

Moral Identities and Moral Ambiguity

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Feminist political and moral theorists have for some time explored the ways in which the politics of identity/difference shape the parameters of the moral domain.¹ By and large, however, moral educators have sidestepped the challenges that the politics of particularity pose to our efforts to foster the sorts of universal moral principles and shared virtues that are needed to sustain a society that aspires to be both liberal and democratic. Because many moral educators presume that the moral underpinnings of such a society are widely shared, they are often startled to discover the ways in which the politics of race, class, gender, and sexuality affect the moral understandings and moral commitments of our students. This is not to suggest that a student's racial, sexual, gender or class identity *determines* their moral outlook in any straightforward way, but it is to point out the likelihood that the process of coming into consciousness about their racial, sexual, and gender identities will affect students' perceptions of the moral possibilities open to them at particular moments in relation to particular others. Increasingly, as Lawrence Blum notes, students are more aware of the ways in which particular identities delimit their moral possibilities than they are of the possibilities for forging relationships of moral and political solidarity across racial differences. The result is a pervasive skepticism about the moral value of working across racial differences to combat racial injustice.

It is not clear where this skepticism about the moral and political value of forging political and civic allegiances comes from. It might be a result of a broad cultural awareness of the difficulties black and white civil rights activists encountered when they tried to work together in the 1960s and 1970s. Although very few of my own students have been political activists, I suspect that their doubts about the possibility of working together across racial lines is a result of the ways in which this recent history has filtered into the popular consciousness via the sorts of oral histories that circulate in families and communities. These oral histories have been augmented by the work of scholars and activists who have uncovered and made public a history of tenuous coalitions between whites and blacks in the various stages of struggle against racial injustice, first, among abolitionists and later, among integrationists in the Civil Rights Movement. Feminists in and outside of the academy are also increasingly aware of the uneasy alliances between white women and women of color in the first and second waves of the feminist movement.² The troubling legacy of expediency and betrayal on the part of white suffragists toward the black women and men with whom they worked in the struggle for abolition filtered into second wave feminism, although this time the problem was not overt racism but rather, the more subtle problem of "white solipsism." Adrienne Rich, who coined the phrase, defines white solipsism as "a tunnel-vision" shared by those who have a tendency "to think, imagine, and speak as if whiteness described the world."³ Indeed, women of color have long felt marginalized within feminist circles, a factor that explains ongoing racial divisions within feminism today.

Accounts of these necessary but nonetheless difficult moral and political alliances are slowly filtering into Hollywood. At best, these films spark public conversations about key moments in our national past. In the course of these conversations, the moral complexities of the issues at hand are often brought to the fore, and the public learns a great deal not only about our national history, but also about the conventions of the mainstream movie industry, which has tended to address racial matters obliquely if at all. Without these sorts of public conversations, the moral significance of these films would be rather thin. By and large, Hollywood movies oversimplify complex moral issues and reduce morally complex characters to caricatures. More often than not, in their quest for moral uplift in stories that attempt to come to grips with aspects of racism, these films make the standard Hollywood error of making the ally the moral center of the filmic universe. In this regard, *Amistad* represents a shift in the popular consciousness. More so than most mainstream films, *Amistad* is primarily a story of black resistance to the injustice of slavery. While allies play a crucial role in Cinque's struggle for freedom, they are not the focus of the film, and they are not portrayed as unequivocal exemplars in the moral universe. In many ways, this shifting emphasis is part of a much needed attempt to right the historical record, however Lawrence Blum worries that in the process of setting right past wrongs, these films may unwittingly be contributing to the moral skepticism that is so prevalent among students today, at least on college campuses. Rather than reinforcing this skepticism, Blum wants moral educators to find ways to counter it.

In his essay "Universal Values and Particular Identities in Anti-Racist Education," Lawrence Blum takes up this challenge. Blum's main point is that students would be more likely to act against racism if they had a better sense of the moral choices available to them given their particular location in the racial hierarchy in this country. There are two stages to Blum's approach. First, educators need to acknowledge not only the material effects of racial inequality but also its effects on the moral domain. There is no question that race circumscribes the moral domain, drawing us toward some while distancing us from others. How best to challenge this racial apportioning of moral obligation remains a question, however. At issue, as Blum notes, is a fundamental conflict in moral theory between a commitment to universal moral principles and a grasp of the ways in which students' moral responses are conditioned by their particular identities. Put simply, *what* we are — our race, gender, and class — circumscribes our moral perspectives. Because we experience the world differently as a result of our race, sexual orientation, gender, and class, what matters and in what ways things matter will correspondingly differ. But simply noting the effects of particular identities on the shape of the moral domain does little to alter the shape of the moral domain.

This brings us to the second step of Blum's anti-racist pedagogy: helping students forge a moral identity that will enable them to participate meaningfully in the struggle against racial injustice. Following the lead of advocates of identity politics, Blum does not dislodge moral identities from racial identities. Forging a moral identity does not mean transcending one's particular racial identity. Rather,

it requires that one face up to the specific sorts of responsibilities that follow from one's racial particularity.

Blum's approach to the problem of student skepticism is to offer alternative ways of thinking about moral possibilities. To this end, he combs contemporary media for examples of people who have recognized the specific moral obligations that follow from their particular racial location. Of the four categories Blum pinpoints in *Amistad*, only two are morally exemplary, although all four combine to remind us that in many situations, we are confronted with moral choices. The first category consists of the victims of injustice. The category of victim is morally salient in two ways. First, we are reminded that what is at stake is suffering, and that the purpose of moral action is to alleviate this suffering. Second, as the Socratic maxim emphasizes, it is better to suffer than to do wrong.⁴ The victim thus acquires a certain moral standing that bystanders — who may be equally passive — can never attain. But much like the bystander, the victim is not necessarily a moral exemplar. Primo Levi's devastating account of life in Auschwitz makes this clear. In *If This is a Man*, Levi warns those of us who were not there to not make moral judgments about the behavior of prisoners in the death camps. Nonetheless he resists the temptation of making martyrs of people whose very survival depended on their capacity for the most shocking kinds of moral compromise. For the prisoners, the main questions were not moral ones but rather, matters of survival. Levi writes that the only well-differentiated categories of men and women were "the saved and the drowned." Levi elaborates: "Other pairs of opposites (the good and the bad, the wise and the foolish, the cowards and the courageous, the unlucky and the fortunate) are considerably less distinct, they seem less essential, and above all they allow for more numerous and complex intermediary gradations."⁵ Levi's memoir raises crucial questions about the sorts of moral compromises necessary for survival in unthinkable circumstances. His point is not to denigrate the survivors but rather, to point to the moral complexities of the category of victim. At what point do victims cease to have moral agency? At what point are victims responsible for harms inflicted on others? Can victims also be perpetrators? Are the harms one inflicts on others in the pursuit of one's own survival morally excusable? What makes Levi's memoir morally significant is precisely his refusal to stop asking questions in the face of such immense suffering, in the midst of such tremendous horror. In the aftermath of the war in Kosovo, we are faced with similar questions today. It is not clear that either the Kosovan Serbs or the ethnic Albanians fit the moral categories of victim and perpetrator in any straightforward sense. Because the category of the victim is morally ambiguous, the need for sustained moral inquiry remains. Because the moral identities of victims may well be called into question, this sort of questioning is bound to be unsettling, not only for those whose survival depended on moral compromise, but also for those of us asking these sorts of questions.

The category of the perpetrator is of course, much less morally ambiguous, although it is nonetheless a complex category, especially in societies in which racism is built into our key social institutions. Does the category of the perpetrator consist only of those who deliberately harmed others, or does it include those who do

nothing to prevent or minimize this harm? What are we to make of the moral standing of bystanders, who unlike victims, could have chosen to act otherwise? The moral passivity of the by-standers points to our need to come to grips with the conditions of moral agency. This requires us to develop ways of teaching about racism that recognize both the ways in which it is perpetrated by those who deliberately discriminate against others, but also, the more pervasive inequalities that perpetuate white privilege. It requires also a more concerted effort on the part of schools to foster what Patricia White refers to as “civic virtues.” These are the virtues associated with political action: courage and the more elusive but nonetheless crucial category of social hope.⁶

The moral identity closest to Blum’s heart is the category of the ally. Blum explains that the ally is the one category that might counter the “general cynicism and disbelief in the possibility of disinterested altruistic concern.” The ally, in other words, exemplifies our potential to forge moral solidarity in the face of racial injustice and other sorts of social divisions. This is what makes the ally a moral exemplar. The ally is evidence that people can move from being bystanders to becoming moral agents. Nonetheless, the ally occupies a difficult situation, both morally and politically. Indeed, the ally is by far the most morally ambiguous position, since standing in solidarity with victims and resisters does not mean that one ceases to occupy a position of privilege. The continuing privilege enjoyed by the ally is a constant source of tension, not only among those with whom we stand in solidarity, but also, within the ally him or herself. To be sure, the more involved one is in struggles against injustice, the more one stands to lose. Depending on the nature of the struggle and the regime in question, one may be harassed, arrested, imprisoned, and even killed as a result of one’s actions. I want to make it clear that the moral ambiguity of the ally follows from the position of the ally and not from any particular character flaw. I also want to emphasize that this inevitable moral ambiguity is not a reason to repudiate the moral and political significance of becoming an ally. The very existence of those who are brave enough to become “race traitors” not only manifests the weakening of a particular ideology, it also opens up moral possibilities for others to emulate.

Hollywood in general and Steven Spielberg in particular have done much to bring the moral category of the ally to the fore. I am thinking of *Cry Freedom*, a film about the political friendship between the black South African activist Steven Biko and the white journalist Donald Woods who had to leave the country shortly after Biko was murdered by the security police while in their custody. And of course, I am thinking also of the far more powerful *Schindler’s List*, which did much more to bring out the moral ambiguity of the position of the ally who, after all, was still in a position to cavort with and benefit from his association with high-ranking Nazi officials. The trouble with a film like *Cry Freedom* is that while it has opened up the category of whiteness, in this case white South Africanness, the category of the ally becomes morally suspect when, half way through the film, Biko fades into the background and Donald Woods’s character becomes the central focus. In the film’s portrayal of Donald Woods, his character achieves a moral stature that glosses over

the moral challenges that come from occupying a position of privilege even as one works toward social justice. *Schindler's List* was far more attentive to the moral ambiguities of Schindler's situation.

I raise this issue of the ambiguous situation of the ally without in any way wanting to diminish either the political or the moral import of the role. But I think that the moral ambiguity of the ally's situation poses further challenges to those of us wishing to engage the moral complexities that particular identities pose to our efforts to develop moral identities. The ambiguity of the ally's situation as beneficiary of the very privileges he or she wishes to resist is part of the reason why political alliances that cross racial differences are so difficult. The challenge to moral educators is to help students understand the particular moral challenges of forging alliances, to prepare them for the difficulties they will face as they set about the delicate business of working across differences to remedy racial injustice. Some of these difficulties come from the asymmetries between the situation of whites and blacks that Blum mentions, but they are also a result of a history of betrayals, hidden agendas, and misappropriations of the suffering of others that have until recently not been widely understood. Much of the cynicism that we see today about the possibility of forging alliances, but more specifically about the role of the ally, is a reaction to these sorts of revelations, many which are only now beginning to filter into the official histories of the Abolitionist and Civil Rights Movements. Interestingly, and encouragingly, much of this work is being done by allies — white women and men who are now doing the sorts of work the resisters have long admonished us to do. These scholars are confronting the complexities that the particularity of identities have historically posed to our efforts to stand in solidarity with others.⁷ The trouble is that in their efforts to right the historical record, and in their outrage about what they have found, there is the tendency to overemphasize the moral blind-spots of allies at the expense of foregrounding the moral commitments that make even the most tenuous political alliances possible. These moral commitments — and the desire to fashion a moral identity — are after all what enable us to struggle to sustain difficult alliances in the face of the moral complexities that result from the asymmetrical situations of allies and their comrades.

Blum's essay correctly cautions us against this overemphasis on the ally's shortcomings. He is right that they may well foster rather than challenge the prevailing moral cynicism. But the search for moral exemplars on which Blum has embarked must not take the place of the equally pressing need to engage students — especially college students, but high school students as well — in an inquiry into the moral complexities of these moral identities. Forging a moral identity is, after all, not always a morally straightforward practice. This moral ambiguity might pose a challenge to those moral educators who want to counter student skepticism with moral exemplars, be these particular individuals or moral categories. But if we are to move beyond the sort of caricature that sanctifies and demonizes too readily, we will have to become better at facing up to the challenges of moral ambiguity, not only in Hollywood, but in broader public conversations about moral matters.

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1. See for example, Virginia Held, *Feminist Morality: Transforming Culture, Society, and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Understandings: A Feminist Study in Ethics* (Princeton: Routledge, 1997); Iris Marion Young, *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy, and Policy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997); Elizabeth Spellman, *Fruits of Sorrow: Framing Our Attention to Suffering* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997); and Minnie Bruce Pratt, "Identity: Skin Blood Heart," in *Yours in Struggle*, ed. Elly Bulkin, Minnie Pratt, and Barbara Smith (New York: Long Haul Press, 1984).
 2. For an account of these troubled alliances among black and white abolitionists and black and white suffragists, see Vron Ware, *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History (Questions for Feminism)* (London: Verso Books, 1992) and Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981). For an account of these uneasy alliances during the second wave of feminism, see *This Bridge Called My Back*, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983).
 3. Adrienne Rich, "Disloyal to Civilization: Feminism, Racism, Gynophobia," in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* (New York: Norton, 1979), 299. See also Elizabeth V. Spellman, "Gender and Race: The Ampersand Problem in Feminist Thought," *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988).
 4. Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," *Between Past and Future* (1961; reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 244.
 5. Primo Levi, *If this is a Man: Remembering Auschwitz* (New York: Summit Books, 1986), 65-75.
 6. Patricia White, *Civic Virtues and Public Schooling: Educating Citizens for a Democratic Society* (New York: Teacher's College Press, 1996), 8-15.
 7. Spellman, *Fruits of Sorrow*, comes to mind.