

When is Guilt More Than Just a Petty Face? Moving from Liberal Guilt Toward Reparation and Responsibility in Education

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In classrooms dealing with traumatic histories of injustice or with the troubling violence and inequities that continue to mark everyday life at the end of the millennium, guilt often surfaces persistently and indelibly, as a relation between the stories of suffering being retold and those who listen to their retelling. The fact that guilt is so commonplace in accounts of classroom encounters dealing with social justice issues (for example, the Holocaust, racial injustices, and homelessness) raises numerous questions regarding how students and teachers understand guilt as a relation between one's sense of moral responsibility and the suffering experienced by others. For guilt acknowledges that some harm has been committed against an other for which one feels some culpability, whether or not one has been directly involved in such harm.¹ Yet, the manifestations of such guilty responses are not all of a kind.

At the risk of oversimplifying what is a complex phenomenon, I wish to draw attention to two different types of response which have not only appeared with some regularity in published accounts of teaching but in my own experience as well. On the one hand, it is not uncommon to hear students proclaim their guilt and their feelings of responsibility for deeds they have not directly committed. These students generally feel weighed down by the inadequacy of their position in the face of suffering they are witness to, and express a sense of being overwhelmed by the enormity of it all, struggling to maintain a sense of hope when all they feel is despair. On the other hand, it is perhaps equally common for students to proclaim their innocence and their anger at "being made to feel guilty" by the very pedagogy that is supposed to make them "more enlightened" and "feel better" about themselves. These students attempt to negate the overwhelming effects of guilt by proclaiming that they cannot be held responsible for actions they have not themselves committed. However different the outward appearances of these responses may be, underlying each are the tremors of guilt students experience in becoming aware of the wrongs committed against an other.

The phenomenon of guilt in education has been a subject of commentary (and numerous parenthetical remarks), if not full-fledged inquiry. There have been many ways of approaching the meaning of guilt in these educational contexts, some authors asserting that what lies behind such evocations is self-pity or a form of defensiveness, others claiming that such responses are simply inadequate, and may even be improper, in the face of the pain experienced by others.² Nevertheless what unites many of these responses is a view of guilt as a manifestation of "liberal" sensibilities. The subtext is that liberal guilt is an individualistic response that detracts from marshalling the energy needed to recognize the larger, systemic factors that facilitate violence and maleficence toward others. Moreover, such guilt, it is charged, leads to paralysis with respect to taking social or political action to

repair the harm committed. Guilt *qua* liberal guilt, then, is thus held to be problematic, and is alleged to be responsible, at least in part, for a kind of moral catatonia at worst and political indifference at best.

But is guilt always already problematic and does it necessarily lead to moral paralysis? After all, guilt, insofar as it involves some feeling of culpability, seems at least a tentative place to begin to think about one's responsibility in working toward alleviating the suffering of others. As both Emmanuel Levinas and Melanie Klein suggest — albeit from radically different perspectives — guilt is frequently a necessary (if not sufficient condition) for “making reparation” (Klein) and for arousing responsibility (Levinas).³ The question, then, it seems to me, is twofold: how might we understand guilt outside the rubric of liberal guilt? And, how might we, as teachers (particularly those of us involved in social justice issues), think about and act on those declarations of guilt and innocence (read: not responsible) made by students? By way of response, I first explore the notion of liberal guilt and then turn to a reading that views guilt as morally significant.

THE PETTY FACE OF LIBERAL GUILT

While the term liberal guilt is familiar to most of us, there is, on the one hand, a troubling lack of precision about what counts as liberal guilt, while, on the other, there is a broad-based assumption as to its value or worth within progressive circles. What appears to count as liberal guilt often boils down to expressing one's guilty feelings over an other's condition of pain, misery or suffering.⁴ That is, any and all guilt which results from coming face-to-face with individual or group suffering has the potential to become liberal guilt. Liberal guilt appears to be less about a specific type of guilt (such as Oedipal guilt or survivor guilt) as it is about grouping guilty feelings together under a rubric that is understood to have certain political connotations and valuations.

With respect to such valuations, Julie Ellison, in her history of liberal guilt, points out a number of characteristics. Liberal guilt has become a notion of disparagement, a futile exercise in self-absorption, making it an abject condition for progressives. Liberal guilt is of the rank of the petty, its logic redolent with sentimentalism and embarrassment, rather than with a sense of political or social purpose. Ellison writes, for example, that “the embarrassments of liberal guilt arise from the authenticity of a more absolute pain discovered by the white intellectual in the gaze of the racial Other.”⁵ That is, in comparison to the suffering endured by others, any guilt experienced by one who is privileged seems downright petty. Consequently, the words we use to attach liberal guilt to actual persons cast their own moralistic shadow: one can be “accused” of liberal guilt, one “suffers” from liberal guilt, and one can “wallow” in it. Read under the moralizing rubric of liberal guilt, guilt itself becomes a moral failure of sorts, where the pettiness of self-doubt and uncertainty that guilt bestows on us is a debilitating condition that is seen to be in need of a remedy.

For example, at one point in her book *Feeling Power*, Megan Boler quotes a student's perceptions of her own guilt: “The collective guilt that overpowers many

of us should not be the reason for examining the Holocaust. We need to explore the origin of the cruelty of it.”⁶ Here we see that guilt “overpowers,” it stands as an obstacle to exploring roots and “origins,” and ought not to be the “reason” for seeking out answers to what are, perhaps, ultimately unanswerable questions. Such a reading of guilt suggests that it prevents us from counteracting the misery that we continually witness and rewitness through literature, film, or face-to-face encounters in the streets. As Ellison remarks, “in the throes of liberal guilt, all action becomes gesture, expressive of a desire to effect change or offer help that is never sufficient to the scale of the problem.”⁷ The pedagogical task at stake, it seems, is to overcome the obstacle (guilt) that stands in the way of making adequate and effective social change.

As it is named, labelled, and categorized as liberal, it is *all* guilt which becomes that obscure object of denial and repudiation in progressive pedagogies. Through metonymical displacement, liberal guilt stands in for, and thereby conceals, the traces and layers of pain, struggle, and “ontological shock”⁸ that are frequently found in what Shoshana Felman calls the “event of teaching:” a teaching that “strive[s] to produce, and to enable, *change*.”⁹ Guilt is seen to be an unruly force that threatens our capacity for making “real” or “authentic” social change, and, as Ellison points out, guilt is the “embarrassed position which nobody wants to occupy.”¹⁰ Both as a threat and source of embarrassment, then, guilt, it appears, needs to be disciplined and held at bay. Conceiving of guilt as liberal guilt in effect tames, as it denounces, the potentially disruptive flow of sorrow, anger, shame and embarrassment that often accompany expressions of guilt in the classroom. Liberal guilt at once recognizes the strength of such affect, yet it also functions simultaneously to control such affect by its illocutionary dismissiveness. Thus liberal guilt acts like a sentry barring us from probing too deeply into the significance of guilt within progressive education. That is, guilt *qua* liberal guilt guards and protects us from inquiring too deeply into whether guilt can have moral or political value. If we grant guilt any moral status, we run the risk of being charged with appealing to crass sentimentalism, on the one hand, and with a failure to recognize the political futility of guilt, on the other.

Yet, if guilt is such a relatively common response to others’ suffering, pain, and discrimination, are we really doing it justice when we simply denigrate it or condemn it as petty and sentimental under the rubric of liberal guilt? Can we recover a notion of guilt that seeks not to deny or repudiate its affective power but instead considers the significance of such affect for moral action? Might we, as teachers, resist the urge to denounce our own and others’ guilt in order to think carefully about how guilt is implicated in making reparation and in assuming responsibility for deeds we may not have committed ourselves?

REFRAMING GUILT: AWARENESS AND SUSCEPTIBILITY

One of the major factors, it seems to me, contributing to the appearance of guilt in the classroom is the psychological bridge it builds between the listening and telling of stories of pain. Patricia Williams tells of a student who, after attending Williams’s

class on poverty and the law, declares with some anger that she is being made to feel guilty about poverty, about her uncle who is a “slumlord” and about her family’s privileged status in general, thus declaring her innocence in the process. Williams comments that “the class discussion had threatened the deeply vested ordering of her world.”¹¹ In this account, guilt and innocence emerge precisely at the point of new awareness, where the stories of suffering (in this case due to poverty) become too difficult to hear, to bear, and to integrate into one’s sense of self and one’s world view. Yet, even more significantly is the way guilt (and innocence) operate together here as a concerted response to this threat. Felman remarks,

If innocence is an illusion, guilt is not a *state* opposed to innocence, it is *process* of coming to awareness: a process of *awakening* which, as a process, is not theory, but as Camus here [in his book *The Fall*] puts it, an actual *practice*: a practice, or a process, of a constantly renewed wrenching apart.¹²

As a process of awakening and wrenching apart, guilt involves the subject in an often painful recognition of an other’s pain. Stories of suffering call upon us; they involve us in a response to an other, they hail us and demand, in the moment of their telling — or more precisely, in the moment of our listening — that we say, do, or feel something in return. That this is not always easy to accomplish is evident in Williams’s example above. Yet the demand to respond to stories of suffering does not tell us why guilt, rather than, say shame or envy, is so prevalent and persistent.

One possibility is that guilt is a constitutive feature of subjectivity itself, characterizing an *anticipatory* state, a *susceptibility* to becoming a subject in relation to another person. For instance, Judith Butler peels back a critical layer from Louis Althusser’s illustrative example of interpellation to examine its assumptions about guilt. Drawing on his paradigmatic case of interpellation whereby “a subject is hailed, the subject turns around, and the subject then accepts the terms by which he or she is hailed,” Butler argues that what is so significant here is the subject’s *readiness* to turn toward the person who hails.¹³ For Althusser, it is after turning toward the hailer that the subject assumes a position of guilt which enables its birth into language, into the law that confers identity upon the subject. For Butler, it is the *susceptibility* to the other’s call that enables the subject to turn, and where the subject’s guilt is to be found. Guilt, in this rendering, pre-dates any knowledge of the law. The subject turns because she is already prepared to subject herself to the other; she is already responding as a guilty subject.

While Butler says little about how such guilt is to be understood in ethical terms and about the possible reasons for aligning guilt with a readiness to turn to the other in the first place, it is precisely the idea that guilt is characteristic of an initial susceptibility to an other’s presence that is so compelling for moving us out of discourses of liberal guilt. Rendering guilt in terms of such susceptibility may help explain why it is that guilt so often emerges at the point when the suffering of an other is exposed and brought into one’s sphere of awareness. But what is it about guilt’s relation to awareness that lends itself to specifically moral considerations? How is guilt implicated in one’s susceptibility to an other, and to what degree is this significant for moral responsibility?

GUILT AS A MORAL ORIENTATION: REPARATION AND RESPONSIBILITY

Suggesting that guilt is involved in awareness of an other's suffering and in one's susceptibility to that suffering means understanding guilt as a moral orientation rather than as a moral obstacle. It is such awareness that Klein identifies as part of the work of making reparation, and it is such susceptibility that Levinas views as significant for the sense of responsibility we have for an other. Read through these moral categories (reparation and responsibility), guilt emerges as a pressing concern for grappling with the moral demands of responding to the injustice of an other's suffering.

Making reparation, or making good the wrongs done to another stems from one's own sense of guilt about our potential to do harm to other people. Klein notes in particular that it is not so much the deeds we actually commit that make us experience guilt, rather guilt emerges in conjunction with our *fantasies* of aggression. She traces this emergence of guilt to early infantile experiences, where powerful emotions of love coincide with equally potent doses of aggression and hate. For instance, the infant, in testing the reality around her, often rejects (bites, kicks, pushes away) that which she is most bound to in love. Klein asserts that it is this nascent awareness that one could lose the very thing one loves through one's aggressive impulses that propels the subject to experience guilt and compels her to (re)negotiate her relationship with her loved one.¹⁴

Hence, rather than view guilt as simply debilitating, on Klein's account, guilt gives rise to a desire to restore the damage suffered by the loved one. That is, guilt is a catalyst for moral action, driving the subject to make amends, to restore and repair the injured party. "Doing good" is attached to a guilty awareness of the harm one has caused (even if only imaginatively) and a willingness to reach out to an other in a time of suffering. Unlike liberal guilt, viewing guilt as a moral orientation toward reparation recognizes the force of emotions that lie behind our attitudes to another's suffering. Guilt has the potential to incite moral action,¹⁵ but it does so as the result of profound vicissitudes of affect, where aggression and kindness, love and hate, reside in a contradictory and ambivalent space. It is precisely because a notion of reparation recognizes the strength of this affect that it can, in my view, speak directly to the rage, embarrassment, and genuine passion through which students express their guilt and innocence in becoming aware of the suffering of others. It is, therefore, not surprising that the student in Williams's story is not only merely frustrated with the knowledge she is beginning to acquire but is deeply and thoroughly enraged at feeling guilty itself.

Although Kleinian reparation explains how guilt incites moral action directed toward those for whom we feel some attachment, how might we understand guilt as a moral orientation toward an other whom one does not know? To inquire into one's susceptibility to the suffering of an unknowable other (whose suffering we did not cause, not even in imagination) requires turning to the larger, philosophical issue of responsibility and the role guilt plays therein.

Being susceptible to another means being receptive and vulnerable to an other's pain, sorrow, joy and pleasure. Drawing on Levinas, it requires an openness to the

alterity and difference that marks the other's life as infinitely unknowable. Thus, although one cannot ever fully "know" the pain of an other (while we may know *about* it), there is nonetheless a sense of responsibility we have for the other we cannot know borne out of a sense of guilt. Often quoting from Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, Levinas insists that "We are all guilty before everyone for everyone, and I more than all the others."¹⁶ Thus the self is always in a state of subjection in the face of an other, the self alone is guilty before the other because it can never fully inhabit or attain the position of the other; it alone can only bear the other, and this it does inadequately. He continues, "A face is... given over to my responsibility, but to which I am wanting and faulty. It is as though I were responsible for his mortality, and guilty for surviving."¹⁷

The guilt that emerges in the asymmetrical relation between self and other is a condition of one's responsibility, a condition which first must acknowledge the fundamental asymmetry between one's own and an other's life. In this sense, guilt always involves recognizing the inadequacy of one's freedom in alleviating the other's pain and suffering, "but in its guilt it rises to responsibility."¹⁸

The emergence of guilt, then, indicates a parallel emergence in understanding that stories of pain invite us, even command us, to respond, to assume responsibility for those stories in a way that does not ask us in turn to empathize or identify with the suffering. In response to this command, it is not surprising perhaps that students confronted with the knowledge *about* an other's suffering in turn immediately either deny their responsibility, or feel overwhelmingly responsible and inadequate to the task of making reparation. In other words, it is responsibility, along with innocence and guilt, that students themselves identify as having significance in confronting the pain of others. And although they may offer significantly different reasons for identifying why they feel guilty (for example, the teacher *made* me feel guilty; how come I am so privileged in the face of such suffering?) and thus gesture to the different dynamics underlying declarations of guilt, the declarations themselves are rooted in receiving and being susceptible to the stories of suffering being told. It is, in my view, precisely because one is open and susceptible to the other that one experiences guilt, and not because one is inappropriately defensive or politically naive as liberal guilt would have us believe.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Rendering guilt as a moral orientation means inquiring into how a pedagogy of suffering builds on our initial susceptibility to an other. Educators who deal with social justice issues often do so out of the conviction that conscious awareness about an other's suffering can have a positive effect upon the way people develop concern for others — a conviction which is largely premised on the subject's capacity to be moved by such suffering.

Yet, the subject's susceptibility to the other comes *prior* to knowing *about* the other. It is this which makes guilt possible and which makes educators' efforts to teach about suffering fraught with (necessary and inevitable) tensions. That is, while educators may desire that knowledge of suffering will inform moral action, such desire is often frustrated. Defensively mustering the discourse of liberal guilt speaks

less about the place of guilt in developing moral concern and more about our profound discomfort with inciting such guilty affect, especially since such affect is frequently read as a failure of students to learn. However, if we understand that our initial susceptibility to an other provides us with the hope to work against injustices, then we also need to understand how this very susceptibility places us all in a fragile learning community. For being susceptible to an other means attending to the work of learning as emotional labor, a labor which involves us all — students and teachers — in new awarenesses. That guilt should emerge as part of this work is a sign of our emotional vulnerability, not of our pettiness. Reframing guilt as a tentative encounter with the suffering of others is not a mark of the failure to learn but one of the symptoms of emotional struggle to learn across differences. In acknowledging guilt as a moral orientation perhaps we can begin that interminable inquiry into what it means to learn *from* (and not merely *about*) others.

1. Elizabeth Spelman, drawing on Gabriele Taylor's *Pride, Shame, and Guilt* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), views guilt as only being, in the end, self-referential; that is, it only recognizes that one has done harm, not that harm has had an affect on someone else. Thus, she deems guilt an inadequate response to the suffering of others. See Spelman, *Fruits of Sorrow: Framing Our Attention to Suffering* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 106-7. My own view is that guilt is very much about the recognition of harm experienced by others and it is precisely this awareness that often causes us to feel guilt over deeds we have not directly committed.

2. See Leslie Roman's understanding of innocence as a form of white defensiveness in "White is a Color! White Defensiveness, Postmodernism, and Anti-racist Pedagogy," in *Race, Identity, and Representation in Education*, ed. Cameron McCarthy and Warren Crichlow (New York: Routledge, 1993), 71-88. Patricia Williams remarks on the futility and inadequacy of guilt in confronting an other's suffering. See in particular her chapter "Gilded Lilies and Liberal Guilt (Reflections on Law School Pedagogy)" in *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 15-43.

3. Melanie Klein, "Love, Guilt, and Reparation," in *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works 1921-1945, The Writings of Melanie Klein* (London: Karnac Books, 1992), 306-43; Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingus (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 203.

4. See the numerous examples in Spelman, *Fruits of Sorrow*; Williams, *Alchemy*; Julie Ellison, "A Short History of Liberal Guilt," *Critical Inquiry* 22, no. 2 (Winter 1996): 344-71; Gayatri Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym (New York: Routledge, 1990); and Megan Boler, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1999), to name just a few.

5. Ellison, "A Short History," 358.

6. Boler, *Feeling Power*, 172.

7. Ellison, "A Short History," 349.

8. Sandra Lee Bartky uses the phrase, "ontological shock" to denote the radical disjunction of subjectivity one experiences as a result of new awareness about one's self and world. See Bartky, *Femininity and Domination* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

9. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 53.

10. Ellison, "A Short History," 345.

11. Williams, *Alchemy*, 22.

12. Felman, in *Testimony*, 196.

13. Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 106.

14. Aside from Klein's essay "Love, Guilt, and Reparation," see also in the same volume "Weaning," 290-305; "The Oedipus Complex in the Light of Early Anxieties," 370-419; and "The Early Development of Conscience in the Child," 248-57.

15. See Patricia Greenspan's elaborated argument in *Practical Guilt: Moral Dilemmas, Emotions, and Social Norms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

16. See, for example, Emmanuel Levinas, "Philosophy, Justice, and Love," in *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 105.

17. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (1974; reprint, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 91.

18. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 203.