon of 'undererogation'. Second, some question the SCM's effectiveness in transcending blame, with the allocation of differentiated duties potentially resulting in a resurgence of victim-blaming.

In this paper, I address both objections in relation to the issue of patriarchal bargains. To tackle the first, I propose turning to Serene Khader's deliberative perfectionist approach (Khader 2011), which advocates for an intersubjectively defined spectrum of vulnerability. This spectrum can help determine the scope and degrees of victims' duties, thus mitigating the issue of undererogation. To address the second objection regarding the risk of victim-blaming, I suggest two strategies: 1) Robin Zheng's clarification of Young's distinction between blaming and criticizing (Zheng 2018; 2019), and 2) differentiating between victim-blaming and blaming victims after the

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allocation of justified duties. While both strategies have their limitations, they provide valuable insights for navigating the complexities of Young's reconceptualization of responsibility in relation to blame.

*Keywords:* responsibility, structural Injustice, patriarchal bargains, victim-blaming, gender norms.

### *Introduction*

Structural injustice, given its pervasive, iterative, and multifactorial character, presents a challenge for the conventional understanding of responsibility. At the heart of this challenge lies the recognition that addressing structural forms of injustice, such as gendered oppression, necessitates a profound re-evaluation of how we assign duties to combat these injustices. The conventional understanding of responsibility – what Iris Marion Young (2011) calls the 'liability model' – seems inadequate for this task because it hinges on establishing a clear and direct causal connection between a specific agent and an alleged wrongdoing in order to ascribe responsibility and subsequent corrective duties. However, this link is hard to establish when we are confronted with the complex web of structural forms of oppression in which agents often wield little control over the multiple factors that enforce injustice (Gädeke 2021).

The case of patriarchal bargains in circumstances of gendered oppression is particularly illustrative of this complexity. Patriarchal bargains are self-interested trade-offs that women make with their communities in circumstances of gendered oppression (Kandiyoti 1988; Narayan 2002). They can be seen as a strategy to maximize security or optimize an already limited set of life options: for instance, a woman living in a patriarchal community might exchange submissiveness for protection, stability, and presumed respect (Kandiyoti 1988). Patriarchal bargains, thus, usually require compliance with oppressive gender norms, which has sparked a heated debate as to whether these negotiations represent efforts to cope with oppression or make women responsible for perpetuating it.

One of the main arguments against assigning individual moral responsibility for perpetuating oppressive gender norms to the bargaining woman is that she primarily functions as a norm taker rather than a

norm maker. Therefore, in complying with these norms, she cannot be considered at fault for perpetuating them, as they would continue to exist regardless of her individual decision to not comply. Additionally, non-compliance is considerably costly for her given her vulnerable position within the oppressive system in which she lives. (Khader 2011) Individually assigning a moral duty of non-compliance would not only misconstrue the system of gendered oppression, which manifests itself as an exceptionally intricate collective action problem, but also inflict harm on the agent herself. This would compel the agent to sacrifice the pursuit of her higher-order ends, despite the fact that her individual actions would yield little to no change in the structural system of oppression. On a conventional understanding of responsibility, given the structural character of gendered injustice, blame is thus placed on the victim for something that she has not directly contributed to. Moreover, the subsequent imposition of a supererogatory duty of non-compliance would be profoundly exploitative, especially given the agent's vulnerable position within the system of oppression.

Yet, exonerating women as individuals from all forms of responsibility concerning gendered oppression also has its drawbacks. Addressing structural oppression, in fact, necessitates structural change, which is a process that involves all constituents within the structure, even those at its lower echelons. Historical examples actually reveal that victims, when organized into structured collectives, frequently emerge as leaders of the struggles against injustice and occasionally overcome their individually imposed structural vulnerability by uniting and collaborating to realize the desired social change (Vasanthakumar, 2020). Standpoint theorists also note that marginalized individuals and communities may have, in virtue of their marginalization, a better grasp of the issues regarding oppressive gender norms and institutions than do privileged individuals. Therefore, their contribution to resisting oppression may be crucial, if not essential (Hooks 1984; Wylie 2003).

Moreover, characterizing individual agents as passive subjects of oppression, unable to respond to injustice because of their socially imposed vulnerability, may inadvertently raise some concerns for their victimization. In striving to avoid victim-blaming and the imposition of supererogatory acts of resistance against gender oppression, we risk portraying women as 'dupes of patriarchy' in need of salvation (Narayan,

2002). How, then, can we reconcile this tension between avoiding burdening the victims of oppression with a moral duty to resist and asserting that addressing structural oppression mandates the participation of marginalized groups in the struggle for its elimination?

In her influential work, Young (2011) offers a compelling and thought-provoking alternative to the conventional understanding of responsibility, which, as I will argue in this paper, helps us to circumvent – if not fully, at least partially – the negative implications of the ‘liability model’ – victim-blaming and supererogation – while simultaneously acknowledging that addressing structural injustice demands a collaborative effort that also includes the victims of oppression. Her Social Connection Model (SCM) redefines responsibility within the context of structural injustice as primarily shared and political, as opposed to how the liability model defines responsibility by singling out and blaming culpable agents for the unjust outcomes that they have brought about. Moreover, the specific duties that derive from this shared political responsibility are assigned on a differentiated basis such that what an agent ought to do individually is ascertained given her specific abilities and circumstances. This assignment thus avoids the imposition of supererogatory acts of resistance.

However, the SCM has not been without its share of objections. Here, I will especially focus on those that question its effectiveness in avoiding the negative implications of the liability model in relation to patriarchal bargains. The first objection that may arise from the application of the SCM to women’s compliance with gender norms revolves around the differentiated process of assigning responsibilities to individuals. One could argue that this differentiation may inadvertently create a moral landscape in which everyone – including oppressors and relatively privileged victims – could potentially evade responsibility by only choosing duties that align with their own preferences, capabilities, or subjective views of what they can reasonably accomplish. In other words, if individuals are given substantial latitude in selecting their duties on the basis of their subjective assessments of their abilities and circumstances, the prescriptive force of the SCM may be weakened. This would result in a form of ‘undererogation’ rather than supererogation.

The second objection, which is closely related to the first, looks at the intersection between assigning differentiated duties to individuals and the conceptualization of a forward-looking account of responsibility that

aims to transcend blame. Martha Nussbaum (2011), among others (Barry and Ferracioli, 2013; Gädeke 2021), contends that the concept of blame, which the SCM seeks to distance itself from, potentially re-emerges once individual duties are differentially assigned. In essence, if an agent fails to fulfil one of the duties assigned to her within the SCM framework, questions may naturally arise about whether she should also be blamed for her failure. This objection, thus, suggests that the SCM may inadvertently pave the way for victim-blaming.

After delineating Young's SCM and illustrating how it can be applied to the case of patriarchal bargains (Section 1), I respond to the first objection (Section 2) by referring to Serene Khader's deliberative perfectionist approach. (Khader 2011) I argue in favour of an intersubjectively defined spectrum of vulnerability that determines the scope and degree of the victims' duties to resist so to avoid both supererogation and undererogation.

I then address the second objection (Section 3) about the risk of victim-blaming. I suggest two different strategies to respond to it. However, I recognize that neither is ultimately convincing, so I leave this objection open for further discussion.

The first strategy involves Robin Zheng's explanation of Young's distinction between blaming and criticizing, which is itself based on a longstanding distinction in the literature between responsibility as attributability and responsibility as accountability (Zheng 2018; 2019). The second strategy, instead, relies on an understanding of victim-blaming as being incompatible with the apportioning of justified duties. In other words, if the victim's duties are justified, not taking them up licenses a form of blame that cannot be considered victim-blaming, at least not in the pejorative sense in which we typically conceive it.

### 1. *The structural turn: Young's Social Connection Model of responsibility*

In *Responsibility for Justice*, Young (2011) elaborates the SCM to address the problem of thinking about responsibility in relation to structural injustice. She argues that, because structural injustice is 'produced and reproduced by thousands or millions of persons usually acting within institutional rules and according to practices that most people regard as

morally acceptable' (*ibidem*, 95), we need a specific type of responsibility that reflects the complexity of social injustice.

To better illustrate how structural injustice works, Young uses the example of sweatshop labour, the production of garments and other consumer items in relatively small manufacturing centres in less-developed countries (*ibidem*, 125-134). Sweatshop laborers suffer injustice in the form of coercion, extremely poor working conditions, and need-deprivation. However, while some of this injustice can be attributed to specific culprits, such as factory owners who violate labour laws and harass their employers, other concurrent and interlocking factors are outside of these culprits' control. Having to survive and produce profit in a capitalistic and highly competitive environment, corporations cut production costs by operating sweatshops, which are tolerated by the governments of less-developed countries that seek foreign investments to develop their economy. Workers, on their end, accept the bad working conditions since working in a sweatshop is often their only available source of income, while consumers opt into this system by looking for the 'best deals', which require keeping labour and production costs to a minimum. The result is a complex pattern of interlocking interests that are produced and reproduced by a large number of individuals and institutions who are differently related to each other and that ends up harming workers but also makes the realization of alternatives impossible because everyone is to some extent involved in the system. Young argues that, in these circumstances, we need a concept of responsibility that focuses on the reproduction of this pattern rather than the wrongdoing of a few individuals. She, thus, proposes to separate responsibility into two distinct models: the liability model and the SCM.

Young argues that the liability model is the traditional understanding of responsibility by which we conceive of legal and moral responsibility. She recognizes that this is 'indispensable for a legal system and for a sense of moral right that respects agents as individuals and expects them to behave in respectful ways toward others' (*ibidem*, 99). However, it presents several limitations when assessing structural injustice, such as in the cases of sweatshop labour or gendered injustice, because of the multiple factors at play. These make it impossible to single out a linear causal connection between a single wrongdoer and a certain social harm.

Unlike the liability model, the SCM focuses on bettering the situation (i.e., is forward-looking) rather than on allocating blame (i.e., backward-looking). Accordingly, in cases of structural injustice, the SCM maintains that individuals are not guilty of wrongdoing but instead share responsibility for improving the background social conditions in which they interact (*ibidem*, 105). This does not mean that the SCM ought to completely replace the liability model but instead that it ought to supplement it when we need to analyse structural injustice (*ibidem*, 174). Therefore, the two models should be pursued in tandem so that we can determine the kind of responsibility that we ought to assign to the agent, depending on her relation to injustice.

The duties of a bearer of political responsibility should be delineated based on one's abilities and circumstances. Specifically, Young proposes four parameters for discerning agents' duties: power, privilege, interest, and collective ability (*ibidem*, 142-151). Power refers to the extent of influence or control the agent wields over the processes that lead to unjust outcomes. Privilege considers the agent's position within the structure and often but not necessarily aligns with power.<sup>1</sup> The third parameter, namely interest in undermining injustice, refers the crucial role that victims have in publicly articulating their situation as injustice, thus voicing their particular interest in changing the situation (*ibidem*, 146). Lastly, the fourth parameter is collective ability, which denotes the capacity to leverage the resources of already organized entities to effect change.

Young recognizes that these parameters may conflict with each other (*ibidem*, 147-150). For instance, she acknowledges that agents with significant power within the structure of injustice may also have an interest in perpetuating the structure rather than in undermining it and, conversely, those who are less powerful within the structure may have a more vested interest in changing it. She thus contends that the first step is to expose these structural fissures and allow political contestation in which those who have an interest in undermining the structure may hold accountable

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, Young offers the example of the middle-class clothing consumers who have a relatively privileged position but do not wield much power with respect to the issue of sweatshop labour (2011, 145). Nonetheless, in being economically privileged and the beneficiaries of the affordable prices that retailers offer, they have greater responsibility to take action because they would not suffer too much from the costs of opting out of system.

those who have power and are privileged enough to change it. Moreover, those who are powerful and privileged should recognize their enhanced capacity to change the underlying conditions that lead to specific injustices (*ibidem*, 148). Yet, it is unclear on what basis this political contestation takes place. For instance, Young leaves undetermined the features of the structural fissures from which guidance for action allocation should be derived. This will be the main point of discussion in Section 2.

Young also adds that, while the agent cannot be *blamed* for her decisions in relation to differentiating her duties because it is not possible to track a linear causal connection between her actions and the system of injustice, she can be *criticized* for not taking enough action, taking ineffective action, or taking action that is counterproductive (*ibidem*, 144). Unfortunately, she does not specify what is the distinction between blaming and criticizing. Consequently, this remains one of the most contentious aspects of the SCM, which will be thoroughly explored in Section 3. However, before delving into these critical issues, the following section illustrates how the SCM applies to women's compliance with gender norms.

### 1.1. The SCM and women's compliance with gender norms

While it might appear counterintuitive to discuss the assignment of responsibility for combating structural injustice to everyone, including victims, especially after expressing a profound concern for victim-blaming and imposed supererogation, Young's SCM can help circumvent the challenges inherent in conventional understandings of responsibility related to women's compliance with gender norms. Specifically, here I show how her framework can be applied to two cases of bargaining women in situations of gendered oppression – Shreya and Lisa.

Shreya is a black female attorney, who chooses to accommodate the racist and sexist demands of her colleagues. (William and Dempsey 2014; Khader 2021)<sup>2</sup> She knows that not only non-compliance would ren-

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<sup>2</sup> Shreya's story is an imaginary example based on the data about challenges to women's advancement in the workplace (William and Dempsey 2014). Khader (2021) uses it to show the possibility of self-respect and resistance under circumstances of oppression. Much of my discussion of patriarchal bargains is based on her insights about this fictitious case.

der the workplace environment intolerable, but it would also seriously jeopardize her career prospects.

Lisa is a married woman, trying to find an agreement on full-time childcare with her husband (Cudd 2006). Lisa opts to be a stay-at-home mom, after considering that her husband's job is more remunerative than hers and so would guarantee better economic prospects for her family. According to the SCM, both women are *not morally culpable* for perpetuating unjust gender norms by complying to pursue their higher-order ends. Yet, they are *responsible* for combating gender injustice, given their involvement in the system that perpetuates these norms. Additionally, despite prioritizing other interests, they possess an interest in undermining the structure that limits their opportunities for flourishing.

The key question revolves around how this type of responsibility can be discharged. One way to do so is to reframe Shreya and Lisa's bargains as instances of prospective resistance. Prospective resistance entails that the bargainer negotiates with gender norms to achieve her higher-order ends while intentionally deferring open resistance to a time when she is more powerful or better positioned in the social structure, thus also potentially maximizing its impact. This reframing ensures that the agent is not burdened by any supererogatory demand, as the duties she must fulfill are proportionate to her vulnerability in the circumstances she faces.

However, this does not imply that 1) the bargaining agent cannot take any action to fight injustice while waiting for more favourable conditions – for instance, self-reflection, *per* Young's account (2011, 148), is already an initial step of resistance; 2) the option of immediate resistance is foreclosed if it carries reduced efficacy; 3) that failure to reframe a bargain as prospective resistance renders the agent blameworthy. While I extensively address the third claim in Section 3, here I briefly analyse the first two.

Consider Shreya's case in relation to point 1). As a black female attorney in a law firm marked by racism and sexism, she may recognize her relative lack of power and privilege compared to her colleagues. While feeling limited in her ability to openly confront this injustice at present, she may acknowledge a responsibility to resist when circumstances allow for explicit resistance without unbearable or excessive costs. According to the SCM, this already marks a crucial step in combating

injustice, as compliance and responsibility can harmoniously coexist in circumstances of structural injustice. By striving to do her best and keeping the possibility of future resistance in mind, Shreya aligns with the SCM's principles. Additionally, despite facing marginalization and disempowerment, she may opt for subtler forms of resistance that are less burdensome than open resistance, such as joining a group focused on raising awareness of women's working conditions or discreetly challenging certain requests from her colleagues.

Similarly, let's consider Lisa's case. Prioritizing full-time care for her child to maximize family income does not imply that she must abandon the fight against gender injustice. For Lisa, prospective resistance might involve returning to work once her child is older, but, in the meantime, she could advocate for women's equal pay and work towards closing the gender pay gap by actively supporting policy changes and legislative initiatives. In both cases, compliance does not amount to acquiescence to oppression.

Moreover, even after reaching a certain position from which it is less costly for an oppressed person to resist more openly, one can differentiate between counter-normative and a-normative behaviour to resist oppression (Terlazzo 2020). Counter-normative non-compliance entails direct opposition to norms and is tendentially more costly. For instance, with respect to beauty norms, a plus-sized woman may reclaim the use of 'fat' as a positive adjective but at the cost of a higher risk of backlash. A-normative behaviour, on the other hand, involves eccentricity that lies outside of a norm without necessarily contradicting or challenging the values at its heart. An example might be the case of dying one's hair an unconventional bright colour. Therefore, even when it comes to non-compliance, different types of action can be more or less costly and consequently may or may not represent a duty depending on one's social position and the power that an agent has within the structure.

Turning to point 2), differentiating duties, based on the parameters Young proposes, does not imply that the agent cannot choose to openly resist, despite the associated costs, if she desires to do so. It only implies that no one can *compel* her to do so precisely because this goes beyond her duty. One might argue that she should refrain from openly resisting in these circumstances because doing so would have reduced efficacy compared to prospective resistance. While deferring resistance might be

more impactful, the fact that the agent bears higher costs might compensate for this by inspiring other people to fulfil their duties.<sup>3</sup> Observing a person who significantly sacrifices her interests for the cause may not provide immediate rewards in terms of emancipation and certainly cannot be mandatory – once again, given the costs involved – but it might encourage others to fulfil their obligations. For instance, consider the stories of renowned social reformers, such as Rosa Parks or Nelson Mandela, whose dedication inspired numerous individuals to join the fight against injustice, even though they faced exceptionally high personal costs. Therefore, the SCM neither precludes nor discourages the option of open and immediate resistance.

I move now to discuss the process of allocation of certain duties, in particular by addressing the objection according to which subjectivity in assigning duties may result in a moral free pass because of under-erogation.

## 2. Undererogation: The problem of differentiating duties

As illustrated so far, Young argues that all the agents who (indirectly) contribute to the background conditions in which injustice takes place still share some form of responsibility for social change (2011, 142). Yet, it is up to them to decide how to discharge this responsibility within the limits of what is reasonable for them to do, given the four parameters of power, privilege, interest, and collective ability (*ibidem*, 143). This raises questions about the subjective nature of specifying individual duties to bring about desired social change. In fact, while responsibility is shared, the fact that individuals can choose what is reasonable *for them* to do may leave space for being lax about resisting injustice and offering excuses for inaction. Even more worrying is that this problem applies not only to the case of the victims of oppression, who may be legitimized in opting out of certain particularly demanding duties given their vulnerability to injustice, but also to those who are more powerful and privileged within

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<sup>3</sup> The efficacy of a certain act of resistance can be particularly hard to predict. However, from a general perspective, having more power, privilege and collective ability intuitively leads to greater chances of success.

the structure of injustice and who may find it reasonable for them to do the bare minimum because they have no particular interest in dismantling a system that benefits them. In this sense the subjective nature of differentiating duties may amount to a form of ‘undererogation’.

Young recognizes that the parameters for reasoning about individual action may lead to this counterintuitive conclusion and argues that political contestation can help us to clarify one’s role in a system of oppression and the corresponding duties one should fulfill in relation to that system. Yet, this seems to reiterate the problem of subjectivity at an earlier stage of the process of assigning duties: the moment when one recognizes one’s role within the system. How do we reveal the structural fissures that function as a basis for action guidance during political contestation? An agent may have a distorted perspective of how she contributes to a system of oppression and so, once again, she may argue that she ought to do much less than her actual role would require her to do.

Take again the case of Shreya, but this time once she has reached a position of power within her firm. Let’s hypothesize that, in this situation, she no longer faces any particularly high costs of non-compliance since she is powerful and privileged enough to defy her colleagues’ demands. What if she refuses to recognize that her situation has changed and so does not accept that her responsibility to fight structural injustice has also changed? According to Young, the process of political contestation should help her to recognize that she now has a more burdensome duty to discharge than she did before, when she was more vulnerable to the costs of non-compliance. Yet, without a point of reference in the political arena to guide this process, the allocation of differentiated duties remains rather undetermined. The more undetermined it is, the more laxity is granted to resisting injustice. For instance, even after engaging in the process of political contestation, Shreya may fail to recognize that her situation has changed, given the absence of shared criteria to assess the social circumstances she lives in. A way to overcome the indeterminacy of the process of political contestation would be to provide a clear assessment of an agent’s vulnerability, enabling us to determine how demanding a specific duty should be in relation to it. In the following section, I argue that Khader’s deliberative perfectionist approach can facilitate this assessment by clarifying the structural fissures that ground the agents’ subsequent duties to fight oppression.

## 2.1 An intersubjective process for allocating differentiated duties

Khader's deliberative perfectionist account aims to articulate a specific conception of basic human flourishing, through a process of public deliberation, with the purpose of guiding public interventions in circumstances of oppression. (Khader 2011) While she does not advocate for a predefined flourishing framework, she does outline certain specific formal requirements for what this conception of flourishing ought to entail.

In particular, she argues that it should be cross-culturally acceptable, substantively and justificatorily minimal, and vague (*ibidem*, 60-63). By 'cross-culturally acceptable' she means that it must be arrived at through an actual, rather than hypothetical, process of deliberation that is inclusive and widely perceived as legitimate. To achieve cross-cultural acceptability, this conception must also be substantively minimal because there seems to be greater consistency among different cultures regarding what basic flourishing requires than what human excellence requires (61). Additionally, it should be justificatorily minimal, meaning that it should be compatible with a variety of different justifications.<sup>4</sup> The conception is vague insofar as it is described at a level of generality that allows for its application in various cases.<sup>5</sup> Finally, this conception requires local-level deliberation for practical use, given that understanding the role that a specific action plays in its particular context is essential when defining the costs attached to certain actions of resistance.

Khader acknowledges that there are already several existing proposals for a conception of flourishing with the potential of aligning with these stipulations. She refers to the list of human rights, Nussbaum's

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<sup>4</sup> Khader borrows this term from Joshua Cohen (2004), who uses it to describe conceptions that do not involve comprehensive moral justifications. Therefore, the agreement reached on a certain list of elements that constitute basic human flourishing can be supported by different perspectives. Examples include the justification of women's human rights using ideas found in the Koran (Afkhani 1997) or a reinterpretation of human rights based on traditional Yoruba beliefs (Bewaji 2006).

<sup>5</sup> For instance, one should refer to 'access to adequate nutrition' rather than access to specific foods (Khader 2011).

(2001) capabilities list, Ackerly's (2000) list of what human beings should be able to choose, and Alkire's (2005) list of capability dimensions. Yet, she also recognizes that none of these may be sufficiently cross-culturally acceptable. Therefore, she not only refrains from presenting her own proposal but also does not take a stance on which of these conceptions is the best vis-à-vis her suggested stipulations. She argues that an actual process of public deliberation should guide the elaboration of these conceptions, yet she also leaves open the question of what kind of deliberative process would be the most appropriate.

Here, I do not intend to offer answers to these questions because doing so would be beyond the scope of this paper. My contention is that a publicly deliberated conception of flourishing – whatever this might be – can integrate the SCM to guide the process of differentiating individual duties. Such a conception would provide guidance in recognizing and assessing specific vulnerabilities, allowing for a thorough evaluation of the potential costs of certain actions for individual agents, in relation to their vulnerability. Moreover, by being subject to public deliberation, it sidesteps criticisms of paternalism and ethnocentrism often leveled against other conceptions of flourishing.<sup>6</sup>

For instance, let's turn back to Shreya's case, once she has reached a position of power and privilege within her firm. After the public deliberation of a specific conception of flourishing, it is easier to determine how burdened she should be by the allocation of duties of resistance. This conception would highlight that Shreya is now in a different position than before and thus must fulfill a set of duties that are likely more demanding than those she had when she used to hold a less privileged position in her firm. Similarly, regarding Lisa, an account of flourishing would assist in determining the demandingness of her duties, once she is no longer solely occupied with full-time childcare. Thus, this conception of flourishing acts as a benchmark for identifying the structural deficiencies within a given social setting. It provides a measure of vulnerability that guides the differentiated assignment of duties based on the associated costs relative to

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<sup>6</sup> For a review of the debate concerning the charged of paternalism and ethnocentrism against different accounts of flourishing, especially Nussbaum's capabilities approach, see Khader 2011.

the agent's specific circumstances. Yet, the account of flourishing does not prescribe *specific* actions in a given situation; the decision on what to do in a given situation still lies with the agent, who determines the appropriate course of action based on her circumstances and, ultimately, through the process of political contestation that takes place within her community with whom she shares political responsibility.<sup>7</sup> In short, the primary role attributed to the flourishing account here is to indicate the extent to which the agent should bear certain costs to address injustice to prevent her from opting for undererogation. Once the demandingness of her duties has been established; it is up to the agent to decide what to do.

While the conception of flourishing guides offers guidance in the process of duty allocation, the question of addressing failures in duty fulfillment remains open. In particular, detractors of the SCM argue that Young falls short of delivering an account of responsibility that successfully extends beyond the concept of blame. The following section discusses this objection and examines two viable strategies to tackle it.

### 3. *Failing duties: The problem of victim-blaming*

Nussbaum (2011), in her famous foreword to Young's *Responsibility for Justice*, contests the possibility of conceptually separating responsibility from blame. She thinks that if an agent A bears forward-looking responsibility R for social ill S and time passes without A's taking up R, then, after enough time has passed, A is guilty of not doing what she was supposed to. By contrast, on Young's view, the agent cannot be considered guilty because the SCM goes beyond the idea of blame. A, thus, seemingly acquires a moral free pass. Similarly, Gädeke (2021) and Barry and Ferracioli (2013) echo Nussbaum's concern, contending that refraining from blaming the agent for failing to discharge political responsibility overlooks the genesis of past injustices, effectively 'wiping the slate clean' even when the agent fails to act as expected.

However, if we take these objections seriously and revise the SCM to include blame, we risk ending up with a version of the SCM that very

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<sup>7</sup> I wish to thank one of the reviewers for suggesting to clarify the purpose of the flourishing account in the SCM.

much resembles the liability model. In fact, if the revised SCM affords us the possibility of blaming the agent for not discharging her forward-looking responsibility, it also affords us the possibility of blaming victims for failing to act as they should have and thus re-enacts the previously examined worries concerning victim-blaming.

The two strategies I analyze here attempt to address this challenging objection from distinct angles, yet neither fully resolves the issue. Therefore, I refrain from favoring one over the other and focus solely on assessing their respective advantages and disadvantages. The first strategy entails adopting Zheng's (2019) explanation of the distinction between blaming and criticizing. The second involves arguing that holding a victim accountable for failing to fulfill their justified duties does not amount to victim-blaming.

### 3.1 Blaming vs. criticizing

To address the victim-blaming objection, Zheng (2019) reframes the difference between the SCM and liability model as a difference in responsibility as accountability and responsibility as attributability. She explains that responsibility as attributability appraises agents for their actions by focusing on the agent, while a conceptualization of responsibility as accountability apportions burdens by concentrating on the harm and its redress. Zheng argues that the liability model of responsibility represents a particular conception of responsibility as attributability, while the SCM can be considered as a conception of responsibility as accountability. As we have seen, it is not possible to identify some form of faulty agency for a specific individual because of structural injustice's pervasive, iterative, and multifactorial character. Therefore, the SCM proceeds by determining how certain responsibilities should be apportioned without assessing faulty agency to certain individuals. This also means that if the agent fails to take up her responsibility, she cannot be blamed on the SCM, which is always directed at clarifying what should be done next rather than what should be done about the past. If the agent does not discharge her differentiated duty, the SCM then moves on to elaborate ways to redistribute these burdens across the community.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> I would like to express my gratitude to one of the reviewers for bringing attention to the issue of free-riding political responsibility, which arises when an agent fails

Yet, Young (2011) and Zheng (2019) agree on the idea that the agent can be *criticized* for not acting as she is supposed to act. For instance, let's hypothesize that, based on the spectrum of vulnerability previously analysed, subject A needs to discharge a specific duty D, which is proportioned to her threshold of vulnerability. Yet, regardless of the threshold, A decides to go for duty L which is much less onerous and effective for furthering resistance to struggle. Zheng (2019) argues that we cannot blame A since her agency is not at fault given that she is not intentionally causing harm and that intricate, concurrent factors make up the system of oppression that generate the harmful outcome. What we can do is to criticize A for not fulfilling her assigned role in the collective struggle for resistance.

The subtle but fundamental distinction between blaming and criticizing lies in Zheng's argument that criticism is applicable to a broader set of cases, while blame is justified only when a wrongful outcome is attributable to a certain person. For instance, criticism holds someone accountable by exposing them for not acting as expected. In the context of structural injustice, where linking individual consciousness to action in macro-social processes is challenging, basically everyone can be the object of this type of criticism. Blaming, instead, is qualified as the exercise of distinguishing those who are more or less morally righteous.<sup>9</sup> However, it is hard to locate a special higher or lower moral ground vis-à-vis structural oppression if all the agents are to some extent involved in the structure of injustice, but, at the same time, they cannot individually affect the structure to make a substantive difference.

While Zheng's strategy aligns with Young's understanding of the social connection model, it is vulnerable to two criticisms. First, one may argue that regardless of how much we emphasize the distinction between blaming and criticizing, it is too difficult to implement it. When criti-

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to fulfill her duty, leading to the redistribution of the burden of resistance across her community. While I do not delve into the topic of free-riding in this paper, as my primary focus is on the allocation of differentiated duties and victim-blaming, it is worth considering that determining what is the appropriate response to the lack of duty fulfillment, either by opting for the first or second strategy analyzed here, is also crucial to respond to the issue of free-riding. In fact, one may prevent the agent from engaging in free-riding either by criticizing (strategy 1) or blaming (strategy 2).

<sup>9</sup>Here Zheng (2019) refers to Young (2011, 170), who refers to Nietzsche (1967).

cizing a victim for not acting as expected, we risk inevitably conveying an element of blame in our judgment. Second, authors like Nussbaum (2011) argue that blame should actually be welcomed since it serves as a powerful deterrent for inaction. Therefore, any account that tries to avoid it risks being insufficient for motivating agents to act differently. In this perspective, praise and blame are seen as incentives to seek social change in the future yet on the proviso that blame is properly allocated. This, thus, leads us to the second strategy for saying that the SCM avoids victim-blaming, at least in the pejorative sense.

### 3.2. Victim-blaming vs. blaming the victim

The strategy that distinguishes between victim-blaming from blaming the victim takes a fundamentally different approach from the first one. It essentially argues that, under certain circumstances and provided that blame is properly allocated, blaming the victim is justified and does not amount to the pejorative sense of 'victim-blaming' when apportioning blame signifies something inherently wrongful. Although this strategy is not explicitly present in Young's work, it enables her account to respond to Nussbaum's and others' criticisms, while preserving the idea of not strictly blaming victims.

The argument unfolds as follows: if an agent A has a certain duty D, but the apportioning process of D has not considered her social position, the costs attached to resisting, or other relevant factors, then A should not be blamed for not fulfilling her duty. However, if D has been assigned through an appropriate process, as with an application of the SCM, then we may not only criticize her but also legitimately blame her for not discharging her duty. Most importantly, blaming in this case does not align with the traditional understanding of victim-blaming. According to Harvey (1995), victim-blaming involves claiming that the victim either contributed to a specific harm or responded in a way that exacerbated the outcome. The revised version of the SCM that reintroduces the notion of blame does not blame the victim for these reasons. The victim cannot be blamed for making a critical contribution to structural injustice or for exacerbating harm, as we have established that, as an individual, she can only make a marginal contribution (i.e., she acts as a norm-taker rather than a norm-maker). The reason to blame her specifically lies in her failure to fulfil her differen-

tiated duty to contribute to the collective struggle against oppression. She is, in a way, 'blameworthy' for impeding the process of social change but not for making things 'worse', given her limited capacity to do so.

The first drawback of this strategy is its unorthodox nature; it may be argued that it introduces such a significant change in Young's account that it distorts the essence of the SCM. After all, one of the primary objectives of the SCM is precisely to separate the concept of blame from that of responsibility. Therefore, reintroducing it, even if on a different basis to avoid victim-blaming, might be seen as undermining the nature of Young's theoretical project.

The second concern revolves around the distinction between cases of victim-blaming in the pejorative sense and what can be termed as 'blaming the victim' or 'victim-blaming in the justified sense'. This distinction hinges on whether the latter truly qualifies as victim-blaming or is rather akin to holding someone accountable for failing in their duties, despite being a victim themselves. The distinction aligns with the framework of the SCM because the SCM operates on the assumption of shared political responsibility towards structural injustice. However, it is incompatible with the liability model, which requires tracing a direct causal link between an individual and a specific wrongdoing. Therefore, according to the liability model, all instances of victim-blaming ought to be considered in the pejorative sense. On this model, in fact, if the victim fails to fulfill her duties she is identified as someone who 'makes things worse' and so deserves to be blamed as such.

### *Conclusion*

The examination of Young's SCM has provided a comprehensive exploration of an alternative framework for understanding responsibility in the face of structural injustice. I have tried to shed light on its strengths and address various objections that may arise in its application within the context of women's strategic compliance with gender norms.

To respond to the first objection about the possibility of undererogation within the SCM, I introduced an intersubjectively defined spectrum of vulnerability, drawing from Khader's deliberative perfectionism. The second objection, closely tied to the first, questioned the SCM's ability

to distance itself from blame. I have proposed two strategies for addressing this concern: 1) distinguishing between blaming and criticizing and 2) distinguishing between victim-blaming and the apportioning of justified duties. However, I have also highlighted how both strategies face some criticism, so this issue has been left partially unresolved within the SCM.

Yet, despite this lingering question, I find the SCM to be a compelling framework for conceptualizing shared political responsibility in combating structural injustice. It advocates for a nuanced approach to duty allocation, thereby preventing systematic and disproportionate disadvantage to the most vulnerable, while also ensuring that everyone is included in the fight against injustice.

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