IRIS MARION YOUNG, 1949-2006

Professor Iris Marion Young, born January 2, 1949, who was one of the most influential political philosophers and feminist theorists of her generation, died of cancer on August 1, 2006, at her home in Chicago. She is survived by her husband, David Alexander; her daughter, Morgen Alexander-Young; her sister, Jacqueline Young; and her brother, L. James Young.

Young was born and raised in New York City, attended Queens College in the late 1960s, and earned her Ph.D. in philosophy from the Pennsylvania State University in 1974. After receiving her doctorate, she taught philosophy at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Miami University, and, for a decade, Worcester Polytechnic Institute. In 1990 she moved to the University of Pittsburgh’s Graduate School of Public and International Affairs, where she taught until 1999; from 1999 until her death she was Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago. She remained closely connected to the discipline of philosophy, not least through her ongoing involvement in and service to such organizations as The American Philosophical Association, the Society for Women in Philosophy, and the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy. She was a figure of international stature, visiting no fewer than seventeen countries as an invited lecturer.

Young did not publish her dissertation, entitled “From Anonymity to Speech: A Reading of Wittgenstein’s Later Writing,” though a Wittgensteinian attention both to the texture of language in use, and to the social significance of speech as a practice, ran throughout her work. Instead, beginning in the late 1970s, Young published a series of influential essays that drew together phenomenology and radical feminist politics, offering a rich account of women’s lived experience of embodiment, and showing how such a phenomenology could also help make sense of, and challenge, the oppression of women. Several of these essays were collected in the volume Throwing Like A Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory (1990), recently republished, with the addition of three new chapters, as On Female Body Experience: ‘Throwing Like A Girl’ and Other Essays (2005).

Though Young never gave up her interest in phenomenology, over the course of the 1980s her work became more intensively engaged with social and political theory. At the same time, what would come to be called the “Third Wave” of feminism, by drawing attention to differences of power and perspective within women’s movements, challenged Young and other feminists to think more explicitly about the relationship between women’s oppression and other dimensions of social and political injustice. The result was the book for which Young is most widely known: Justice and the Politics of Difference (1990).

The book’s thesis was characteristically straightforward: justice is not in the first instance about the distribution of goods, but about the overcoming of oppression, including the oppression of social groups. Just as characteristically, its exposition was staggeringly rich. Young moved with ease among the political philosophy of Rawls and his critics, Marxist social theory, feminist philosophy, the history of political thought, theories
of race and racism, and vividly concrete discussions of affirmative action, city life and urban and regional planning, and participatory challenges to the bureaucratic welfare state, among other topics. Her approach had fans and critics, but its importance was undeniable, and the book became an indispensable point of reference for anyone seeking to understand the lasting significance, for politics and philosophy, of the new left social movements of the 60s, 70s, and beyond.

Young continued to explore these issues throughout the 1990s, sometimes through disputes, published and unpublished, with colleagues and compatriots. A collection of her essays of the first half of the decade, *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy, and Policy*, appeared in 1997. Two themes from *Justice* demanded more extended attention: the forms of communication appropriate to a genuinely inclusive politics (an issue she had broached when she applied her critique of the ideal of impartiality to Habermasian communicative ethics), and the specific problems posed by the pursuit of justice on a global scale (a question she had begun to explore in a brief epilogue to *Justice*); these problems were at the center of *Inclusion and Democracy*, published in 2000.

Over the last several years, Young had been pursuing the problem of global justice even more intensively; and because in her view many important kinds of global injustice were best conceived as structural, she had also begun to work out a theory of responsibility that, by dissociating political responsibility from such notions as guilt, blame, or legal liability, could explain why people have a duty to respond to the injustice of social structures to which they are connected, but whose existence is not in any straightforward way their fault. The first results of this effort appear in a new collection of Young’s last essays, *Global Challenges: War, Self-Determination, and Responsibility for Justice* (2007), which also includes Young’s thoughtful, impassioned engagements with contemporary political issues, including the Palestine/Israel conflict; the post-9/11 securitization of American politics; the fate of the rule of law; global labor justice; and police brutality, among others.

Such issues were not merely academic for Young, who remained both a scholar and an activist even during her illness; and, as more than one of her friends has recalled, she was not the sort of scholar-activist who condescended to the non-academics with whom she was involved, or who left the drudgery of day-to-day politics, the repetitiveness of the phone bank or the picket line, to others. In that respect as in many others, she was a relentlessly consistent person, committed not only to advocating equality but also to living it.

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