

Guilt and Education

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I would like to begin my remarks by thanking Sharon Todd for having provided us with an engaging and thoughtful essay. Todd's essay takes us inside the teacher education classroom, and engages with paradigmatic student responses to narratives of injustice or inequity, specifically in this instance, proclamations of guilt or of innocence. Her analysis ranges across the discourses of law, morality, ethics, psychoanalysis, critical pedagogy, and religion, culminating in asking in what the pedagogic utility of these emotional responses might consist.

Todd puts the question as follows: "How might we, as teachers (particularly those of us involved in issues of social justice), think about and act on those declarations of guilt and innocence (read: not responsible) made by students?" Giving guilt pedagogic value means, she argues, interpreting students' emotional reactions to injustice as if those reactions could constitute a valuable starting point for fashioning a morally responsible and productive response — a taking action that would enable students to do something in the face of injustice, and in the place of the unproductive paralysis that Todd refers to as the hallmark of, namely "liberal guilt."

Let us backtrack a bit here, before moving to the pedagogic use-value of guilt, and work toward articulating a picture of what is happening in these classrooms where students respond to narratives of difference and of oppression with declarations of guilt or of innocence. What kind of language game are we likely to be creating in the name of social justice pedagogy? What kind of stories elicit the students' guilty reactions and how are those reactions to be interpreted?

Stories of injustice typically highlight alterity and its attendant asymmetrical power relations as these are reproduced within specific cultural/historical moments, for example, the Holocaust, slavery, women and labor, aboriginal land claims. Such stories represent, for the listener, a certain kind of performance of subjection — a narrativisable subjectivity. And so it makes sense to ask about such stories: when they are performed in an educational setting, how it is that these accounts interpellate the listener, and in what kind of relation to the speaker? Often, these stories of marginality are performed in order to "fill in a blank" — to represent a voice or voices not the norm amongst the student body in teacher education. The voice of the absent Other.

As Todd rightly points out, it is commonplace for students who are part of a cultural majority to respond to such stories by making some kind of disavowal of responsibility. The prototypical response here is either "It is not my fault; I am innocent" or "What can I possibly do paralysis." And as Todd points out, there is, in this guilty reading, an implicit claim about subjectivity and identity, about one's relation to the Other.

In Todd's essay, guilt is specifically linked with the ontogenesis of subjectivity through a discussion of Judith Butler's analysis of Louis Althusser, interpellation,

and subject-formation. Now, things get a bit hairy here regarding my interpretation of Todd's interpretations of Butler's interpretation of Althusser; so bear with me for a minute.

For Althusser, guilt is an anticipatory state that signals readiness for subject-formation in relation to the Other.¹ It is interesting to me that what Todd's essay does not point out here, and what Butler discusses at length, are the specific Judeo-Christian roots of Althusser's argument concerning guilt. As Butler argues, "the readiness to accept guilt to gain a purchase in identity is linked to a highly religious scenario...[and] the theory of ideology is supported by a complicated set of theological metaphors."²

According to Butler, interpellation is always-already ideological, and the guilty subject's relation to the law, in the anticipatory move toward identity, "establishes subordination as the price of subjectivation."³ And of specific relevance to any discussion of pedagogy, Butler proceeds to argue that the primary responsibility of the guilty subject in Althusser's account of interpellation is to master what he terms "a problem of speaking properly."⁴ And this mastery is figured by Althusser quite clearly as a kind of submission.⁵

It seems to me that this close alignment between guilt and subordination, between guilt and ideology, and between subjectivation and learning to speak properly is of particular significance in thinking about pedagogical contexts where a social justice agenda predominates. Typically, and in a certain sense inevitably, these are educational spaces characterized by a clear ideological bent, and where learning to say the right kinds of things — to ventriloquate appropriate sentiments — becomes an inevitable by-product of the normative order.

In such spaces, students perceive, and for good reason, that authority to speak is closely aligned with apparent group membership, and that the only way for a majority student to participate "legitimately" is to represent views that accord with the prevailing normative order. And so, for the male student in a discussion of feminism, for the white student in a discussion of aboriginal issues, for the straight student in a discussion of homophobia, there appears no valid speaking position except for that accorded to the obedient and subordinated student, the student who has learned to "say the right things." Like the guilty person in the confessional, the appropriate mantras are repeated, perhaps in the paradoxically futile and yet fervent hope that one's clear and evident guilt might be expunged once and for all time.

It is probably a valuable endeavor to inquire as to the relationship, if any and of what kind, that exists between the pedagogical context where social justice education is implemented. This occurs within a normative order, or the Foucauldian regime of truth, in that context and in the way in which it both produces and sets conditions for the uptake of "stories of suffering." The significance therein is of students' apparent identities and the emergence of guilt as a reaction to narratives of oppression.

Todd's argument also draws on Levinas to make a link between guilt, responsibility for the Other, and an attendant moral orientation. It is this moral orientation

that for Todd, clarifies in what the pedagogic utility of guilt may consist. Levinas locates the ground of ethics in the responsibility the self assumes for the Other — an irreducible Other. For him, guilt is the affective marker for the moment when the self recognizes the Other, as an Other, and one for whom this guilt signals an infinite responsibility. As time limits do not allow me to explore Todd's use of Levinas, I will merely ask several questions:

First, Levinasian ethics is rooted in a theological ideological framework, and yet the argument of this essay does not touch on the aspects of normativity and ideology that produce guilt within such a system. I have already once mentioned a possible relationship between guilt and normativity, and it seems that this is an aspect of guilt that Todd might say more about, especially since classrooms are, themselves, highly charged ideologically normative contexts.

Second, the binary opposition that separates Levinas's Self and Other would appear to be logically consistent with an "Identity politics approach" to a discussion of differences, and to that extent, troublesome from a postmodern emphasis on the multi-vocality, or hybrid character of selves, and the blurring of rigid self-other essential ontological solitudes. Identity politics specifies a clear pedagogic orientation for the way in which we link the identity of speakers in a social justice classroom with the performance value of their stories, and with the specific responsibility of differently positioned listeners. I am curious to hear more about what Todd thinks about the relationship between the identity of the teller of a story of suffering, the identity of the listeners, and the function of this telling in the process of fighting oppression and moral education. The questions are these: To the extent that we reinforce notions of irreducible difference, are we taking as essential and fixed alterities that are much more fluid, and dynamic, and in so doing, are we creating a pedagogy based on a reification that will actually take us farther away from our goals?

And finally, it seems reasonable to consider the possibility that "shame," as an affective response distinct from guilt, may in fact prove to be a more useful place for the kind of moral orientation that Todd's essay examines. It might be argued that whereas guilt indicates the possibility of transgression with a legalistic framework oriented to proving one's innocence, or, within a theological framework, an originary condition from which there can never be any release. Guilt then is, in Althusserian terms, an arrested state. His state the prompts either repudiation, or confession, in both cases, a subjection to the law.

Shame, by contrast, points to a close identification with malfeasance — an alignment with the doer or doers of harm, and an orientation to the suffering of others that is predicated not on proving one's innocence or separateness from that state of suffering, but rather, on the possibility of a shared responsibility in confronting and remediating wrong-doing. And it could, then, be asked whether it is shame, and not guilt that better represents a "teachable moment," and comes closer to the kind of moral orientation that Todd argues is a pedagogically fruitful one in the ongoing process of education for social justice.

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1. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).
 2. Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 109.
 3. *Ibid.*, 112
 4. *Ibid.*, 115.
 5. *Ibid.*, 116.