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# Guilty Subjects, Reparative Politics:

# On Guilt and Political Theory after Freud

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Political Science

by

Stephen Cucharo

2024

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Guilty Subjects, Reparative Politics:

On Guilt and Political Theory after Freud

by

Stephen Cucharo

Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Joshua F. Dienstag, Chair

This dissertation offers a challenge to a paradigmatic way of approaching guilt in the tradition of 20th century Western political thought. In short, I argue the indebtedness to a Nietzschean-Freudian conceptualization of guilt, which associates this emotion with self-regard, lawfulness, inertia, and self-abasement, has either written off guilt-feelings as hindrances to political engagement, or regards the guilty subject as beset by operations of power that bind them to authoritative injunctions. As a result of the attachment to this paradigm, political theorists still have yet to seriously engage alternative framings of guilt that cast it as a potentially productive, solidaristic dissonance that attunes subjects into their implication in the suffering of others. The foundational categories of this alternative perspective were pioneered by Melanie Klein, who not only casts guilt-feelings as expressions of value, but also suggests that potentially productive forms of guilt are actualized in different ways depending on the interpretive significance that we grant to

these feelings themselves. In other words, what we do with guilt-feelings is dependent on cultural, social, and political scripts that narrate action in response. Two central figures of 20th century political thought, John Rawls and Theodor Adorno, offer politicized readings of the categories and concepts pioneered by Klein. Though Rawls and Adorno are not performing straightforward applications of Klein's work, they are distinctively operating outside of a Nietzschean-Freudian paradigm as it relates to this emotion, writing different interpretive scripts for the reparative activity undertaken in response to feelings of guilt. These differing processes of emotional script-writing give theorists a glimpse of how, and for which purposes, reparative impulses emanating from senses of guilt can be narrated and directed in conflicting ways, one in line with liberal political thought and the other in critical theoretical terms. The dissertation concludes by sketching the promises and pitfalls of the liberal and critical theoretical approaches in conceptualizing the phenomenon of "white guilt."

The dissertation of Stephen Cucharo is approved.

Davide Panagia

Michael P. Rothberg

Giulia Sissa

Joshua F. Dienstag, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2024

For Scarlett and Oscar

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Thomas Cucharo had an unfulfilled wish to teach history. I suspect my passion for teaching is in some sense his, and is just one of the ways he makes his presence felt in my life over twenty-five years after his passing. The library he left behind has also nourished my intellectual development in ways I never would have expected.

This work is dedicated to my wife, Scarlett, and my son, Oscar. Scarlett has been the central source of support during my graduate studies, and has managed to pull me out of the great many ruts that come with this choice of profession. She has also been one of my most valuable interlocutors throughout this project, whether she knows it or not. She made countless sacrifices to see this finished. I will always be indebted to her for the support she has shown me throughout these past few years. Words can only fail me if I attempt to explain what this has meant to me. My son Oscar had the good fortune of being born after most of this was written. He is one thing that gives me hope in these unimaginably dark times. However, rather than passively invest our hopes in him and his generation, we should ask ourselves what we owe them in the here and now.

VITA

Stephen Cucharo holds a BA in Political Science from Fordham University, an MS in Global Affairs from New York University, and an MA in Politics from the New School for Social Research. His research interests include modern political thought, contemporary political thought, psychoanalysis and politics, Marx and Marxism, fascist political thought, pessimism, and theories of guilt and responsibility. From 2020-2021 and from June 2023 to December 2023, he served as Assistant Editor for the journal *Political Theory*. He has also completed editorial work for the journal *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* and *Vereinte Nationen*, the in-house journal of the United Nations Association of Germany (*DGVN*). His work has appeared in *Contemporary Political Theory* and *parallax*. He will spend the 2024-2025 year as a Visiting Assistant Professor of Government at Wesleyan University.

## Introduction

*Guilt as a Political Problem*

I. Feeling Bad about Feeling Bad:

Throughout the past twenty years there has been an explosion of philosophical and political theoretical literatures that take an interest in the so-called "negative emotions" or "negative affects." The aims of this body of scholarship are diverse. In one sense, the turn towards these emotions as objects of inquiry is an attempt to name and index our experiences of collective conditions of crisis, exhaustion, disorientation, domination, or injustice. It is in this manner of thinking that we find a proliferation of literatures that take stock of feelings like dread,[1] melancholia,[2] paranoia,[3] anxiety,[4] disappointment,[5] or despair[6] as characteristic of our age and

[1] See David Theo Goldberg, *Dread: Facing Futureless Futures* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2021).

[2] See Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016). This is also taken up in a similar vein in Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002). See also Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012) and Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (New York: Zero Books, 2009).

[3] Noga Rotem, "World-Craving: Rahel Varnhagen, Daniel Paul Schreber, and the Strange Promise of Paranoia," *Political Theory* 48, no. 2 (2020): 192-217.

[4] Zygmunt Bauman, *Die Angst vor den Anderen: Ein Essay über Migration und Panikmache* (Suhrkamp Verlag, 2016).

[5] Sara Marcus, *Political Disappointment: A Cultural History from Reconstruction to the AIDS Crisis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2023).

[6] Robyn Marasco, *The Highway of Despair: Critical Theory After Hegel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

emanations of a specific and shared set of political circumstances. However, very seldom is the turn to negative emotions merely an attempt to name or describe an experience. Many of these literatures have internalized basic precepts from the tradition of critical theory, in which attentiveness to the negative serves a means of unearthing certain forms of political possibility or insight.[7] Here, the negative emotions stand less as suffering states that must be described and ameliorated, but instead as bodily and psychic dissonances that attune us to a potentially productive insight if we would merely attend to them rather than disavow, neglect, or suppress them.

With some notable exceptions,[8] this theoretical turn is therefore characterized by a certain kind of ambivalence.[9] What Mariana Alessandri calls "dark moods" are oftentimes almost unbearable feeling states, some of which might easily be integrated into the logic of a dominant order, but they can also present us with opportunities to make and remake a system of personal or political meaning if we give pain the attention it demands. As Alessandri suggests, it is a mistaken

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[7] Take, for example, Adorno's assertion in *Negative Dialectics*: "The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth. For suffering is objectivity that weighs upon the subject; its most subjective experience, its expression, is objectively conveyed". Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 17-18. For Adorno, suffering is the subjective revelation of the objective conditions of a dominant order. To address suffering at its source, the body, is a means of unearthing the character of contemporary relations of domination. For an additional meditation on pain in the tradition of early critical theory, see: Walter Benjamin, "Outline of the Psychophysical Problem", in *Selected Writings: Volume I*, ed. Michael Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1996), 393-401.

[8] There is a strain of the pessimist tradition that vehemently resists the imperative to make use of suffering as part of a political program. This position is best represented by the thought of Emil Cioran and some of his heirs like Eugene Thacker. See Eugene Thacker, *Infinite Resignation* (London: Repeater Books, 2018).

[9] This is in line with Sianne Ngai's approach towards the "ugly feelings" like anxiety, envy, or disgust. They may contain within them a potential critical force, but there is nothing certain about this potential, nor should we make the mistake of uncritically "romanticizing" them as the key to claiming political agency. It is best to think of these feeling states as "marked by ambivalence". Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2005), 3-4.

conceit of the Western tradition to denigrate the “dark moods” “as scary, ugly, ignorant, and sinful”[10] in favor of privileging of “the light” as a representation of “truth, goodness, and beauty.”[11] This is not just a trope, but also a technique of rule in which the injunction to “be happy” has a disciplining and depoliticizing effect.[12] In this context, we are blocked from reading the negative emotions as sites of self-knowledge, insight, or growth, or from understanding pain as social and potentially solidaristic.[13] To find oneself governed by “the light metaphor” means that one is unable to ask a fundamental question that unlocks the personal and political possibilities in pain: “*What will I do with my experiences of suffering? What can I see that I could not see before?*”[14] Instead of avoiding the dark, for Alessandri our engagement with it has the potential to yield something of deep philosophical and political importance.

This framework is strongly indebted to Nietzsche. As Walter Kaufmann suggests, Nietzsche’s “dialectic” stresses the “ultimate recognition and affirmation of the value of the apparently negative”, placing before us an image of self-actualization and development as a “travail,” a process by which we come to grasp suffering and freedom as deeply imbricated with one another rather than separated.[15] To acknowledge and tarry with pain is therefore the pressing

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[10] Mariana Alessandri, *Night Vision: Seeing Ourselves Through Dark Moods* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), 7.

[11] *Ibid*, 13.

[12] Han, Byung-Chul, *The Palliative Society: Pain Today* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021), 7-13.

[13] Alessandri, *Night Vision*, 12.

[14] *Ibid*, 127.

[15] Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 253.

personal and political task set before us, and the blockages that impede this process become sites of personal and political struggle. For Alessandri, the character of this contestation is explicit. Unlocking the power of pain, so to say, requires struggling against a set of social "commandments" that tell us to "silence, stifle, and swallow…dark moods."[16] This "travail" does not simply entail a struggle in grappling with suffering itself, but also a struggle against the reflexive social and personal responses that repress this pain and redirect it back towards the self. To navigate the productive possibilities that inhere in the darkness, the first task is to directly confront and move beyond the engrained injunctions that cause us to feel bad about feeling bad. Only then can we make sense of suffering in a generative way.

Though Alessandri naturally locates the origin of the "light metaphor" with the Greeks, her account on this point brings our attention to the persistence of an Augustinian narrative long after the supposed eclipse of hegemonic Christian dogma, in which we are trained to reflexively interpret "physical evils (suffering) as punishment for moral evils (sin)."[17] After all this time, we are still consistently led to pass judgment on our own suffering in particular ways, specifically through the reflexive, disciplinary moralization of pain. Back to Alessandri: the righteous power of anger, for example, particularly among historically oppressed and marginalized groups, is cut off at the pass because of this reflex.[18] Where we could potentially derive insight, meaning, and even nourishment for emancipatory struggle, we instead find ourselves in the grips of a very specific form of suffering that organizes our relation to our own feeling states in ways that keep us

[16] Alessandri, *Night Vision*, 6.

[17] Mara van der Lugt, *Dark Matters: Pessimism and the Problem of Suffering* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), 7.

[18] Alessandri, *Night Vision*, 27.

"distracted and obedient."[19] This form of suffering is in reality a collection of emotions like "regret, embarrassment, shame, and disgust" that have "*self-evaluative* functions," meaning that they feature at their core a kind of judgment.[20] A fixture of this collection of emotions is the "meta-affect" of guilt, [21] a feeling state that organizes and casts judgment on specific real or imagined actions or inactions as unacceptable according to a set of social dictates.

If suffering is, as G.A. Cohen writes in the vein of the early Marx, a "mode of knowledge" or an "intimate way of knowing" oneself and one's relation to their surroundings, guilt-feelings tend to stand as a kind of socially and self-imposed mystification that hinders our ability to locate the sources of suffering as well as the active potential that resides in suffering itself.[22] Here, guilt is strictly disciplinary, and not in a way that permits the education of desire, passion, or suffering. It expresses itself in univocal terms, and it cannot be reasoned with. At the risk of being hyperbolic, guilt is a kind of anti-knowledge, insofar as it does not permit actual productive engagement with one's feeling states. In a more political vein, it is common to suggest guilt-feelings speak through the language of authoritative and repressive law, whereas the other negative emotions are sites of potentially creative and transformative action. Literatures on suffering therefore tend to reproduce a basic dichotomy. On one hand, there are the negative emotions like anxiety, anger, or despair, which may contain within them an active and emancipatory potential, and there are the evaluative

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[19] *Ibid*

[20] Herant Katchadourian, *Guilt: The Bite of Conscience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 3.

[21] Brian Leiter, *Moral Psychology with Nietzsche* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 76.

[22] G.A. Cohen, "Bourgeois and Proletarians," in *Lectures on the History of Moral and Political Philosophy*, ed. Jonathan Wolff (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), 253.

emotions like guilt that serve as pre-fabricated structures of interpretation that limit our ability to engage with these other feeling states on different terms, or to make use of them in productive ways.

If this is all framed in terms of a struggle between the stifling evaluative and moral emotions on one hand and more animating forms of suffering on the other, we need to inquire into the exact nature of this tension. Once we advance the idea the idea that guilt-feelings are associated with repetition, mystification, self-punishment, and, importantly, the question of judgment in the eyes of another, we are raising the question of who is doing the judgment and why this judgment matters to the subject in its grips. We are also asking what the socio-political function of this mystification is, and who might be invested in keeping the subject in a perpetual state of self-punishment. In other words, most political theoretical discussions of guilt and suffering will raise the question of power, with guilt-feelings representing the voice of prohibition, sanction, and authority (i.e. the effects of an operation of power), while other insurgent emotions stand as dissonances that might resist or reconfigure our relationship to that voice of power.

This framing yields not only a normative question, but a scholarly heuristic. Take, for example, Pierre Bourdieu's influential category of "symbolic violence." Bourdieu suggests "symbolic violence" is a process by which "the dominated apply categories constructed from the point of view of the dominant to…relations of domination, thus making them appear as natural."[23] Symbolic violence is invariably *produced* in ideological state apparatuses like "families, the church, the educational system" and "the state", and has the specific function of exerting a pressure

[23] Pierre Bourdieu, "Gender and Symbolic Violence," in *Violence in War and Peace: An Anthology*, eds. Philippe Bourgeois and Nancy Scheper-Hughes (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 339.

on the subject to bodily and psychically internalize the voice of power, thus limiting the scope of what is considered proper, possible, or desirable from the standpoint of the subjugated. This, so says Bourdieu, is reinforced through "*bodily emotions* – shame humiliation, timidity, anxiety, guilt – or *passions* and *sentiments* – love, admiration, respect."[24] Power therefore speaks through the emotions of the subjugated, and where intense evaluative emotions exist, there is a scholarly reflex to try to reveal the power system at work that stands behind the emotions that reinforce a system of domination. As it relates to guilt more specifically, its political valence is only recognized when viewed as a residue of power. Acting out of guilt aids in the reproduction of domination, while acting against guilt might produce critical or political possibility that aids in the emancipation of the subject in question.

Other political theorists in the contemporary period, even those not strictly concerned with the problem of suffering *per se*, consistently reproduce certain basic elements of this attitude towards guilt-feelings, particularly when exploring the contours of emancipatory struggles in the present. With general uniformity, guilt is simply not part of a discourse of liberation. For example, literatures that take up the liberatory power of responsibility in particular tend to immediately bracket guilt-feelings as distinct from the more worldly, less disciplinary, and more dynamic feelings of *responsibility*. While guilt denotes a subject caught up in the psychodrama of personal blame, liability, moral condemnation, and self-punishment, the category of responsibility more appropriately accounts for structural and historical injustices that we take as sites of common political struggle. Resonant with Hannah Arendt's insistence on the distinction between guilt and

[24] *Ibid*, 341.

responsibility,[25] Melvin Rogers takes this up in some of the clearest and most incisive terms in relation to racial domination in the United States. To properly account for our shared responsibility in the face of the enduring injustices originating from race-based slavery in the US, one must first move beyond what Iris Marion Young calls the "liability model of responsibility," which has at its core a kind of presentism and a narrow focus on discrete individuals who can be causally linked to the outcome of a specific action.[26] To move beyond the "liability model" and claim a more broad and properly political account of responsibility in the face of racial domination, Rogers speaks through James Baldwin:

> (Baldwin) is not interested in blame or guilt. 'I'm not interested in anybody's guilt,' he writes in 1964…Baldwin is after responsibility, but not of the liability kind. 'But I am responsible for it,' he continues, 'because I am a man and citizen of this country and you are responsible for it, too.' The 'it' here is the racial nightmare of American life that functions as a shared inheritance.[27]

Rogers continues: "The point is not that the liability model is wrong, but it most certainly is inadequate to meet the normative demand of democracy given our specific racial history."[28]

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[25] See Hannah Arendt, "Collective Responsibility," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 147-158.

[26] Melvin Rogers, *The Darkened Light of Faith: Race, Democracy, and Freedom in African-American Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2023), 281-282.

[27] *Ibid*, 282-283.

[28] *Ibid*, 284.

Baldwin's claim to not be "interested in anybody's guilt" is, of course, not intended as an evasion, but rather a conceptual shift that allows us to meet the demands of a contemporary political condition, namely the need to affirm responsible collective action amid conditions of injustice and domination. This shift from *personal* guilt to *political* responsibility is indeed a common theoretical move to make, one that has the function of not only establishing a more appropriate conceptual apparatus to navigate current political impasses, but also shifting our theoretical aperture away from individual psychodrama towards intersubjectivity and collective action.[29] Additionally, if it is assumed that guilt is strictly inhibitive and disciplinary in its character, usually bearing the residues of power, then it would therefore have little to do with an action-oriented politics that attempts to energize the subject rather than discipline them.

However, it is worth questioning what is lost in this reflexive bracketing of guilt-feelings as either irrelevant or unhelpful for both scholars and activists. What if not being "interested in anybody's guilt" from either a practical or scholarly perspective *does* have the function of evading a relevant and important mode of experience that still requires further exploration? And what if a reassessment of this specific emotional state reveals it to be much more variegated than political theorists let on? Perhaps guilt is not an emotional dead end of politics, where the impetus to self-discipline or obey places limits on our ability to act and think differently, but instead a more dynamic, active, and even creative emotion than it seems.

[29] For examples of this tendency, see, for example: Jürgen Habermas, "Historical Consciousness and Post-Traditional Identity: Remarks on the Federal Republic's Orientation to the West", *Acta Sociologica* 31, no. 1 (1988): 3-13; Antonio Vasquez-Arroyo, *Political Responsibility: Responding to Predicaments of Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); Iris Marion-Young, *Responsibility for Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

In simple terms, the broad purpose of this dissertation is to probe what guilt-feelings do politically, and to explore which diverse forms of political action reside as potentialities within this feeling state. My aim here is not to litigate the appropriateness of feeling guilty in this or that circumstance, a rather fraught task that figures like Arendt have undertaken, nor is it to set forth any kind of moral or normative injunction that people *should* feel guilt for something. Instead, it is my intention to unearth a lineage of thinking that explores guilt-feelings as potentially action-oriented, other-oriented, and open to diverse forms of interpretation that might guide the subject in different directions politically. This is to say that the practice of bracketing guilt from the supposedly more worldly or politically valuable emotions, which include other moral emotions like shame or resentment, eclipses the diversity of political behavior that can emerge from a feeling state that is more variegated and dynamic than traditionally assumed.

## II. Guilt, Shame, and Political Selfhood:

The assumptions outlined above are in no small part expressions of a conceptual and historical baggage that we inherit from the Christian tradition, exemplified by Augustine, and the Freudian critique of it. In each of these traditions, the subject's guilt and guilt-feeling is always expressed and measured in relation to a law, be it the law of God or the law of the Oedipal father. From this vantage point, guilt is experienced as a violation or fear of violation of a standard that is always personified as authoritative and punishing. This is, for the Christian or the Freudian subject, what makes the law *mean* something, and it is what gives it the voice of condemnation and punishment such that it has a compelling, and indeed compulsive, force. Crucial, however, is the fact of this voice's internalization by the subject, which has as its function the limitation of desire

such that it does not transgress a specified or unspecified boundary. Guilt-feelings are what register this violation or fear of violation, which in turn bring the subject into line with authority.

Equally as important for political theorists is the fact that in each of these structures of thinking, the guilty subject, though always situated in relation to an authoritative persona, is embroiled in a distinctively *intra-psychic* drama. Here, Augustine is illustrative. His conversion story in the *Confessions*, which is fraught with unbearable guilt, shame, and self-punishment, is undertaken in solitude.[30] It is a fundamentally self-oriented process, geared towards self-evaluation, the training of the will, and the renunciation of certain desires. The Freudian subject in the throes of guilt is similarly enmeshed in an individualized, intra-psychic struggle.[31] Because of Freud's focus on an intricate topographical and structural theory of mind, the major aim of Freudian analysis is to unravel the conflicting components within the psyche and express a core of individual selfhood beyond the punitive injunctions of the superego.[32] In this schema, guilt-feelings are rarely, if at all, cast as the result of situated interpersonal conflict, but are instead at their core an expression of an individualized psychodrama set in motion in early childhood. The movement for Augustine is from individual fallenness to guilt and shame, then to self-examination and later grace. For Freud, the basic trajectory is, as Kristeva describes it, "desire – guilt – working-through – sublimation," all of which is cast in individual terms.[33] For each thinker, despite their

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[30] Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 133-154.

[31] Katchadourian, *Guilt*, 64

[32] Stephen Mitchell, *Hope and Dread in Psychoanalysis* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 101

[33] Julia Kristeva, "The Contemporary Contribution of Psychoanalysis," in *Passions of Our Time*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 69-83, 72.

very different valuation of guilt-feelings themselves, to be hung up on one's sense of guilt means that someone is undergoing a profoundly *personal* struggle, potentially on a pathway towards individual grace or health.

It is for these reasons that many recent political theorists have avoided conceptualizing guilt as an active political emotion at all. It is considered either a strictly individualized emotion that speaks more to the individual psyche than to broader social conditions, or it simply registers the voice of power, thus making it a univocal expression of a command and obey structure that we would obviously wish to think beyond. As a result, it is *shame* that becomes cast as the most political or politicized of the moral sentiments. The most readily apparent expression of this is the deep anxiety about the supposed death of shame among political leaders and prominent activists, particularly those on the far-right.[34] Implied here is if politicians no longer feel exposed for their misdeeds by the watchful eye of the demos, it constitutes a genuine crisis for democracy itself.[35] As the argument goes, the death of shame is in effect the death of democracy. It is not just disciplinary, but also has the effect of introducing the leader (or citizen, for that matter), into a world beyond themselves towards which they would ideally express some degree of care or concern.

This privileging of shame as distinctively worldly is a visible throughline in the continental tradition, the most famous example of which was fashioned by Sartre in his well-known theory of

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[34] See Judith Butler, "Genius or Suicide: Trump's Death Drive," *The London Review of Books* 41, 24. (October 24th, 2019). There are countless examples of this in the popular press as well. See, for example: Talia Lavin, "The Death of Shame," *The Huffington Post* (October 22nd, 2018); Tom Nichols, "We're living in Post-Shame America," *The Atlantic* (May 10th, 2023); Jonah Goldberg, "The Age of Impeachment and the Death of Shame," *Chicago Tribune* (Feb 4th, 2020).

[35] See Chapter One of Jill Locke, *Democracy and the Death of Shame: Political Equality and Social Disturbance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

"the look." In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre locates in the shame-producing gaze of "the Other" the birth of one's cognizance of a world outside the self. However, this is not typically interpreted as a moment of intersubjective recognition, but instead as a loss of one's freedom, as "the look" inaugurates a sense of self as an object of judgment for another rather than autonomous subjectivity.[36] This interpretation has recently given way to a different one, which reads Sartre's account of shame not as a strict moment of objectification (becoming an object in the eyes of another), but instead as an experience by which one comes to *feel* oneself as both subject and object simultaneously in an *affective* rather than cognitive moment of recognition.[37] The dissonance we supposedly feel in shame is the registering of ourselves as selves that exist for another, which takes us beyond a narrow discussion of specific deeds that we may or may not have done and instead places before us the question of moral selfhood or being in a more abstract sense.

This is usually a solid point of departure to make distinctions between shame and guilt, and it provides a reason why shame tends to be privileged over guilt as an engine for action or a political consciousness. For Sartre, for example, shame is both a moral and existential category, moral

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[36] Sartre notes the following: "Now, shame...is shame of *self*; it is the *recognition* of the fact that I *am* indeed that object which the Other is looking at and judging. I can be ashamed only as my freedom escapes me in order to become a *given* object." Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1969), 350. Martin Jay interprets Sartre as pessimistically setting forth a conception of shame as part of "sinister dialectic of gazes" that reifies a kind of self-alienation and self-limitation. See Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. 1994), 289.

[37] See Ellie Anderson, "Sartre's Affective Turn: Shame as Recognition in "The Look"', *Philosophy Today* 65, no. 3 (Summer 2021): 709–726. On this point, it is also relevant to turn to Deleuze and Guattari's conceptualization of shame in *What is Philosophy?*. For Deleuze and Guattari, shame is an animating sentiment that we experience in the face of the suffering other. Philosophy is responsive and resistant to the "shame of being a man" (Levi), insofar as it aims to transform social relations. Guilt does not have the same animating character as does shame. See Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 106-110.

insofar as it has "bonding" and "interactive" effects that allow us to see ourselves and our actions from the point of view of another,[38] and existential insofar as this speaks to a generalized condition of distinctively human subjectivity. Shame speaks in clear terms, as Bernard Williams suggests, to "what I am" and not simply to what I do in discrete instances.[39] In this vein, shame invariably has as its referent the whole subject and one's moral or political personhood, as well as the existential identifications that orient this sense of personhood. It allows us to speak about one's relation to a broader collectivity, allowing us to say that we could be be ashamed to be part of a polity that acts in a particular way,[40] or even broader, as Arendt was, "ashamed of being human" in the aftermath of the Holocaust.[41] Here, shame operates as a means of accepting responsibility by way of one's belonging to a broader category like "human being," or a subcategory like American, Californian, or member of a chosen affiliation like the Democratic Party or the University of California, for example. Being "ashamed" of our association with these categories permits us to aspire to something different and better on the basis of that relation.

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[38] Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008), 83-84.

[39] *Ibid*, 93.

[40] Carlo Ginzburg has dedicated some attention to this question: "A long time ago i suddenly realized that the country one belongs to is not, as the usual rhetoric goes, the one you love but the one you are ashamed of. Shame can be a stronger bond than love." Carlo Ginzburg, "The Bond of Shame", *New Left Review*, 120 (Nov-Dec, 2019): 35-44. Here, shame is that moral and political sentiment that has the power to reveal to us our multifaceted forms of attachment, in turn allowing us to be critical of these same attachments.

[41] Hannah Arendt, "Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility", In *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing, 2011), 121-132.

Shame therefore appears to be a more appropriate political link between self and world than guilt. It is supposedly a more capacious moral category and moral sensation, one that can engage us regardless of our own individual wrongdoing and make us accountable for and within the attachments we naturally form as political animals. This standard conceptualization of shame is what allows me to say something like: "I am ashamed to be American because of the unjust invasion of Iraq," a feeling likely to be commonplace among some Americans of a certain age. This evinces a critical attachment to a broader category of belonging, a sense of moral personhood in relation to that category, and an implied political aspiration (namely, that I must help keep something like this from happening again). If we were to hear this from someone, we might consider them both worldly, responsible, and politically engaged. If, on the other hand, I were to claim to feel guilt for the Iraq War, despite having not participated in it directly, I would be met with a degree of skepticism or even hostility. It is this figure who is castigated by Arendt for being "wrong, confused" or guilty of "playing intellectual games," as they fail to grasp the basics of moral and political responsibility.[42] To insist upon one's guilt for the Iraq War in this case is to curiously inflate one's own personal relationship to the event itself, thereby mystifying the nature of our accountability towards others and towards the broader moral and political categories to which we belong. It also reads as excessively self-regarding, even narcissistic, to assert such a thing if one had no direct hand in facilitating or actively perpetuating the war. As a result, for most average citizens, feeling guilt over a large-scale political injustice without direct participation appears to be something of a grave category error and a complete misrecognition of one's political

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[42] Hannah Arendt, "Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship", In *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books. 2003), 17-48, 19. See also Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 251.

obligations. Shame, instead, appears to political theorists as the much more generative and appropriate category to consider in questions of collective responsibility and its relationship to political action.

Last, shame appears to be, in some sense, a more fundamental and capacious moral emotion, one that must be anatomized and engaged if we are to have anything to say about guilt. Williams explains this in *Shame and Necessity*, and it is worth quoting at length:

> To the modern moral consciousness, guilt seems a more transparent moral emotion than shame. It may seem so, but that is only because, as it presents itself, it is more isolated than shame is from other elements of one's self-image, the rest of one's desires and needs, and because it leaves out a lot even of one's ethical consciousness. It can direct one towards those who have been wronged or damaged, and demand reparation in the name, simply, of what has happened to them. But it cannot be itself help one to understand one's relations to those happenings, or to rebuilt the self that has done these things and the world in which that self has to live. Only shame can do that, because it embodies conceptions of what one is and of how one is related to others.[43]

Here, the more relational and existential category of shame is what enables guilt to have actual meaning as a moral sensation for the individual. For Williams, shame as a "structure" is what allows for the "possibility of controlling and learning from guilt," which is to say that any analysis

[43] Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 94.

of guilt-feelings (what I have done) require a more foundational discussion of the more existential idea of moral personhood ("what I am") before we can interpret any specific deeds, failures of action, or intentions in a given case.[44] This implies two things. First, it is impossible to pursue a detailed analysis of guilt-feelings in an individual or group without taking up the question of how "structures of shame" organize guilt. As Williams notes, "shame can understand guilt, but guilt cannot understand itself."[45] Next, at the individual level, when we feel guilt for something we are always addressing the question of who we think we are and what kind of person we want to be on an individual and collective level, which in turn means guilt, if it is to mean anything for someone, is never felt as an isolated moral emotion. In fact, if we follow Williams, the capacity for shame is the only thing that can make guilt mean something at all. Shame represents a foundational receptivity to moral experience, whereas guilt is in some sense secondary.

Williams is by no means alone in this attempt to revaluate shame as a dominant moral and potentially productive political emotion. As the humanities and social sciences turned against Freud towards the end of the 20th century, so too went a privileging of both guilt and anxiety as the central elements of psychic life to which shame played a subordinate role.[46] This did not mean that Freud's basic analysis of guilt that we briefly recounted was jettisoned from scholarship. The exact opposite is true. Many of Freud's reflections were still considered definitive in relation to guilt. However, the emotional and moral universe of the subject was opened up and other discrete emotional states became subject to different forms of revaluation. In this context, guilt became

[44] *Ibid*, 93.

[45] *Ibid*

[46] Ruth Leys, *From Guilt to Shame: Auschwitz and After* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 123.

"shame's 'other,' the carrier of bad, negative, and destructive implications," while shame was cast as "more productive, even possibly healing in its very nature."[47] We could therefore say that Freudian psychoanalysis still provided a dominant account of the anatomy of guilt and guilt-feelings as well as their political, social, and individual function, but the general displacement of Freud meant that guilt was given less attention as a central element of human experience. This would make room for shame to become the more theoretically and experientially rich, as well as politically productive, feeling state.

The move "from guilt to shame," as Leys would have it, is now a standard theoretical gesture to make in countless domains of inquiry, particularly for those focused on how moral sense can be translated into creative forms of action and interpretation. Leys sums this up in the following way:

> Donald Nathanson believes you can do better self theory with shame than with guilt; Bernard Williams believes you can do better moral theory with shame than with guilt; Eve Sedgwick believes that, using Tomkins's theories, you can do better queer theory with shame than with guilt; Giorgio Agamben believes you can do better survivor testimony theory with shame than with guilt; Elspeth Probyn thinks you can do better gender and cultural studies with shame rather than guilt; psychiatrists and therapists think you can do better trauma theory with shame than with guilt; and so on. The result is that shame has emerged in recent years as a

[47] *Ibid*, 124.

privileged operator not only for various psychological-psychotherapeutic projects, but also for diverse kinds of theoretical- interpretive undertakings.[48]

This is by no means an exhaustive list of thinkers that privilege one moral sentiment over the other.[49] In any case, it is almost received wisdom in political theory that guilt is the dead-end of politics, whereas shame is, or at least can be, an active, productive, and emancipatory sentiment. This leaves us with a set of dichotomies. Where guilt-feelings express rigid fidelity to law and authority, shame allows us to reconfigure what we are and could be in a more collective fashion. Where guilt is reflexive, shame can be reflective. Where guilt is individualized, self-regarding, even narcissistic,[50] shame can be social and intersubjective. Where guilt is mostly univocal, reinforcing a command-obey structure, shame is much more multifaceted in what kind of moral and political sense it can register.[51]

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[48] *Ibid*.

[49] See, for example: Farid Abdel-Nour, "National Responsibility", *Political Theory* 31, no. 5 (Oct., 2003): 693-719; Alexis Shotwell, *Knowing Otherwise: Race, Gender, and Implicit Understanding* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2011); Christopher J. Lebron, *The Color of Our Shame: Race and Justice in Our Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[50] Nussbaum sums up many of these objections to guilt a personal moral motivation by suggesting this specific emotion has an "unpleasantly stifling and narcissistic aspect", insofar as it tends to direct anger towards the self instead of channeling care or "positive love" towards the other. This latter sentiment is considered more politically productive and creative. Martha Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2016), 129.

[51] See Christina Tarnopolsky, "Prudes, Perverts, and Tyrants: Plato and the Contemporary Politics of Shame," *Political Theory* 32, no. 4 (2004): 468-494.

III. Rethinking the Guilty Subject:

The overarching purpose of this study is not to re-assert the primacy of guilt in relation to shame, nor is it to vindicate guilt as an inherently productive emotion. Instead, my purpose is to *pluralize* our understanding of what guilt-feelings are, how they work, what they do, and what they might permit us to see in certain political circumstances. This means providing different resources than those typically drawn upon to make sense of this emotion, which will in turn allow us to discover new ways of thinking about what is politically unproductive or productive in this specific moral feeling, and may also permit us to better understand the tumultuous inner lives of a more diverse set of political subjects, particularly the figure Michael Rothberg calls "the implicated subject,"[52] what Bruce Robbins calls "the beneficiary,"[53] or what Mihaela Mihai describes as the "complicit" figure.[54] These subject positions stand between the spaces of victim and perpetrator, and therefore in between neat legal categories, instead occupying a specific position within a dominant order or association in which they actively live at the expense of suffering others.[55] They are not active and willing perpetrators of direct violence or injustice *per se*, but instead members

[52] Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

[53] Bruce Robbins, *The Beneficiary* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017).

[54] Mihaela Mihai, *Political Memory and the Aesthetics of Care: The Art of Complicity and Resistance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022).

[55] Rothberg is careful to note that the category of the "implicated subject" is not an "ontological identity", but rather a specific "subject position" that takes shape in relation to a specific problem in specific times and spaces. The aim is not to use the category as a vague or catchall identity, but instead as a tool that helps us identify differentials in how some are situated within particular predicaments of power, injustice, or domination. Susanne C. Knittel and Sofía Forchieri, "Navigating Implication: An Interview with Michael Rothberg," *Journal of Perpetrator Research* 3, no. 1 (2020): 6–19, 17-18.

of a certain stratum within a specific regime of racial, class, or gender-based domination where they acquire undue and sometimes unwitting benefits and advantages from the exploitation and oppression of others past and present. In this context, the dissertation will show that guilt is one way "implication" may be more than simply acknowledged, but also acted upon in such a way that helps us to think about ways of breaking free from the unjust order that implicates us. Instead of thinking of guilt as that which affectively binds us to law and authority, the core aim of this study is to unearth a strain of thinking that imagines guilt as a dissonance that can beget critically responsive action and undo certain structures of identification that undergird relations of domination. In other words, rather than thinking of guilt strictly as a reflex towards obedience, it can also in many iterations move us towards the reparation and "safeguarding" of others in direct opposition to a dominant order.[56]

This move already reconfigures our understanding of what the "guilty subject" looks like. In contemporary critical literatures, the quintessential "guilty subject" is flattened and typically regarded as the figure most fully subordinated in a power relationship. Guilt is what affectively ties the subjugated to law and keeps them pliable and obedient. As a result, breaking free from a certain form of bondage always implies breaking free from guilt. What I hope to do in this study is not so much rehash what the psychic life of the subordinated is like, but instead take up the moral psychology of the "implicated subject," a figure given far less attention in political theory. From this vantage point, guilt has a much more complex character, something that requires different theoretical tools than its simplistic description of as the residue of an authoritative demand and the main affect that drives us towards obedience. Against this, we can find guilt-feelings

[56] Judith Butler, *The Force of Non-Violence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (London: Verso Books, 2020), 94.

perceived as persecutory, despairing, or self-regarding, but also potentially reparative and other-oriented. The "guilty subject" is not necessarily caught up in a strictly self-abasing cycle, but instead vacillates between feeling states, different forms of guilt, and different kinds of narration that actualize the reactionary or emancipatory potential within these feeling states.

Making the shift from guilt as disciplinary subordination towards guilt as the potentially productive perception of "implication" is a fundamental move this dissertation makes. This shift does not simply mark a reconceptualization of what guilt is and how it works, but it also constitutes a reconfiguration of how we think of the psychic life of the political subject. This in turn tracks with a revolution in psychoanalysis that shifts away from certain commitments in Freudian metapsychology towards an object relations approach. According to Stephen Mitchell, Freud's original theory of mind centralized the problem of keeping in check the "formless energy of the id" by means of the mind's other sub-structures, namely the ego and the superego.[57] For Freud, "to be a person is to struggle with powerful asocial impulses, to check, divert, or sublimate them, to reconcile them with internalized parental presences."[58] The problem for Freud, then, is how one actually manages to govern the self, given the underlying energies that press upon our consciousness. From this perspective, guilt as both a social, familial, and individual structure of limitation is the central force that places opposite forms of aggressive pressure against the semi-ungovernable violence of the id.[59]

The object relations approach, as Mitchell writes, is different:

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[57] Mitchell, *Hope and Dread in Psychoanalysis*, 103.

[58] *Ibid*

[59] Sigmund Freud, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1989), 20.

> Since Freud's death, in a halting, diffuse, and informal fashion, his structural model has been largely replaced…by different versions of a relational model. Freud pictured conflict as the clash among impulses (id), regulatory functions (ego), and moral prohibitions (superego). In a growing sector of contemporary psychoanalytic thought (often connected with the term object relations theories), the joints of the mind are located at the borders between different versions of self. Conflict is now envisioned as the clash between contrasting and often incompatible self-organizations and self-other relationships.[60]

This constitutes a radically different understanding of selfhood than the one offered by Freud. Whereas Freud places prime importance on intrapsychic dynamics that arise from the confrontation between the id and the limitations that tame and shape it, the object relations approach reads the self as radically situated within specific constellations of self and other.[61] In other words, the object relations theorists attempted to make the subject inherently associative and *plural*, vacillating between different forms of self-organization depending on the "relational contexts" in which one finds oneself.[62] Whereas the Freudian subject is confronted with more or less repressive forms of social and individual limitation that determine the general character of the

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[60] Mitchell, *Hope and Dread in Psychoanalysis*, 104.

[61] This tracks with yet another shift, namely the turn away from the patriarchal, punishing father as the central figure in psychoanalysis and the move towards the figure of the nurturing mother. This framing is made most explicit in: Janet Sayers, *Mothers of Psychoanalysis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991).

[62] Mitchell, *Hope and Dread in Psychoanalysis*, 104.

ambient guilt and malaise they personally feel, the post-Freudian subject might slip in and out of different kinds of guilt-feeling depending upon the circumstances that elicit divergent forms of self-organization and intersubjectivity. As the figure of the "implicated subject" or beneficiary are at their core defined by a situated set of social and political relations and not an ontological condition, the object-relations approach seems particularly suited to help us make sense of these forms of life.

As I alluded to earlier, the upshot to this is as follows: the Freudian subject experiences guilt univocally as a nervous and self-punishing excitation before an authoritative demand. Guilt disciplines, which in turn means the task of emancipatory political struggle is to soften the voice of power in the subject to help them release their capacities to resist and create. In this sense, Freud's aim is to allow the subject to individually reclaim a degree of freedom and self-knowledge. For the subject conceptualized by the object relations theorists, the task is not strictly to release political actors from guilt, but instead to understand how certain forms of guilt manifest in different relational constellations. These different contexts elicit different expressions and metabolizations of this specific emotional state, sometimes engendering defensive postures, and other times facilitating forms of productive acknowledgment and reparation depending upon the forms of attachment in each position. In this latter scenario, guilt is a means by which the individual might recognize and invest in productive and just forms of dependency and sociality, not something to be shaken off in a movement towards individual freedom and self-actualization.

This theoretical and practical shift is what might enable us to ground Kennan Ferguson's project to move contemporary political theory away from its preoccupation with "freedom" and

towards an investment in the concepts of "debt" and "indebtedness."[63] As discourses of freedom (many of which are either cynical or hollow) take as their aim the removal of limitation, which in turn makes them fertile ground for right-wing politics to mobilize "freedom" as a justification to neglect any sense of social obligation on the grounds that it stands as an inhibition and is therefore *de facto* an infringement on one's autonomy, a discourse of indebtedness takes seriously the fact of what Ferguson calls our "imbedded mutuality."[64] Rather than fetishizing a narrow conception of freedom, Ferguson's aim is to reclaim new forms of collective responsibility and new possibilities of remaking social life to make life livable for all. The overarching concern is not the discrete individual's "freedom," but the process by which we come to recognize how we remain connected to others in specific political arrangement and how these others stake a particular political claim on us. The Freudian conceptualization of subjectivity is not quite suited for this particular project, but the inherently plural and interconnected subjectivity of the object relations perspective is.

As the project will show, we can ground the object relations approach in the work of Melanie Klein, who will provide the counterpoint to the Freudian conceptualization of guilt and give us resources to make sense of our capacities to recognize and invest in relational forms of "indebtedness." Despite Klein's use of fundamental Freudian categories and concepts, her theory of "the depressive position" represents a substantial deviation from the Freudian guilt complex. For Klein, "the depressive position" is a recurring phase of psycho-social life in which an infant and later an individual relinquishes a structure of idealized attachment and recognizes how the

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[63] Kennan Ferguson, "Beholden: From Freedom to Debt," *Theory & Event* 24, no. 2 (April 2021): 574-591.

[64] *Ibid*, 587.

action within this feeling state may have harmed another whom the individual values. The form of responsiveness within the "depressive position", and out of "depressive guilt" specifically, is not inward-oriented as it is for Freud and not principle oriented as it is for Kantians, but outward-oriented, relational, and geared towards the reparation and protection of the damaged object.[65] Whereas the subject for Freud experiences guilt most often as a kind of ambient malaise whose origins oftentimes remain opaque to them,[66] Klein conceptualizes guilt as more responsive to a specific perceived wrong within a specific relational constellation. It is a means by which we come to register our actions as potentially harmful to others, leading us to at least attempt to make amends to others in a specific situation. The turn to Klein is in effect what enables us from a psychoanalytic perspective to take seriously guilt as a real and even productive element of the life we share in common with others.

The turn to Klein is not in itself a scholarly innovation in the humanities and social sciences. This study will engage with several authors who have made use of Klein and made her work speak to certain theoretical questions. One such author is Judith Butler, who has explicitly

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[65] This is resonant with Carol Gilligan's stages of moral development, a fixture of literatures on care ethics. Avoiding theorists like Lawrence Kohlberg's schema that envisions a child's movement from self-interest and fear of punishment towards gradual commitment towards more and more nuanced moral principles, Gilligan places at the forefront of her account the idea that morality is an emanation out of relationships of care and concern. This is to say that the basis of morality is not authoritative voice and then the instilling of principle, but instead the concrete connections we have with others. See Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982). For a recounting of this debate see Todd May, *Care: Reflections on Who We Are* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Agenda Publishing, 2023).

[66] Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, ed. Samuel Moyn. Norton Critical Editions (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2022), 59. See also Sigmund Freud. "Lecture XXI: The Development of the Libido and the Sexual Organizations," in *The Complete Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton and Co. 1966): 320-338, 331.

made reference to Klein in *The Psychic Life of Power*, *Frames of War*, and, most recently, *The Force of Non-Violence*. Butler's use of Klein is intended as a specific counterpoint to Freud and a tradition of political thought that conceptualizes guilt strictly as self-reproach or the voice of power.[67] However, Butler strictly insists that we hold up Klein as a way of thinking differently about sociality, while also holding out hope that Klein's work might provide us with a means of actualizing this sociality on a different ethical basis. Given Butler's explicit anxiety about the displacement of politics by ethics,[68] their work in *The Force of Non-Violence* is attentive to the ways that the ethical import of Klein's work may nourish a *politics* of non-violence, which in turn cuts against a biopolitical regime that places divisions between intelligibly grievable and non-grievable life. In other words, for Butler, Klein is not a political thinker, but her insights can be *politicized*. However, in Butler's framing, this politicization of Klein still remains abstract, as it doesn't quite address in-depth the diverse sets of political activities and behaviors Klein's "depressive guilt" might yield. Additionally, while Butler uses Klein for the purposes of rethinking the operations of conscience, they do not give us resources to think about what a political subject on Kleinian terms might look like, in all of its messy attachments and vacillations between complex feeling states. In this sense, it is my aim to give texture to Butler's analysis, which has teed up the

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[67] The following passage is an example of how Butler frames this dichotomy: "The psychoanalytic answer to the question of how to curb human destructiveness that we find in Freud focuses on conscious and guilt as instruments that re-circuit the death drive, holding the ego accountable for its deeds by means of a super-ego that lashes out with absolute moral imperatives, cruel punishments, and definitive judgments of failure. But this logic, in which one's destructive impulses are curbed through internalization, seems to find its culminating moment in a self-lacerating conscience of negative narcissism, as we saw in Freud. In Klein, however, that inversion, or negative dialectic, spawns another possibility: the impulse to preserve that other life. Guilt turns out not to be fully self-referential, but one way to preserve a relation to another." Butler, *The Force of Non-Violence*, 96.

[68] See Judith Butler and William Connolly, "Politics, Power and Ethics: A Discussion Between Judith Butler and William Connolly," *Theory and Event* 4, no. 2 (2000).

a set of ideas, most notably that Klein's work might give us resources to re-think how we might imagine a politics of non-violence; however, it is my aim to develop these insights and pursue them further by asking which forms of politicization are possible, on which terms, and in which specific contexts.

The aim of this work, then, is not to uncritically suggest Klein's categories give us a simplistic key to cultivating a new form of politics, but rather to assert that Klein gives us resources to think about guilt-feelings as objects and sites of messy attachments, political contestation, and different forms of political meaning-making. What is important here is not strictly that Klein gives us the idea of the "depressive position," but instead that she and her interpreters allow us to ask how, and to what extent, it can be channeled into certain productive political acts. Additionally, Klein will provide us with resources to make sense of how guilt is not a static feeling. Rather, we can vacillate between different kinds of guilt-feelings that may reproduce a structure of paranoid attachment, or enable us to relinquish that attachment and acknowledge our implication in injustice or harm. In each of these instances, structures of politicization and emotional script-writing can bring out certain possibilities or blockages latent within the specific form of guilt. As a result, it is not my intention to claim that guilt necessarily leads us towards certain justice-oriented political behaviors, but instead that the reflective and active elements of the emotion are to an extent malleable, open to diverse forms of narration and interpretation. The "guilty subject" is, therefore, a figure who is more complicated, and perhaps more politically capable, than we would otherwise assume.

IV: The Outline:

The second chapter of this project ("Making Sense of the Guilty Subject: Nietzsche, Freud, and Klein") will begin with a detailed analysis of how guilt is conceptualized by three figures: Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, and Melanie Klein. Nietzsche and Freud's reflections constitute what I consider a paradigmatic way of thinking about what guilt is and how it works politically. Despite their differences, Nietzsche and Freud come together and construct the following set of assumptions in relation to guilt-feelings: 1) Guilt is set in motion through an originary form of violence that blocks the will and reroutes it back towards the self such that the subject disciplines themselves according to the dictates of an authoritative figure; 2) Guilt-feelings are primarily conceptualized as forms of fiction that order our psychic and physical reality, but do not correspond to facts of one's actual deeds; 3) Though guilt is set in motion by an external power, guilt is conceptualized as a strictly individualized and self-regarding emotion, one that draws our attention to the dramatic intra-psychic dynamics of self-punishment and self-abasement in relation to an imagined law or demand. It is political only insofar as guilt registers the residue of power within the psyche. Given this, the aim is the release of the subject from these internal hang-ups such that they can finally free themselves from ill-health and self-actualize on their own terms, insofar as it's possible.

As noted, this paradigm has provided political theorists, particularly critical theorists, with a powerful heuristic. Where there is guilt, there is invariably a demand from an authoritative voice that is keeping the subject in a cycle of disciplinary self-punishment. As the idea goes, a process of critique or demystification will enable the subject to break free from this cycle and finally act in a way that does not reproduce a given order. Here, the movement towards emancipation and justice is inevitably a movement away from guilt. The aim is not simply to get the subject to break

free from a structure of power, but also an attempt to, as Adam Phillips would have it, to free "people to lose interest in themselves." This is to say that to break free from guilt is a way of breaking free from an unhelpful self-regard and instead direct political energy outwards and towards some collective aim.[69] If guilt works by keeping the subject in a pattern of what Butler calls "negative narcissism," then it is always against and beyond guilt that emancipatory politics will take shape.[70]

Though this is a popular and compelling framework, it remains a rather narrow way of thinking about the political valence of this emotion. In this same chapter, I suggest that through Klein we can best consider guilt as a multifaceted emotion that can in some instances shore up an exclusive and paranoid structure of identification through feelings of persecutory guilt, and can in other instances serve as a potentially productive dissonance that dissolves a pattern of identification. This is to say that depending on the psycho-social "position" the subject inhabits, guilt might retrench a violent form of attachment, but can in other instances help relinquish this attachment and facilitate outward-oriented action to repair the real damage done to others. Klein's theory of "depressive guilt" is a resource to think of guilt-feelings as a form of critically responsive action that might do justice to the suffering of another. However, as Thomas Ogden, one of Klein's most famous interpreters suggests, the potential of the significance of "depressive position" is dependent on how one interprets its meaning.[71] This means that while a productive sense of guilt might emerge from a recognition of one's embeddedness in a structure of implication or benefit,

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[69] Adam Phillips. *Attention Seeking* (New York: Picador, 2019), 16.

[70] Butler, *The Force of Non-Violence*, 96.

[71] Thomas Ogden, *The Matrix of the Mind: Object Relations and Psychoanalytic Dialogue* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 73.

the existing frameworks of interpretation that allow the implicated subject to make sense of their feeling states and potentially act upon them in productive ways are going to be decisive in determining if and how "depressive guilt" will mean something politically. Put differently, as "depressive guilt" aids in dissolving a paranoid structure of identification, it matters which resources an individual can draw upon to narrate a script that can reconfigure how they relate to themselves and act in the world.[72] Here, what matters is if and how "depressive guilt" is *politicized* in useful ways.

The third chapter ("John Rawls and Liberal Guilt") will claim that political theorists in the mid-20th century were already drawing from Klein as a theoretical resource to ground guilt-feelings in something other than the Oedipus complex. More specifically, this chapter engages the political philosophy of John Rawls, and takes seriously Katrina Forrester's passing reference in *In the Shadow of Justice* that Rawls drew from Klein's work in order to sketch his account of the origins and functions of moral emotions.[73] Here, I provide a reading of Rawls's moral psychology, specifically his account of "the sense of justice" to show how Rawls writes a distinctively liberal script for Klein's theory of "depressive guilt," one that emphasizes an exchange-based model of reparation that has as its aim the re-establishment of a social equilibrium on a specific set of terms. In so doing, I claim reading Rawls as a very specific kind of Kleinian allows us to reconsider how we might think about "liberal guilt" as a cultural phenomenon in the current day. I argue Rawls's reading of Klein may actually give us leverage to better understand "liberal guilt" as a symptom

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[72] This notion of "emotional script-writing" that I will reference throughout the dissertation is taken from: Owen Flanagan, *How to Do Things with Emotions: The Morality of Anger and Shame Across Cultures* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

[73] Katrina Forrester, *In the Shadow of Justice: Postwar Liberalism and the Remaking of Political Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 9.

of a specific constellation of political attachments. "Liberal guilt," as I suggest, is not necessarily the narcissistic posturing that many think it to be, but instead a genuine acknowledgment of one's implication in the harm of another that pushes someone to repair, but only in the form of gesture that aims to re-establish a kind of neutral moral balance sheet of harms. As is the case for both Rawls and the individual in the throes of "liberal guilt," feelings of guilt and reparation are immediately circumscribed by a set of paranoid attachments to stability, equilibrium, and order. These attachments prevent any interpretation of one's guilt as more than something that can be solved through discrete reparative gestures. If guilt-feelings call into question these broader attachments, they elicit responses not of depressive anxiety, but paranoid anxiety. "Liberal guilt" is therefore characterized by an admixture of both the desire to acknowledge and repair a harm, and also to protect the terms of a certain kind of order. The result is a politics of guilt that can be either ineffectual or paralyzing.

If Rawls's work constitutes a "liberal" reading of Klein, one that takes up some of Klein's central categories and repurposes them to conform to certain liberal commitments, the fourth chapter ("Justice Beyond Repair: *Negative* Dialectics and the Politics of Guilt and Atonement") offers a different politicization of Klein's insights. This different interpretation is offered by Theodor Adorno, who, despite his rather ambivalent attachment to Freudian concepts and categories, mostly rejects Freud's analysis of guilt when he explains the elements of negative dialectical critique. While Adorno obviously makes extensive use of Freudian thought in his analysis of fascist propaganda, bourgeois subjectivity, and the "authoritarian personality," Adorno deviates from the Freudian paradigm when the project of *Negative Dialectics* comes to fruition. Here, while outlining the aims and operations of critique, Adorno sketches both the way we inevitably take on guilt by simply living in capitalist society, and how guilt-feelings constitute the

engine that thrusts us to transform the society in which we live. For Adorno as for Klein, guilt (or "depressive guilt") operates as a dissonance that dissolves a pattern of identification, making us alive to our embeddedness in an unjust order and the fact that we unjustly live at the expense of others. What we *do* with this guilt is relentlessly critique the dominant order, revealing its contradictions and mystifications, which in turn produces political possibilities that point beyond the administered world of late capitalism.

Adorno's reflections on guilt stand as a distinct counterpoint to those offered by Rawls. Where Rawls writes a script for "depressive guilt" that is intended to stabilize a given order by conceptualizing reparation as a matter of simple exchange, Adorno thinks of guilt as a form of attunement to suffering that allows us to contest the dominant order that produces these linked differentials in suffering. Put in different terms, my reading of Rawls allows us to think of "liberal guilt" not as the weddedness to narcissistic self-regard as it typically considered to be, but instead an expression of genuine concern towards others who have been harmed. However, this reparative response to guilt is always meant to reinstate an equilibrium among social and political actors, and reinvest in a set of liberal principles that themselves cannot be questioned. If they are questioned, a kind of paranoid investment is revealed. "Liberal guilt," as I will show, is therefore characterized by an uneasy navigation between these two concerns. Adorno, in contrast, thinks of guilt not as reparative, which would imply a commitment to rebuilding a given order that is the source of injustice, but radically transformative, insofar as it takes as its aim the pessimistic but active process of moving beyond the order that implicates us.

This sets the stage for the last chapter of this study ("The Anatomy of White Guilt"), which takes as its point of departure the politics of guilt in the context of contentious struggles over racial justice in the contemporary United States. The backlash to the George Floyd uprisings of 2020 has

produced countless pieces of legislation that take as their inspiration Donald Trump's Executive Order 13950, which banned the promotion of "critical race theory" in the training of federal workers. It is noteworthy that most of these newer pieces of legislation, all of which are oriented around restricting K-12 curricula, make explicit the idea that "critical race theory," which is a stand-in for any given push for racial justice, has as its aim the persecution of white students by making them feel guilt. Here, guilt-feelings themselves are energizing objects and sites of contestation in the right-wing imagination. Completely conceptualizing guilt as persecutory, the proponents of this legislation inhabit and aim to reproduce what Klein calls a "paranoid-schizoid" orientation towards racial politics, reinforcing an attachment to a structure of identification and material benefit that we would name as "whiteness." Here, guilt is felt and narrated as a weapon used by others to persecute as part of racial struggle.

What we commonly call "white guilt," a species of "liberal guilt," has a similar structure. The only difference is the willingness to acknowledge some degree of suffering on the part of racialized others. However, as is the case with the right-wing attitude towards guilt in the context of racial politics, "white guilt" features an overarching desire to return to a state of purity and frictionlessness. This is done not through complete disavowal as it is in the case of those on the political right, but instead through forms of hollow gestures that will enable the return to equilibrium. This suggests that "white guilt" and the revolt against "white guilt" are elements of the same structure of identification, only differing in how much voice the individual might lend to the feelings of implication they experience.

Despite widespread criticism of "white guilt", thinkers like Audre Lorde have insisted that guilt might in other instances be transformative or a means by which someone registers their real implication in the harm of others. In this context, there is an implied tarrying with the idea of

something like “depressive guilt” and an investment in its political potential. However, which resources do we have to direct this dissonance towards efficacious political action? In the current moment I claim that “depressive guilt” is oftentimes depoliticized, filled in with narratives that emphasize work on the self and interpersonal growth as a means of combatting racism. If the “depressive position” is, as Klein and Ogden suggest, narratively open, the political task before us is not to insist upon guilt as a dead end in anti-racist struggle, but to re-narrate how implicated white subjects might make sense of their guilt such that it could lead towards transformative political action.

The aim of this study is to provide political theorists with alternative resources to reconsider what guilt-feelings are and what they might do politically. However, this is about more than the theoretical relationship to one specific emotion. This work touches upon a set of interrelated questions that are of deep significance for the discipline of political theory, namely how we might incorporate into our work an analysis of the psychic life of diverse social actors like “implicated subjects”, “beneficiaries”, or individuals that find themselves placed in the ambivalent position of actively living at the expense of others. Additionally, it is worthwhile to ask how Ferguson’s movement away from freedom and towards indebtedness might give us an alternative political vision and lexicon that enables us to do politics in new and creative ways. Last, there is the question of how certain feeling states make themselves available to specific forms of political narration. Beyond guilt, which other emotional states might make us open to certain appeals and processes of mobilization? By reconfiguring our relationship to guilt in the way this dissertation suggests, countless other questions arise. They are there for someone else to pursue.

## Chapter Two

*Making Sense of the Guilty Subject: Nietzsche, Freud, and Klein*

I. Introductory Remarks

Nietzsche and Freud, despite their differences, set forth in clear terms a strikingly similar goal for their respective philosophies. Nietzsche, albeit in his *Nachlass*, stakes out as the first of his "Five No's" his "struggle against the *feeling of guilt* and the projection of the concept of *punishment* into the physical and metaphysical world; also into psychology and the interpretation of history."[74] Freud, as suggested by David Rieff, consistently takes as the aim of therapeutic reason "to revise the moral faculty, the super-ego," the internalized imposition that "emerges as the last enemy of reason,"[75] Self-actualization, insofar as it is possible for both thinkers, is a process that necessarily moves through and against one moral emotion, namely *guilt*.[76]

It should not be mistaken, however, that both Nietzsche and Freud are envisioning an individuality (and for Freud, an individuality and sociality), in which there should be freedom from

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[74] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 528.

[75] David Rieff, *Freud: The Mind of the Moralist* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 71.

[76] At the outset it is crucial to note that, for both thinkers, the critique of guilt is of a dialectical character, and not simply an oppositional one. For Nietzsche, as Kaufmann notes: "Without acquiring a bad conscience, without learning to be profoundly dissatisfied with ourselves, we cannot envisage higher norms, a new state of being, self-perfection". Walter Kaufmann, "Introduction", In *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House Inc. Modern Library Edition, 2000), 448. For Freud, sublimation, the engine of cultural creation, can only develop out of supererogatory renunciations. Yet, these developments are only yielded through struggle with the reflexive and univocally punitive character of the guilty conscience.

any kind of limitation. They are not preaching a mindless revolt against conscience. Yet, if we map the anatomy of guilt-feelings, explore their specific operations, and make it fully known through genealogy, speculative anthropology, or investigation into the Oedipus complex, both thinkers immediately confront us with the idea that guilt is not a suffering like other forms of suffering, and as such must be given particular attention as a potentially grave, enduring, and mostly mystified affliction. For both thinkers, particularly Nietzsche, guilt-feelings hinder our ability to make *other* forms of suffering or tension known and potentially productive. This is because it has at its core a supposed judgmental or evaluative character. For Nietzsche, guilt is a category of suffering that *organizes and interprets* other suffering, such that "all displeasure, all misfortune" can be "falsified with the idea of wrong (guilt),"[77] In more intrapsychic terms but in a similar vein, Freud attributes to supererogatory judgment, the fear of which Freud characterizes as a "sense of guilt," a dominating life of its own, standing "on the watch" to constantly organize and render strict verdicts on different forms of behavior as worthy of punishment.[78] This is in effect a process of meaning-making that Freud, on Rieff's account, believes to be "the prime variety of human sickness."[79]

As a result, on Nietzschean and Freudian terms, guilt is granted a certain kind of primacy in accounts of individual and social experience. Not only is it an omnipresent form of suffering in modern life, but it importantly represents an almost reflexive and prefabricated means by which the subject tends to make sense of their suffering and indeed their broader relationship with the

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[77] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 166. This sentiment is found in earlier texts like *Dawn*. Nietzsche writes: "Misfortune and guilt – Christianity has placed these two things on *one* scale: such that whenever the misfortune ensuing from an instance of guilt is great, the greatness of the guilt itself is then apportioned, completely involuntarily, in relation to the misfortune". Friedrich Nietzsche, *Dawn*, trans. Brittain Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 58.

[78] Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its* Discontents, 50.

[79] Rieff, *Freud: The Mind of the Moralist*, 64.

world. Attempting to explain the origins and operations of this particular emotion therefore does critical work that yields more than one insight. It allows both Nietzsche and Freud to develop a robust account of the inner life of the subject, explain the means by which particular forms of suffering are experienced and understood, and it allows us to denature, demystify, and explain guilt to ourselves such that the bite of conscience can be tamed or transformed, and neurotic ill-health can be alleviated.

This chapter maps the anatomy of Nietzsche and Freud's explanations and critiques of guilt such that they can be brought together as a coherent paradigm. This paradigm has a set of components, the first of which is an origin story that frames guilt as the mostly unconscious residue of a distinctively violent political act that takes place within a hierarchical relation. For Nietzsche, this is the moment in which the subject is "enclosed within the walls of society" by the "blond beasts," setting in motion the inward-directed nervous excitation known as "bad conscience," which in turn produces memory and selfhood.[80] For Freud this is the originary political overthrow of the primal father, which establishes unconscious structures of identification as well as social attitudes towards obedience, transgression, and law. These origin stories have the function of centralizing enactments of violence as the primary means by which the self is made, with guilt bearing the traces of a power relationship and the residues of an originary wound.

The second component concerns what guilt-feelings are and what they do. For both thinkers, guilt-feelings are extremely powerful *fictions* that have the function of inhibiting and binding a subject to an external demand that is later internalized, making the subject enact self-punishment on themselves for perceived transgressions. This is not to say that guilt-feelings are

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[80] Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Geneology of Morals," in *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 520.

not real. They are indeed very real. However, for Nietzsche and Freud the guilty subject, and in Freud's case the guilty neurotic, is gripped by a mystification that they reflexively need punishment for a supposed moral transgression that does not necessarily correspond to reality, but instead to the dictates of past or present authority figures who have disciplined the subject to adopt a sense of nervous, self-abasing excitation in anticipation of transgressing an arbitrary demand. Freud puts this in stark terms when, in *Totem and Taboo*, he claims that behind the neurotic's "sense of guilt are always *psychical* realities and never *factual* ones."[81] Similarly, Nietzsche attempts to disabuse us of the fiction of guilt, writing in *The Gay Science*: "Although the shrewdest judges of the witches and even the witches themselves were convinced of the guilt of witchery, this guilt nevertheless this guilt did not exist. This applies to all guilt." [82]

Next is the third component of the paradigm. Though for both Nietzsche and Freud guilt as we know it only emerges within an authoritative relationship and is generally reinforced socially, guilt-feelings are an occasion to strictly assess "the relationship of man to himself – that is, as failure in the process of individuation," rather than the relationship between an individual and others with whom they share a particular lifeworld.[83] Put differently, if we follow Nietzsche and Freud's critical anatomy of this emotion, we are made to return to fact that the subject has internalized a demand or custom that cannot be neatly transcended, and the individual relationship to this demand mediates their relationship to themselves and others. As a result, understanding the

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[81] Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989), 197-198.

[82] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science. (With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs)*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 250.

[83] Marin Buber, "Guilt and Guilt Feeling," *CrossCurrents* 8, no. 3 (1958): 193-210, 195. Buber is speaking strictly about Freud here but this could just as easily apply to Nietzsche's work.

behavior of the guilty subject is an opportunity not to look at the deed for which they may feel guilt, but rather an occasion to explain this situation as an individualized psychodrama, where the "anxiety-induced bugbears that are generated in the cavern of the unconscious" speak in particularly forceful terms as vestiges of power.[84] It is from this vantage point that guilt is considered fundamentally *self-regarding*. It is set in motion relationally but always experienced individually as a relationship that one has to oneself, and this individual experience and the later prospect of emerging from this status of ill-health is what animates the writings of both figures on the subject.

This way of conceptualizing guilt yields a specific kind of political analysis and critique, one that has been expressed most forcefully in the post-structuralist[85] and post-colonial traditions,[86] as well as certain Marxist tendencies.[87] In short, to take on the subject beset by guilt as an object

[84] *Ibid*, 200.

[85] See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York and London: Routledge, 2007).

[86] This is readily visible in Achille Mbembe's *Necropolitics*. The situation is more complicated in the work of Frantz Fanon, for example, who is careful to suggest that the Freudian Oedipal scene does not clearly correspond to the situation of the colonizer and the colonized. Nonetheless, there are instances in *Black Skin, White Masks* where the basic schema holds, and the mark of "sin" and "nonexistence" in the colonized subject is translated into feelings of guilt and self-abasement. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 139. However, as Homi Bhabha suggests, for Fanon this subjectivation is never total, and in fact serves as the stimulus by which resistance to the symbols and practices of power can take shape. See Homi K. Bhabha, "Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt". In *Cultural Studies*, eds. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paul Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1991), 56-68, 65.

[87] Althusser's famous scene of "interpellation" does not strictly or solely operate through the production of a guilt relation, but one could argue the structure of the scene is consonant with a familiar understanding of how guilt is seen to work on the basic Freudian view. In Althusser's framing, ideology stands as a material force that shapes the subject, contouring their sense of self and the limits of their action. The police officer, inherently an authoritative figure that operates through the threat of force, reproduces a terrain of subjectivation and discipline. Any critique of this form of subjectivation will take place against the bodily responses, as well as the engrained conceptions of "conscience" and "duty", that delimit the individual's thought and action in sites

of study invariably means, within this paradigm, understanding the authority that trains the subject to develop guilt as a disciplinary emotion in accordance with a set of demands or rules. In other words, this critique traces a process of subjectivation whereby the tendency to obey is established, internalized, and reproduced. As a result, the guilty subject is fundamentally an obedient subject, and wherever there is guilt, there is the residue of the power relation that dictates the character and aims of this obedience. In this sense, to take guilt-feelings as objects of study in this paradigm means inquiring into how a power relationship produces forms of subjectivation, orienting us towards the site where the subject meets the externally generated limits of what can be said, thought, and enacted, namely the body itself and the identity that emerges out of the originary violent inscription.

This situation is tragic in a specific sense. The individual is unwillingly bound to produce and reproduce a form of domination and *self*-domination while they might think they are acting freely and "morally." They are also fated to suffer under the weight of the processes of subjectivation for which they bear no responsibility. However, as Judith Butler has noted, this process of subjectivation is never total, always producing the subject but also the means by which the subject acquires a power to resist and grow.[88] Here, resistance typically means something specific in relation to guilt. In short, it means destabilizing how certain internalized norms function

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of ideological production. See Louis Althusser, "Law," in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (London: Verso Books, 2014), 57-69; Louis Althusser, "On Ideology," in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (London: Verso Books, 2014), 171-207.

[88] This argument is most prominent in *The Psychic Life of Power*, where Butler identifies in Nietzsche, Freud, Hegel, Foucault, and Althusser a similar process by which power constitutes the subject but also produces a subject capable of tarrying with internalized injunctions and in turn undoing or resisting that subjectivating power. This is of course a foundation of the argument of *Gender Trouble* as well.

such that guilt speaks in less forceful terms and an impure but creative form of agency therefore becomes possible.[89] As a result, the struggle for emancipation is in part a struggle against guilt. If guilt reinforces obedience, it must become an object of critique such that the subject can operate outside of the constraints of power that speak through the injunctions of the guilty conscience. This primarily necessitates a certain kind of work on the self, which in turn stands in as a way of struggling against the voice of power.

This is admittedly a compelling explanation of how this political emotion works. Even among those not straightforwardly sympathetic to Nietzsche or Freud, there are elements of the paradigm that inform disparate traditions of political thought and reinforce the basic paradigm's persistence. Yet, it is worthwhile to ask what is lost in this framing. Which alternative perspectives of this emotion might yield different, and potentially productive forms of political critique? Butler asks this question in *The Psychic Life of Power*, but simply *begs the question* rather than drawing out what it might mean for us to pursue this alternative framing in the same way that they do so for Nietzsche and Freud. The question is posed as follows:

> In the work of Melanie Klein, guilt appears to emerge, not in consequence of internalizing an external prohibition, but as a way of preserving the object of love from one's own potentially obliterating violence. Guilt serves the function of preserving the object of love and, hence, of preserving love itself. What might it

[89] For the specific question of agency, see Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 17-18.

> mean to understand guilt, then, as a way in which love preserves the object it might otherwise destroy?[90]

Moving towards an action-oriented upshot, Butler then asks what we might be able to see or think if guilt were "traced in a register other than that of prohibition, in the desire for reparation?"[91]

In addition to drawing out a Nietzschean-Freudian paradigm for making sense of guilt, my purpose here is to take seriously the question that Butler poses but does not pursue in sustained terms. In so doing, I draw out how we might read guilt-feelings on Kleinian terms, such that we can destabilize, or rather *pluralize* the dominant framework we inherit from Nietzsche and Freud, and extract from this alternative framing a distinctive and productive reconfiguration of our political field of vision. Rather than imagining guilt to be fundamentally linked with self-punishing obedience and the internalization of a powerful norm, this chapter suggests that taking Klein as a point of departure allows us to consider guilt as, first, a variegated emotion that takes on a different character depending on the "position," or "shifting psychic vantage point" that facilitates a particular "structure of emotional life."[92] Second, guilt in one such position, "the depressive position," is concomitant with the experience of becoming a subject not through authoritarian injunction, but through gradual intersubjective recognition in which "other people are viewed as being alive and capable of thinking and feeling in the same way that one experiences oneself as having one's own thoughts and feelings."[93] "Depressive guilt" is a perception that one, in deed or

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[90] Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power,* 25.

[91] *Ibid*, 26.

[92] Julia Kristeva, *Melanie Klein* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 66-67.

[93] Thomas Ogden, *The Primitive Edge of Experience* (Northvale: Jason Aronson Inc, 1989), 12.

in phantasy, has harmed another whom one is beginning to consider a "whole object" rather than a projection of one's own inner experience.[94] Last, this form of guilt does not set in motion reflexive forms of self-punishment, but instead outward-oriented forms of reparation.

The aim of the latter portion of this chapter is to explore which kinds of alternative forms of critique, action, and relationality might arise if we think with Klein on this subject. In short, I take the view that Klein permits us to think about guilt not as a force that binds the subject to an authoritative injunction that tends to reproduce a form of power, but as a potentially productive dissonance that does not speak in univocal terms, but rather lends itself to diverse forms of interpretation and political narration that can express the latent structures of acknowledgment, ambivalence, and action. The subsequent chapters of this dissertation will grapple with how political theorists have taken up, and may *differently* take up this alternative way of reading guilt and explaining its political relevance.

## I. An "Inexhaustible, Unpayable" Debt:[95]

"The conscience reprehends an action because it has been reprehended for a long time," Nietzsche writes in his *Nachlass*. "It merely repeats: it creates no values. That which in the past decided to reprehend certain actions was not conscience; but the insight into (or prejudice against) their consequences."[96] At once, we are confronted with a central challenge in Nietzsche's critique

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[94] See Melanie Klein, "On the Theory of Anxiety and Guilt," in *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works 1921-1945,* ed. Roger Money-Kyrle (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 25-42.

[95] Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 141.

[96] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 294.

of morality. Morality is not necessarily a fiction, though Nietzsche claims that there are "no moral facts whatever."[97] Indeed, moral experience confronts us as something eminently real, a potential source of unimaginable psychic and bodily pain. Yet, it is not what it purports to be. It is not a product of grand reasoning, calculation or divine dictate, but instead as after-effects of a founding trauma, the symptoms of which endure through repetition compulsion, a set of "judgments of our muscles," as Nietzsche would later remark.[98] Morality, we could say, and guilt in particular, is in some sense not a "judgment" at all, but rather the expression of a memory trace in the form of a physiological reflex. It is the origin of this reflex, in a sense the reflex of obedience, that for both Nietzsche and Freud requires explanation.

What is striking is that in the work of both Nietzsche and Freud the pathology of moral self-beratement, most notably excessive guilt or self-reproach, is given an origin story, and a distinctively *political* origin story. Out of each story emerges not simply moral concepts and affects, but *political* concepts and affects. More finely put, the moral experience that emerges from the Freudian overthrow of the primal father and the Nietzschean moralization of bad conscience at the hands of the priestly caste is a *political* experience. These "two destinies of morality," which in reality are "two destinies of guilt," are simultaneously textured as stories of power, law, and eventually the birth of the subject capable of fearfully obeying and *internalizing* a fixed, external prohibition (i.e. the juridical subject).[99] Tracing the origins of feelings of guilt, whether

[97] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 66.

[98] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 314

[99] Paul-Laurent Assoun, *Freud and Nietzsche* (New York: Continuum, 2002), xxxvlii. The idea of the morality and guilt as expressions of an *oppressive law* is significant for both thinkers. Take Nietzsche's assertion in *The Will to Power*: "A morality, a mode of living tried and *proved* by long experience and testing, at length enters consciousness as a law, as *dominating*" Nietzsche, *The Will*

characterized in the Freudian vein as an anxiety coinciding with the punishing "*fear of the super-ego*"[100] or in the Nietzschean vein as man's brutal "will to think himself punished"[101] for all the misfortunes that befall him, are all attempts to explain, as Butler writes, the messiness of "both the subordination and becoming of the subject," the construction of a juridical identity grounded in a predisposition to obey.[102]

Nietzsche's account of the origins and development of guilt, mostly fleshed out in the *Genealogy* but given additional substance in the *Nachlass*, tracks in a way with Freud's account of guilt in *Totem and Taboo* and *Civilization and its Discontents*. The accounts are surely not identical, but various convergences merit attention. A pre-social state is postulated, a traumatic act of violence (or series of acts of violence) produces the human psychic economy that makes social life possible and in effect establishes civilization, and there is a process of internalization whereby a rule or a prohibition is implanted in the psyche as a result of an operation of power. The sharpening of an omnipresent sense of guilt is the end result of this lengthy and violent process. What this guilt *does*, so say both Nietzsche and Freud, is foster a kind of pliability and willingness to obey.

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*to Power*, 514. For Freud, the moral injunctions delivered by the superego are framed as follows: "I shall presently bring forward a suggestion about the source of its power to *dominate* in this way – the source, that is, of its compulsive character which manifests itself in the form of a categorical imperative (*kategorischer Imperative*)." Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id* (New York: W.W. Norton. 1989), 30-31. What we consider to be laws (moral, or for Nietzsche, even scientific) mask relations of power.

[100] Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 58.

[101] Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 529.

[102] Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 13.

Nietzsche's story in effect begins with a mockery of social contract theory and, as David Graeber suggests, of the dominance of bourgeois "commercial calculation" writ large.[103] For Nietzsche, the entry into society is not borne out of a recognition of shared interest or a natural propensity to acknowledge exchange-based obligations as it is for Adam Smith, but rather a singular act of violence followed by continuous domination. Before this act, humans in their original state, for Nietzsche, were "semi-animals, well adapted to the wilderness, to war, to prowling, to adventure" and purely guided by "unconscious and infallible drives."[104] Not only was there no political or social arrangement, but there was in effect no consciousness as it is traditionally understood. Human action was driven by the imperatives of physiological appetite, which meant that by their nature, humans had no faculty of conscience, consciousness or memory because they had never *needed* anything like morality or consciousness or memory.[105] It was not until man "found himself finally enclosed within the walls of society and peace,"[106] not by an act of covenant but rather through a traumatic founding, that we begin to see the origins of something like consciousness and later morality.

If not by covenant, then how could this association come into being? Nietzsche's famous conjecture is that a "conqueror or master race" that was "organized for war" (Nietzsche

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[103] David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (Brooklyn and London: Melville House, 2014), 79.

[104] Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 520.

[105] Dienstag notes that Nietzsche "is quite careful to refer to presocial, unremembering humans as animals" This textures Nietzsche's genealogy as not simply a movement from the "state of nature" to society, or from pure instinct to instinct mediated through consciousness and morality, but also a shift from animality to humanity. Joshua Foa Dienstag, *Dancing in Chains: Narrative and Memory in Political Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press. 1997), 116.

[106] Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 520.

incidentally calls this a "state") had taken the "formless", appetitive and still nomadic "semi-animals" and violently confined them for the purposes of making them "thoroughly kneaded and pliant."[107] In other words, Nietzsche's story posits the founding of states and society itself represents the founding of the human as we know it, which is not the product of "an organic adaptation" but rather a "break, a leap, a compulsion, an ineluctable disaster which precluded all struggle," borne out of violence and "carried to its conclusion by nothing but acts of violence."[108]

It is at this moment that Nietzsche locates the origins of what he calls "bad conscience." The physical repression at the hands of the powerful masters was accompanied by a psychological "internalization" (*Verinnerlichung*), the production of man's "inner world" that gathered "depth, breadth and height in the same measure" that man was forced to repress his instincts according to the new dictates of society.[109] Deleuze[110] and Assoun[111] mark this as a practice of "introjection," clearly reading backwards using the Freudian parlance, and importantly note how this repression represents a turn *inward*, insofar as the instinctual excitation that would normally directed outward must be channeled somehow, yet can only be inflicted back on the self. However, the production of this pain, the agitating "sting of conscience" that Nietzsche equates with the "illness" of "bad conscience," is not the same as guilt.[112] As Aaron Ridley writes, this moment in the *Genealogy*

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[107] *Ibid*

[108] *Ibid*, 522.

[109] *Ibid*, 520-521.

[110] Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 129.

[111] Assoun, *Freud and Nietzsche*, 141.

[112] Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 517.

has “nothing yet to do with morality or guilt,” but is rather a point at which Nietzsche marks the beginning of the painful interiorization of the instincts, and uses this moment to mark the subject at a crossroads, whereby one may choose the “joyous, affirmative attitude that Nietzsche associates with nobility or in the vengeful, moralized valuations that he associates with slavishness.”[113]

The explanation of the shift from bad conscience to guilt is famously treated through Nietzsche’s recounting of the “history” of punishment and the gradual *moralization* of debt. Nietzsche’s conjecture is that punishment was originally conceptualized as a non-moral, legal obligation. A “guilty” or indebted party would “balance debts” by being made to physically suffer at the hands of the joyous creditor in a so-called “festival” of cruelty.[114] The fusion of moral guilt with punishment emerges as the “guilty” party of the creditor/debtor relationship at once begins to say of himself not “‘here something has unexpectedly gone wrong’” (punishment as an inconvenience, a fact of life), but rather *reproaches* oneself, saying “’I ought not to have done that.’”[115] Here, guilt is gradually cast as an *internalization* of self-punishment for having transgressed a demand, as the debtor party begins to turn on himself to claim *that he himself* is responsible for his own suffering, eventually making *all* physical pain imbued with the a sense that the sufferer is indeed to blame for that pain.[116] Upon this terrain, the sufferer of bad conscience, now guilt, becomes receptive to the Christian ideal that one remains guilty before God, guilty at

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[113] Aaron Ridley, “Guilt Before God, or God Before Guilt?” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, 29 (Spring 2005), 35-45, 36.

[114]Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 501.

[115] *Ibid*, 519.

[116] In *The Will to Power* Nietzsche remarks that in this scenario “pain has been robbed of innocence”. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 166.

birth, and guilty before a holy law. The subject therefore wallows in pain, but also reflexively gives meaning to his pain as a matter of an unimaginable failure for which there can be no possible atonement.[117] One instead lives hopelessly in a state of insurmountable moral indebtedness that cannot be repaid, left only to "feel the palpable certainty of his own absolute unworthiness."[118]

Guilt enters into Nietzsche's frame in the form of what Leiter calls a "meta-affect," meaning that it is not a purely bodily experience, but rather features a "cognitive" component to some degree. It is not an affect *per se*, but the interpretation or *explanation* of an affect.[119] Nevertheless, it is *still* a reflex that has been bred and transmitted phylogenetically. This tendency to interpret this pain and misfortune as *guilt* has extraordinary political ramifications. Insofar as guilt is unpleasant, it produces a kind of recoil whereby a subject consciously *avoids* acting, creating or willing in order to experience some "means of relief," which Nietzsche describes in his *Nachlass* as "absolute obedience, machinelike activity, avoidance of people and things that would demand instant decisions and actions."[120] The moralization of bad conscience, and indeed all of morality generally, is cast quite simply as a systematized practice of obedience to a set of moral laws.[121] Guilt in effect relentlessly *predisposes* a subject towards docility in relation to a set of fictitious mores as a way of expiating and alleviating pain, thereby reinforcing a subjectivity that

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[117] In the same way that bad conscience is felt in the same measure that a degree of repressive force is pressed upon the subject, guilt is "apportioned" in the same measure that a degree of painful misfortune is experienced. Freud will complicate this in *Civilization and its Discontents*.

[118] Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 529.

[119] Leiter, *Moral Psychology with Nietzsche*, 76.

[120] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 28.

[121] Nietzsche, *Dawn,* 10.

is in some sense invested in its own subjugation at the hands of moral and political dictates. Yet, this particularly Christian "*pride* in obedience" does not even produce what the subject expects of it.[122] The expectation is an alleviation of pain, but the increased pliability and docility of the subject produces further "unhappiness and misery" that is once again interpreted as a self-inflicted failure to obey in the special way that was required.[123] As one expects from the Nietzschean perspective, this creates an *even more intense* desire to obey, and an even more intense feeling of guilt. This cycle endures indefinitely.

It must be noted that the Nietzschean guilty subject is not an unenviable figure because they suffer. Rather, they are unenviable, or perhaps on Nietzsche's terms reviled, because they are reflexively primed to organize and interpret their own suffering on the basis of mores that reinforce the guilty subject's impotence. As such, Nietzsche does not revolt against suffering in the way that other moderns like Rousseau or Hobbes do. Nietzsche wants to destroy the specifically Christian organization of suffering that also finds itself manifest in modern moral reasoning, which preoccupies itself with trying to "delineate the conditions for accountability, for causation, and for assigning blame" for suffering.[124] This invariably represents a prefabricated form of judgment and reasoning that generates its own form of disciplinary self-abasement in response to the suffering of the self and the suffering of the other. Whether Christian or modern, the unconscious tendency to think of oneself as *responsible* for the suffering one encounters in the world is the primary means

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[122] *Ibid*, 44.

[123] *Ibid*, 21.

[124] Cynthia Halpern, *Suffering, Politics, Power: A Genealogy in Modern Political Theory* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002), 3-4.

by which the potential productivity of other kinds of suffering is muted, locking the subject in a repetitive cycle of self-inflicted wounding for no other reason than the hope of eventual expiation.

Here we encounter a rudimentary constellation of concepts that helps us sketch this "paradigm" before we approach Freud. From the Nietzschean perspective, guilt is linked with self-inflicted pain, self-punishment, passivity/docility, and most importantly, obedience before an externally imposed limitation that is *internalized* and given a certain kind of meaning. Here, Nietzsche assumes the figure of diagnostician whose theoretical innovation does not simply reside in locating "the political" in cultural creation,[125] but also in explaining the pliability of the modern subject in alternative political terms, as the persistent echo of an originary violent wounding rather than a rational contract. Not only this, Nietzsche explains the *investment* in one's own subjection as an almost physical imperative, opening up discussions of the psychic and bodily economy alongside political power.[126] Additionally, as a fundamental guiding idea for how we think about guilt in contemporary politics, Nietzsche's framework posits guilt as fundamentally *fictitious* and *arbitrary*, an apparently inexhaustible misapprehension that has simply endured trans-historically for the purposes of creating a pliable, self-punishing subject bound to and dependent on legal and normative imperatives, be they issued by states, priests, or economists.

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[125] Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 473.

[126] Foucault's reading is of course classic here. "The body is the inscribed surface of events…the locus of a dissociated self…and a volume in perpetual disintegration. Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body." Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York. Random House, Inc. Vintage Books Edition. 2010), 83.

II. Freud and Deferred Obedience:

The Freudian frame is not exactly identical to Nietzsche's. For one thing, Freud constructs a subject with a richer and more complex inner life. Nonetheless, as noted, Freud's work, like Nietzsche's, features an arc that aims at explaining the movement from lawlessness to law and convention, and also the gradual introduction of repression and guilt-feelings into civilization. Additionally, through each author we are presented with a seemingly unbreakable cycle through which unconscious feelings of guilt don't only produce toxic forms of suffering, but also a psychic *investment* in that suffering. This is to say that we are granted an explanation as to *why* one would continue to believe in one's own guilt if it causes so much agony. In short, the familiar Nietzschean frame of guilt as inhibitive, repetitively passive, and also in some sense fictitious is repeated in Freud, and it produces similar effects. The Nietzschean guilty subject, preoccupied by its own nervous excitation before a set of moral demands, is through Freud translated into the neurotic, who is similarly stuck in the grip of a set of compulsions they cannot quite understand nor break, but is this time under the sway of the lingering authority of a parental imago. On these terms, the question of "guilt, for what?" is less important than what guilt *does*.

Freud's speculative cultural anthropologies in *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism* have not necessarily passed muster as strictly historical studies, yet they serve the purpose, as does Nietzsche's *Genealogy*, of "permitting *history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not,"[127] which is to say these stories permit us to write the history of an originating traumatic wound that constitutively cannot fully be known to us, but gives us an

[127] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 12.

orienting point to reflect on forgetting and "inaccessibility" itself.[128] This moment of inaccessibility, as it is for Nietzsche, is a distinctively *political* scene that is reconstructed in such a way to explain the severity and force of the phylogenetic traumatic wound, as well as one's own attachment to the law that enacts a process of subjectivation. What emerges out of this speculation is an explanation of the simultaneous "beginning of society and of the sense of guilt."[129]

We may begin with Freud in the same way we began with Nietzsche, which is with the reconfiguration, and perhaps even a mockery, of social contract theory. Joel Whitebook suggests *Totem and Taboo* tells us a story that is functionally a reenactment of the Hobbesian social contract, whereby a violent social order is transcended through a compact among the sons of the murdered "primal father" who determine in "a Hobbesian manner" that "the only way to escape a war of all against all was to relinquish their individual sovereignty (omnipotence) and enter into a social contract."[130] However, there is a twist. Rather than strictly claiming that the inauguration of civil society grows out of a self-interested determination that it is more advantageous than the state of nature, Freud adds "an additional motivation for this social compact."[131] Freud asserts that the social bonds that "cement" society are primarily affective senses of shared guilt that emerge out of a "father complex."[132] The rituals that emerge out of this are in some sense affective enactments

[128] *Ibid*, 19. Caruth is speaking here about *Moses and Monotheism* but her account has applicability to *Totem and Taboo* and conceivably Nietzsche's *Genealogy*.

[129] Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 186.

[130] Joel Whitebook, *Freud: An Intellectual Biography*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 300.

[131] *Ibid*

[132] Assoun, *Freud and Nietzsche*, 147.

of a lack. Though for Hobbes the social contract is solidified through fear, an equally potent emotion, this fear is a *rational* fear emanating out of an interest in self-preservation. This is less so for Freud. Though for Freud the social contract is indeed preferable to the state of nature, the bond that we have towards law, and indeed each other, betrays complex emotional matrices of ambivalence, pain, sacredness, guilt, anxiety, and renunciation "that are passed on unconsciously through evolution and history"[133] and emanate out of what Freud calls "deferred obedience."[134] As Hobbes imagines a clear progressive leap from the state of nature to civil society, Freud marks which relatively opaque psychic wounds we take on during the leap, and to what effects.

How do we arrive at this moment? Freud speculates that the origins of society are traced back to a scene in pre-civilizational, tribal society, in which a tyrannical patriarch termed "the primal father" was deposed, murdered and cannibalized by his sons out of jealousy and fear. The originary relationship between father and son, in effect a relation between ruler and ruled, was one of ambivalence. As Freud writes:

> They hated their father, who presented such a formidable obstacle to their craving for power and their sexual desires; but they loved and admired him too. After they had got rid of him, had satisfied their hatred and had put into effect their wish to identify themselves with him, the affection with had all this time been pushed under was bound to make itself felt. It did so in the form of remorse. A sense of guilt made

[133] Eli Zaretsky, *Political Freud* (New York: Columbia University Press 2016), 98.

[134] Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 178.

> its appearance, which in this instance coincided with the remorse felt by the whole group.[135]

This passage suggests that for Freud, unlike Nietzsche, the capacity to feel guilt appears to precede its instantiation as a socio-political and legal imperative to obey.[136] In fact, we could say that Freud gestures towards, but then disavows, thinking of guilt as a potentially pre-Oedipal feeling.[137] After all, the primal brothers did not run afoul of a particular authoritative injunction or taboo in overthrowing him, but instead caused real harm to a love object, albeit an ambivalent and authoritative one. In the quote above, Freud suggests it is the feeling of *affection* the brothers had towards their father that crucially qualifies the relationship such that guilt could emerge.[138] However, Freud, of course, does not give sustained attention to a conception of guilt that might betray an innate moral revulsion against violence or guilt as an expression of solidaristic value. Rather, in subsequent analyses, Freud, when speaking about external authority as a source of the

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[135] *Ibid*, 177-178.

[136] Zaretsky identifies this and puts it in the following terms: "The fatal inevitability of guilt is the heart of all aggression and the reason we can never be rid of it. The guilt derives from the murder of the father, but there must have been something prior to the murder to explain the guilt. The prior condition is the ambivalence of instinctual life itself. Thus, the sons both loved and hated their father; after the murder they transformed both instincts into guilt." Eli Zaretsky, *Secrets of the Soul: A Social and Cultural History of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 239-240

[137] See Whitebook, *Freud: An Intellectual Biography* for a sustained analysis of this disavowal. Klein will invariably take up this idea, though she does not engage in the historical analysis Freud does to ground her claim.

[138] This is echoed in *Civilization and its Discontents*, as Freud notes "After their hatred had been satisfied by their act of aggression, their love came to the fore in their remorse for the deed." Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 56.

sense of guilt, goes no further than translating guilt into fear of a "loss of love" in certain states of dependency, and, "above all" in more developed senses of guilt before the onset of conscience proper, into a fear that another will demonstrate superiority over the self through exercising punishment.[139] In some sense, the pre-Oedipal perspective that would be developed by Klein, was for Freud immediately cut off at the pass.

In any case, taking as his point of departure the aftermath of the overthrow of the primal father, Freud emphasizes how an original guilt relation among family members became political and generalized through the construction of totemic rituals, which in effect established law that bound not only "the brothers", but indeed all members of the social group. So says Freud, the establishment of totemic rituals was a way of appeasing a "filial sense of guilt" by honoring the father through what is called "deferred obedience," a term meant to express the practice of adhering to a set of demands so as to make up for his overthrow and diminish the feelings of guilt that emerged therefrom.[140] But this still amounts to a denial, as the worship of totems emerged as *a substitute* for the father himself. In this sense, the father's violent power endures, and the sense of guilt that plagued the brothers was transferred or displaced onto another object, rather than eliminated. And it is that sense of guilt that phylogenetically binds individuals towards law. The

[139] *Ibid*, 49-50. Freud puts this in different terms in the *New Introductory Lectures*. Speaking of the developed superego, he notes: "The super-ego seems to have made a one-sided choice and to have picked out only the parents' strictness and severity, their prohibiting and punitive function, whereas their loving care seems not to have been taken over and maintained." Sigmund Freud, "The Dissection of the Psychical Personality," in *The New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1966), 521-544, 526. This all suggests the development of the superego is indeed a function of a love relationship, but fear, prohibition, and sanction are its dominant expressions.

[140] Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 180.

"elimination of the primal father," therefore, is not one discrete originary wound, but an enduring and repeating weight that has "left ineradicable traces in the history of humanity."[141]

This is the birth Oedipal scene, and it is incidentally an account of the violent birth of organized politics itself. But of course, as we know, for Freud the Oedipal scene is something reproduced in each familial unit, and given additional texture depending on social circumstances.[142] In this sense, for Freud politics is always a *family affair* in a dual sense, insofar as politics itself originates from a family drama, and our particular attachment to laws and norms more broadly is always an expression of the Oedipal situation in which we all find ourselves in family life. The superego, the component of psychic life that functions as the source of internalized parental voice, is produced through the Oedipal scene in the family and comes to function as a mechanism that *enforces the law* and has a dual purpose of setting an idealized standard and determining prohibitions.[143] The force through which these standards are imposed, for Freud, corresponds but does not necessarily equal the severity of self-reproach, or the "unconscious sense of guilt" later on in life.[144] The severity of this self-reproach can express itself in a number of ways, but Freud comes back consistently to one particular practice, namely self-punishment and a weddedness to suffering as a means of satisfying the dictates of superego.[145] This is to say that

[141] *Ibid*, 192.

[142] Freud notes the following in *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*: "The parental influence of course includes in its operation not only the personalities of the actual parents but also the family, racial and national traditions handed on through them, as well as the demands of the immediate social *milieu* which they represent". Freud, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, 16.

[143] Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, 30.

[144] *Ibid*

[145] See Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, 50; and Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 51.

Freudian guilt is always a way of relating to an injunction that is at its core *personified* as parental. When one feels guilt, on Freudian terms, one is invariably encountering the look and the univocal condemnation of the authoritative figure from whom one fears punishment and withdrawn love.[146] Hence, as Buber notes, the tendency of Freudian theory to avoid granting guilt an "ontic" or *real* character, instead strictly conceptualizing it as an emanation from the "anxiety-induced bugbears that are generated in the cavern of the unconscious."[147] Guilt-feelings, particularly in their more neurotic varieties, always speaks more to the particular development of the individual who experiences them rather than the actual moral weight of the deed in question.

Within this framework, the superego speaks in very specific ways. In short, for Freud and his interpreters, it always speaks through command. It is not to be reasoned with, nor can it be simply ignored.[148] Since it is an internalized representation of a parental figure rather than an actual individual watching us, it remains in some sense a trace, but one that nevertheless relentlessly elicits a particular kind of uncritical obedience. Freud regularly describes this relation of one of submission, and the superego as the mechanism that delivers a "categorical imperative (*kategorischer Imperative*)."[149] To liken these dictates as those akin to Kantian moral laws is of

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[146] See Sigmund Freud, "The Economic Problem of Masochism," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume XIX*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1961), 159-170.

[147] Buber, "Guilt and Guilt Feelings," 200.

[148] For an account of the Freudian superego as an element of psychic life with which one cannot enter into a productive dialogue, see Adam Phillips, "Against Self-Criticism", *The London Review of Books*, 37 no. 5 (March 2015).

[149] Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, 49.

course deliberate. Kant, speaking about our relation to the moral laws in the *Groundwork*, claims the following:

> "…there arises a natural dialectic, i.e., a disposition, to argue against these strict laws of duty and to question their validity, or at least their purity and strictness; and, if possible, to make them more accordant with our wishes and inclinations, that is to say, to corrupt them at their very source, and entirely to destroy their worth - a thing which even common practical reason cannot ultimately call good."[150]

The dictates of the superego are therefore very much conceptualized as categorical imperatives as Kant describes them, insofar as they are insulated (ideally in Kant's sense but functionally in Freud's sense) from criticism, standing over and above us as demands that require full observance. Of course, Kant's categorical imperative is a product of reason and autonomy while the Freudian superego is not, yet these both stand as centers of legalistic authority to which there cannot be questioning. For Freud, to feel guilt then means anticipating that one will run afoul of an imperative to which one cannot appeal or respond, save for the reflex of self-punishment.[151]

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[150] Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals with On a Supposed Right to Lie Because of Philanthropic Concerns*, trans. James W. Ellington. (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1993), 17.

[151] Ricoeur refers to guilt as a "preventive procedure" rather than a clear instance of violation. This means that guilt is more so the anxiety that one experiences in relation to an unchallengeable demand, not necessarily the experience of transgression itself. Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 293-309.

Guilt is famously expressed in more ambivalent terms in *Civilization and its Discontents*, yet, as Ricoeur rightly notes, Freud's more mature and culturalist account of the function of guilt-feelings in no way cuts against the more intra-psychic account that he develops in *The Ego and the Id*.[152] They are, rather, complementary readings. What *The Ego and the Id* explores at the individual level is not negated by the cultural explanation of guilt, which Freud takes pains to show in Chapter 7 of *Civilization and its Discontents*. However, it is only in the latter text where Freud makes explicit a "switch in fronts" in his general theory, where guilt is not just an expression of the superego speaking in severe terms against libido, but instead represents a byproduct of the inward-directed aggression towards aggression itself that makes civilization possible.[153] This suggests that guilt serves *Eros* in a roundabout way, insofar as it marks a limitation that comes to invariably serve the individual pursuits that could only take place in civilization. Freud's observations in *Civilization* do not represent an abandonment of the general psychoanalytic pursuit to reduce the punitive voice of the superego. However, Freud explores the sense of guilt as an indicator of both advance and loss, necessitating a pessimistic balancing act, supported by the mediating function of the ego, between punitive inhibition and self-abasement and aggressive destructiveness.

We are thus permitted to consider the limitations placed upon us in family and social life as simultaneously the source of neurotic misery, but also the means by which we divert and morph aggressive energy into something potentially productive. As a result, we are telling a similar story that Nietzsche tells us about bad conscience. Insofar as an external pressure creates the subject, this same pressure facilitates the subject's ability for self-transcendence, self-mastery, and

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[152] Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 306-307.

[153] *Ibid*, 306.

creation. However, as is the case with Nietzsche, we are still left in the same place vis-à-vis guilt. For each of them, guilt itself, conscious or unconscious, does not appear to be an engine of creative energy or self-transcendence. Guilt does not motivate outward-oriented action in the world. It rather produces a relation towards the self which strictly inhibits the will. This is to say that for each thinker, guilt is the product of a *limitation* out of which potentially creative energy emerges, but guilt-feelings themselves are not the source of that energy. They function as the affective means by which we are bound to the limitation itself. As a result, for both thinkers guilt is still something that must be to some extent muted and transcended if there is to be any possible self-fulfillment or emancipation.

III. Synthesizing a Paradigm:

Despite noteworthy differences between Nietzsche and Freud's political and moral psychology, we could see Freud's work on guilt as reaffirmation rather than deviation from Nietzsche's basic sketch. Both stories begin with a political scene that instantiates a foundational and enduring tendency towards repression and obedience. While for Freud this process is shot through with ambivalent attachments and emotionally-charged identifications that are not fully present in Nietzsche's thought, both thinkers are presenting guilt as a relationship that takes place in relation to a set of moral dictates that emerge as prohibiting laws emanating from authoritative systems or figures of power. Additionally, for each thinker these processes are set in motion through a process of violent disruption. In Nietzsche's formulation, this takes place at the hands of the "blond beasts," presumably a metaphor for any group with a capacity to exert their will on others, who enact a literal process of enclosure that turns outward-oriented aggression inward. For Freud, the origin story is violent revolution, followed by a reconstitution of a violent, authoritative

father-figure through law and totemic object, thereby inaugurating a template for subsequent forms of social organization. This originary wound is repeated through each individual's process of Oedipal struggle, which repeat two interrelated elements, namely that "the father comprises the primary representative of reality and that the child's entrance into reality is *essentially violent*."[154] The process of individuation that takes place through these originary sites of wounding at the hands of an *external force* is in effect what comes to explain the adversarial relationship that each of us have towards ourselves in the work of both thinkers. We could sum up this first element of the paradigm as follows: *guilt as we experience it is set in motion from without through processes of violent repression undertaken by figures of authority*. *This means that guilt invariably has a political quality from the outset, a function of authoritative violence that brings the subject in line with power*.

The second fixture of this paradigm is a function of the first. This concerns what guilt *does*. For both Nietzsche and Freud, guilt assumes a function that other emotions do not. Enacted first in an original political scene and then re-enacted in subsequent political and social arrangements, guilt binds individuals to laws and mores that are invariably imposed from the outside. Wherever there is guilt, there is a conscious or unconscious imperative that demands uncritical obedience, which has been internalized in the subject such that they police themselves in particular ways. Here, for both thinkers, guilt is inextricably linked with punishment and the *fear* of punishment, which in turn places the subject in a state of nervous excitation before a law. This fear of punishment resulting from a perceived transgression, or, for Freud specifically, a *fantasy of transgression*, instills in the subject self-abasing gestures that create hopes for expiation and relief, but in reality serves as a means by which uncritical obedience to authoritative figures or institutions

[154] Whitebook, *Freud: An Intellectual Biography*. 160. My italics.

is reproduced. These feelings do not correspond to a reality of moral failure, but rather strictly concerns reflexive perceptions of violation that stem from the psychic and bodily residue transmitted from the originary political scene. From here, we have a rudimentary constellation of concepts that constitute the second element of the paradigm: *guilt is characterized by an anxious excitation before a demand, the perceived violation of which, in thought or in deed, produces a reflexive tendency towards self-punishment*.

Last, the overarching concern with both Freud and Nietzsche appears to be the health of the individual, who must be released from a certain kind of misapprehension about their own perceived culpability and tendency to think themselves punished for something. This revision of the punitive tendencies in human behavior has the function of releasing the subject from the grips of a power that is mostly unknown to them, which in turn permits a degree of self-transcendence in the face of this power, however partial this may be. This process represents a different kind of tarrying with the negative, one in which a tendency towards irrational *self-negation* is gradually overcome in favor of a more realistic and empowering sense of self. This process is not without its contradictions, however. The limitations that produce guilt, for both thinkers, represent pivot points that facilitate self-creation. Yet, guilt itself does not appear to have a creative character. Rather, for both thinkers, striving *against* guilt as a reflexive way of confronting limitation is required in order to make use of the affective energy that can be redirected for different purposes. Here, we could say that *muting bad conscience or the superego is a fundamental element of individual health, the process of self-actualization, and the drive for freedom. The effort to contest the irrational nature of these demands, insofar as it is possible, constitutes an act of personal, and potentially political, resistance*.

It is not my intention to evaluate this paradigm and explain what both Nietzsche and Freud get wrong, though I will at times assert this account does indeed have a set of blind spots and deficiencies. Rather, the purpose of this intervention is to explore how taking Nietzsche and Freud as points of departure locks the theorist into certain understandings about the relationship between guilt, power, law, and authority. More specifically, political theorists assuming the Nietzschean and Freudian account tend to speak to a vision of a subject mostly, though not necessarily entirely, constituted by power, and guilt as an internalized mechanism of enforcement that reproduces that system of power. Guilt is therefore treated with a certain kind of suspicion, a mark of one's investment in domination that must be transcended if the subject's emancipation is going to become possible. Though this approach helps us understand a fundamental question in contemporary political theory, namely how, through cycles of repetitive enactment, the subject invests themselves in a system of domination, it is worth probing what might be lost if this account of guilt is taken for granted. How does this produce a mode of theorizing that centralizes a specific set of political concerns at the expense of others? Is there an alternative conceptualization of guilt that might beget a different method of political critique, thereby unearthing a different way of thinking through the subject's relationship with a system of domination and a different way out of this system? The next sections of the chapter will pursue this question.

## IV. The Paradigm's Persistence:

In *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud*, Phillip Rieff expresses a certain anxiety about the rise of "psychological man" in the United States, a product of the generalization and socialization of analytic categories and techniques in the postwar era. As the aims of analytic treatment are raised to guiding social and political ways of living, it permits a kind

of "casuistry," whereby, in the name of healthy living, one mutes a *real* guilt to free themselves of the agony of moral feeling.[155] This is, as Rieff notes, a "vulgar and popular misinterpretation of Freud" that of course has a convenient function for individuals embedded in a culture of narcissism. However, he goes on to say, "there is something about the presuppositions of analytic therapy that encourages such misinterpretations."[156] If one of the main aims of analysis is to "revise the superego," relieving the individual of neurotic ill-health, the actual question of "the good" becomes neglected, which has adverse effects if the aims of analysis are elevated into generalized ways of life. What emerges, so says Rieff, is licentious individualism raised to its own kind of imperative. This constitutes a critique of Freudianism insofar as it becomes a fixture of public life.

Though Rieff's critique has some merit and force, particularly as it relates to the consequences of reducing political questions to matters of individualized work on the self, this anxiety about uptakes of Freud's work fetishizing licentiousness is not quite my concern. Rather, the concern is related to how political theorists working with Nietzsche and Freud in this paradigm engage in a form of critique that precludes alternative ways of explaining the complex moral and emotional life of the subject. Take, for example, Wendy Brown's seminal and influential conceptualization of the "wounded attachment" in *States of Injury: Freedom and Power in Late Modernity*. Brown takes as her point of departure the prevalence of the production of "politicized identities," groupings of individuals that weaponize a sense of collective injury as a means of attaining a degree of power amid oppression within "configurations of disciplinary and capitalist

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[155] Phillip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966), 58.

[156] *Ibid*

power."[157] Brown describes this subject as "starkly accountable yet dramatically impotent,"[158] implying that they are in some sense already subjected to a supposedly liberal "blaming-structure"[159] that organizes the way view their own agency and the sources of their suffering in political life. This agonizing excitation produced by late capitalist domination generates a kind of *ressentiment* that is in turn weaponized in such a way that a moralizing blame and guilt is projected outwards in a futile attempt to gain moral and political standing amidst a generalized impotence.

Brown's work is at its core giving an account of the reduction of politics to a morality play, where groups vie for supremacy by weaponizing the moral emotions while leaving in place or indeed reifying a broader system of domination that features blame and guilt as one of its means of discipline. On the part of subaltern groups, grasping at moralization as a means of emancipation is essentially evidence that the politics of emancipation has been coopted by a hegemonic disciplinary logic, and that exercising guilt and blame in particular is a means by which subjects are further bound to its basic means of operation. In short, we could say that in Brown's explicitly Nietzschean analysis, guilt is strictly conceptualized as a weapon used in order to solidify a kind of power. The original "blaming-structure" of liberal democratic life at the time of Brown's writing invariably gets reproduced in the subject who is attempting to break free from a broader system of domination. In Brown's drama, wherever guilt is felt or deployed, it is evidence of the residue of a power relation that goes unrecognized as such, thereby setting in motion a kind of repetition cannot give rise to genuinely democratic action.

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[157] Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1995), 69.

[158] *Ibid*

[159] *Ibid*, 70.

This is, as Achille Mbembe writes, a drama that is incidentally reproduced in the post-colony. The guilt that the colonizer "ought to feel" for colonial oppression is displaced onto the colonized, which in turn reproduces a violent logic set in motion by colonization itself. The victims of colonization, in the throes of guilt, expiate this condition by becoming "executioners and projecting on those weaker than they are the terror they once suffered, thus reproducing on occasion, and excessively so, the logics that presided over their own extermination."[160] To draw this out, guilt emerges here, as in Brown's schema, through a process of subordination but also identification, in which those placed in a condition of guilt without hope of expiation come to take on the characteristics of the power with which they identify. This guilt, itself a product of violence, has the function of solidifying an overarching logic of domination *and* a basic subjectivity that conforms to the dictates of power.[161]

We can go further. We find elements of the paradigm at work in countless other fixtures of contemporary political thought, from feminist theory to work adjacent or within the Marxist tradition. For example, in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* we find a noteworthy reading of *The Ego and the Id*, in which the superego functions as a regulatory mechanism as well as a law, which has the function of channeling desire and identification in such a way as to produce heteronormativity. The pronouncements of the superego build the subject set to conform in a particular way, with significant implications for how sex and sexuality are developed and

[160] Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 39.

[161] Ruth Leys catalogues a vast array of literatures that make this exact claim in relation to Holocaust victims who felt "survivor's guilt" upon their liberation. Those in the grips of "survivor's guilt" were in reality pathologically enacting a form of identification with their captors, insofar as they actually thought themselves worthy of punishment. See Leys, *From Guilt to Shame*, 19-55.

maintained, keeping the subject in a state of relative self-abasement and obedience before an imperative that dictates how the sexed body must act. This basic story is repeated in Fanon's Marxist-inflected account of real subsumption, whereby the worker in the settler colony, through the imperatives foisted on them by the "time clock," is introduced to the "moral notion of guilt" in the workplace.[162] The time clock has the function of surveilling and controlling the worker, and instilling in them an assumption of acting in bad faith or malintent in relation to their employer and the products of their labor. The feelings of guilt for not having worked hard enough are produced by certain standardized mechanisms of control. Once again, where there is guilt, there is the residue of power and the repetitive, individualized re-enactment of the demands of power. The worker *works* such that they can alleviate the weight of this demand, thereby reproducing a relation of class domination.

This relationship between guilt, time, and work is perhaps latent in Marx's discussion of the working day and real subsumption, but made more explicit in Fanon's discussion of the time clock. However, this relationship is generalized as a broader social phenomenon in Foucault's lectures *The Punitive Society 1972-1973*, such that time-discipline, within the space of the factory or penitentiary, is conceptualized as having a moral character along Christian lines.[163] Here, "guilt" as a juridical designation marks the subject, who in turn performs certain acts of penance that are quantified in temporal terms within certain sites of power. Doing a day's work or "doing time" as a criminal are *moralized* acts, which is what establishes the Foucauldian "punitive society" as an

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[162] Frantz Fanon, *The Psychiatric Writings from Alienation and Freedom* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 374.

[163] See Michel Foucault, *The Punitive Society: Lectures at the College de France: 1972-1973*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 82-98, 99-121.

*affective economy*, more specifically an *affective economy of guilt*.[164] The subject who becomes integrated into a power relation is therefore not merely designated as something, but is made to feel a certain kind of indebtedness towards the authoritative voice in a hierarchical relation. While Foucault is of course known for his refusal of the "repressive hypothesis," which we associate with Freud, Butler notes that Foucault is indebted to Freud's basic "account of the production and proliferation of the regulated body."[165] Here, Foucault's account of the subject within the "punitive society" is broadly psychoanalytic, insofar as Foucault is not merely conceptualizing obedience, but also *attachment* to, and internalization of, the practices of power that aid in the subject's construction.[166] This is all to say that despite Foucault's critical engagement with Freud, as it concerns guilt Foucault's is less a deviation from the Freudian paradigm than an iteration of it.

Last, we can even find elements of the paradigm in the Arendtian tradition of political theory, despite Arendt's general unwillingness to incorporate psychoanalysis and psychology into her work.[167] Her dismissal of Freud, though persistent and total, did not mean that she did not in some sense adopt originally Nietzschean insights as it relates to the question of guilt and responsibility that germinated in her earliest post-war writings and developed into to her most mature reflections on the subject in the 1960s. In *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt's relatively idiosyncratic account of Nietzsche's concept of the will contains a reading that potentially clarifies

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[164] Philipp Wüschner, "Shame, Guilt, and Punishment," *Foucault Studies* 23 (August, 2017), 86-107, 94.

[165] Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 60. See also Deborah Cook, "Foucault, Freud, and the Repressive Hypothesis", *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 45, no. 2 (2014): 148-161.

[166] *Ibid*, 7.

[167] See Richard King, *Arendt and America* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015).

her own conception of guilt as a strictly individual, legalistic, and moral concept.[168] Though Arendt would not adopt Nietzsche's general attitude towards morality and guilt as fictions, nor would she accept the staunch individualism of Nietzsche's philosophy, for both thinkers guilt is an emotional state that has no capacity to transcend "the sheer givenness of the world."[169] If guilt represents the antithesis of willing in Nietzsche's philosophy, it has a similar valence in Arendt's work. Though morality and lawfulness will always involve matters of judgment, meaning that guilt is not simply the thoughtless residue of a demand, it does not have a dynamic worldmaking or self-transcending capacity as does a category like responsibility or action. These latter categories, in keeping with Nietzsche's conception of the will, have the capacity to transform conceptions of ordered time and meaning, whereas guilt, for both thinkers, has no such apparent capacity or leverage. We could say that guilt, on Arendt's and Nietzsche's terms, constitutes the dead end of politics, insofar as it keeps the subject in a state of impotent self-regard. This is one observation that animates Arendt's firm distinction between guilt and responsibility, which, as we will see in chapter 4, is mostly untenable.

These literatures constitute dominant strains of contemporary political theory scholarship, not merely in the substantive questions they pose, but also the method they develop to make legible and meaningful certain social phenomena. As it concerns guilt-feelings, the question of what guilt does and how to interpret this emotion in political theoretical terms yields a specific kind of critique, which mainly reproduces rather than deviates from the paradigm set forth by Nietzsche and Freud. In short, taking guilt-feelings as an object of inquiry is also inevitably a way of giving

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[168] See Arendt, "Collective Responsibility" and Arendt, "Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship"

[169] Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Inc., 1978), 169.

an account of a system of power that produces that guilt, always serving the broader function of locking the subject into an identification and alignment with authority. These feelings do not merely dictate the limits of action, but remain fundamental ingredients of subjectivation and self-constitution. This is to say that where there is guilt there is not *just* power, but a certain *kind* of power that substantially produces the political subject repeatedly and oftentimes unconsciously. Acting out of a sense of guilt means invariably producing and reproducing the demands of power. As such, to demystify and counter-act operations of guilt becomes a concrete political task that has the added effect of resisting and unraveling a dominant power, be it personal or impersonal.

What if this dominant strain of thinking features its own kind of impoverishment? In each of these deeply important traditions of political thought, guilt is assumed as having a political character insofar as it *binds* the subject to power, or generally inhibits them from undertaking the more substantial and transformative political activity like collective political resistance, reparative work, worldmaking, or political critique. It simply disciplines individuals in such a way that they remain pliable in the face of authority. However, the Nietzschean and Freudian anatomy of guilt-feelings should not simply be assumed by political theorists. Rather, this account itself must be subject to critical engagement, not with the aim of discrediting Nietzsche and Freud, but instead offering an alternative way of reading this emotion that in turn opens up a new way of seeing the relationship between guilt-feelings, political power, and political action. In so doing, rest of this study hopes to pry open a concept in need of rethinking, in turn providing a different set of analytical tools at the disposal of political theorists.

V. Melanie Klein and an Alternative Social Theory:

In thinking against Nietzsche and Freud it is tempting to jettison a psychoanalytic account of psycho-social life entirely and develop a new framework with different attendant concepts and categories. In some sense, there is already a tradition on hand that does this and has been no less influential in the 20th century than psychoanalysis. This is the account we can derive from certain existentialist literatures from Kierkegaard and Heidegger to Buber and Jaspers. Kierkegaard and Heidegger, despite their differences on this question, both assert that guilt is a core element of being rather than a psychological affliction in the Freudian sense or an emanation of a power relation. It is, instead, a constitutive element of being that makes possible our character as free and ethical subjects (in Kierkegaard's framing),[170] or a "primordial" and fundamental component of *Dasein* that undergirds the very possibility of care and therefore moral judgment (in Heidegger's framing).[171] This is to say that for both thinkers guilt is the existential condition of possibility for a distinctively human life. Within this same tradition, Buber and Jaspers both hold onto categories of guilt, "existential"[172] and "metaphysical"[173] respectively, which signify a relation between man

[170] See Søren Kierkegaard. *On the Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Oriented Deliberation in View of the Dogmatic Problem of Hereditary Sin*, trans. and ed. Alistair Hannay (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014), 117-133.

[171] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 325-333.

[172] For Buber, "existential guilt occurs when someone injures an order of the human world whose foundations he knows and recognizes as those of his own existence and of all common human existence." In order to come to terms with this form of guilt, Buber suggests one must become "responsible to his relationship to his own being", meaning that existential guilt requires a self-examination that can only take place in the "abyss of the I-with-me", a process by which one relates to oneself as a human self. Buber, "Guilt and Guilt-Feeling," 202-203.

[173] Jaspers famously describes "metaphysical guilt" in the following terms: "There exists a solidarity among men as human being that makes each co-responsible for every wrong and every injustice in the world, especially for crimes committed in his presence or with his knowledge. If I

and humanity as such. These specific concepts are meant to probe deeper than "our everyday guilt in psychological terms," and instead reach for a more fundamental guilt that denotes an offense against the very reality of human life in common, not simply a mere breaking of taboos.[174] The more complex typologies offered by each thinker still have scholarly purchase for those want to understand real and genuine forms of guilt-feeling against the standardized Freudian approach.[175] However, whatever the existentialist tradition grants us in thinking against the relative myopia of the Nietzschean-Freudian paradigm and in favor of a more outward-oriented and intersubjective account of guilt-feelings as fundamental aspects of the human person, they lack a psychodynamic element as well as a compelling account of how individuals develop specific kinds of attachments to objects and people in specific political arrangements. In short, some of the totalizing categories of existentialist philosophy, particularly as it relates to guilt-feelings, remain somewhat abstract and static, lacking an account of the subject's ongoing relationship with broader systems of power. What is required, then, is to retain from psychoanalysis an account of attachment as well as a dynamic theory of psychic life, while holding out for alternative ways of imagining guilt as part of a critical social theory.

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fail to do whatever I can to prevent them, I too am guilty. If I was present at the murder of others without risking my life to prevent it, I feel guilty in a way not adequately conceivable either legally, politically, or morally. That I live after such a thing has happened weighs upon me as indelible guilt…Jurisdiction rests with God alone." Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 25-26.

[174] Katchadourian, *Guilt*, 111.

[175] Most recently, Nadia Abu El-Haj has made use of the work of Robert Jay Lifton and Buber's category of "ontic guilt" as a way of designating real and authentic guilt-feelings of perpetration by soldiers in the context of the War in Vietnam and the "War on Terror". For Abu El-Haj, Buber's ability to see guilt-feelings as *real* makes him an indispensable thinker for those who want to find a counterpoint and corrective to Freud. See Nadia Abu El-Haj, *Combat Trauma: Imaginaries of War and Citizenship in Post-9/11 America* (New York: Verso, 2022).

What we might lack in the existentialist account *and* the Nietzschean-Freudian account, we might gain through sustained engagement with Melanie Klein. Klein is, of course, widely considered to be a faithful Freudian, and is controversially one of the few prominent psychoanalysts to take as a given Freud's elaborate speculations on the "death drive". However, according to Alford, the Kleinian account of childhood development, though indebted to Freudian categories, is of "a different psychic world, whose relationship to Freud's is virtually incommensurable."[176] Klein's central innovation, and indeed deviation from the standard Freudian account of early childhood in part resides in her drawing out the "disavowed" elements of Freud's work that constitute what Whitebook calls Freud's "unofficial" position. So says Whitebook, Freud gestures towards and then immediately pulls back from two intertwined positions that would eventually become fixtures of later analytic work, namely the emphasis on the maternal and pre-Oedipal instead of the Oedipal, and the attendant development of an account of early psychic life that is not characterized by separateness and the gradual development of identifications but rather initial "unity" and "relatedness."[177] The "unofficial" elements of Freud's work that remain suppressed undercurrents or unrealized possibilities are made explicit in Klein and used in such a way that the central elements of the Freudian paradigm are called into question, thereby producing an alternative framework for understanding the emergence of guilt-feelings and their effects.

Klein begins by conceptualizing the infant as beset by a fundamentally different collection of feelings and capacities than Freud does. According to Klein, the infant contains a fragile ego

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[176] C. Fred Alford, *Melanie Klein & Critical Social Theory: An Account of Politics, Art, and Reason Based on Her Psychoanalytic Theory* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 37.

[177] Whitebook, *Freud*, 163-164.

that is threatened from the earliest stages of life by a "primordial anxiety" in the face of the death instinct, which manifests as an early fear of disintegration and annihilation.[178] In the face of this early anxiety, the infant engages in a process of projection, by which the fear of destruction is cast out and attached to specific objects, while the "life instinct" animates a process of introjection, by which "life-giving" objects are internalized, nourishing the nascent ego.[179] Here, the projection outward of the anxiety generated by the death instinct and the introjection of "life-giving" sources in the external world creates a rudimentary set of stable objects, one of which is hated and has the function of a receptacle for anxiety and destructive impulses,[180] and another that is loved and facilitates a sense of inner stability and outward identification. In Klein's famous formulation, the earliest objects of love and hate are the so-called "good breast" and "bad breast", which take on fixed valences and help the infant organize their own emotional states. The "bad breast" is hated, cast as fully threatening and "endangering,"[181] whereas the "good breast" becomes an idealized object that serves as the core foundation for the infant's sense of self.

For Klein, this mode of organization is described as the "paranoid-schizoid" *position*, suggesting that this is not a "stage" of development that it is transcended in a process of indefinite developmental growth, but rather a potentially recurring way of organizing the self. Positions, specifically the paranoid-schizoid position, therefore present as "constant temptations" instead of

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[178] Melanie Klein, "On the Development of Mental Functioning," in *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works 1946-1963*, ed. Roger Money-Kyrle (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 236-246, 237.

[179] *Ibid*, 238.

[180] Melanie Klein, "Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms," in *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works 1921-1945*, ed. Roger Money-Kyrle (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 1-24, 4.

[181] Ogden, *The Primitive Edge of Experience*, 44.

a phase that is entered, endured, and then completely shed.[182] Here, in producing an image of a subject slipping between feeling states, Klein implicitly gives us resources to call into question linear conceptions of progress and development, or an image of the child moving seamlessly from immature dependency towards autonomy in adulthood. The paranoid-schizoid position is, then, a repeated vantage point through which the relationship between self and world is understood in both childhood and adulthood, one that is characterized by an almost Schmittian division of objects into friend and enemy, ideal and abject.[183]

This world of purely threatening objects and purely idealized attachments has a veneer of stability, but in reality manifests as a tendency of thought and behavior that leads the individual into volatile oscillations "between feelings of blissful satisfaction and violent persecution."[184] Objects do not exhibit their own particularity, but are stamped as either threatening or idealized,

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[182] Noelle McAfee, *Fear of Breakdown: Politics and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 176.

[183] On more political terms, this could be considered a Schmittian form of psychosocial organization, insofar as psychic life is divided into safe and threatening objects, or friends and enemies. Schmitt's description of the "friend and enemy" distinction as "concrete and existential" is a direct parallel to the paranoid-schizoid position, in that both envision a world in which the integrity of the self is always at stake. Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 27. The resonance between Schmittian enmity and regressive patterns of behavior in children was drawn out explicitly by Theodor Adorno in *Minima Moralia*. Adorno writes: "…Carl Schmitt defined the very essence of politics by the categories of friend and enemy. Progress to such consciousness makes its own regression to the behavior patterns of the child, which either likes things or fears them. The *a priori* reduction to the friend-enemy relationship is one of the primal phenomena of the new anthropology. Freedom would be not to choose between black and white but to abjure such prescribed choices." Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 2005), 132.

[184] David McIvor, "The Cunning of Recognition: Melanie Klein and Contemporary Political Theory," *Contemporary Political Theory* 15, no. 3 (2016): 243-263, 251.

functioning as "receptacles of aggression or outsized love."[185] This splitting of objects in the world indicates not a sense of security and certainty, even a false one, but a genuine split within the ego itself, a disintegrated psychic organization constantly beset by the anxiety generated by the unacknowledged destructive impulses that lie at the core of the individual's being.[186] As a result, the individual in the paranoid-schizoid position is constantly taking on the laborious work of separating a structure of idealization, with its attendant love objects, from a set of external objects that are considered to be fully threatening to that structure. At stake here, according to Hanna Segal, is always the perceived "survival of the self."[187]

If the paranoid-schizoid position channels a disorganized primal anxiety such that it integrates all object-relations into a broader structure of enmity, at the outset it is clear the subject cannot see things in the world for what they are, including themselves. Put differently, if all relations from this vantage point are perceived as either fully idealized or fully threatening, the individual invariably *objectifies* things in the world such that they fit into this dichotomous structure of organization. Taking on the posture of an omnipotent power, the individual engages in myriad forms of manipulation such that they can fully control objects of attachment to fit within a Manichean structure of identification. The paranoid-schizoid position is therefore a mode of psychic organization that sees people as only "part objects," quite literally fungible *things* that are not endowed with complex inner states, characteristics, and motivations, but are instead uniformly

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[185] David McIvor, *Mourning in America: Mourning and the Politics of Race* (Ithica and London: Cornell University Press, 2016), 26.

[186] Klein, "Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms," 5.

[187] Hanna Segal, *Melanie Klein* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 127.

controlled and misrecognized as an appendage or "anatomical part" of the self so they can provide a foothold in stabilizing the disintegrated ego.[188]

Paranoid-schizoid organization, therefore, is at its core a process of objectification that functions as a defensive operation. However, what is being defended is not quite a substantive self that has become integrated and reconciled itself with its own destructiveness. The paranoid-schizoid position does not facilitate self-reflection or even an ability to experience change over time internally or in objects of attachment.[189] What Ogden calls the "nonsubjective self" therefore becomes its own kind of object, incapable of integrating, acknowledging, and synthesizing internal feeling states, and unable to see others as whole, ordinary objects that are not considered either idealized or abject.[190] Instead, the "nonsubjective self" remains in a permanent defensive posture against outside persecutors that threaten the structure of idealization. Nowhere does the paranoid-schizoid nonsubject recognize their own feelings *as their own*. Intense feelings are externalized onto things in the world, which then confront the nonsubject as outside forces that cannot truly be owned or acknowledged as actual reflections of an inner state.

According to Klein, the psychic and relational processes characteristic of the paranoid-schizoid position are fundamental elements of both "normal development" and "abnormal object-relations."[191] Paranoid-schizoid states, along with its featured "primitive mental mechanisms" of "denial, splitting, projection and fragmentation," represent initial footholds for subsequent

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[188] *Ibid*

[189] Ogden, *The Matrix of the Mind*, 80.

[190] *Ibid*, 84.

[191] Klein, "Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms," 9.

development, but are ideally gradually overcome through dynamic and complex processes of integration.[192] Despite the fact that the paranoid-schizoid position becomes a constant pull under the weight of the pressures that object ties exert on us, Klein sketches this as but one way of relating to the world. As the paranoid-schizoid orientation features splitting, projection, objectification of self and others, disavowal, and omnipotent manipulation as fixtures of its operation, Klein imagines a state that, at least temporarily, undoes this posture. When shifting out of this posture, the "nonsubject" does not disavow their paranoia as another means of defense, but relatively self-consciously relinquishes the omnipotence inherent in the position and begins to see others and themselves as "whole objects," or complex individuals that do not fit within a totalizing schema of "all good" or "all bad." This represents, in Kleinian parlance, the onset of the "depressive position."

A fair amount of literature has been produced on the particular significance of the depressive position for social and political theory. Though Klein had no intention of becoming a "social reformer," nor did she draw out many, if any, of the interdisciplinary insights from her work,[193] this element of Kleinian psychoanalysis has been mobilized to nourish countless theoretical innovations, from "reparative reading" in the field of literary studies,[194] to new

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[192] Hanna Segal, "From Hiroshima to the Gulf War and after: Socio-political Expressions of Ambivalence," in *Psychoanalysis, Literature and War*, ed. John Steiner (London: Routledge, 1997), 157-168, 131.

[193] George Makari, *Revolution in Mind: The Creation of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 427-428.

[194] Eve Kosofksy Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 123-152.

foundations for socialist politics,[195] to novel conceptualizations of mourning in the context of racial struggle.[196] However, in many cases, emphasizing the richness of this concept for emancipatory political struggle has come at the cost of a lopsided reading of Klein, one in which there is too strong a faith in the potential of the "reparative thrust" to make a significant impact on social and political life.[197] The dilemma, then, is to probe the limitations in what the depressive position can do as a theoretical resource for political theorists, without discarding the theory outright or uncritically adopting it as a key to political progress.

The depressive position, as noted, is for Klein a natural phase of development just like the paranoid-schizoid position. However, there exists a complex and dialectical interplay between the emotional elements of each phase, which in turn means there is no "pure" depressive position or a "pure" paranoid-schizoid position, but rather a push and pull between certain tendencies of behavior aligned with either state. In any case, for Klein, the shift from one position to the other is described as follows:

> In normal development, in the second quarter of the first year, persecutory anxiety diminishes and depressive anxiety comes to the fore, as a result of the ego's greater capacity to integrate itself and to synthesize its objects. This entails sorrow and guilt about the harm done (in omnipotent phantasies) to an object which is now felt to be

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[195] See, for example, Michael Rustin, "A Socialist Consideration of Kleinian Psychoanalysis," *New Left Review* 1 no. 131 (1981).

[196] In addition to McIvor's *Mourning in America*, see: David McIvor "The Struggle of Integration: James Baldwin and Melanie Klein in the Context of Black Lives Matter," *James Baldwin Review* 2 (2016), 75-96.

[197] Kristeva, *Melanie Klein*, 234.

> both loved and hated; these anxieties and the defenses against them represent the depressive position.[198]

A number of things are noteworthy in this formulation. First, Klein implies the shift from paranoid-schizoid anxiety (here labeled "persecutory anxiety") and depressive anxiety is brought on by a greater ability to see objects as not merely loved or hated, but both loved *and* hated. Here, the infant discovers that the object is not a fixed embodiment of either love or frustration to be used up or renounced, respectively, but a multidimensional *subject* with their own inner life and their own desires and needs. The other is no longer an extension or predicate of one's own omnipotent action, but a "whole and separate human being" who, importantly, can be harmed.[199] This is the foundation for the second important element of Klein's formulation, namely that guilt is an element of critical responsiveness to the other who has, in real or imagined ways,[200] suffered at the expense of one's own acts or desires of omnipotent manipulation. The depressive position therefore features a kind of immediate and natural recoil in the face of one's aggression, which in turn implies that the infant recognizes that they themselves are a source of aggression and not an external persecutory other.

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[198] Melanie Klein, "On Identification," in *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works 1946-1963*, ed. Roger Money-Kyrle (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 141-175, 143.

[199] Ogden, *The Matrix of the Mind*, 75-76.

[200] Klein is careful to note that the depressive position features real or imagined harm. However, it is important to stress that from the depressive position, Klein believes the "perception of reality increases and objects appear in a more realistic light." Melanie Klein, "Some Theoretical Conclusions Regarding the Emotional Life of the Infant," in *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works 1921-1945*, ed. Roger Money-Kyrle (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 61-93, 75. Ogden similarly suggests the depressive position features a greater ability to "distinguish between real and imagined harm." Ogden, *The Matrix of the Mind*, 74.

It is here where we may locate the birth of the subject properly understood in Klein's work. Against Freud and Nietzsche, the nonsubject does not become a subject through a violence enacted by an external force, but instead through a gradual and natural recognition of another as similar to oneself, capable of being harmed through acts of aggression. Kleinian subjectivity is instead the result of a process akin to the Hegelian struggle of recognition, but with a crucial difference. For Hegel, recognition is a gradual movement towards self-consciousness such that one sees others in the world as "projections of consciousness,"[201] that is, not as opaque, alien, and inscrutable objects, but as subjects that embody the same powers of consciousness as does the self. Put differently, Hegel's struggle for recognition traces how an external object becomes integrated into the "sovereignty of consciousness," such that one sees one's own powers of consciousness in another. This is, in Avineri's characterization, is a means of reducing "everything to phenomenal images with no real existence,"[202] its own kind of omnipotent manipulation that claims to be able to account for the inner life of the other by reference to oneself. Though Klein to some extent envisions a process of Hegelian recognition in the depressive position, the Hegelian schema has characteristics more like projective identification, the omnipotent means of placing onto objects partial elements of one's own inner state, in effect seeing the other as an extension of oneself. If anything, the Kleinian depressive position features a movement in the opposite direction, the gradual relinquishing of the desire to project one's inner state onto another in favor of a more ambivalent kind of critical responsiveness fraught with its own instability and insecurity.

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[201] Shlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 97.

[202] *Ibid*, 98

However, the depressive position is more than a simple relinquishing of omnipotence and more than a process by which we come to know ourselves and others as *subjects* rather than objects. It is also a position that features distinctive kinds of labor, namely the work of mourning the object ties that have now been lost. This is a fraught process, which can only be successful if there has been a stable internalization of a loved object in the first place, giving the infant a degree of security in the face of a perceived potential loss of love. Nonetheless, it is this process of mourning that by its nature facilitates a sense of history and time-consciousness, instantiating in the subject the realization that one's actions cannot magically be rewritten through omnipotent fantasies, but must be owned and worked through over time. It is for this reason that Ogden suggests "the depressive position" is a misnomer. Better described as the "historical position," it is here where the infant comes to take on a responsibility for *past* actions and thoughts that were previously, in the paranoid-schizoid position, undertaken in fits of unreflective, immediate action.

At this point we encounter what for social theorists becomes one of the major upshots of Klein's reflections. Inherent in the depressive position is a sense of acknowledgment, the onset of a process of mourning, and, as Klein notes throughout her corpus, the "drive to repair."[203] Also described by Klein as an "urge," this comes to the fore simultaneously with depressive anxiety, guilt and a predominant feeling of love over "destructive impulses," establishing a fundamental and apparently immediate link between guilt-feelings, love, and an outward-orientation in relation to another. However, as is the case with most Kleinian concepts, the reparative is not a stable or fixed element of relationality. It can, as Klein notes, feature its own kind of omnipotence and can serve as a defense rather than a genuine active engagement towards another.[204] And even

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[203] Klein, "Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms," 14-15.

[204] Klein, "Some Theoretical Conclusions Regarding the Emotional Life of the Infant," 75.

throughout normal processes of integration characteristic of the depressive position, the infant is still beset by paranoid anxieties that create interferences and volatile shifts between paranoid-schizoid tendencies and reparative tendencies.[205] Nonetheless, in processes of "normal development," and despite natural setbacks, the gradual and piecemeal ability to integrate previously split portions of the self emerges alongside a greater confidence in one's own reparative power in the face of one's aggression toward another.

This already constitutes a profound shift in perspective from that of Freud and Nietzsche. As Winnicott notes:

> …the work of Klein has enabled psycho-analytic theory to begin to include the idea of an individual's *value*, whereas in early psycho-analysis the statement was in terms of *health* and neurotic *ill-health*. Value is intimately bound up with the capacity for guilt-feeling."[206]

Instead of emphasizing the turmoil, violence, and self-abasement inherent in the Oedipal scene, we are instead presented with a "benign circle," beginning with "(i) instinctual experience, (ii) acceptance of responsibility which is called guilt, (iii) a working though," and ending with "a true

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[205] Klein, "On the Theory of Anxiety and Guilt," 37.

[206] D.W. Winnicott, "Psycho-analysis and the Sense of Guilt," in *Psycho-Analysis and Contemporary Thought*, ed. J.D. Sutherland, (London: Hogarth, 1958), 25. See also D.W. Winnicott, "Aggression, Guilt, and Reparation," in *Home is Where We Start From: Essays by a Psychoanalyst*, eds. Clare Winnicott, Ray Shepherd, and Madeline Davis (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Co., 1986), 80-89.

restitutive gesture."[207] Winnicott's reading, though important, unduly evokes an image of Klein's theory as an account of equilibrium, where the recoil of guilt channels an instinct into reparative impulses, this constituting a closed emotional circuit. Implied here is also the notion that the depressive position is simply something to be indefinitely transcended once the circuit is completed. Though Klein did indeed make gestures towards this idea in her earlier work,[208] she appears to have concluded later that the depressive position, fraught with all its ambivalences, is instead something to be *maintained* rather than transcended. This is of course no small task. Equally important is Klein's assertion that reparative gestures may fail under the weight of a perceived inability to make good on the harm done to an object, resulting in feelings of despair or returns to persecutory anxieties rather than further investments in reparation.[209] As such, the processes associated with the depressive position are at every moment fraught with potential breakdown, meaning that realizing genuine intersubjectivity and responsibility is a balancing act and not a stage of life that we enter indefinitely.

Crucial here is to maintain the anti-utopian and indeed pessimistic character of Klein's thinking. The difference we want to mark between Freud and Klein is not that the latter gives us clear emancipatory hope through the notion of reparation, whereas the former does not. More realistically, both are giving us an account of a frustrated subject who is destined to suffer, though in potentially different ways. However, as this study will later suggest, the differences in how

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[207] *Ibid*, 24.

[208] See Melanie Klein, "Love Guilt and Reparation," in *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works 1921-1945*, ed. Roger Money-Kyrle (New York: Free Press,1975), 306-343. and Melanie Klein, "Mourning and its Relation to Manic-Depressive States", in *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works 1921-1945*, ed. Roger Money-Kyrle (New York: Free Press, 1975), 344-369.

[209] Klein, "On the Theory of Anxiety and Guilt," 37.

Freud and Klein both conceptualize guilt and guilt-feelings is of decisive importance for how political theorists might integrate an analysis of guilt into a broader social theory. As of yet, we can categorize the differences between Klein and Freud in the following way: First, for Klein depressive guilt-feelings are not the product of impositions that unidirectionally place a limitation on the drive from without (or from *above*), but are instead products of an intersubjective process by which the subject comes to actualize their innate conscience by assuming responsibility towards another. Second, the drive does not turn inward and mete out aggression towards the self, though that can be an element of certain guilt-complexes, but instead becomes harnessed to turn outward in a move to engage with the harmed object. Third, guilt-feelings in their pre-Oedipal phase indicate a mode of relationality, a dynamic interplay between aggressor mobilizing restitutive gestures and attaining a sense of "reality," and the object of aggression who is put in the position of accepting or denying these gestures. As a result, depressive guilt-feelings do not present themselves as inexhaustible sources of self-abasement in the face of an implacable demanding agent within the subject, the superego, but instead emerge within a space of relationality where the superego is transformed into a "concrete other" to whom we feel responsive and indebted.[210] Fourth, for Freud guilt-feelings more often than not evince repetition compulsions that stand in the way of the autonomy and freedom of the subject, this autonomy being largely Kantian in its aspiration. As such, responsibility and guilt-feelings remain somewhat antithetical, whereas for Klein mature guilt-feelings and responsibility are synonymous and indicate the realization of the human as an *ethical* subject within a relation of interdependence. Last, guilt-feelings yield different responses for each thinker. For Freud, guilt keeps the subject in a repetitive state of nervous

[210] Eli Zaretsky, *Secrets of the Soul: A Social and Cultural History of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 259.

excitation in relation to a fictitious demand, whereas for Klein, depressive guilt begets an outward oriented impetus that functions as a relatively self-conscious means of grappling with the reality of harm.

The purpose of this study is not, however, to simply mark these differences for their own sake, nor is it to just vindicate Klein against Freud and Nietzsche. Rather, the purpose here is to claim that if we tarry with a set of categories developed by Klein rather than Freud and Nietzsche, we can fashion a different set of political questions and critical insights when we think of the potential functions that guilt-feelings have within a political order. If we follow Freud and Nietzsche, as we noted, guilt-feelings are in effect expressions of power. Wherever we find this emotion, political theorists search for an authoritative demand (personal or impersonal) to which the guilt-feelings correspond. As such, the study of guilt is an interrogation into political power as an external force that pressures the subject into alignment with authority. If we follow Klein, guilt-feelings might instead serve as dissonances that wrests the subject out of certain kinds of idealizations, and potentially place the subject in a different mode of distinctively tragic but active engagement with the world. If for Freud and Nietzsche the tragic resides in the pessimistic fact that we are destined to become beset by suffering for which we are not responsible, Kleinian guilt might have a resonance with Max Scheler's conception of tragedy as an action that is aims at realizing a "high value" but in reality works towards "the undermining of the very existence of the being it is helping."[211] The paranoid-schizoid orientation has as its aim love, but in reality this love features an aggressive, omnipotent kind of manipulation. Once recognized, the shift towards the depressive position functions as a recoil in the face of one's omnipotent desires, requiring the

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[211] Max Scheler, "On the Tragic," *CrossCurrents* 4 no. 2 (Winter 1954): 178-191, 183.

relinquishing of a previous form of love. We are thus not destined to bear the weight of suffering because we cannot actualize our drives, but because we are destined to become inadvertently implicated in forms of harm towards those whom we value.[212]

As noted, it is out of this specific mode of engagement with objects in the world that reparation takes shape. The very existence of the "reparative" constitutes a fundamental deviation from the Nietzschean-Freudian understanding, but the nature of this difference is of fundamental importance for political theorists. Though for Nietzsche and Freud bad conscience and the sense of guilt serve as respective templates of emotional experience upon which more or less intense forms of moralization can be written, the script is mostly unidimensional. Either the social actors aim to mute the sense of guilt and release the subject from the grips of prohibitions and authoritative injunctions, or they aim to intensify these injunctions to create greater forms of social and personal control. This process of emotional script-writing, where guilt-feelings beget more or less intense forms of self-abasement according to the disciplinary aims of the social actors in question, yields one very specific question, namely who or what is keeping the subject in a state of nervous excitation and for which purposes. This, as already suggested, is what it means to think along with the Nietzschean-Freudian paradigm on the question of what guilt-feelings are supposed to mean politically. However, if we think with Klein, we are presented with an alternative set of questions. As Ogden has noted, the depressive position as Klein sketches it is fundamentally open to the subject's own interpretation.[213] So, there are an inherent set of dispositions we associate with

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[212] My intention is not to arrive at an existentialist point, but rather a *political* point. We may be destined to harm another through forms of omnipotent manipulation, but this will look a different way in specific political arrangements.

[213] Ogden claims: "In the depressive position an event is what one makes of it; its significance lies in the interpretation one gives it." Ogden, *The Matrix of the Mind*, 73.

the depressive position, such as the drive to reparation, processes of acknowledgment, and specific kinds of guilt-feelings, but this begs another question that requires attention, namely what reparation, acknowledgment, or guilt-feelings are supposed to *mean* and how they are to be actualized socially and politically. Put differently, the depressive position is a normal facet of individual and social experience, but *what it does* is a matter of what we make of it and how we are led to interpret it. This is at least in part a matter of which political modes of interpretation we have at our disposal.

To clarify by way of example, in *Psychology and the Natural Law of Reparation*, C. Fred Alford suggests Melanie Klein developed an account of the depressive position that is in line with previous, oftentimes religious conceptions of natural law. So says Alford, from Klein we can grasp "primitive but hardly simple desires to love, care for, and make reparation to those we have hated and harmed in phantasy or reality."[214] However, Alford claims these impulses still need to be *made moral* in a proper sense, which is to say they need to be given texture through broader forms of narration and explanation.[215] Reparation, one of the central animating concepts of Kleinian psychoanalysis, is in some sense merely an impulse that can be actualized in countless different ways. As Alford claims, reparation can easily "be rendered self-indulgent, turned inward" and actualized through something like aesthetic creation rather than any concrete restitution towards an actually harmed object.[216] Yet, this cultivation of the reparative impulse could just as easily be done on different terms. The trajectory of reparation and the way we make sense of guilt-feelings

[214] C. Fred Alford, *Psychology and the Natural Law of Reparation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3.

[215] *Ibid*

[216] *Ibid*, 120.

of the depressive position are fundamentally interpretive acts that can be narrated in different ways. From this perspective, the task of the political theorist is not necessarily to look for the presence of power in guilt-feelings themselves, but instead to explore which kinds of dominant methods of interpretation we have at our disposal to actualize this sentiment and narrate it in ways that are political productive or unproductive. The Kleinian account of depressive guilt gives us resources to take guilt as a means by which real harm to another is registered to another, but can be politicized and de-politicized in relation to the nature of the harm, what can be done about it, and what constitutes genuine reparative action in response. This is to say that where political theorists tend to mark guilt-feelings as the dead end for transformative political action, a moment where power has left its mark and created a subject built to conform to an authoritative demand, we might instead take the Kleinian frame to provide alternative resources to analyze what political and social actors ask that we *do* with these sentiments. What we interpret to be a dead end may just as easily be reconfigured as a potentially productive starting point for political action. Therefore, what Carlo Ginzburg writes of shame we may write of guilt-feelings from a Kleinian perspective: "it is a passion placed at the intersection between biology and history."[217] Though it is perhaps a stretch to say guilt is a *passion*, Ginzburg's emphasis on the irreducibly *historical* element of our emotions, which is to say the shifting social, ideological, and political dynamics that shape and mediate the character of emotional expressions, is central for the purposes of this study.

The question that emerges from this shift in perspective is not, then, how we mute guilt such that the subject can become more autonomous and exercise their will without being plagued by the limiting voice of others. Rather, we are granted ability to ask a set of questions that the Nietzschean-Freudian paradigm does not quite permit, namely, how guilt-feelings mark

[217] Ginzburg, "The Bond of Shame," 35.

acknowledgment of implication in real harm of others and may serve as potentially productive dissonances that destabilize a sense of self rather than reify it. Additionally, rather than assuming that guilt-feelings are at best inert and at worst complicit with dominant power systems, we might think of these feelings as possessing inherent potential for outward-oriented action that can be harnessed politically in different ways. Guilt of the depressive position can be rendered "self-indulgent," or it can be made creative or politically productive depending on how the subject comes to narrate their own implicatedness.

This wrests Klein from her most prominent interpreters like Sedgwick, who insisted on interpreting her work as an antidote to the "paranoia" and "suspicion" inherent in the critical tradition. However, my reading suggests that instead of using Klein to think beyond critique and towards a reparative engagement with the world, Klein actually gives us resources to situate critique on a different basis. Where Nietzsche and Freud see guilt-feelings as the objects of critique and demystification, which in turn will tell us something about power, the Kleinian perspective makes it possible to think about how guilt itself can be mobilized as an engine of critical engagement. If depressive guilt presents itself as a dissonance that enables us to relinquish a structure of attachment and thrust us outward to repair something or someone we feel we had a hand in damaging, then it can be considered a potentially productive source of conflict with the dominant order that produces the terrain upon which we act. What matters, then, is how we might interpret and then harness the critical energy latent in certain forms of guilt.

In pursuing this action-oriented upshot of my analysis of Klein, a set of more interpretive and diagnostic questions emerge. How can we explain the blockages that keep people in states of paranoia? What are the existing hegemonic forms of interpretation that color how we act on these different feeling states? To whom is care or concern newly extended in the depressive position,

and how can this be maintained?  The aim of the subsequent chapters of this project is to determine which kinds of political insight and methods of criticism we might be able to extract from Klein's framing, and in so doing investigate how Klein's work grants us new explanatory categories that might have contemporary relevance. This study is not a straightforward application of Kleinian psychoanalysis, but rather an assessment how certain authors take up some of Klein's central insights related to guilt, whether inadvertently or explicitly, and endow these insights with a certain kind of political meaning and political potential. Though two of the central figures of this study, John Rawls and Theodor Adorno, are not performing a strict exercise in Kleinian analytic thinking, they are in some sense taking it upon themselves to perform different processes of script-writing for guilt-feelings, one on liberal terms and the other in critical theoretical terms. In other words, Rawls and Adorno are engaging in their own kinds of interpretations as to what we can and should do with this emotion, and which kinds of political potential we may be able to read into guilt-feelings that stand outside and against the dominant paradigm. Where Nietzsche and Freud see a degradation of the will, neurotic self-abasement, and an attachment to lawfulness, we might be able to write an alternative story centered around intersubjectivity, care, and constructive political activity.

## Chapter Three

*John Rawls and Liberal Guilt*

In the direct aftermath of the events of September 11th, 2001, Susan Sontag famously penned a brief set of reflections on the attacks in the September 24th issue of *The New Yorker*. Her work, now read as prophetic, was at the time regarded as scandalous. The opening paragraph is as follows:

> The disconnect between last Tuesday's monstrous dose of reality and the self-righteous drivel and outright deceptions being peddled by public figures and TV commentators is startling…Where is the acknowledgement that this was not a 'cowardly' attack on 'civilization' or 'liberty' or 'humanity' or 'the free world' but an attack on the world's self-proclaimed superpower, undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliances and actions? How many citizens are aware of the ongoing American bombing of Iraq? And if the word 'cowardly' is to be used, it might be more aptly applied to those who kill from beyond the range of retaliation, high in the sky, than to those willing to die themselves in order to kill others. In the matter of courage…whatever may be said of the perpetrators of Tuesday's slaughter, they were not cowards.[218]

In response, the psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin recoiled. What Sontag expressed, for Benjamin, was evidence of a kind of paranoid myopia in which the US became "defined solely by our position

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[218] Susan Sontag, "Tuesday and After," *The New Yorker* (September 24th, 2001).

as victimizer."[219] Continuing, Benjamin claims "the absence of grief, which is able to turn guilt into useful remorse, is an indication that her statement is unable to bear/contain our wrongdoings without abandoning all love for and pride in our society."[220] This is to say that Sontag, rather than being able to simultaneously mourn a genuine loss while engaging in responsible political criticism, instead immediately directed an outlandish kind of reproach towards the United States without any ability to maintain a semblance of healthy and measured ambivalence. Sontag's response was then an example of Schmittian politics in reverse, a reflexive designation of *oneself* as the enemy rather than the other, which is no less an omnipotent manipulation than any other construction of a friend and enemy distinction. Out of statements like this, Benjamin, through Joel Whitebook, derives a more general claim not about Sontag personally (as far as I can tell), but of "liberalism" generally: in the aftermath of 9/11, "liberalism showed its weakness to be guilt."[221] Sontag, the "liberal" in this instance, falls prey to a supposed tendency of the political left to self-victimize and self-flagellate as a reflexive response to any occurrence at all.

While it seems to me that Whitebook and Benjamin are wrong about Sontag specifically, the general claim about liberalism's "weakness" as guilt is a relatively commonplace assumption.

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[219] Jessica Benjamin, "Terror and Guilt: Beyond Them and Us" *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 12, no. 3 (2002): 473-484, 480. This concern is in keeping with Benjamin's attempt to move beyond what she calls the "doer-done-to" model of intersubjectivity, in which we wholly inhabit the inner space of victim or perpetrator without being able to inhabit a space of critical and reflective distance. See Jessica Benjamin, "Beyond Doer and Done To: An Intersubjective View of Thirdness," *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 73, no. 1 (2004): 5–46. A similar position is taken by Judith Butler in relation to the 9/11 attacks, in which responsibility meant eschewing the status of pure victim or pure perpetrator. See Judith Butler, "Explanation and Exoneration, or What We Can Hear," *Social Text,* 72, 20, no. 3. (Fall 2002): 177-188.

[220] Benjamin, "Terror and Guilt," 480.

[221] *Ibid*

We might encounter this in everyday politics through the idea of "liberal guilt," which is a concept and feeling that is met with almost universal derision or denial. However, it does not appear that there is a consistent characterization of what "liberal guilt" actually means or why it is specific to "liberals" or "liberalism." In common discourse, the term might conjure images of an individual gripped by a mystification, one who imagines, narcissistically perhaps, major political pathologies to be a simplistic matter of their individualized failure or transgression rather than structural design. For some, it indicates the reduction of political action to a vulgar, self-abasing sentimentalism that allows the subject to exude moral concern without having to acknowledge genuine responsibility, or engage in political action or organization.[222] In a more benign sense, some might consider this particular political emotion as simply a misguided way of making sense of the world, a search for moral agency amidst misfortune and a sense of lost control.[223] Synthesizing many of these criticisms, Raymond Geuss, in *Not Thinking Like a Liberal*, suggests that guilt is a fixture of the liberal vision of political subjectivity, which is a function of certain supposedly liberal presuppositions about the centrality in politics of individual conscience, intentionality, lawfulness, and conformity. For Geuss, "liberal guilt" (a term which he might regard as redundant) is all at once a mystification, indicative of a disposition towards obedient pliability,

[222] Talal Asad considers guilt as "a sensibility" to be a curious hallmark of American liberalism in the sphere of foreign policy. For Asad, feeling guilt for carrying out violence is a kind of currency, a mark of moral and political superiority in relation to racialized others for whom moral suffering supposedly carries less significance. We might notice a similar translation of this sentiment in other areas of political life. Liberal guilt could therefore be considered a prop that serves as a marker of superior status. Talal Asad, *On Suicide Bombing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

[223] See Shklar, *The Faces of Injustice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992). 54-65.

and a “bad motive for action.”[224] As a result, for those invested in social transformation, “liberal guilt” requires correction of some kind, either a more hard-nosed or “serious” approach to political action, or a rethinking of how one interprets the sources and operations of political domination. In the broad sense, however, we might think of it not as an enviable or desired position by those who express it, but rather what Ellison would describe as “symptomatic,” a product of a set of conditions and political attachments that may be particular to the liberal tradition and liberal politics, but are not *owned* or even *described* by the tradition or its adherents.[225]

The question, for our purposes, is not simply to explain what “liberal guilt” is as a cultural phenomenon, but to broaden the theoretical resources we have at our disposal to make sense of its personal and political character. Interestingly, scholars have attempted to explain the phenomenon of “liberal guilt” by developing a genealogy that traces its roots to Enlightenment sentimentalism and the practices by which one identifies with the pain of others.[226] However, this chapter will proceed relatively differently. In short, I want to analyze a thinker whose work, oddly enough, is absent in discussions of “liberal guilt,” namely John Rawls. Rawls’s absence in this literature is striking for one major reason. He has a rather well-developed conception of liberal selfhood, and focuses a substantial portion of *A Theory of Justice* on tracing out the origins and character of guilt-feelings as cornerstones of what he would come to call “the sense of justice.” This is to say that Rawls has a relatively sophisticated account of guilt as a constitutive part of his broader liberal vision. Though Rawls of course does not have anything to say about “liberal guilt” as a cultural

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[224] Raymond Geuss, *Not Thinking Like a Liberal* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022), 88.
[225] Julie Ellison, “A Short History of Liberal Guilt,” *Critical Inquiry* 22 no. 2 (Winter, 1996): 344-371, 345.

[226] See Ellison, “A Short History of Liberal Guilt,” and Henry Wonham, “Post-Critical Howells: American Realism and Liberal Guilt,” *American Literature* 92 no. 2 (June 2020): 229-255.

phenomenon, his version of liberal theory gives an indication as to how a major strain of this contemporary political tradition interprets and writes a script for guilt as a specific moral emotion while granting it a place in a broader politics. For our purposes, returning to Rawls may give us leverage to rewrite an account of what "liberal guilt" is and what it does, how it manifests both in theory and practice. However, in no sense is it my intention to reclaim "liberal guilt" as a generative or positive experience, nor is it breathe new life into Rawls's project, but rather to interrogate and pry open a concept in need of rethinking, one that may benefit from an alternative interpretation that does not simply rely on vaguely Nietzschean and Freudian resources.

The chapter will take on a set of interrelated claims: First, I try and make sense of Rawls's turn towards, and then *away* from Freud as a theorist of guilt, a move that expresses anxiety about the implications of Freud's understanding of the Oedipus complex and what it infers about ability of the Rawlsian subject to self-consciously and autonomously develop a "sense of justice" from which the principles of justice can be fashioned.[227] However, Rawls does not abandon psychoanalysis entirely. Rather than imagining guilt as a function of fear and anxiety in the face of and external and internalized authority, Rawls, implicitly following Melanie Klein, provokes us to think of guilt as a natural emanation of love relationships, revealing itself as an expression of solidarity and fellow-feeling. This is not merely a move of convenience, in that Freud gives us an image of a subject too messy for Rawls to pigeon-hole into *A Theory of Justice*. This must also be recognized as a potentially productive innovation, one that seeks to ground the liberal subject in a

[227] Given Rawls's primary emphasis on Freud rather than Nietzsche in his work, this chapter will track Rawls's engagement with Freud. Rawls says of Nietzsche: "Nietzsche is a great stylist, but his words do not belong to political philosophy, though his views certainly bear on it." John Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy*, ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 192. As such, Rawls tends not to grant his work much attention.

kind of horizontal intersubjectivity from the outset, rather than assuming a standpoint of a self-interested and atomized individual. Additionally, within this schema Rawls productively imagines guilt-feelings as emotions functioning outside of what Jessica Benjamin calls the "doer and done-to" model, leaving space to think of guilt-feelings as responses to individualized transgression or harm within a given relationship, but also as expressions of passive implication, whereby one has sat idly by and failed to act while another suffers. For Rawls, guilt is also an eminently *public* and outward-facing feeling, one that originates naturally in and among associations of human beings and has a regulative political function that is not strictly an expression of lawful obedience. This represents an alternative means of granting a political valence to guilt-feelings, leaving space for them to operate in potentially productive ways that facilitate the security of the other with whom one shares a political space.

However, in implicitly taking up Klein (and others) as a point of departure rather than Freud, Rawls ends up stripping some previously discussed concepts of their complexity, particularly those related to guilt, acknowledgment, and reparation. This represents, as I claim, a *liberalizing* of the categories of guilt and reparation, meaning that Rawls continuously circumscribes this emotion, and therefore Kleinian psychoanalysis to fit the terms of his liberal vision more broadly. In this sense, we could speak of Rawls as developing a distinctive theory of "liberal guilt," a narrow way of seeing the emotion that is meant to affirm a certain liberal commitment to consensus, justification, and a very specific kind of commitment to the alleviation of suffering. Any deviation from this is unintelligible on Rawls's terms. So, for Rawls, guilt functions according to a kind of script that can practically actualize the broader components of a liberal vision and stay within its boundaries. This is to say that in this section, I will explore what makes Rawls's reflections on guilt distinctively *liberal*. And as the chapter shows, the liberal

element of Rawls's understanding of guilt surrounds his condensation of moral suffering, reparation, apology, and harm into definable units that can be trafficked and traded in order to create a general equilibrium in political life. As such, I'll demonstrate how on Rawls's terms Kleinian categories are made to fit the assumptions and categories of liberalism.

Last, the paper will approach the lingering question of the relationship between Rawls's ideal theory of moral sense and the more common understanding of "liberal guilt" as an everyday emotion. In other words, the central question is how a re-reading of Rawls allows us to see this political emotion differently as we encounter it in everyday politics. The paper will argue that, instead of reflexively considering "liberal guilt to amount to narcissistic or impotent posturing, we might consider it a rather complex moral and political sense that one benefits at the expense of a suffering other. However, built within this potentially solidaristic emotion is also a paranoid attachment to the terms of liberalism itself, which include a certain commitment to economic inequality, beyond which solidaristic political action cannot move. As such, the solidaristic element of "liberal guilt" comes into conflict with a broader liberal identificatory structure, in which the liberal subject grasps as gestures to create reconciliation without transgressing the fixed attachments of liberalism. As McIvor suggests, Rawls's liberalism has a "depressive" moral psychology and a "paranoid" moral psychology within the same framework. So does "liberal guilt" as a cultural phenomenon. Guilt-feelings can be conceptualized as solidaristic and beget reparative gestures (the depressive element), but those gestures are not thought of beyond a narrow exchange model of apology, penance, or confession, that could destabilize the broader structures of liberal thought and practice. In other words, if we think of Rawls as a theoretical avatar for a concrete cultural phenomenon, the problem with "liberal guilt" is not guilt itself, which can be a complex moral and political attunement to injustice, but rather the fact that guilt-feelings are broadly

interpreted and messaged to play a specific role in what Dienstag calls a "compensatory narrative,"[228] where guilt in this instance begets individualized gestures of repair that re-establish a political equilibrium on liberal terms.

This is not to say that contemporary liberals are implicitly or explicitly thinking with Rawls. Rawlsian philosophy has obviously not permeated political culture such that liberals actively ground their politics according to the dictates of "justice as fairness." Instead, the upshot of this offers a reading of Rawlsian guilt and "liberal guilt" as a cultural phenomenon as *symptomatic* of a particular set of political attachments, which, when confronted with concrete instances of injustice, remains insufficient in generating a constructive or transformative conception of repair. On this reading, then, "liberal guilt" could be considered a potential expression of genuine solidarity that is interpreted in such a way that it condenses the practice of repair to one-off gestures rather than engagement in broader transformative political struggle. It is a potentially solidaristic expression that cannot function outside the terms and categories of liberalism. However, if we follow a Kleinian insight, what might come out of this initial feeling of implication is multivariate. Reparation can be boiled down to an individual gesture in line with liberal assumptions, but it can also be *further politicized* into something larger and potentially more effectual if one works on disengaging it from a paranoid attachment to liberal assumptions. Important for our purposes is not parsing out what these avenues of repair might be, but rather stressing the overarching point that "liberal guilt" as a negative emotion, both in the cultural and psychological sense, contains a certain kind of political possibility. Our task is not to recode this

[228] Dienstag is speaking about pity in this context, but I will show this could just as easily apply to the way Rawls grapples with guilt-feelings. The assumption here is that suffering should and *can* be alleviated through gestures that can create social equilibrium. Joshua Foa Dienstag, *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 269-270.

emotion as a positive experience, but rather, following Cvetkovich, to "depathologize" this negative emotion so we may take it seriously as distinctive kind of engagement with the world, one that has effects on how we think about broader political concepts.[229]

I. Guilt and the Inner Life of Justice:

If, as Katrina Forrester has suggested, the story of Rawls's re-writing of the terms and vision of political philosophy is indeed "a ghost story, in which Rawls's theory lived on as a spectral presence long after the conditions it described were gone," it is reasonable to raise the question of what *to do* with Rawls's philosophical project, given that it may not speak to a set of political circumstances beyond those produced it .[230] Since *A Theory of Justice* provided a politics for the *trente glorieuses* at the moment of its eclipse by neoliberalization, we might wonder what the theory has left to provide during the contemporary eclipse of liberalism itself. The crisis of liberalism is in other words also a crisis of scholarship on Rawls, and it is yet to be seen whether the theory lives on as a "Fabergé Egg," left to be marveled for its intricate detail but functionally useless,[231] or still yet provides guidance and orientation for members of a liberal-democratic polity in need of clarification of their own political commitments during moments of political stress.[232]

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[229] Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 2.

[230] Katrina Forrester, *In the Shadow of Justice: Postwar Liberalism and the Remaking of Political Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), xi.

[231] William Clare Roberts, "Do We Live in a Society?" *Polity* 53, no. 4 (October 2021): 572-579

[232] Alexander Lefebvre, "The Spiritual Exercises of John Rawls," (*Political Theory*. 2022), 7.

What is living and what is dead in Rawls's theory will obviously remain an open question for some time, with its fate invariably bound with the fate of liberalism.

Nevertheless, this question of utility can be sidestepped by approaching Rawls in a rather different vein recently illuminated by Robyn Marasco, which concerns the way that *A Theory of Justice* "*produces* its objects" of contemplation and action, specifically the liberal subject and its emotional inner life.[233] The attempt to give an account of this "production," however, does not mean that we are merely providing the anatomy of a fantasy. Rather, the aim is to better understand how Rawls's substantial account of liberalism's inner life is in some ways indicative of how liberals tend to deploy and think about certain emotions, and it is also a guide for understanding concrete political behaviors in the present, specifically the phenomenon of "liberal guilt". This is to say that Rawls does indeed create a kind of artificial and abstract liberal subject who is dutifully capable of carrying out the dictates of justice, but the construction of such a subject can tell us something about the relation between liberalism and guilt as a moral and political emotion more broadly, and provide insight into how liberal commitments and attachments shape liberal action. Therefore, the ideal liberal subject that Rawls "produced" is in many ways abstraction, but it is also an insightful reflection of liberal commitments and political psychology, as well as a potential guide.

Now, despite his explicit claim that *A Theory of Justice* is a "theory of moral sentiments," scholarship on Rawls's inquiry into affect, attachment, and sensation still remains an undercurrent

[233] Robyn Marasco, "Introduction," *Polity* 53, no. 4 (October 2021): 526-531, 529. Rawls is forthright about this constructed element of his theory. In "Justice as Fairness: Political, not Metaphysical", he writes that "Justice as fairness starts from the idea that society is to be conceived as a fair system of cooperation, and so it adopts a conception of the person to go with this idea". John Rawls, "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical," in *Collected Papers*, ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 388-414, 397.

rather than a dominant strain of commentary on his project.[234] Nonetheless, the paradigmatic framing of Rawls as a strict rationalist and neo-Kantian has been challenged by compelling studies that have at the very least placed Rawls "between two Enlightenments,"[235] the sentimentalist and the rationalist, and have succeeded in unearthing in his work the centrality of the affective categories of care,[236] love[237] and fear.[238] These studies, which have produced a lineage of work revealing a broad instinctual and affective basis for certain moral behaviors, have opened up a broader view of the Rawlsian subject as embodied and bound to a set of affective dispositions.[239]

While it may be true that Rawls's "conception of the self is actually remarkably substantial,"[240] the emotional life of the subject is nonetheless evaluated on rather narrow economic terms. This is to say that while Rawls fleshes out the character of emotions (moral or otherwise) in great detail, these emotions are given a particular function so as to validate the

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[234] Rawls continues that *A Theory of Justice* is a "theory of moral sentiments (to recall an eighteenth-century title) setting out the principles governing our moral powers, or, more specifically, our sense of justice", thus reiterating that at its core *Theory* is an inquiry into the life of the emotions. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 44.

[235] Michael Frazer, "John Rawls: Between Two Enlightenments," *Political Theory* 35, no. 6 (2007): 756–80.

[236] Susan Okin, "Reason and Feeling in Thinking about Justice," *Ethics* 99, no. 2 (Jan, 1989): 229-249.

[237] Susan Mendus, "The Importance of Love in Rawls's Theory of Justice," *British Journal of Political Science* 29, no. 1 (Jan., 1999): 57-75

[238] C. Fred Alford, *The Self in Social Theory: A Psychoanalytic Account of its Construction in Plato, Hobbes, Locke, Rawls, and Rousseau* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

[239] Kiran Banerjee and Jeffrey Bercuson, "Rawls on the Embedded Self: Liberalism as an Affective Regime," *The European Journal of Political Theory* 14, no. 2 (2015), 209-228, 216.

[240] Alford, *Melanie Klein and Critical Social Theory*, 140.

"stability" and self-regulatory character of the broader theory, with the end goal of demonstrating that "justice as fairness generates its own support" without relying on the injunctions of a sovereign.[241] Human emotions, be they envy, love, shame, resentment or fear, are therefore inevitably explored in relation to *what they do* for the broader theory, and how they derail or maintain the possibility for a just society according to justice as fairness. We could say that for Rawls, the emotions seem to lack a life of their own, as they are consistently given a relatively rigid script, circumscribed and qualified so as not to exceed the limits and equilibrium that justice as fairness requires.

For Rawls, guilt is a part of this psycho-social economy, which is to say that it too has a broad stabilizing function. Yet, Rawls's specific characterization of this rather elementary moral emotion is striking nonetheless, insofar as it is in many ways a substantial deviation from the standard Freudian account that served as the foundation for countless reflections upon the origin of moral feelings. As we have recounted, the Freudian account of guilt is tragic in a very specific sense. In Freud's anthropology, it is an intergenerational burden resulting from the belated regret of an original crime, the fallout of which produced not simply strict prohibitions in the forms of repressive and authoritative taboos and laws, but a very particular relationship with law itself. The birth of law, so says Freud, is concomitantly the birth of an unconscious *desire and need to obey* for the purposes of expiation and "penance," which in turn represents an uncritical re-investment in the law itself.[242] But this same relation, which is reproduced through the microcosm of the Oedipus complex, is more fundamentally one of anxiety and fear. The sense of guilt broadly speaking manifests as a fear of an external authority in the form of the parent or a parental imago

[241] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 399.

[242] Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 181.

and by extension their injunctions, as well as a fear in the face of this same authority when internalized in the form of the ego and superego.

The Freudian account of the origin of moral feelings suggests that the subject is from the outset of their development beset by an originary wounding, placing them in a position where they are not the master of their own moral sense or reasoning. Freud does not give us resources to think about innate moral sentiments at all, insofar as the Oedipus complex, a fundamentally repressive relation that instantiates the voice of *another* as the source of moral judgment, is the primary means by which we acquire basic moral selfhood. This, as we have noted in the previous chapter, is how Freud gives us means to explain how, through the operations of conscience, we come to treat ourselves "in the manner of a repressive other."[243] The birth of conscience, as it is for Nietzsche, is the originary enactment of violence directed inwards, and its aftereffects in the form of basic human sociability are more agonizing than they are fulfilling. The ambient sense of "dissatisfaction" and "malaise" that emerges out of the oftentimes unconscious fear and anxiety in the face of authoritative limitation is the inevitable price of social life.

Against this, Rawls, following Hume, appears to be committed to reclaiming the very notion of an innate moral feeling in the face of "Marx and Nietzsche, Freud and Pareto (to mention several) – whose views can undermine and put in doubt our common moral sentiments."[244] Rawls's relatively sympathetic reading of Hume in his *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy* is in some sense a corrective to the critical view, as both Rawls and Hume attempt to vindicate the idea that "morality, and our practice of it, is the expression of our nature, given our place in the world

[243] Assoun, *Freud and Nietzsche*, 141.

[244] John Rawls. *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*, ed. Barbara Herman (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press. 2000), 100.

and our dependence on society."[245] The issue with Hume, so says Rawls, is simply that "Hume's view lacks a conception of practical reason and psychologizes moral deliberation by relying on laws of association and of the emotions, and invoking the strengths and desires of their influences."[246] This means that Rawls is committed to an account of the moral sentiments that emphasizes the subject's innate ability to experience moral sense, but wishes to move beyond Hume to make room for a commitment to rational elaboration and guidance of these moral impulses. His main insistence is to leave space for what he calls "principle-dependent desires," an ability for individuals to make "principles, rational or reasonable as the case may be," the aim of moral desire and motivation rather than simply settling for a "purely psychological" account of moral sentiments.[247]

However, Rawls does not simply sidestep Freud in favor of Hume. He quite clearly moves directly *against* as well as *through* Freud by telling an alternative story about guilt as a capacity that facilitates a certain kind of decentralized intersubjectivity and fellow-feeling, which in turn has the function of stabilizing just political arrangements without appeal to an authoritative law, at least in theory.[248] In order to flesh out this alternative, Rawls begins by attributing to Freud a

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[245] *Ibid*, 69.

[246] *Ibid*.

[247] *Ibid*, 47.

[248] David McIvor levels a compelling challenge to this element of Rawls's project. McIvor claims that for all of Rawls's concern for providing a decentralized account of political stability, Rawls invariably relies on a set of authoritative and idealized practices (the "original position" and later "public reason") that function akin to a Freudian conception of the superego. As such, Rawls ends up instantiating his own kind of supererogatory mechanism of judgment while attempting to move away from it. I will discuss this further below. McIvor, *Mourning in America*, 68.

particular attitude towards the process of moral learning, which, once established, he can contest. Rawls says of Freud:

> He holds that the processes by which the child comes to have moral attitudes center around the oedipal situation and the deep conflicts to which it gives rise. He moral precepts insisted upon by those in authority…are accepted by the child as the best way to resolve his anxieties, and the resulting attitudes represented by the superego are likely to be harsh and punitive reflecting the stresses of the oedipal phase. Thus Freud's account supports the two points that an essential part of moral learning occurs early in life before a reasoned basis for morality can be understood, and that it involves the acquisition of new motives by psychological processes marked by conflict and stress. It follows that since parents and others in authority are bound to be in various ways misguided and self-seeking in their use of praise and blame, and rewards and punishments generally, our earlier and unexamined moral attitudes are likely to be in important respects irrational and without justification.[249]

The Freudian subject is at the nexus of competing authoritative forces that are constantly delivering threats of approbation and punishment in ways that are opaque to the child, and mostly opaque to the adult. Quite simply, Rawls is rightly characterizing Freud's subject as hopelessly entangled in attachments and desires whose origin points are unknown and are difficult to justify on what Rawls would consider to be reasonable moral terms. Freud's account of moral learning is, for Rawls, not

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[249] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 402.

really an account of the conscious development at all, but is instead an attempt to explain how certain behaviors become unconsciously sedimented rather than actively and consciously cultivated. For Freud, the neurotic guilt-complex is meant to mark the subject's boundedness to tangled and unconscious parental and social imagoes. The Rawlsian guilt-complex, as we shall see, is meant to be reflective of a subject that is able to make discernable and defensible moral judgments rooted in a natural sense of active solidarity with others, and not a residue of arbitrarily and opaquely imposed "moral motivations." In other words, against Freud, Rawls holds out a degree of hope that we may, to an extent serviceable for a just political order, *know ourselves* more easily than Freud might suggest.

Rawls's issue with Freud is not strictly of an empirical nature, but is also related to philosophical disposition. Deigh suggests the philosophical pessimism of Freud conflicts with Rawls as a theorist of possibility and reconciliation, and his desire to build a subject capable of coming to certain constructive conclusions when situated in the "original position."[250] This is not to say that Rawls is simply a naïve optimist. At times, as I will show, Rawls's philosophy even evinces what Amanda Anderson calls a "bleak liberalism," a recognition of moral suffering as a simply inevitability of social life.[251] However, at a base level, the Freudian account quite simply cannot give Rawls what he wants his subject to have, namely self-knowledge and a subject that can securely, reliably, and rationally steer those innate moral passions that Hume sees as fixtures of the human subject. As a result, Rawls opts to draw from a repertoire of thinkers who frame moral learning as "not so much a matter of supplying missing motives as one of the free

[250] See John Deigh, "Love, Guilt, and the Sense of Justice," *Inquiry* 25, no. 4 (1982): 391-416. See also Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 405.

[251] Amanda Anderson. *Bleak Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2016).

development of our innate intellectual and emotional capacities according to their natural bent."[252] Constructing an alternative genealogy through Rousseau, Kant, Piaget, and Wittgenstein,[253] Rawls develops his basic attitude towards moral development in the following way:

> We have a natural sympathy with other persons and an innate susceptibility to the pleasures of fellow feeling and self-mastery, and these provide the affective basis for the moral sentiments once we have a clear grasp of our relations to our associates from an appropriately general perspective. Thus the tradition regards the moral feelings as a natural outgrowth of a full appreciation of our social nature.[254]

Here, moral sentiments like guilt, shame or indignation are *natural* sentiments, at first latent but gradually and actively cultivated through a process of self-actualization and care within schemes of social cooperation. They are not the result of a disfiguring process of internalization, anxiety and fear, but rather a by-product of natural, solidaristic behaviors that emerge within social arrangements in which we find ourselves. With clarification, they lead us relatively seamlessly to the principles of justice.[255]

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[252] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 402.

[253] For Rawls's specific indebtedness to Wittgenstein, see Andrius Gališanka, "Wittgenstein and Mid-20th Century Political Philosophy: Naturalist Paths from Facts to Values," in *Wittgenstein and Normative Inquiry*, eds. Mark Bevir and Andrius Gališanka (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016) and Andrius Gališanka, *John Rawls: The Path to A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2019).

[254] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 402-403.

[255] Gališanka, *John Rawls: The Path to A Theory of Justice*, 3.

Before mapping the content of Rawls's reflections, it is crucial to note that while he is insistent that he is taking up "speculative psychological questions", it is in these sections of *A Theory of Justice* where his theory has a concreteness that it might lack elsewhere.[256] Rawls's arrival at his "three psychological laws," which are in reality "three parts representing the development of three forms of guilt feelings,"[257] track with a re-appraisal of Freud *within psychoanalytic circles*, suggesting Rawls was receptive to shifting empirical and theoretical currents within psychoanalysis and child psychology. As Forrester makes passing reference to Rawls studying Melanie Klein, for example, one finds the actual substance of this influence by recalling how both deviate from Freud in a very concrete sense.[258] If, as we noted, one of Klein's psychoanalytic innovations was to emphasize guilt-feelings as a potential expression of value in the pre-Oedipal situation, a central developmental marker, we could see how this tendency in psychoanalytic work might provide Rawls with supplemental resources to bolster an account of moral sentiments that does not appeal to parental, social, or political authority as the sources of moral motivation.

Here I will show that Rawls does not so much abandon psychoanalysis, despite his very clear and correct intuition that he could not repurpose Freud for the style of liberalism he was trying to build.[259] Rather, Rawls makes an appeal to a *different* kind of psychoanalysis that

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[256] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 399.

[257] John Rawls, "The Sense of Justice," in *Collected Papers*, ed. Samuel Freeman. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999), 96-116, 100.

[258] Forrester, *In the Shadow of Justice*, 9.

[259] Rieff sees Dewey as a main example of the liberal "reviser" of Freud, attempting to avoid the "pessimistic implications" of Freud's reasoning by "absorbing" the individual into the social. Rieff, *Freud: The Mind of the Moralist*, 33. Rawls's project, explicitly modeled on Hegelian *Versöhnung* (reconciliation) in *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, could not make use Freud's

repeatedly echoes Klein's basic categories and psychoanalytic vocabulary, one that was incidentally incubated within roughly the same historical milieu that Rawls's own philosophy was developed, namely the aftermath of the Second World War and the birth of the postwar welfare state. At times, Rawls will make claims about the process of moral learning that are functionally identical to those made by Klein in her earlier work, particularly as it relates to the childhood development, which in some ways eclipses Rawls's use of traditional figures in the Western canon like Rousseau. The emphasis on moral learning as grounded not in fear of punishment that result in neurotic maladjustment, but rather in expressions of value that elicit innate feelings of responsibility, are to some extent Kleinian and later Winnicottian developments that come to the fore in Rawls's corpus. When Rawls remarks in the forerunner essay "The Sense of Justice" that "guilt feelings are…part of what defines a relation as one of love and trust," he appears to be channeling this alternative strain of psychoanalytic thought.[260] The shift away from thinking of guilt as anxious obedience and towards imagining it as a function of a particular kind of caring attachment is not just speculation, but a further development of theoretical tendencies already underway in other disciplines, psychoanalysis in particular. From these alternative sources, Rawls fleshes out the anatomy of a different kind of emotional life for a different kind of political subject in a new political era.

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central insights related to the tense irreconcilability between the individual and the social unit. If, as Zaretsky notes, Freud's social theory in *Civilization and its Discontents* traced the "inevitable limit to all attempts to harmonize the public and the private", Rawls's project as an implicit rejoinder to Freud's pessimistic doctrine seeks to carve out a space whereby consensus and modest reconciliation between individual and social can be developed. Zaretsky, *Secrets of the Soul*, 239.

[260] Rawls, "The Sense of Justice," 101.

III. Rawls and the Process of Moral Learning:

Rawls's story about the origins and character of guilt-feelings unfolds first through an account of the dynamic and communicative interplay between child and adult (authority guilt), next between adults in associative ventures (association guilt), and last between citizens and principles of justice (principle guilt). In the case of "authority guilt, " Rawls begins by grounding his inquiry in a set of assumptions. He claims that the dynamic between parent and child is quite obviously one of authority and subordination, but more importantly for Rawls is the idea that it is characterized by both love and trust and not strictly burdensome fear of punishment. Interesting, however, is the idea that love and trust are not strictly given in the case of the child, but are rather cultivated over time through certain behaviors. For Rawls, we may assume that parents love their children, but it is only in time that children come to love and trust their parents. He notes that "although the child has the potentiality for love, his love of the parents is a new desire brought about by his recognizing their evident love of him and his benefiting from the actions in which their love is expressed."[261] This is, incidentally, a near exact reproduction of a claim from Klein in "Love, Guilt and Reparation", where she notes "feelings of love and gratitude arise directly and spontaneously in the baby in response to the love and care of his mother."[262] The birth of this relation of love and trust between parent and child *begins* with expressions of love on the part of the parent, and are gradually reciprocated by the child once they recognize their parents to "not only to be concerned for his wants and needs, but to affirm his sense of the worth of his own person."[263] This, for Rawls, is the basic anatomy of a love relationship, one that is of marked

[261] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 406.

[262] Klein, "Love, Guilt and Reparation," 311.

[263] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 406.

contrast to the turmoil, ambivalence, and struggle of the Freudian Oedipus complex. Rawls instead relies on a self-evident and relatively uncomplicated concept of love. It is clearly manifest in behavior, it is reciprocal, and it evinces a concern for the intrinsic *worth*, and not just material well-being, of another.

So, the guilt-relation in this parent-child dyad is only present if it is first established as a love relation. According to Rawls, the child tends to accept parental injunctions not strictly because parents are in a position of power and are capable of striking fear into the child, but more substantially because they are viewed as love objects to whom love is reciprocated in kind. It is only out of this dynamic that the child develops a particular relationship with moral injunctions. For Rawls, recognition of one's transgression naturally begets not repression or acting out, but attempts at confession and reconciliation.[264] This reconciliation, we must assume, does not *transform* the relationship between child and parent, though it does aid in their moral development, but it rather motivates the child to implicitly restore a loving relation of equilibrium that once existed. Guilt therefore has a certain kind of active quality that is certainly in line with a Kleinian vision, but we can already see how Rawls is, in Flanagan's terms, engaging in a process of emotional script-writing,[265] sketching the means by which the individual can and should interpret and act upon their own emotional states. For Rawls, the child does not dissemble, lash out, self-flagellate or deny, but instead demonstrates a tendency to atone and return to a position of reciprocated love. And it is only out of love that the child does this.

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[264] *Ibid*, 407.

[265] See Owen Flanagan, *How to Do Things with* Emotions, 69-76. In this selection Flanagan directs his attention towards anger, but it is here that he neatly expresses how we might be able to think of emotions as "plastic" and "malleable" and thus liable to different forms of script-writing.

This is the first step in what constitutes a repurposing of Klein and Kleinian categories for the purposes of underwriting a liberal political project. Love takes precedence over fear, uncomplicated moral cultivation over repression, equilibrium and peaceable relations over violent separation and struggle, and conscious reconciliation over unconscious conflict. As noted, Klein in effect sidesteps an analysis of the Oedipus complex in favor of an analysis of pre-Oedipal dynamics, in which the development of conscience is not a result of the forceful instantiation of the superego, the mechanism by which authority threateningly censures and inhibits the drives and turns them inward back towards the self, but rather a function of the experience of early love and care.[266] In this situation, guilt is not generated through an *external* and forceful limitation as it is for Freud. Rather, guilt is a natural function of a love relationship, by which a child expresses a *concern* for the loved object in the face of the natural destructive impulses the child feels.[267] Whereas Freudian guilt is typically an enactment of punitive self-abasement in the face of the superego, the core of Kleinian guilt, and conscience generally, is pre-Oedipal, a natural element of human feeling that is elicited in and through love and characterized by a responsible desire to sacrifice and make reparation.[268] While Klein does indeed formulate love, guilt, responsibility, and concern in this way in her early work,[269] it appears that Rawls is filtering Kleinian categories through a set of basic assumptions, namely that the act of atonement or reparation is commensurate with a deed, that there is a relatively seamless movement from disequilibrium (brought about by

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[266] See Klein, "Love, Guilt and Reparation"

[267] *Ibid*.

[268] *Ibid*, 311-313.

[269] This is most pronounced in Klein, "Mourning and its Relation to Manic Depressive States" and "Love Guilt and Reparation".

transgression) to equilibrium (re-established through apology), and that the authority in question is mostly benign.

My critique of Rawls, however, is not that he doesn't buy into Klein's project in its entirety. This is not the concern of this study. My reading is simply interested in how and why Rawls makes use of these categories the way he does. In short, Rawls provides us a reading of Klein (and others) through a liberal lens, which in effect establishes an account of "liberal guilt," a script that places emphasis on certain capacities, means, and aims of a certain kind of subject. In so doing, Rawls strips Klein's subject of its messiness, its boundedness to the death instinct (a concept for which Rawls would obviously have no use), its tendency towards destructiveness, its inability to manage the instability and weight of the positions, etc. If Klein, as we have shown, imagines the depressive position and depressive guilt as impermanent and fledgling steps forward, a recurring stage that needs to be maintained amidst an onslaught of, Rawls repurposes this idea to keep his subject permanently inhabiting the "depressive position". Here, the active-oriented and reparative quality of guilt-feelings are not only prominent, but characterized as self-evident and natural responses to harm. Gestures of reparation are always possible, commensurate with a given harm, and eventually accepted by the object of love and trust.

This, however, is merely the first step in Rawls's argument, even though we can already see his basic schema coming into view. The truncated use of Kleinian categories is grafted onto the next phase of moral development. For Rawls, as the child grows into adulthood and becomes embedded in more diverse forms of association, the relation between moral agents becomes more horizontal. In the second phase (association guilt), Rawls imagines, similar to the first phase, an intersubjective arrangement through which certain capacities are gradually cultivated. Here, assuming that an individual has a capacity for fellow-feeling, Rawls places the individual in a

scheme of cooperation in which the guiding rules are public and considered to be just. It is through participation in this mutual arrangement that certain feelings of friendship and trust emerge, which in turn binds participants to one another through an affective tie. In this sense, Rawls does not believe participation in his hypothetical association to be a matter of sterile rule-following, but is rather a matter of exercising some degree of fraternity and solidarity with fellow participants within a cooperative schema. One feels indebted and attached to others within this "game" by virtue of their shared participation within it.

Understanding guilt in this context requires the elaboration of two interrelated phenomena: first, the temporal sequence Rawls attributes to this moral experience, and second the nature of the harm that elicits guilt-feelings. First, Rawls notes that "(association) guilt" is experienced only once feelings of mutual trust and affection are established, and an individual "fails to do his part" within the cooperative scheme.[270] Once again resonant with Klein, this suggests that an emotional tie of fellow feeling precedes guilt, but it is also the solidaristic precondition for it to emerge at all. Rawls's general approach here is, as Forrester[271] and Chambers[272] rightly note, broadly circular. There must be a just arrangement to foster the sense of justice, which can then in turn be applied to reinforce a just arrangement through the original position. However, for our purposes the temporal sequence is noteworthy nonetheless, insofar as it highlights how Rawls takes pains to detach guilt-feelings from the strict process of rule-following. What elicits guilt is the sense that one has caused undue harm to an individual to whom one has an attachment, not that one has

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[270] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 412.

[271] Forrester, *In the Shadow of Justice*, 36.

[272] Clare Chambers, "Rereading *A Theory of Justice*," *Polity* 53, no. 4 (October 2021): 580-588.

necessarily violated a law.[273] This, as we will discuss further, begets an attempt at repair through apologies and penance, which consequently re-establishes a return to a stable order. The temporal sequence, then, is the cultivation of affection and fellow-feeling between participations, a transgression that begets guilt-feelings, and then the desire to repair such that an originary relation between participants is restored.

Though Rawls is obviously giving account of developmental stages when he sketches the birth of "the sense of justice," which is to say that he is envisioning a progressive movement overall, guilt-feelings have a very specific, almost static function in the second stage of "association guilt." Reparation, apology, or various forms of atonement do not constitute a constructive process, nor are they dissonances that potentially push individuals to advocate for a more transformative justice or equality on different terms than Rawls himself imagines. The fact that the temporality here is circular simply suggests that guilt, despite its character as a product of fellow-feeling, ends up being strictly imagined as a very specific kind of "disciplinary emotion," an expression of solidarity that is circumscribed and confined such that it can work towards reestablishing an equilibrium. Put differently, Rawls is engaging in a very specific process of emotional script-writing for the "depressive position," where any potentially creative or constructive interpretation of "depressive guilt" is narrowed down and made to perform one kind of function.

Next, we are left with the question of harm. Though Rawls appears to think of harm and guilt in a relatively straightforward way (one person might physically and deliberately hurt another), he also seems to attempt to broaden the spectrum of what constitutes harm to include

[273] Rawls clarified this in his paper "The Sense of Justice" when he explained that the in the authority guilt and association guilt are connected with an actual natural attitude toward certain particular persons", not necessarily towards rules. Rawls, "The Sense of Justice," 105.

certain indirect relationships and actions. On this subject, Rawls speaks about guilt as an attentiveness to "the burdens that fall on others" within a social arrangement, or a sense that one has failed to participate in an association such that others do not suffer unduly.[274] This is not necessarily an account of a direct harm, but the recognition that one may live and act at the expense of others with whom one shares a social and political association. In this sense, we are permitted to think that guilt is a natural response to a sense of failure to ameliorate certain forms of suffering as they arise, or a response to the perception of unduly benefiting from an associative arrangement that does not adequately consider the needs of others. On this reading, we could say that Rawls is even attempting to think through in a rudimentary way the category of what Shklar might call "passive injustice,"[275] or, as noted previously, "implication".

Yet again, this more complex kind of harm and the guilt that accompanies it remains confined to a very specific set of reparative practices, all of which are geared towards maintaining the equilibrium of a just order. Insofar as Rawls grants us any sort of tools to imagine guilt-feelings outside of the paradigmatic framework granted to us by Nietzsche and Freud, a reconceptualization that enables us to see guilt as a potentially solidaristic emotion that places the subject in an active rather than passive role, the subject is immediately made to perform a specific set of functions that cannot maneuver outside of what will eventually crystallize into the precepts of "justice as fairness" or later "public reason." These represent the overarching regulative ideals to which the individual in the end must obey. As a result, to do justice to the harmed individual within a schema of cooperation means going no further than what the principles of justice implicit in that

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[274] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 412.

[275] Shklar, *The Faces of Injustice*, 40-50.

arrangement require. McIvor frames this in a way that maintains a similar psychoanalytic reading of Rawls:

> Although Rawls's explicit moral psychology is closer to Klein than to Freud, in the end he slips back under the gaze of a Freudian superego: demanding, univocal and unforgiving. It is this problem that must be addressed to move Rawlsian liberalism from an original position of paranoid anxiety toward a depressive position of democratic repair.[276]

Once Rawls moves to "principle guilt," the final and most mature stage of moral development for the liberal subject, he assumes that we have inherited a set of behaviors and traits. First, from the previous two "psychological laws" that grant us a corresponding sense of guilt, we acquire "cooperative virtues: those of justice and fairness, fidelity and trust, integrity and impartiality"[277] as well as "attitudes of love and trust, and of friendly feelings and mutual confidence."[278] The innovation of "principle guilt," however, resides in the need to explain and clarify our natural, moral feelings in associative ventures and articulate them not according to contingent circumstances or in reference to our personal attachment to individuals, but rather to generalizable principles that are implicit in associations but not yet made explicit, namely the two principles of justice. This constitutes a motivational and affective shift for Rawls, one that shifts

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[276] McIvor, *Mourning in America*, 78.

[277] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice,* 413.

[278] *Ibid*, 414-415.

his center of gravity from a theorist of care, attachment, etc. to a neo-Kantian. “Principle guilt,” from which we derive the broader “sense of justice,” draws from the solidaristic energies built in association and channels them towards principles that are known to secure the mutual benefit and well-being of others with whom we have no personal relationship. The “two principles,” insofar as they advance human interests, are meant to be objects of desire themselves. It is at this stage where Rawls speaks about “guilt in the strict sense,” a guilt that refers to generalized precepts rather than contingent attachments.[279]

Principle guilt, and thereby the sense of justice, requires a degree of imagination to work. But what exactly is Rawls asking his subject to imagine and enact? In the first two stages, the individual develops certain natural sentiments like love and affection, out of which moral emotions emerge. As associative ventures take on a shape that roughly conforms to the principles of justice, the sense of justice emerges once we see ourselves and others benefit from these rules.[280] The principles that produce such a benefit are invariably extended as governing principles to those with whom we do not have a direct relationship, and are the objects of attachment in and of themselves, insofar as they secure the well-being of others. However, this does not mean that Rawls is equating moral maturity with uncritical rule-following, though, as McIvor suggests, Rawls inevitably ends up idealizing the “original position” and “public reason” as a “superordinate agency” that functions as a law.[281] Instead, in this context Rawls is rather asking us to imagine that the principles incubated in association do indeed advance human flourishing, and once they are generalized, their violation still produce harm. In other words, the principles, if not followed, do not produce a guilt reaction

[279] *Ibid*, 415.

[280] *Ibid*, 429-430.

[281] McIvor, *Mourning in America*, 81.

because they are simply moral rules that compulsively require compliance, but instead that they are tested and understood to generate a degree of human well-being, making their violation in some sense an indirect cause of harm to others. Though our mature moral selves act from "principle dependent desires," Rawls requires that we never lose sight of the fact that the principles themselves cannot fully be abstracted from the impact they have on real individuals.

On Kleinian terms, it is here where Rawls's framework runs into an indissoluble contradiction. It features an account of depressive guilt that is solidaristic, registering a potentially diverse set of harms, but it is fundamentally bound to an overarching kind of identificatory structure that cannot be relinquished. This identificatory structure is comprised of the terms, categories, and at the end of the day, inequalities, of Rawls's liberalism, which his conception of depressive guilt must inevitably reinforce.[282] As we will show, this contradiction is in practice what gives "liberal guilt" its character as a cultural phenomenon. "Liberal guilt" features an inchoate solidarity, but at the same time a commitment to terms, categories, and structures of identification of liberalism that cannot be relinquished. "Liberal guilt" therefore resides in between solidarity and the commitment to an existing state of affairs, which creates either a kind of irresolvable moral

[282] If Rawls's account of guilt is at its core aimed at reinforcing the basic elements of "justice as fairness", which includes the "difference principle's" justification for inequality, then guilt-feelings cannot have as their aim the transformation of a given order such that it resolves the basic contradiction inherent in the "difference principle" itself. This contradiction is characterized by G.A. Cohen as a tension between the "moral arbitrariness claim" Rawls makes as a justification for the "difference principle" in that "none should fare worse than others through no fault of their own", and Rawls's invariable acceptance of certain arbitrary economic inequalities in his defense of the principle itself. See G.A. Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 156-161. What this implies, for our purposes, is that the Rawlsian subject will have as an actual attachment inequality itself. One might feel guilty for unduly living at the expense of another, but this difference cannot, and should not, be fully remedied on Rawls's terms.

tension or a desire to simply rely on gestures as a central form of moral action that can leave intact a broader order.

The sense of justice, of which "principle guilt" is a large component, is the backstop for Rawls's theory. It is the irreducible assumption that Rawls needs to build justice as fairness. And for Rawls, it is not only the minimum capacity required for participation in the "original position,"[283] but it is a foundation of what makes people actual human beings. As Rawls notes, to lack a sense of justice is to "lack a part of our humanity."[284] This justificatory appeal to "who we are" is, as Honig notes, a practice of producing and consolidating of the subject presupposed in the theory, insulating it from the "disruptions of politics" that could undermine the capacity of the constructed individual to choose the output principles Rawls wants us to reach.[285] Here, the familiar "agonist" critiques of Rawlsian liberalism from Wolin[286] or Mouffe[287] have much to say. Rawls's attempt to provide an economistic account of guilt is indeed a function of the broader liberal tendency to dissolve the political into a style of politics that privileges equilibrium, stability, and management over contestation and power.

In short, Rawls uses psychoanalytic thought against Freud in order to breed a subject capable of displacing politics in the way that Honig describes. In so doing, Rawls strips the subject

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[283] Rawls, "The Sense of Justice," 99.

[284] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 428.

[285] Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithica and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), 135.

[286] Sheldon Wolin, "The Liberal/Democratic Divide: On Rawls's *Political Liberalism*," in *Fugitive Democracy: And Other Essays*, ed. Nick Xenos (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2017).

[287] See Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (New York: Verso Books, 2005) and Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (New York: Verso Books, 2009).

of very particular kinds of conflicts that might trouble the ascendency from "authority guilt" to "principle guilt." To Rawls's credit, he does not think of this progressive movement from full dependency to full autonomy, an idea that is mostly untenable from a psychoanalytic point of view, but instead an account of the gradual ability of individuals to make sense of what their inherent dependency implies about how we formulate political principles. If we continue a reading of Rawls as indebted to a rather truncated Kleinianism, the Rawlsian subject remains in a permanent depressive position, morally and emotionally indebted to others, and in time capable of developing an account of how to secure the welfare of the other through abstract justificatory principles that then provide the unquestionable limits to political action. This presupposes an account of the self that Klein, rather than Freud, can neatly supply if abbreviated in specific ways. As the next section will show, this is visible in how Rawls uses Klein to think about suffering and the actions of reparation in more general terms, not simply the base emotional life of the individual. This speaks in more explicit terms to what a theory of "liberal guilt" might look like.

## III. Liberalism, Suffering, and Impasse:

Rawls is not typically considered a theorist of suffering. The references he makes to pain and suffering throughout his corpus are typically discussed briefly, insofar as he makes explicit attempts to build a subject capable of responding to and alleviating the suffering of others.[288] Here, there is a rather typical leveling and narrowing of human suffering as something that is intelligible, has a discernible cause, and can be readily acknowledged and stopped. But Rawls also insists upon

[288] See John Rawls, "Justice as Fairness," in *Collected Papers*, ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999), 47-72; John Rawls, "Justice as Reciprocity," in *Collected Papers* ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999) 190-224.

the idea, similar to Freud, that the price of entry into a just political arrangement is the agony of having to experience certain moral emotions. He writes:

> Now the moral feelings are admittedly unpleasant, in some extended sense of unpleasant; but there is no way for us to avoid a liability to them without disfiguring ourselves. This liability is the price of love and trust of friendship and affection, and of a devotion to institutions and traditions which we have benefited and which serve the general interests of mankind.[289]

This constitutes an acknowledgment that the moral emotions (guilt, shame, resentment, indignation, etc.) are a kind of suffering, an unavoidable affliction that comes along with living with one another peaceably and justly. To disavow these natural moral inclinations is in some sense a process by which we relinquish or disavow our own humanity. In an almost uncharacteristic passage towards the end of *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls reaffirms this through the metaphor of a love relationship:

> Those who love one another, or who acquire strong attachments and to forms of life, and the same time become liable to ruin their love makes them hostages to misfortune and the injustice of others. Friends and lovers take great chances to help each other; and members of families willingly do the same…Once we love we are vulnerable: there is no such thing as loving while being ready to consider whether

[289] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 428.

> to love, just like that. And the loves that may hurt the least are not the best loves. When we love we accept the dangers of injury and loss…Now if these things are true of love as the world is, or very often is, then a fortiori they would appear to be true of loves in a well-ordered society, and so of the sense of justice too. For in a society where others are just our loves expose us mainly to the accidents of nature and the contingency of circumstances. And similarly for the sentiment of justice which is connected to these affections.[290]

To feel invested in the well-being of others in the way that justice as fairness requires is not a matter of simple mutual benefit, but also of mutual liability. To feel attached to others in society is equally fulfilling as it is agonizing. But suffering the weight of moral feelings is one way we register the humanity in others as well as our own. If we can find any semblance of ambivalence in Rawls's theory, it may be here. At the same time, Rawls's account of the origins of the sense of justice assumes that suffering is never really a permanent, lingering, complex affliction, but rather a matter of stimulus-response that is invariably geared towards resolution and reconciliation. In its most simplistic formulation, an individual who is harmed actively suffers such that this suffering elicits a moral response from others in society, who in turn simply rectify an injustice, eliminating both the suffering of the harmed and the moral suffering of the bystander or offender.

In *Liberalism and Human Suffering: Materialist Reflections on Politics, Ethics, and Aesthetics*, Asma Abbas suggests this way of approaching suffering as a political problem is typical

[290] *Ibid*, 502.

of liberalism as a family of political ideas and practices.[291] For Abbas, what unites liberals *as liberals* is "the commitment of each of its variants to the cause of managing and abating human suffering."[292] This "commitment," however, is only intelligible on a set of terms that serve to naturalize and reinforce an abstract model that is meant to produce varying degrees of mutual, justifiable consensus.[293] In practice, this attitude has found its purest expression in liberal humanitarianism, which casts the global victim as an almost sacred object whose suffering valorizes a certain imperative to act on liberal terms and through liberal categories.[294] This is a process by which the victims, be they refugees, internally displaced persons, or the impoverished have their suffering rendered intelligible through a liberal vision, and are "admitted" or "included" into a liberal international order through operations that produce out of this suffering a rights-bearing individual who can express themselves through sanctioned channels. For Abbas, and implicit in Brad Evans's account in *Ecce Humanitas*, liberalism has its own moral and political

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[291] "Liberalism" is of course not a self-evident category, but rather a constructed one. See Duncan Bell, "What is Liberalism?" *Political Theory* 42, no. 6 (2014): 682-715. It is not my intention to develop my own construction, but rather to draw on Abbas's formulation, which takes as its major objects of inquiry *self-described liberals* like Rawls and Shklar.

[292] Asma Abbas, *Liberalism and Human Suffering Materialist Reflections on Politics, Ethics, and Aesthetics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 10.

[293] Jeremy Waldron suggests that one major presupposition of liberalism is a "respect for the capacities and the agency of individual men and women, and that these commitments generate a requirement that all aspects of the social should be made acceptable or be capable of being made acceptable to every last individual". Jeremy Waldron, "Theoretical Foundations of Liberalism," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 37, no. 147 (1987), 127-150, 128. Raymond Geuss echoes a similar sentiment, claiming that "What is distinctive about liberalism isn't, therefore, so much its openness to pluralism as its view that all societies should be seen as capable of consensus, despite a lack of homogeneity in the manners, beliefs, and habits of their members". Raymond Geuss, "Liberalism and its Discontents," *Political Theory* 30, no. 3 (2002), 320-338, 326.

[294] See Brad Evans, *Ecce Humanitas: Beholding the Pain of Humanity* (New York: Columbia UP, 2021).

vision whereby the "suffering are admitted into liberalism on preset terms, and where entry into a sphere or arena requires registering at the door with an assigned role, relinquishing any matter and materiality not relevant to the operations of liberal justice."[295]

What does this mean concretely? Abbas claims that it is typical of liberal thought, particularly contemporary liberals like Shklar and Rawls, to strip the subject down and rebuild it so it can perform certain mental, emotional and physical operations that their brand of liberalism, even Shklar's pessimistic "liberalism of fear", requires. In the case of Rawls's work, the moral drama in *A Theory of Justice* evinces a process whereby suffering is registered as pain that has a discernable injurious cause, which in turn valorizes rights that can rectify the injustice and render it "fit for trade".[296] What makes Rawls's moral vision work on its own terms is the very idea that the liberal self can easily objectify and quantify its own suffering and the suffering of others such that it can produce a political response that brings all participants back to a state of harmonious consensus. Any form of suffering that cannot be registered on the pre-fabricated terms produced at the outset is invisible. Harm is dehistoricized, compressed and abstracted to make it manageable. As it relates to guilt, it is assumed that injury and the guilt-feelings it elicits in the in party responsible can used as a kind of currency. In exchange for my apology or gesture of restitution, your suffering dissipates and my moral discomfort is assuaged. As a result, implied in Rawls's schema is a specific kind of economy of suffering, whereby the price of participation is the ability to feel something and act upon those feelings on the preset terms of the broader theory. Despite

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[295] Abbas, *Liberalism and Human Suffering*, 42.

[296] *Ibid*, 45.

Rawls's own sympathies towards "liberal socialism,"[297] one can't help but feel that Rawls's particular deployment of reciprocity and the implied balance sheet of harm in his theory likens suffering and our responsiveness to suffering as reified and marketized activity in a broader sphere of circulation.

What is the exact effect of the rather neat, economic characterization of guilt as a public feeling? Our purpose is not merely to point out the narrow, quantitative character of the emotional life of Rawls's subject, but also to explain how this might pose a problem for Rawls on his own theoretical terms. Take, for example, his initial framing of authority guilt as a dynamic between parent and child. In this simple dyadic interaction, the child violates a relationship of love and trust and therefore naturally feels a sense of guilt. This guilt is expiated through a few different avenues, namely a vague conception of "reconciliation" through the acceptance of parental injunctions and the modification of behavior. After expiation we return to equilibrium. When we move further to association guilt, as noted, Rawls encourages us to imagine more complex relations of indirect and direct harm. These could include a direct violation of someone's bodily integrity, but also the more indirect notion that we may feel guilty for "the burdens that fall on others" through a failure to act. This sense of failure, or a sense that one lives at another's expense, constitutes a leap in how Rawls treats our relationship to injustice. It is not simply a matter of direct harm, but rather a relation whereby one passively benefits unduly in an associative arrangement that may or may not be just. Once again, Rawls sketches the tools we have at our disposal, namely "reparation" and the "willingness to admit that what one has done is unfair (wrong) and to apologize for it."[298] Then,

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[297] See William A. Edmundson, *John Rawls: Reticent Socialist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2001).

[298] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 412.

as we have noted, an association's consensus-based equilibrium has been restored. This same emphasis on conduct-modification as a restorative, reparative tendency is at work when Rawls speaks about "principle guilt" and the more mature "sense of justice." He notes:

> When plagued by feelings of guilt, say, a person wishes to act properly in the future and strives to modify his conduct accordingly. He is inclined to admit what he has done and to ask for reinstatement, and to acknowledge and accept reproofs and penalties; and he finds himself less able to condemn others when they behave wrongly. The particular situation will determine which of these dispositions are realized…[299]

As Rawls gradually imagines more complex forms of harm and more complex social arrangements, the tools at our disposal to make good the harm we're supposedly responsible for remain relegated to vague notions of repair or a simple modification of behavior. Once we are presented with a relatively significant theoretical insight, that guilt-feelings are action-oriented, they can be felt for passively living at the expense of others, and they constitute eminently *public feelings* that we experience *in relation to others*, Rawls limits its active component to personal gestures assumed to have the force needed to restore or recalibrate the behaviors and social practices that secure the principles of justice. The elements of this assumption, though necessary for Rawls's rarified ideal theory, appear to lack a kind of commensurability. The liberal subject's guilt, regardless of scale, source, and degree, is always made good by an individualized gesture.

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[299] *Ibid*, 423.

Whatever suffering or injustice endures after this gesture is enacted cannot be accounted for on these terms. Here, Geuss is not necessarily correct that "Rawls has no theory of political *action* or agency", but it is surely true that whatever political action Rawls imagines, including civil disobedience, is circumscribed, individualized and presumed to have the function of producing stability rather than re-creating the terms and vision of politics itself.[300]

If Rawls is indeed developing a kind of truncated Kleinianism as the basis of his theory of moral sentiments, he is not alone in doing this. As Kristeva notes, positing Klein as developing a "primal morality" that obviates the messy pessimism of Freud and at times the pessimism of Klein herself, as well as centralizing the power of reparation "at the cost of focusing on the more negative elements" of her theory, has been a fixture of certain literatures attempting to create a new foundation for social theory.[301] If the "depressive position" is open to narrativization and interpretation, meaning that guilt-feelings in this position have a kind of open possibility to be scripted, Rawls appears to be implicitly providing a very specific kind of "intellectual and moral guidance" to make this emotion work on liberal terms, divesting Klein's work of that which can't be integrated into liberal commitments.[302] This constitutes a theoretical account of *liberal* guilt that can be distinguished as follows: first, it features an economy of suffering in which harm is interpreted as having a discernible cause, and this harm can be quantified and alleviated on terms such that a social equilibrium can be reached or restored. Second, the unit of analysis is the autonomous individual, capable of generating acts of repair that actually do the concrete moral and

[300] Geuss, "Liberalism and its Discontents," 330.

[301] Kristeva, *Melanie Klein*, 324.

[302] Alford, *Natural Law of Reparation*, 124.

political work of alleviating this harm. This kind of action is not necessarily transformative, but rather geared towards bringing the subject in line with an existing just arrangement or slightly modifying that arrangement. At each stage of argument, this account features a compression and narrowing of experience to fit within the vision of liberal politics towards which one must have an attachment.

Though Rawls is not claiming that this is how human beings act in all cases, he is claiming that citizens of liberal democratic polities, as a function of the various existing associations and groupings that refine their moral and political engagement with the world, contain within them the capacities to affirm and act upon these principles of justice on these exact psychological bases. In this sense, Rawls is consistently giving us account of the "practicable political possibility" to affirm and instantiate a more just order.[303] We are endowed with an ability to take responsibility in a particular way, and we are afforded opportunities to do so at any given time. The task of political philosophy for Rawls is therefore to help us make clear to ourselves what kind of just order may be feasible taking individuals as they are. Nevertheless, Rawls's sketch of this capacity, even when it features all of the elements needed to secure justice, still remains rather one-dimensional, a narrow politicization of what constitutes, guilt, reparation, and the attendant emotions and behaviors that fit within the schema of "justice as fairness."

This may be a reason to jettison Rawls's theory altogether as something that meaningfully explains core aspects of human experience. Surely, as Alford has noted, there are other reasons to be skeptical of Rawls's liberal psychology, as it is predicated on a narrow notion of reciprocity that presupposes that we can only "love others to the degree that they mirror, confirm, and respect" our

[303] Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, 4.

"self-esteem."[304] This means that there is an unacknowledged exclusionary element in Rawls's psychology that suggests affection and solidarity can only be expressed towards those who affirm our own sense of self. Therefore, strictly following Rawls's moral psychology leads us to question who will be unable to perform the reciprocity essential for "justice as fairness" and may therefore be left outside or hanging precariously in relation to the sphere of moral concern that Rawls describes. Once more, following Bonnie Honig, we are left with the often medicalized or pathologized remainders of Rawls's theory, towards whom guilt is presumably not felt.[305] This raises problem of what Táíwò has described as Rawlsian liberalism's "selective conscience," an inbuilt tendency to place at the forefront of our moral concern certain domestic in-groups at the expense of obligations owed to those outside of a domestic polity.[306] As a result, underlying Rawls's naturalistic assumptions of human sociability may reside a disavowed narcissism or privileging of some over others. As Sarah Ahmed has perceptively noted, a politics that affirms love and fellow-feeling as a binding force may place forceful, even hateful in-group privileges at the expense of others.[307]

These are very real limitations of Rawls's project. However, these specific problems are not our concern, at least for the purposes of this work. Instead, I wish to ask how Rawls's work reveals a kind of symptom of the liberal vision of political life, which in turn allows us to re-read a particular political emotion that we see in contemporary American politics. Here, rather than

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[304] C. Fred Alford, *The Self in Social Theory*, 52.

[305] Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, 126-156.

[306] Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò, "John Rawls and Liberalism's Selective Conscience" *The Nation* (November 27, 2021)

[307] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburg: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 122-143.

taking up Rawls's proposed use for his theory, which is to provide citizens with tools for thinking and enacting the principles of justice, I suggest it provides us with a kind of avatar that allows us to identify and explain "liberal guilt" as a cultural phenomenon. In short, I claim the following: what is wrong with Rawls's ideal theory is that it compresses moral emotions to make them manageable and fit for trade, thereby facilitating an exchange model of guilt and reparation. As I noted, this endows the subject with some of the capacities that Klein does, a potentially productive move, but contains a script in which the subject is meant to perform only a certain set of gestural acts that have the function of re-establishing an equilibrium on specific terms. However, I suggest that we can use this shortcoming as a clue to describe and understand "liberal guilt" as a cultural phenomenon, which we can read not as narcissistic moral posturing or a cynical smokescreen for oppression, a common refrain, but as a sense of genuine implication that contains within it an impetus to act upon feelings of solidarity and towards repair. Yet, the narrow understanding of reparation as apology or individual atonement that can be trafficked as an exchange is not enough to make use of guilt in a transformative way. The paranoid attachment to the assumptions of liberalism makes this difficult. If there emerges a contradiction between how the liberal subject wishes to make critical use of their guilt and the terms of liberalism itself, I suggest the individual in the throes of "liberal guilt" either settles as a satisfaction with individual gesture, or slips into what Wonham describes as a "moral paralysis" upon recognition that reparative gestures would require contesting the basic liberal presuppositions and structures towards which all action must conform.[308]

This analysis does not suggest that all liberals are somehow explicitly or even implicitly following Rawls, intending to actualize his theory while realizing that it falls short in practice. I

[308] Wonham, "Post-Critical Howell," 246.

*do* wish to suggest that there is a symptomatic deficit in liberal thought and practice, in which the centrality of individualist action, an overarching and rigid commitment to a set of fixed dogmas associated with civility or public reason, the emphasis on returning to equilibrium and consensus, and the implicit reified model of exchange, make guilt-feelings unable to be actualized in politically constructive or transformative ways. However, this begs the question of whether or not fundamental assumptions and scripts for this emotion can be re-written. Put plainly, perhaps "liberal guilt" as a cultural phenomenon is not necessarily inert or a dead end of political life, but instead a moment in which a very real dissonance might be channeled into a productive political action.

V. Rethinking "Liberal Guilt":

If we take "liberal guilt" as our object of inquiry, we are invariably turning away (though not fully away) from an analysis of the unconscious and moving further towards problematizing expressions of guilt themselves. The political problem at hand is therefore not necessarily the repression of guilt and its channeling into pathological behavior, obviously a common theme in psychoanalysis, but the sources of the specific attachments and emotional scripts that make this political emotion a *problem*. In both conservative and left-wing political commentary in the United States, the person expressing "liberal guilt" assumes the mantle as a fundamentally disingenuous figure. In such commentary, they might grasp at a degree of moral superiority by expressing intense moral anxieties about injustice while only making hollow gestures that will not change anything about the material circumstances that produce it. Many examples of "liberal guilt" are related to the persistence of racial injustice in the United States, but are not exclusively so. Political crises like war, class inequality, and gender-based hierarchies are all injustices that are said to elicit

"liberal guilt", which appears to be primarily identified through its "specifically performative qualities"[309] like that of confession,[310] apology, refining habits of consumption,[311] or gestures that acknowledge "privilege" with a supposed goal towards expiation.[312] Ellison has suggested these acts "signify sentimental indecisiveness" and a simultaneous "failure of tough-mindedness,"[313] a complete inability to in clear terms set forth a theory of change that is of "sufficient scale of the problem" that has elicited such moral feeling in the first place.[314]

What if we were to read situations like this differently? Though it is impossible to discount some cynical appropriations of sentimentality in an attempt to grasp at a moral high ground or relinquish a sense of moral obligation, we could also read this as a sense of solidarity that is only actualized on the terms of the existing liberal order. There is a mixture of depressive guilt directed towards others, but also an apparent paranoid attachment towards a broader arrangement that in turn places limitations on which kinds of solidaristic behaviors are considered thinkable or possible without destabilizing that paranoid attachment itself. This admixture of ambivalent emotions

[309] Ellison, "A Short History," 350.

[310] Angela Nagle, "The Scourge of Self-Flagellating Politics," *Current Affairs* (February 22, 2017)

[311] See Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (London: Verso. 2009). Though Žižek analyzes guilt most notably by reflecting upon "white guilt" in the wake of colonialism as a narcissistic gesture that re-centers the experience imperial subject rather than that of the colonized, his inquiry on "ethical" consumption has a consonance with the commonplace narratives related "liberal guilt". The hollow gesture of purchasing "ethical" products assuages the conscience of the nervous first world subject.

[312] Frederik DeBoer, "Admitting that white privilege helps you is really just you congratulating yourself," *The Washington Post* (January 28, 2016).

[313] Ellison, "A Short History," 348.

[314] *Ibid*, 349.

produces a set of contradictory actions that appear cynical. These could be acts of confession, repentance, or apology that have the supposed effect of combating a large-scale form of domination, or attempts to support an "ethical capitalism" by simply purchasing the right products. My reading here is that these behaviors demonstrate certain kinds of depressive guilt and solidarity, but are only done on the exchange-based terms of the existing order to which one feels attached. This creates a kind of cycle, where potentially real solidarities are only actualized on a rigid set of terms compatible with liberal attachments.

When the desire to express reparative solidarity is perceived to challenge the terms liberal order itself, thereby creating a kind of irreconcilable conflict between moral obligation and one's more general commitments that presumably provide someone with different benefits, guilt-feelings may simply languish as what as what Robbins calls "unproductive guilt," an unactualizable "responsibility for the suffering of others that finds no satisfactory outlet in action that might lessen that suffering."[315] This appears to be an instance of "moral paralysis," a kind of "emotional instability" that emerges out of a kind of contradiction, namely a real expression of solidarity and a sense that one is implicated in the harm of another, but also an inability or unwillingness to stand against the terms, categories, and material benefits derived from the existing liberal order that might produce that harm.[316] These feelings could also be actualized into one-off pseudo-reparative gestures that seek to manically shed individual guilt-feelings through acts that reproduce rather than transform the dynamic responsible for the injustice being addressed. When confronted with the concrete conditions of political impasse and large-scale structures of domination, the conflict between the paranoid and depressive posture causes vacillation between

[315] Robbins, *The Beneficiary*, 37.

[316] Ellison, "A Short History," 350.

a kind of despair or a self-satisfaction with small and individualized modifications of behavior. It is this irreconcilable dissonance that Ellison would describe as “liberal guilt” as we understand it.

It appears that we are in the same place we started. “Liberal guilt” is still a mystification that requires some kind of corrective. However, what is exactly *wrong* with “liberal guilt” is of decisive importance. From the vantage point of this study, “liberal guilt” could be conceptualized as a real dissonance out of which potentially productive action can be fashioned and guided. Here, guilt is not a dead end of politics, but rather an indication of some kind of fellow-feeling or solidarity. It is in some sense an indication that someone is alive to their implication in the suffering of others, either directly or indirectly. However, it matters how this feeling is mediated, narrativized, and harnessed. In other words, it matters which kinds of dominant forms of narration and attachment produce scripts that channel the emotion into certain practices. What qualifies guilt-feelings as “liberal” are the overarching structures of commitment that invariably color how the emotion is acted upon. In short, if we take this emotion to be problematic in some way, it does not stem from the fact that guilt as such is somehow an inherently anti-political or unproductive emotion. Rather, it prompts us to examine the political and ideological terrain upon which the emotion is expressed and channeled. From such a vantage point, it is possible to read this emotion not as narcissistic posturing, but a genuine expression of solidarity amidst conditions of implication, where the question of what it means to genuinely repair is uncertain and channeled into some behaviors rather than others. Perhaps we could think of “liberal guilt” not as a hopeless pathology, but as the potential beginning of a process of political solidaristic political engagement that can be made and re-made if certain structures of liberal attachment can be called into question.

This leaves us with a lingering issue. What might it mean to hold onto certain Kleinian insights while wresting them from a liberal reading? Would this simply mean that we insist upon

a different conception of reparation, one that is more constructive and transformative rather than gestural? From Klein's work we could conceptualize guilt-feelings as elements of a productive ethic of critical responsiveness that cannot be neatly assumed to function in the streamlined way that Rawls assumes, but can nonetheless be subject to different forms of narration and political mobilization that might facilitate a deeper kind of political engagement rather than simply an impetus towards apology or confession, and can potentially call into question the terms of the existing order. Incidentally, this question leads us to the early tradition of critical theory, which, though indebted to Freud and Nietzsche, holds guilt-feelings as ways of being alive to the violence of reification in the administered world. What's more, from this perspective guilt-feelings may be an engine of restless critique rather than reconciliation. This may stand as a corrective to Rawls, while retaining a rejection of the paradigm set forth by Nietzsche and Freud.

## VI. Concluding Remarks:

Our task here has not been to revive guilt-feelings as a normative prescription for how we *should feel* in our daily life, but instead to take certain kinds of guilt-feelings as objects of inquiry in and of themselves. The proliferation of commentary on "liberal guilt" prompts us to approach this social phenomenon not merely by way of critique, but to substantively engage with these feelings as expressions of a certain kind of political attachment within the circumstances common in western democracies, the United States in particular. Rawls's work in particular provides us with a starting point to re-engage guilt-feelings as significant aspects of political life, and gives us a frame of reference for what guilt is supposed to do as part of political practice. If we follow Rawls, we are afforded the ability to read into this emotion something more than the typical Freudian framing suggests. Rather than an expression of fear before a demand, we might think of

guilt as an expression of solidarity with an individual to whom one has an attachment, and an acknowledgment that one may have been directly or indirectly responsible for the suffering of another. Rawls's account breaks down in a number of ways as he proceeds, but taking it as a potentially instructive framing of how liberals might approach guilt as a moral emotion is analytically useful in parsing out the character of "liberal guilt" as an everyday experience. "Liberal guilt," rather than being a useless narcissistic gesture, may contain an underappreciated solidarity that is only actualized on liberalism's terms. We can read this dynamic as symptomatic of a set of potentially conflicting sets of attachments, namely the sense that one is indebted to others, but also that one cannot express that indebtedness in such a way that would challenge broader liberal commitments.

## Chapter Four

*Justice Beyond Repair: Negative Dialectics and the Politics of Guilt and Atonement:*

As we have noted, the contemporary critical theoretical tradition has mostly taken guilt-feelings as residues of a demand, which have the function of binding the subject nervously to a dominant structure of thinking, feeling, and acting. As such, guilt-feelings are conceptualized as ways of acting out the demand of another, usually authoritative figure or structure. Where there is guilt, there is invariably power. Interestingly, the tradition of early critical theory set forth by the Frankfurt School theorists saw a different problem characteristic of capitalist society. In the work of Herbert Marcuse[317] and, as we shall see, Theodor Adorno, the problem posed by complete reification is not that it causes individuals to constantly subject themselves to compulsive gestures of self-abasement, but instead that conscience seems to have no place in social life at all. As Freud gives us a picture of the individual in civilization constantly sickened by their own emotional states, the picture provided by the Frankfurt School theorists is the subject as an almost completely unfeeling automaton. In Adorno's words, "bourgeois coldness," an unfeeling "indifference" that is "intrinsic to instrumental rationality," is a totalized fixture of social life, deadening the individual to that which cannot be subsumed into a reified social whole.[318] For Marcuse, "conscience" in the administered world is completely "absolved by reification," as "guilt has no place" in the

[317] Herbert Marcuse, "The Obsolescence of the Freudian Concept of Man" in *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader*, eds. Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas McKay Kellner (New York: Routledge, 1989), 233-246, 237.

[318] J.M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 397.

schematic, calculative, instrumental ordering of one-dimensional society.[319] Save for the guilt-feelings that might arise for the "crime" of rejecting the dominant order, the individual does not appear to exercise any degree of conscience, nor do guilt-feelings ever become a social feeling outside of the confines of private life.[320]

What motivates these reflections of the early Frankfurt School theorists is an apparent attempt to rescue conscience and specifically guilt-feelings against the reified order that brings conscience into line, deadens it, and subsumes the individual into a totality that dictates not only their behavior, but their understanding of why they are doing what they are doing. Marcuse's framing of this in *One-Dimensional Man* is only an entry-point into this question. In more substantial terms, Theodor Adorno expresses a developed, though under-appreciated, understanding of what guilt-feelings do, how they work, and what specific function they might have in any politics of transcendence. In *Negative Dialectics* and its precursory works, Adorno provides us ways of thinking beyond the familiar linkage of guilt with self-abasement and obedience. As I will claim, for Adorno negative dialectical critique is animated by guilt-feelings that have an ambivalent, pessimistic, but action-oriented quality that thrusts the individual "to make amends" (*wieder gutzumachen*) to the objects in the world damaged by our participation and implication in a reified social whole.[321] This has led prominent scholars like Jay Bernstein[322] and

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[319] Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 79.

[320] *Ibid*, 82.

[321] Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 18.

[322] J.M. Bernstein, "Negative Dialectic as Fate: Adorno and Hegel," in *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 19-50.

Amy Allen[323] to read Adorno's work as deeply consonant with that of Melanie Klein and the operations of the depressive position. However, a question remains as to how Adorno conceptualizes the nature of the harm we exact on things in the world, and, importantly, what it exactly means to "make amends" in the context of late capitalism. This has been framed as a critical engagement aimed at the "restitution"[324] and "recognition"[325] of things in the world in the face of dominant processes of violent objectification. As Klein imagines the shift from the paranoid-schizoid position to the depressive position as a movement from omnipotent manipulation of people as *objects* to the view of them as *subjects*, Adorno imagines a similar movement from "bourgeois coldness" to critical solidarity, with guilt as an animating force that marks the transition.

However, reading this as a straightforward project of "reparation" or "restorative justice" must be qualified. In a conscious attempt to avoid reifying the exchange model of reparation that Rawls does, Adorno frames repair as a critical attempt at political transformation, one spurred on by the solidaristic capacities latent within guilt. As such, it doesn't settle to reproduce an existing order, but instead aims and the production of transformative political possibility. Importantly, again contra Rawls, the action-oriented elements of guilt-feelings are not one-off gestures that make amends for a given harm. Rather, they are ongoing and demanding enactments that are always

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[323] See Amy Allen, *Critique on the Couch: Why Critical Theory Needs Psychoanalyis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021); Amy Allen, "Progress and the Death Drive," in *Transitional Subjeects: Critical Theory and Object Relations*, eds. Amy Allen and Joel Whitebook (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 109-134.

[324] Axel Honneth, "Performing Justice: Adorno's Introduction to *Negative Dialectics*," in *Pathologies of Reason: On the Legacy of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 71-87.

[325] Brian O'Connor, *Adorno's Negative Dialectic: Philosophy and the Possibility of Critical Rationality* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004), 43.

partial, ambivalent, and imperfect, as a pure reconciliation or reparation can never be fully realized in the administered world. As a result, there is an irreconcilable guilt that lies at the heart of contemporary political life, one that is fundamentally different from the Freudian guilt sketched in *Civilization and its Discontents*. For Adorno, the organization of the world in capitalist modernity means that we are destined to unduly live at the expense of others, and thereby live under the weight of guilt-feelings. For Freud, civilization necessarily places demands that we renounce and repress our instincts, forcing us to into a state of dissatisfaction and malaise. For Adorno, guilt-feelings are a spontaneous response to our embeddedness in violence and injustice, whereas for Freud, guilt is a response to the fact that we live with repressive limitation and law.

This chapter will begin by reconstructing Adorno's critique of legalism, maintaining that he disentangles guilt, justice, and atonement from traditional matters of legal designation, exchange, and the broader machinery of "bourgeois justice," which, as Max Horkheimer and Adorno claim, plays a role in the formalization and quantification of thinking, acting, and feeling. Here, Adorno is careful to explain how the identification of morality and guilt with law and legality is indicative of an "expropriated conscience," a relinquishing of one's particular selfhood and full immersion into the administered world.[326] However, this does not mean Adorno suggests guilt and guilt-feelings are necessarily legalistic categories from the outset, or categories that signify an inherent identification with an authoritative voice. In fact, this is quite the contrary. The next portion of the chapter will elaborate upon the status of guilt-feelings in Adorno's corpus, which are the bodily and affective engines that facilitate human solidarity against and outside of reified consciousness. For Adorno, guilt is not an inherently a legalistic identification, but can

[326] Theodor Adorno, et al., *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Verso Books, 2019), 634.

alternatively be considered a bodily attunement that facilitates an unending practice of making transformative amends through an attentiveness to one's implication in the suffering of others. These claims will provide a foundation to pursue the last contention of this paper, which is that atonement and "doing justice" for Adorno is *more* than a matter of "restitution," "recognition," or "reparation," but a process by which we atone for the guilt that we share in, deliberately or inadvertently, reproducing the logic and the conditions that made Auschwitz possible by attempting to transform those conditions. This and this alone is "the only possible moral imperative" after Auschwitz.[327]

As Amy Allen reads Melanie Klein through an Adornian lens,[328] this chapter reads Adorno through a Kleinian lens, at least in part. Adorno appears to make use of Kleinian categories to animate the performance of negative dialectical critique, and, as Rawls did, politicizes concepts like guilt and reparation such that they exhibit a certain kind of political potential. However, these concepts are politicized on fundamentally different terms. Reconciliation and exchange are distinctively *not* the aims of Adorno's politicized account. Rather, guilt and the impetus to repair are meant to be categories that maintain an indissoluble kind of dissonance with the world as it is. Guilt is not meant to be overcome through gesture, as it is for Rawls. It instead generates a perpetual critical engagement that aims at social transformation. In other words, what it means to "repair" on Adorno's terms is not reparation traditionally understood. It does not have a concrete political aim that can be integrated into a kind of means ends thinking. Adorno's reparation, if we could call it that, rather aims at the critique of society and the production of political possibility.

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[327] Javier Burdman, "'After Auschwitz': Writing History after Injustice in Adorno and Lyotard," *Contemporary Political Theory* (2020) https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-020-00456-8

[328] Allen, "Progress and the Death Drive", 129.

This places Adorno in a dissonant relationship with literatures on suffering, many of which emphasize its unsuitability as a foundation for political action,[329] and it also gives us additional texture to read Adorno as a fraught and complicated Freudian. Though Adorno obviously makes use of Freudian categories in his study of fascist propaganda and ends up adopting elements of his naturalism and libido theory,[330] his attitude towards Freudianism is ambivalent. This study suggests that as it relates to guilt-feelings, Adorno adopts a distinctly non-Freudian view by taking guilt as a means of actively recognizing a personally and socially disavowed interdependency,[331] standing against the Freudian and Nietzschean tendency to read them as potentially instances of neurosis, pathology, or blockages of the will.

## I. Guilt and the Problem of "Bourgeois Justice":

Adorno provocatively remarks in *Negative Dialectics* that "existence has become a universal guilt context (*Schuldzusammenhang*)," designating that human experience is marred by the inescapable and universalizable implication in the suffering of others.[332] For political theorists, Adorno's invocation of a discourse of "guilt" would appear as problematic on its face, insofar as it conjures the fraught discourses of Christian self-abasement and confession, psychoanalytic pathology, or the narrow reduction of a distinctively *political* problem as a matter of individualized,

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[329] See Claudia Leeb, 'Rebelling Against Suffering in Capitalism," *Contemporary Political Theory*. 17, (2018): 263-282.

[330] See Yvonne Sherratt, "Adorno's Concept of the Self: A Marriage of Freud and Hegelian Marxism," *Revenue Internationale de Philosophie* 1, no. 227 (2004): 101-117.

[331] See Claudia Leeb, *The Politics of Repressed Guilt* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

[332] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 372.

lawful designation. Yet, it is exactly these more recognizable conceptions of guilt, particularly those related to individualized transgression and legality, that Adorno wishes to move beyond. Our question is therefore twofold: what are the pitfalls of thinking of guilt in the typical categories of individualized guilt before the law, and how might Adorno aid us in reconceptualizing the specific political valence of guilt outside of traditional, legalist conceptions of justice?

The pursuit of these questions indeed begins at Adorno's critique of the discourse of legality and the assumptions embedded therein. As the following section will show, Adorno creates a parallel between how appeals to law, legal process and justice function in both bourgeois and fascist society, and how we might think of guilt outside of the rigidity of reified legalistic categories generally. Legalistic thinking does not just *produce* sterile designations of guilt through a legal process, but rather dulls conscience, specifically innate feelings of guilt that facilitate a sense of interdependence, indebtedness and solidarity with others. This will become clearer through a discussion of Horkheimer and Adorno's reflections on "bourgeois justice" (*bürgerliche Gerechtigkeit*) in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.[333]

Where exactly can we find a point of entry for this discussion? Antonio Vasquez-Arroyo recently identified a tendency in Adorno scholarship to wrongfully downplay "his roots in the dialectical legacy of 'Hegelian Marxism,' in favor of conceptualizing an 'ethical Adorno,'" a proponent of "ethical modernism" rather than a Marxist critical theorist responsive to historico-political predicaments of power.[334] This cuts against an engrained body of very sophisticated scholarship that reads Adorno as setting forth a substantial ethical vision, but in so doing neglect

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[333] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 4.

[334] Antonio Vasquez-Arroyo, *Political Responsibility*, 181.

the distinctively political character of his reflections.[335] In line with Vasquez-Arroyo's sentiment, recovering the "Hegelian Marxist" Adorno is crucial if scholars wish to fully understand the character and incisiveness of his critique of traditional conceptions of law and justice in bourgeois society.

Adorno's critique of "bourgeois justice" takes Marx as its point of departure, specifically Marx's analysis of the commodity form. As Marx begins in *Capital*, a commodity must be granted a quantifiable identity in the form of exchange-value so that it may be "directly exchangeable with all other commodities".[336] However, what also takes place during this process of quantification is a kind of neglect, in which the sensuous characteristics of the commodity are disavowed to make way for a process of abstraction whereby an arbitrary quantitative designation granted to the object takes priority over its qualitative aspects.[337] In other words, for the purposes of exchange, objects are stamped with a detached identity that does not refer to the distinct particularity of that which is being addressed.

What Marx describes is not merely a meditation on "the mysteries of identity" specific to Marx's age, nor a sterile analysis of how political economy came to understand certain objects as the same or valuable within a particular social totality.[338] Rather, through the birth of capitalist commodity exchange, Adorno reads Marx as identifying process of violent objectification, in

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[335] An example of this might be Bernstein's *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*.

[336] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Volume I* (London: Penguin Classics, 1990), 159.

[337] See Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (Bibliotech Press, 2017), 73.

[338] Frederic Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistance of the Dialectic* (New York: Verso Books, 1990), 23.

which all things are not seen for the uniqueness or qualitative distinctiveness they embody, but rather come to take on a uniform, fixed, and abstract identity that makes them manipulable and exchangeable. If individuals are reduced to "economic functions" and eventually become nothing more than "agents or bearers of exchange value", they have no inherent worth outside of the process of exchange.[339] For Adorno to follow Marx and claim that the "domination of mankind by the exchange-value" is indeed "universal," the components of exchange, namely abstraction, a false sense of equality, and homogenized "identity-thinking" would need to be reproduced in theory and concrete political practices.[340]

It is only upon this historico-political terrain that we can clarify the content and force of Adorno's critique of "bourgeois justice," which is not grappled with in a sustained way, but can be pieced together in fragments of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. If we could summarize it succinctly, we could say that Horkheimer and Adorno are reproducing the fundamental elements of Lukács's concept of reification laid out in *History and Class Consciousness*, which dedicates a great deal of energy to picking apart the discrete elements of capitalist society, particularly law and the organs of justice, that have the effect of harmonizing the basic contradictory structure of capitalism as a social totality.[341] So says Lukács, judicial functions, in line with the quantification characteristic of exchange, serve strictly as "means of calculating the effects of actions and of rationally imposing modes of action relevant to a particular class."[342] Cause and effect, rational quantification of

[339] Deborah Cook, *Adorno, Foucault, and the Critique of the West* (New York: Verso Books, 2018), 23.

[340] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 178.

[341] Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 75.

[342] *Ibid*, 87.

actions and outcomes, is the implicit principle of juridical reasoning in capitalist society. Dropping the class character of Lukacs's reflections, Horkheimer and Adorno claim that "bourgeois society is ruled by equivalence. It makes dissimilar things comparable by reducing them to abstract quantities."[343] This tendency, however, is not merely apparent as a material phenomenon, but also reproduced in specifically Enlightenment thought, which, Horkheimer and Adorno further claim, has tended to assert that "anything which cannot be resolved into numbers, and ultimately into one, is illusion' and therefore worthless."[344] In the same way that political economy cannot register as meaningful something that cannot be exchangeable, Enlightenment moral theories cannot help but reproduce the same emphasis on quantification, uniformity and universality. The result is that, as Horkheimer and Adorno note, "the same equations govern justice and commodity exchange."[345] The legal apparatus through which restitution, punishment, reparation, reciprocity is to be calculated and administered are corollaries of the "laws of logic" that were constructed to build a "unified, scientific order" by Enlightenment rationalists in which all is calculable and manipulable across time and space.[346] This means the violent reification of identity-thinking that is perpetuated through exchange is also perpetuated through the institutions that purport to resolve injustices.

These reflections nevertheless remain ambiguous and relatively scattered. This is one reason why commentators have oftentimes labeled *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as "a series of wild

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[343] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 4-5.

[344] *Ibid*.

[345] *Ibid*, 4.

[346] *Ibid*, 63.

generalizations barely susceptible to empirical confirmation"[347] or "a series of hit-or-miss aphorisms rather than a sustained argument."[348] What exactly are Horkheimer and Adorno referring to when they inveigh against "bourgeois justice?" In short, the ideology of legalism more broadly is their target, as it is for Lukács. As Judith Shklar has noted, legalism as posited by neo-Kantians like Hans Kelsen has a tendency to crystalize into "refined and rigid systems of formal definitions" that isolate "law completely from the social context within which it exists," instead asserting law as a detached and self-evident "science."[349] Not only is the distinctly *political* character of law masked in legalistic thinking, but its inherent tendency towards formalism and uniformity means that legal systems posit "impersonal rules" as the standards through which "justice" is supposed to be adjudicated or administered, making justice itself merely a matter of rationalized rule-following rather than an ongoing practice of critical and moral engagement.[350]

In legalistic "bourgeois justice," a fixed identity of the subject is presupposed, and indeed required if there is to be regularity, conformity and consistency in the application of legal principles. Adorno sees this practice already at work in Kant, who intended to build a uniform and "properly juridical or legal subject" capable of autonomous self-legislation.[351] For Kant, moral

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[347] Simon Jarvis cited in Martin Shuster, *Autonomy after Auschwitz: Adorno, German Idealism, and Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 8.

[348] Richard Rorty cited in Shuster, *Autonomy after Auschwitz: Adorno, German Idealism, and Modernity*, 8.

[349] Judith Shklar, *Legalism Law, Morals, and Political Trials* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1986), 2.

[350] *Ibid*, 35.

[351] Jameson, *Late Marxism*, 19.

reasoning is meant to take on a "lawful" (*gesetzlich*) quality,[352] and obligation becomes not a matter of *feeling indebted* to another and feeling the need to engage in a process of critical restitution, but rather a product of fulfilling a sterile "external demand".[353] As we noted, one need only refer to Kant's consistent appeal to the necessary "purity and strictness" of universally valid moral laws, insulated from our subjective "wishes and inclinations", to get a sense of how his moral schema also contains a rigid, leveling quality that at its core neglects the contextual, material, or qualitative particularities at hand.[354] All individuals are intended to individually conform their wills in accordance with an "objective law of reason" that asserts a universally binding command, which has the function of negating the very possibility for conceptualizing difference and critique.[355] This notion of obligation in Kant, which Adorno also equates with a kind of "moral narcissism,"[356] surrenders the possibility of critical engagement with these fixed universal standards in favor of uncritical obligation.

The character of bourgeois exchange recounted in Marx and the character of "bourgeois justice" that finds its fullest expression in legalism are similar insofar as they posit abstract principles to make unlike things alike. The commodity is granted an abstract quantity and confronts the vicissitudes of the market as an exchangeable item. The legal subject's identity is meant to be equally abstract and uniform, which is necessary for it to fit within a totalizing legalistic framework

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[352] *Ibid*.

[353] Shklar, *Legalism*, 61.

[354] Kant, *Groundwork*, 17.

[355] *Ibid*, 24.

[356] Judith Butler, *Giving Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 108.

that makes moral and political experience merely a matter of uncritical rule-following. The characteristics of both the legal subject and the commodity are manipulated in order to fit within a hegemonic schema, be it law or political economy. And for Adorno, as long as "jurisprudence" represents "the epitome of…a completely consistently structured, dogmatic theory," falsely insisting upon itself as a scientific closed system whereby all moral and political experience is associated with rule-following, it will yield to a tendency to uncritically repeat and reproduce judgment (and institutional conditions of judgment) in relation to subjects who are bred to equate moral experience with obedience to a rationalized external demand.[357] This abstract and rigid conception of morality means that "bourgeois justice" must repress the very possibility of difference, particularity, and also *domination* among the objects it has defined. This is how, in *History and Freedom*, Adorno can assert the only seemingly paradoxical claim that "justice that amounts to a repetition of sameness" can only be "unmasked as injustice and perpetual inequality."[358]

A resurgence in scholarship since the 1980s regarding Marxism's relationship to law made little or no reference to any this aspect of the critical theoretical tradition. Rather, at stake in many of these debates was the extent to which the rule of law functioned as a tool of legitimation for specific relations of class domination, and whether it belonged as a facet of the "base" or "superstructure" in the Marxian analytical frame in its more rigid varieties.[359] The common refrain

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[357] Theodor Adorno, *Philosophical Elements of a Theory of Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 18.

[358] Theodor Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964/1965* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 170.

[359] These debates can be found in: Hugh Collins, *Marxism and Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984). and Andrew Vincent, "Marx and Law" *Journal of Law and Society* 20, no. 4 (Winter, 1993): 371-397.

in Marxist scholarship has been to highlight the fact that bodies of law in capitalist society reinforce relations of domination rather than alleviate it, and here Adorno would not necessarily disagree despite his unwillingness to speak in the language of class entirely.[360] Yet, Adorno's reflections do provide us with an insight that distinctly Anglo-American Marxist reflections on law do not. He is not merely attentive to the fact that law formally reinforces injustice in the form class domination, but also that it betrays a deep irrationality by only rendering a limited set of human experiences as socially legible or important.

This account is fully expressed in *Negative Dialectics* in the following way:

> Law is the primal phenomenon of irrational rationality. In law the formal principle of equivalence becomes the norm; everyone is treated alike. An equality in which differences perish secretly serves to promote inequality; it becomes the myth that survives amidst an only seemingly demythologized mankind. For the sake of an unbroken systematic, the legal norms cut short what is not converted, every specific experience that has not been shaped in advance; and then they raise the instrumental rationality to the rank of a second reality *sui generis*. The total legal realm is one of definitions. Its systematic forbids the admission of anything that eludes their closed circle, of anything *quod non est in actis*. These bounds, ideological in themselves, turn into real violence as they are sanctioned by law as the socially controlling

[360] For an example of this argument, see Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism (*Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 27.

> authority, in the administered world in particular. In the dictatorships they become direct violence; indirectly, violence has always lurked behind them.[361]

In one sense Adorno is claiming that "legal norms" reinforce domination in the traditionally Marxian sense (though there is no mention of class), but more importantly Adorno is asserting that law and the legalistic thinking more broadly associated with the Enlightenment *creates* the subjects to which law applies and expels any idea or experience that cannot be fit into a unitary moral or political theory in the first place. It therefore creates a mythic account of human affairs, and quite literally does violence (deliberately or not) by misrecognizing *subjects as objects* that can fit within a formal, schematic frame and be ordered, manipulated and altered in a particular way.

This tendency towards thinking in terms of uniformity and therefore predictability and calculability inevitably disavows the elements of life that cannot be neatly categorized and ordered. But what are the kinds of experiences that exist within the silence of law and therefore cannot be rendered meaningful or intelligible? For Adorno, the raw affects associated with bodily experiences of injustice (suffering, pity, remorse, guilt, etc.) have no currency within the machinery of "bourgeois justice," and are deliberately neglected in order to make way for a more systematic, formalistic moral and legal theory.[362] It is not because of mere sentimentality that Adorno wishes to bring our attention to affects that he believes have been expunged from philosophical and

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[361] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 309.

[362] Take for example Horkheimer and Adorno's claim in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: "To be free of the stab of conscience [*Gewissensbissen*] is as essential to formalistic reason as to be free of love or hate. Remorse [*Reue*] posits the past – which, contrary to popular ideology, has always meant nothing to the bourgeoisie – as something which exists; it is a relapse, to prevent which, for bourgeois praxis, would be remorse's only justification." Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 75.

political relevance. In fact these are the elements of experience that, as Honneth notes, allow us to "become attentive" to the "pathological character" of our "apparently familiar life-world."[363] In other words, suffering or remorse, for example, help us *sense* injustice, and tip us off to the fact that the institutions and practices that purport to secure freedom, justice or equality do not actually do so. It brings our attention to an extreme insufficiency of justice as it is practiced, and to the other who is cast out, neglected, or dominated within the administered world.

Importantly, this is not meant to be an affirmation of remorse, nor is Horkheimer and Adorno's subsequent discussion of the denigration of pity [*Mitleid*] in Kant meant to be an affirmation of thereof. As Gerhard Schweppenhäuser notes, "to set out an affirmative moral principle was exactly what Adorno did not want to do,"[364] rather, he "sought an element that would foster mimetic solidarity" through certain affects."[365] Remorse and pity for Adorno are therefore elements of human experience that help facilitate receptiveness to the world in a way that the abstract processes of Enlightenment systematization cannot. This is not a foundation for an ethics, but rather one means by which the body registers injustice in a way that propels us to resist, rather than reconcile ourselves to a particular state of affairs. These affects do this by granting us an attentiveness to suffering that endures long after the machinery of "bourgeois justice" is finished and declared that justice has been done. Guilt, as we will see, is a central affect that has been disavowed by legalism, and has been restricted as a mere formal definition rather than a sensory

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[363] Axel Honneth, "The Possibility of a Disclosing Critique of Society: The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in Light of Current Debates in Social Criticism," in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 49-62, 59.

[364] Gerhard Schweppenhäuser, "Adorno's Negative Moral Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, ed. Thomas Huhn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 328-353, 346.

[365] *Ibid*, 334.

experience. And against theorists like Arendt who have suggested that "political action…should not be driven by self-regarding motives such as guilt," Adorno will suggest that guilt is indeed an *indispensable* type of suffering for reclaiming anything like an ethic of political action.[366]

In short, Adorno's basic contention is that the uniformity and calculability of law represses the elements of experience that cannot be neatly categorized and ordered. Bodies of law present themselves as collections of unalterable definition and false conceptions of equality, making them not just compatible with the rigid domination of the "administered world," but one of its essential components, one that eventually sanctions outright violence. In this context, whatever guilt and reparation might come to mean are not so much interpreted as critical concepts or even dissonant and active feelings, but instead as quantifiable designations that in turn serve broader relations of domination within capitalist society. Guilt on bourgeois terms is, if anything, conceptualized as sterile failure of obligation to an overarching demand. Violation of this demand is only intelligible through appeals to quantifiable understandings of cause and effect. Reparation can only be thought on the terms of an exchange model. Whatever innate drives we have to actualize these feelings on different terms are inevitably stifled by as reification becomes total.

## II. Law After Auschwitz:

Adorno's assertions related to the continuity between bourgeois and fascist politics are grounded in observations made in his psychoanalytic studies like *Guilt and Defense*, namely that "the overwhelming portion of the German population" during the Third Reich, typically considered bystanders, were "shaped by the moral imagination…of the liberal-bourgeois world,

[366] Andrew Schaap, "Guilty Subjects and Political Responsibility: Arendt, Jaspers and the Resonance of the "German Question" in Politics of Reconciliation," *Political Studies* 49 (2001): 749-766, 758.

and still internalized a good piece of it."[367] This made the majority of the population very different from the "practitioners of violence" who could successfully suppress their conscience entirely, but the fact of their relative acquiescence and willingness to subordinate themselves to a new regime served as a testament to an engrained respect for the supposed morality of sterile rule-following that served as the bedrock of the continuity between bourgeois and fascist life.[368] It is only upon this terrain, a cultivated tendency towards uncritical obedience towards an external moral and political demand, that the Third Reich could have drawn its social legitimacy.

With this in mind, Adorno links the subject who uncritically submits to legalistic rule-following with the "potentially fascist individual" outlined in *The Authoritarian Personality*,[369] who demonstrates a "wish for legality," the hallmark of a dogmatic, thoughtless, "expropriated conscience."[370] The ideal fascist subject, the thoughtless, machinic individual unable to exercise one's conscience, is for Adorno in effect already the ideal, law-abiding liberal subject. In Hitler's own perverted legalism, uncritical rule-following assumed the same status as a moral imperative, and the tendency that existed in bourgeois society to produce a uniform subject to fit within a totalizing moral schema was present within *fascist* society. The expulsion of difference in bourgeois society takes the form of neglect, disavowal or manipulation, while fascist regimes radicalize this and engage in violent elimination.

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[367] Theodor Adorno, *Guilt and Defense: On the Legacies of National Socialism in Postwar Germany* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 53.

[368] *Ibid*

[369] Adorno et al. *The Authoritarian Personality*, 1.

[370] *Ibid*, 634.

Nevertheless, the practical continuity between bourgeois society and fascist society exists well beyond Adorno's insistence that they facilitate rationalized rule-following as a supreme and *singular* moral principle. Both arrangements, through the imposition of external and abstract moral demands, denature the innate sentiments that would provide an engine for critical engagement with the organization of society. Adorno's Frankfurt School contemporaries approached this very topic, particularly as it relates to guilt, in a cursory fashion that Adorno would address at greater length. As we noted at the outset, this was certainly taken up as a problem by Marcuse in *One-Dimensional Man*. But we find a similar concern by Max Horkheimer, for example, noted in his seminal "The Jews and Europe" that totalitarian society sought to eliminate "bad conscience" (*schlechtes Gewissen*) as the last means of resistance to obedient rule-following.[371] Their lament that feelings of guilt could be slowly eroded with such grave consequences (i.e., the smoother functioning of apparatuses that reinforce domination), is a testament to guilt's centrality as a means of *sensing* and *experiencing* injustice. However, in bourgeois *and* fascist society, when guilt is strictly associated with the transgression of a rigid, external moral demand, or simply a matter of abstract legalistic designation, it reinforces imposed moral laws itself rather than providing subjects with a capacity to critique and change it. Yet, when guilt is rescued from its connotations of legalistic transgression and conceptualized as a way of feeling and experiencing failures to acknowledge human interdependence and boundedness, it can retain its critical capacity as a way of producing the possibilities of transformation.

[371] Max Horkheimer, "Die Juden und Europa," in *Autoritärer Staat: Die Juden und Europa; Vernunft und Selbsterhaltung; Aufsätze 1939-1941* (Amsterdam: De Munter Verlag, 1967), 36.

*IV. Guilt and* Negative Dialectics:

Adorno's interventions on guilt-feeling are typically assumed to be of a strictly Freudian character, and primarily situated in psychoanalytic studies like *Guilt and Defense* and *The Authoritarian Personality*. The former study takes as its aim a thorough elaboration of the defense mechanisms and "ornate illogic" deployed by "ordinary" Germans to absolve themselves and others of their implication in the crimes of the Third Reich.[372] The sociological link that Adorno makes in *Guilt and Defense* between nationalist, authoritarian and anti-solidaristic feelings and the desire to repress or externalize feelings of guilt have a corollary in some observations made in *The Authoritarian Personality*, insofar as the contributors note that expression of internalized guilt-feelings are connected with "low-scoring" (less authoritarian) individuals.[373] Yet, these observations in Adorno's psychoanalytic writings provide only a partial view of Adorno's broader work on guilt in his more formal philosophical and political works.

Though Adorno found Freudian categories an indispensable tool in understanding the authoritarian character latent in the bourgeois psyche and fully expressed in the fascist psyche, his towering and intricate contributions to *The Authoritarian Personality* and *Guilt and Defense* eclipse a much more critical perspective towards psychoanalysis than is generally recognized. In *Minima Moralia*, for example, he indicts psychoanalysis as complicit in the culture industry, insofar as it produces "admonitions to be happy" amidst ongoing human suffering that can be

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[372] Adorno, *Guilt and Defense*, 76.

[373] See, for example, Else Frenkel-Brunswik's contribution "Dynamic and Cognitive Personality Organization as Seen Through the Interviews" in *The Authoritarian Personality*. Expression of conscious, "open conflict and guilt" for "feelings of aggression" is found in participants with fewer authoritarian tendencies. Adorno, et al. *The Authoritarian Personality*, 450. The Kleinian undertones of this statement are self-evident, given the previous discussion.

safely placed out of mind.[374] The fundamental problem, Adorno claims, is that the psychoanalysis of Adorno's time relied on the Oedipal scene as the source of guilt-feelings, which in turn allowed very real, perhaps even excessive expressions of guilt, remorse and receptivity to suffering to be waved off as an almost fictitious expression of the Oedipus complex that can be alleviated through therapeutic intervention. Adorno expresses this sentiment in staggering terms:

> It is part of the mechanism of domination to forbid recognition of the suffering it produces, and there is a straight line of development between the gospel of happiness and the construction of camps of extermination so far off in Poland that each of our own countrymen can convince himself that he cannot hear the screams of pain. That is the model of an unhampered capacity for happiness. He who calls it by its name will be told gloatingly by psycho-analysis that it is just his Oedipus complex.[375]

Against the supposedly "shallow happiness psychoanalysis seeks to recover through its therapeutic 'cure' of neuroses", and the perceived tendency of psychoanalysis to write off genuine attentiveness to suffering as neurosis, Adorno wishes to preserve the critical character of the bite of conscience, and the productive identificatory feelings that naturally arise out of our exposure to suffering, feelings that are constantly dismissed or repressed in bourgeois society.[376] For Adorno,

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[374] Theodor Adorno, *Minima* Moralia, 62.

[375] *Ibid*, 63.

[376] Martin Jay, "'In Psychoanalysis Nothing is True but the Exaggerations': Freud and the Frankfurt School," in *Splinters in Your Eye: Frankfurt School Provocations* (New York: Verso Books, 2020), 60.

the Oedipal scene as an explanatory framework for guilt-feelings simply loses analytical use because of its tendency to *pathologize* guilt-feelings or cast them as a function of being too heavily invested in the past. The analytic intervention can therefore evade or functionally neutralize excessive expressions of conscience as a practice of pathological, punitive self-abasement in a similar way that legalism merely imagines conscience outside of rule-following to be a problem to be repressed or simply unimportant.

Strictly drawing upon Adorno's Freudian lineage can only get scholars so far in understanding how guilt is figured in his broader philosophical corpus. In carving out his own distinct perspective, Adorno very explicitly attempts to rescue guilt from its pathological connotations and legalistic designation. In his 1959 radio address "The Meaning of Working Through the Past", he critiques the dismissal of "guilt complexes" by his contemporaries in reference to the German attempts to come to terms with the recent past:

> Despite all of this, however, talk of a guilt complex has something untruthful to it. Psychiatry, from which the concept is borrowed with all its attendant associations, maintains that the feeling of guilt is pathological, unsuited to reality, psychogenic, as the analysts call it. The word 'complex' is used to give the impression that the guilt…is actually no guilt at all but rather exists in them, in their psychological disposition: the terribly real past is trivialized into merely a figment of the imagination of those who are affected by it. Or is guilt itself perhaps merely a

complex, and bearing the burden of the past pathological, whereas the healthy and realistic person is fully absorbed in the present and its practical goals?[377]

For Adorno, guilt is not to be reflexively transcended or dismissed. He indicts psychoanalysis and psychiatry for pathologizing it and attempting to alleviate it, and he does not draw upon the Oedipal scene as a means of understanding its origins.[378] This is perceived as an actual avoidance of guilt itself, a failure to meaningfully grapple with the notion that there does exist a real kind of implicatedness in injustice that is not taken seriously if we uncritically follow Freud. Additionally, Adorno claims this posture is compatible with the dictates of the administered world, which has no use for a past, only the present, "practical" demands of consumer society.

What, then, does Adorno wish to preserve in guilt-feelings? Against legalism or standard Freudian psychoanalysis, guilt for Adorno is an affective capacity that allows us to recognize an indebtedness and boundedness to those who suffer, will suffer, and have suffered in the past, making it temporally multi-dimensional. It enables us to recognize and *feel* injustice and understand our own implication within an unjust and reified social whole. In reclaiming guilt from legalistic identification and psychoanalytic pathologization, Adorno repurposes it for a new kind of moral-political engagement that is not only cast as reparative justice in response to the violence of commodification and "identity-thinking," but also produces political possibilities of transforming social life itself.

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[377] Theodor Adorno, "The Meaning of Working through the Past," in *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003), 3-18, 5.

[378] Jay has outlined in detail Adorno's deep skepticism of certain tendencies in psychoanalysis, particularly as they relate to the function of therapeutic intervention. Jay, "In Psychoanalysis Nothing is True but the Exaggerations"

V. Survivor's Guilt and the Guilt of Society:

Despite Adorno's psychoanalytic contributions, his broader and more substantive reflections on guilt specifically are relatively difficult to parse out in his broader corpus. Like Adorno's critique of "bourgeois justice," guilt as a category does not receive sustained analytical treatment, and his reflections do not appear to immediately crystalize into a sustained argument. However, upon examination, and in taking reflections from several of his works into account, the thread of guilt can be seen as a crucial lynchpin of the critical method in *Negative Dialectics*.

Some noticeable references to guilt in Adorno's corpus are autobiographical. His letters to his mother, for example, uncover raw expressions of survivor's guilt for having escaped the fate that millions of others had suffered in Europe during his exile. Adorno speaks of "the injustice of continuing to live, as if one were cheating the dead of light and breath. The sense of such guilt is infinitely powerful in me."[379] This sentiment does not remain confined to his letters, but also appears with regularity in his lectures and more formal works, communicating the significance of the idea in his philosophy generally. In the lectures *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, he remarks, after positing the question of whether and how one can live after Auschwitz, that "the question has appeared to me…in the recurring dreams which plague me, in which I have the feeling that I am no longer really alive, but am just the emanation of a wish of some victim of Auschwitz".[380]

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[379] Stefan Müller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 311.

[380] Theodor Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems* (Stanford: Stanford University Press. 2001), 110.

Though a clear instance of survivor's guilt, Adorno makes of this subjective feeling a more general condition. This is apparent if we reference Adorno's recounting of this same episode in *Negative Dialectics*, but take note of the fact that rather than discussing survivor's guilt in the first person, he switches to a more indistinct and general third person.[381] Further on in the *Metaphysics*, he gestures towards this generalization of survivor's guilt in the following way:

> Unless one makes oneself wholly insensitive one can hardly escape the feeling – and by feeling I mean experience which is not confined to the emotional sphere – that just by continuing to live one is taking away that possibility from someone else, to whom life has been denied; that one is stealing that person's life (2001, p.112-113).[382]

Guilt here is textured as subjective, but also something that seemingly moves beyond the first person towards a more general affliction. It is not that Adorno *feels* that he is robbing others of life, but rather he rationally knows this to be the case as a German who lives in a capitalist society that has neatly obscured its relationship with its fascist past. He registers this indebtedness through the category of guilt.

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[381] "But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living – especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living. His mere survival calls for the coldness, the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz; this is the drastic guilt of him who was spared. By way of atonement (*Vergeltung*) he will be plagued by dreams such as that he is no longer living at all, that he was sent to the ovens in 1944 and his whole existence since has been imaginary, an emanation of the insane wish of a man killed twenty years earlier." Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 362-363.

[382] Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, 112-113.

This movement from the particular to the general is an important step in Adorno's reflections. It allows him to make a connection between the seemingly raw affect generated from our simple acknowledgement that we actively live at the expense of the suffering other, thereby emphasizing our dependency on those who have and do suffer, and build upon this into a more general problem, which is the tendency we have to *forget* this kind of indebtedness. In *Negative Dialectics*, he notes:

> The guilt of a life which purely as a fact will strangle other life, according to statistics that eke out an overwhelming number of killed with a minimal number of rescued, as if this were provided in the theory of probabilities – this guilt is irreconcilable with living. And the guilt does not cease to reproduce itself, because not for an instant can it be made fully, presently conscious.[383]

The fact that we cannot consistently and consciously be aware of the fact that we live at the expense of others, *both past and present*, marks us with the guilt of practicing the "empty and cold forgetting" that for Adorno is characteristic of bourgeois politics and philosophy.[384] By virtue of the fact that it is impossible to live fully conscious of this, we all incur the guilt of not attending to those who presently suffer needlessly by keeping them out of sight. As he puts it bluntly in the *History and Freedom* lectures, "a mind that is incapable of looking horror in the face…thereby perpetuates it," thereby highlighting another "burden of guilt".[385]

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[383] *Ibid*, 364.

[384] Adorno, "The Meaning of Working Through the Past," 13.

[385] Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 7.

However, and this is a crucial component of Adorno's reflections related to guilt and guilt-feeling, we don't simply forget those that are rendered invisible and voiceless, we also unconsciously but actively traffic in the language, thought and various practices characteristic of bourgeois society that enact violence on others. If it is bourgeois society that causes us to do violence through abstraction and thereby mystified our dependency and indebtedness to others, the fact that we tend to reproduce this by virtue of our own mimetic capacities means that we inevitably practice this same kind of violence, thereby assuming a "second burden of guilt" in addition to that of forgetting.[386]

This can be clarified in the following way. First, for Adorno, we are afflicted by guilt insofar as we inhabit a specific political arrangement in which some unduly live comfortably at the expense of others, both past and present. This is an inevitable function of the administered world, which inflicts significant violence on some so that others may live at their expense, and has never realized its promise to accord the subject "unabridged autonomy," a guilt that we assume by not living up to our professed ideals of universal freedom.[387] A dissonance invariably arises from this through the recognition that bourgeois freedom is a promise completely unrealized, and this gives Adorno's subject a degree of leverage to immanently critique the existing order. However,

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[386] Here Adorno is speaking in specific reference to our tendency to fix social phenomena with concepts, which is in effect a violent act. "What we see here is the transformation of quantity into quality – monstrous though it is to try to operate with the concept of quality in order to grasp the murder of millions. In fact, even to attempt to withstand such events mentally, to shed light on them with the aid of concepts, is to fix them with concepts. To speak of genocide as if it were an institution is to institutionalize it." Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 7.

[387] The full excerpt reads: "The more freedom the subject – and the community of subjects – ascribes to itself, the greater its responsibility; and before this responsibility it must fail in a bourgeois life which in practice has never yet endowed a subject with the unabridged autonomy accorded to it in theory. Hence the subject must feel guilty." Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 221.

on a more fundamental level, Adorno is asserting the subject's implication simply by virtue of him or her *living* in an unjust society, as we invariably traffic in and adopt the behaviors and actions demanded by reified consciousness. We cannot extricate ourselves from this guilt of objectification, living at the expense of others, anymore than we can simply extricate ourselves from "commodity fetishism" as if it were simply a form of ideology rather than a "material force" in capitalist society.[388]

Additionally, there is another, interrelated kind of guilt at work because of our consistent failure to *recognize* this fact, instead buying into the ideological mystifications, or as Adorno claims, "delusions" that aid in "papering over'" a society's "guilt and over truth."[389] The very notion that we unknowingly or knowingly prop up conditions of injustice and suffering make us actively implicated, and indeed guilty in perpetuating the suffering of others. Adorno therefore reserves "guilt" for the process by which we employ strategies, consciously or unconsciously, in thought or in practice, that help us reconcile ourselves with an unjust world instead of cultivating a resistance to it. But this is not simply a detached designation, it is also an injunction to let oneself *feel* and recognize one's almost omnipresent implication in the suffering of others.

IV. Guilt and Suffering:

It is not sufficient for Adorno to speak of guilt as an acknowledgment that we are indebted to and dependent upon others, and that we share a responsibility to repair the world when it comes under threat. To claim we are guilty of something is not a mere act of description, nor is it

[388] Michael Heinrich, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx's* Capital. (New York: Monthly Review, 2004), 74-75.

[389] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 368.

necessarily an injunction that we *need* to feel guilty because of our implication in suffering and its perpetuation. When Adorno is drawing our attention to the *feeling* of guilt, the *somatic experience* of guilt, he is claiming we have natural capacities to experience such an affect, but bourgeois society represses these capacities. They are disavowed, neglected or rationalized away, unable to be harnessed for any emancipatory purpose. By making feelings of guilt politically meaningful, Adorno is emphasizing the elements of human experience that are rendered unintelligible under the hegemony of legalistic "bourgeois justice." The cold calculation of "reason," the reduction of moral-political engagement to a matter of rule-following, makes no room for, or even actively represses, the somatic experience of guilt, pity, remorse, or even something like mourning.[390]

As Adorno would have it, this is a result of the indefensible mind-body dualism at the heart of the bourgeois subject, which privileges sterile rationalization over bodily experience. By highlighting the somatic character of guilt, the task is not to disavow the mind and uphold the primacy of the body, but rather to re-establish the severed and disavowed link between the body and mind and put them back into relationship. Adorno's claim early in *Negative Dialectics* that "the need to lend a voice to suffering is the condition of all truth" (*Das Bedürfnis, Leiden beredet werden zu lassen, ist Bedingung aller Wahrheit*) points us in the direction of what exactly we are to do with guilt.[391] In the same way that truth exists in the spaces where there is a disjuncture between the concept and the object to which it refers, moral judgment can be recovered in the affects that cannot be incorporated into the hegemony of identity-thinking. The guilt of not having lent a voice to suffering, which to do fully is impossible on Adorno's terms, is the pivot point

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[390] Refer to Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 179.

[391] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 18.

through which “making amends” (*wieder gutzumachen*) becomes possible.[392] This makes guilt a crucial *kind* of suffering that at once gives us a sense that we are indebted to things and people in the world that suffer violence within a particular historico-political constellation, thrusting us to make amends for that violence.

In this context, guilt as a legalistic designation, a matter of having found oneself guilty before the law, does not contest or critically engage the content of law itself, nor does it make visible the fact of disavowed dependency and boundedness that Adorno highlights. Adorno’s expanded conception of guilt moves beyond mere abstract designation and *towards* an affective engagement with one’s own implication and indebtedness. The claim on the part of bourgeois philosophy that we can exist as rational and autonomous subjects without others is an act of undue disavowal of the world outside of ourselves and our effect on it. Any act of separation between subject and object, rather than an acknowledgement of their mutual and indeterminate dependency, is in effect a “claim to domination.”[393]

Adorno’s general emphasis suffering, as Honneth notes, “implicitly follows Freud by taking over his idea that neurotic suffering motivates a ‘need for recovery,’” but guilt as a specific kind of suffering takes an altogether different meaning for Adorno than for Freud.[394] Adorno’s aim is not to mute the bite of conscience, but to actually enliven it. Here, guilt should not be considered mere self-abasement before an externalized moral demand, nor as a pathological identification

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[392] *Ibid*.

[393] Theodor Adorno, “On Subject and Object”, in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 245-258, 246.

[394] Axel Honneth, “A Physiognomy of the Capitalist Form of Life: A Sketch of Adorno’s Social Theory,” in *Pathologies of Reason: On the Legacy of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 54-70, 70.

with authority as it is framed in some more extreme circumstances, but rather an act of solidarity with others, one that stems from an acknowledgement that one is bound to a suffering other. It is on these terms something that must be allowed to speak in capitalist society. Moreover, Adorno, following Buber, acknowledges that the Freudian approach tends to consistently dismiss guilt-feelings as neurotic expressions of unconscious desires rather than an acknowledging that guilt might refer to a *real* situation. As a result, Adorno only follows Freud in a very limited sense. For both, there is indeed a "need for recovery" from suffering and an intractable guilt complex that can reside at the heart of bourgeois civilization, but for Adorno this guilt is not a neurotic expression but a way of becoming aware of real harm after consistently and unwittingly acting in accordance with the dictates of the administered world. This fits the Kleinian model almost exactly. After unwittingly exhibiting an omnipotent will towards objectification, consonant with the subject in the paranoid-schizoid position, Adorno imagines a shift brought on by guilt-feelings that places an individual in a kind of depressive engagement with the world.

For Adorno, then, guilt is therefore a kind of suffering *and* a receptivity to suffering that propels us to challenge the demands of reified consciousness, spurring on a desire to acknowledge our dependence on others, rather than avoid them, dominate them, or secure obedience to rationalized rules within a social arrangement. Guilt is therefore a constituent element of solidarity, not the self-indulgent antithesis of it. In a kind of diagnostic vein, Adorno remarks towards the end of *Guilt and Defense* that "people who desperately tried to escape a feeling of guilt" in the aftermath of war "are incapable of substantive solidarity with any other people,"[395] a "symptom of an extremely dangerous social-psychological and political potential."[396] It is this solidarity, an

[395] Adorno, *Guilt and Defense*, 182.

[396] *Ibid*, 138.

eminently "cosmopolitan" rather than exclusive solidarity,[397] that Adorno wished to rebuild by bringing guilt back into political experience.

V. Contesting the Politics of Guilt:

Guilt as an affect that facilitates solidarity rather than self-absorption, critique rather than obedience, and the sense of genuine moral indebtedness rather than pathological self-abasement, stands against firmly established tendencies in contemporary political thought. Adorno's reflections stand in clear contrast to those of Nietzsche or Freud, as guilt is not characterized by its repetitive, habitual, self-abasing, and neurotic character. Additionally, it is not guilt that is the residue of violence, but the *lack of guilt*. Reified consciousness has at its core a tendency towards violent misrecognition of others and the self. It is the *relinquishing* of reified consciousness through guilt that breaks a cycle of violence rather than reproducing it. However, it is also worth noting how Adorno's re-conceptualization cuts against his contemporaries like Arendt, who denigrates guilt as matter of mere sentimentalism, oftentimes a "self-regarding" tendency rather than the more worldly and "political" notion of "responsibility."[398] This same skepticism of the political character of guilt has been taken on by more contemporary thinkers, some of whom are scholars of Adorno. For example, Antonio Vazquez-Arroyo has recently noted that discourses of guilt tend to "cast a political question in personal terms" and can neglect "the imperatives of

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[397] Rensmann, Lars. "Grounding Cosmopolitics: Rethinking Crimes against Humanity and Global Political Theory with Arendt and Adorno," in *Arendt and Adorno: Political and Philosophical Investigations*, eds. Lars Rensmann and Samir Gandesha (Stanford: Stanford University Press. 2012), 154-172, 142.

[398] Alweiss, Lilian. "Collective Guilt and Responsibility: Some Reflections," *European Journal of Political Theory* 2, no.3 (2003), 307-318, 310.

political action" and distinctly political questions of collectivity.[399] As such, there exists a certain anxiety in ascribing to guilt a significant political valence, instead insisting that "responsibility" implies intersubjectivity and solidarity, whereas guilt implies a matter of personal concern.

It is nonetheless important to take seriously Arendt's challenge. Though Arendt and Adorno have deeply significant affinities with one another, particularly as it relates to their skepticism directed towards law's capacity to inspire "human action"[400] and in their mutual desire to produce new, "decentered" forms of human association and solidarity,[401] their attitudes towards guilt are irreconcilable. Arendt believes guilt to be, as Claudia Leeb notes, "private, personal and apolitical" whereas Adorno imagines guilt to inspire and motivate solidarity with those who suffer, and facilitate what Leeb calls "embodied reflective judgment," the interrelated process by which we both think and *feel* critically.[402] Adorno's political thought thereby insists upon the interrelatedness of thinking and feeling, allowing for guilt to be an affective state that spurs on a kind of political and critical reflectiveness. And where Arendt imagines guilt to be relegated as a moral, personal sentiment, and responsibility as properly political, Adorno implies that there is "no sharp separation between guilt and responsibility,"[403] and in essence, no sharp division between the

[399] Vasquez-Arroyo, *Political Responsibility*, xviii.

[400] Fine, Robert. "Debating Human Rights, Law, and Subjectivity: Arendt, Adorno, and Critical Theory," in *Arendt and Adorno: Political and Philosophical Investigations*, eds. Lars Rensmann and Samir Gandesha (Stanford: Stanford University Press. 2012), 154-172, 171.

[401] Rensmann, "Grounding Cosmopolitics," 153.

[402] Leeb, *The Politics of Repressed* Guilt, 64.

[403] *Ibid*, 57.

moral and the political. On this point it is worth recounting Adorno's last lines from *Problems of Moral Philosophy*:

> In short, whatever we might call morality today goes directly to the question of the organization of the world – one could say: the pursuit of the right life would be the pursuit of the right kind of politics, if such a right kind of politics could be placed in the realm of what is realizable.[404]

Guilt cannot be confined as a matter of personal morality, but rather involves the broad question of social, political and economic structure that makes certain moral experiences possible. More importantly, though, it is the affective receptivity to guilt in relation to human suffering that gives us a sense that political life is not only fraught with indefensible injustice, be it related to class, race, or gender domination, but also that it fails on its own terms to deliver true freedom. Guilt, rather than being self-regarding, signifies one's profound connection to the world as it is, as well as an acknowledgment of one's own inescapable implication in that injustice.

Asserting the interrelated rather than separate character of moral sense and political action does not simply allow us to imagine how guilt can facilitate political engagement. The connection between "morality today" and "the organization of the world" brings into consideration the micro element of how we personally live daily life, and how this intimate engagement of our immediate surroundings is politically meaningful, suggesting that there is no break between the reified practices that govern our everyday experiences and the great crimes of the modern era. There is

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[404] Theodor Adorno, *Probleme der Moralphilosophie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag. 2010), 262. My translation.

little distance, temporal and otherwise, between our seemingly benign and personal interactions and a stream of global injustice, thus blurring fixed divisions of culpability or innocence. The strictness of Arendt's assertion that one can only "metaphorically" feel guilty for something we have not directly done, for Adorno, would deny the structural and expansive connection between our unwitting implication in injustice and the fact of its persistence.

VI. The "Performance" of Justice:

Contemporary perspectives on global justice, such as those by Robbins, Rothberg and Mihai, have sought to develop a language that can clarify the exact character of our embeddedness in transnational systems of inequality and domination. Robbins's notion of "the beneficiary" and Rothberg's term "the implicated subject", and Mihai's analysis of "complicity" all highlight a relation that is not a direct binary of victim and perpetrator, but a layered situatedness in a relation of domination that gets produced and reproduced through neglected and disavowed participation in, say, global supply chains that solidify the impoverishment of workers across the world, or a reaping the benefits from an unjustifiable hierarchy of racial or gendered domination. Supplementing these illuminating studies with Adorno's reflections allow us to foreground not simply the fact of implication, but also the *experience* of it, and what a political ethic of atonement might look like in this context. Therefore, a revaluation of Adorno's considerations on the topic is not merely a way of refining the way we read his work, but also a way of re-discovering its resonance in an age of increased interdependence.

Parsing out the significance of Adorno's work on atonement first requires a recapitulation of his diagnosis of bourgeois society. As noted, for Adorno the "standard structure of society is the exchange form," which is a dynamic that isn't broken, but rather reproduced by "bourgeois

justice."[405] In addition to resolving all social relations into fungible and measurable quantities, in capitalist society the subject is fixed as transcendental, objects are determined through a form of conceptualization, and the relation between these two is one of detachment, whereby the subject falsely announces its independence from the object and forgets that it is bound and co-constituted by objects around it. It is therefore embedded in the structure of bourgeois that we tend to neglect, disavow, or repress our indebtedness to others. Under the hegemony of exchange, all relations are determinate and the fixity of the concept that subjects impart to objects is the means by which relations *remain* determinate and separate. In response, Adorno attempts not to fully break free from this relation, since he pessimistically believes that any moment of transcendence is futile, but rather attempts to find the cracks and contradictions (oftentimes in the form of suffering) that identity-thinking paves over to present itself as natural. Critical philosophy for Adorno is the space where a dissonance is revealed between what is perceived as fixed and the actual qualitative aspects of the object in question, or the nonidentical elements of an object that defy bourgeois processes of conceptualization. Adorno describes this process as an attempt to "do justice to reality" (*Realitätsgerechtigkeit*).[406]

"Doing justice" in Adorno's sense of the term represents a shift in attention that constitutes an act of resistance to a historically-specific, hegemonic practice of identification. This includes a practice of turning towards the object and recognizing its actual indeterminacy and dependency against the Enlightenment fiction of fixed determinism and superiority of the subject over the object. He writes in *Negative Dialectics*: "To yield to the object means to do justice to the object's

[405] Adorno, "On Subject and Object," 248.

[406] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 41.

qualitative moments. Scientific objectification…tends to eliminate qualities and to transform them into measurable definitions. Increasingly, rationality itself is equated more mathematico with the faculty of quantification."[407] This is not an attempt at reconciliation, a process by which the non-identical is subsumed into a more advanced concept. Rather, Adorno wishes to destabilize the concept itself and move beyond it while resisting any moment of reconciliation. The nonidentical is not to be instrumentalized, but rather taken as the space that defies instrumentalization and reification.[408] That unspeakable suffering *exists* is a testament to the insufficiencies, failures, and relations of domination that techniques of formal, supposedly humanist reasoning disavow. Suffering itself is an expression of the non-identical.

As we noted at the outset, the labor of the negative dialectic is oftentimes cast as a kind of "restorative" justice.[409] We see an example of this through Honneth, who claims Adorno's conception of justice is "restitutional," in that objects are given their due as being more complex than their concept lets on.[410] Others, such as O'Connor, consider Adorno's commitment to "doing justice" to be a "project of recognition, one in which our potential for rationality brings us to the reality that is otherwise distorted in our false forms of consciousness,"[411] As we have suggested, negative dialectical critique expresses deep affinities with Melanie Klein's perspectives on guilt

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[407] *Ibid,* 43.

[408] Robyn Marasco, *The Highway of Despair: Critical Theory After Hegel* (New York: Columbia UP. 2015), 112.

[409] For examples of his wariness of the term "restoration" see Theodor Adorno, *Ontology and Dialectics: 1960-1961* (New York: Polity Press, 2019), 242; Adorno, *Probleme der Moralphilosophie*, 254.

[410] Honneth, "Performing Justice," 87.

[411] O'Connor, *Adorno's Negative Dialectics*, 43.

and reparation. Jay Bernstein writes that "*Negative Dialectics* is structurally the experience of contradiction, the recognition of guilt and the need for reparation, and the reflective activity of reparation – call it critique of the rationalized concept of the concept."[412]

At the same time, "restitution", "recognition" or "reparation" can imply the possibility of completeness, or even indicate justice as a matter of exchange. One atones for the damage done to the object through a practice of giving something back to it after an act of violence, thereby creating a settlement of damages, a conception of justice that Adorno wished to move beyond. Even the generative linking of Adorno and Melanie Klein's object relations theory undertaken by Bernstein and more recently by Amy Allen in *Critique on the Couch: Why Critical Theory Needs Psychoanalysis* masks a distinctiveness in Adorno's approach. The Kleinian reparative, which produces a sense of healthy ambivalence towards a love object that one has wronged, no doubt has deep resonance with Adorno's negative dialectic. However, central in Adorno's reflections on guilt is not merely a desire to generate ambivalence, but a desire to consistently produce the possibility of a potentially realizable, future-oriented political state in which things can be thought and done differently. In other words, negative dialectical critique produces moments in which a present reality can be transcended in thought, unearthing a kind of unrealized possibility, but also has a deeply utopian impetus to practically transform an existing material reality. Though guilt for both thinkers can be *generative* and action-oriented rather than pathologically self-abasing, Adorno's thought retains a productive, infinitely demanding utopian element that Klein lacks.

At the same time, this should not be considered a vindication of Adorno over Klein. We could say, instead, that Adorno is doing his own kind of emotional script-writing that facilitates a reconceptualization of what something like "reparation" could possibly mean if we see ourselves

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[412] Bernstein, "Negative Dialectic as Fate," 37.

as implicated in a vast structure of domination that we have a hand in reproducing. In this sense, Adorno is writing a script for something like the depressive position. But the way he writes this script has at its aim not just restitution for an object, but a broader critique of society. This is the Adorno's Marxism coming through. If capitalist society must be thought of as a social totality, the moral dissonance that generates critique must aim towards society at large with an eye towards its transformation. Accounts of reparation that centralize exchange or an emphasis on individual gesture, such as those sketched by Rawls, would on Adorno's reading reproduce an order rather than transform it.

VII. Atonement and Transformation:

Discussions of atonement in contemporary political theory oftentimes begin with Arendt's conception of forgiveness, which is framed as a transformative act that releases us from the irreversible character of past deeds and enables participants to "to begin something new," reformulating a "web of relations" towards an unforeseeable future.[413] Forgiveness, for Arendt, produces distinctly *political* possibilities through a worldly "covenant" among individuals that releases us from historical wrongdoing without forgetting it.[414] It is not an evasion of responsibility, but an acknowledgment of responsibility that "robs a wrong of its future effectiveness."[415]

[413] Arendt, Hannah, *The Human Condition*. Second Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1998), 240.

[414] Marie Luise Knott, *Unlearning with Hannah Arendt*, trans. David Dollenmayer (New York: Other Press, 2013), 82.

[415] *Ibid*

There are significant parallels with Adorno once again, especially as it relates to their mutual desire to spontaneously produce political possibility amidst injustice. Yet Adorno's frame of critique as atonement does not involve soliciting forgiveness or receiving it, but rather acknowledging *one's own* implication within a broader system of domination that constantly reproduces itself, and attending to the affective responses that might thrust us into critical action. The labor of negative dialectical atonement, though containing a glimmer of hope, never relinquishes a bodily sense of guilt and indeed repulsion in the face of its own implication, something for which Arendt does not account. It is a bodily immersion in the aporetic, a despairing attempt to produce the very possibility of justice and emancipation in moments where it appears as futile.

The labor of working through implication is one of the many theoretical considerations that sets Adorno apart from Arendt, and even apart from Derrida on the same theme, [416] despite their numerous affinities.[417] As Peter Dews notes, for Adorno "the absolute, non-deconstructible imperative of justice" in the form of bodily attunement to suffering gives Adorno's considerations a materialist engine that constantly produces political engagement in a way that Derrida's reflections on forgiveness do not.[418] And contra Derrida, Adorno's political ethic of negation, the practice by which we engage with the dissonances, failures, and insufficiencies of the reified social whole that we inhabit, is concretely spurred on by the suffering of the subject and those upon which

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[416] Jacques Derrida, "On Forgiveness," in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooly and Michael Hughes (New York: Routledge, 2001), 27-60.

[417] See Jean-Phillippe Deranty, "Adorno's other Son: Derrida and the Future of Critical Theory," *Social Semiotics* 16, no. 3 (2006), 421-433.

[418] Dews, Peter. "The Idea of Hope," interview by Talita Cavaignac and Thomas Amorim. *New Left Review* 112 (Jul-Aug 2018), 99-129, 121.

the subject is dependent and indebted. As Adorno declares in *Negative Dialectics*, "all pain and all negativity" are the "moving forces of dialectical thinking."[419] And again, in a turn to the body, Adorno claims "it is the somatic element's survival in knowledge, as the unrest that makes knowledge move, the unassuaged rest that reproduces itself in the advancement of knowledge".[420] Our receptivity towards the suffering of others past, present and future is what gives us the impetus to engage in a practice of "making amends" for our implicatedness in the specific configuration of power in capitalist modernity.

Guilt is therefore not only a kind of somatic "unrest" that makes us attentive towards suffering, it also clearly holds within it a strong and inalienable element of broader responsibility, whereby "we answer as individuals for what happens in society."[421] When Adorno reflects on guilt as a way of sensing implication he is identifying the element of moral and political life that not only reveals our indebtedness and connectedness to others, but also gives us the sense that we live at the direct expense of others, thereby provoking an impetus to engage in the painful and despairing labor of atonement through dialectical critique. This is not limited to how we make partial amends for the fact of our implicatedness, but also how we can *transform* material circumstances by unearthing a set of political possibilities paved over through reification. This particular form of bodily suffering tunes us into the suffering of others and our witting or unwitting implicatedness in that suffering, and the process of "doing justice" is the continual act of not making reparations within a damaged whole, but atoning for one's implication by attempting to transform and move beyond those relations.

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[419] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics,* 202.

[420] *Ibid*, 203.

[421] Dews, "The Idea of Hope", 116.

This framing places us in an ironic position to eliminate injustice while simultaneously being aware of its impossibility, tasking us with transcending the conceptual while also being bound to the conceptual. Forced into awareness of the pessimistic doctrine that “wrong life cannot be lived rightly,” the subject is left with a seemingly infinite process of identifying and working through our implication and complicity in the suffering of others, in which the guilt we experience is not directed inwards, but rather outwards through unending critical engagement with the conditions that produce the suffering other.

VIII. Concluding Remarks:

The proliferation of scholarship on affect theory and renewed turns towards psychoanalysis has brought back into view the bodily experiences of political life. Yet, the status of guilt in critical political literatures remains bound to the basic Nietzschean, Freudian or perhaps Arendtian frame, if it is given sustained treatment at all. An assessment of Theodor Adorno’s reflections on the subject grants political theorists a means to break free from this perspective and uncover how guilt-feelings can have critical and solidaristic functions and can even spur on distinctly transformative acts of atonement, rather than simply being considered self-regarding, self-abasing, or restrictive. Additionally, this permits us to view Theodor Adorno’s work in a new light, insofar as it places guilt as a central component *Negative Dialectics*, a kind of bodily attunement that facilitates an ongoing practice of transformative critical engagement geared towards solidarity with the suffering other.

Increasing global interdependence, particularly in matters of political economy, necessitates the reworking of concepts to account for the *experience* of our embeddedness within the reified totality of global capitalism. The cemented relations of production and exchange

characteristic of globalization create networks of domination that, in Adorno's phrasing, facilitate relations by which a few live at the expense of the daily suffering of others. The experience of this particular kind of implicatedness, which is a perpetuation of the very kinds of relations of domination that Adorno himself targeted through his own Marxist critique, requires engagement with the set of affects that enable us to *sense* the pain of our own implicatedness and the suffering of others. This means re-assessing guilt as a distinctly *political* affect, one that has a multifaceted valence related to critique, but also action.

## Chapter Five

*The Anatomy of "White Guilt"*

The preceding chapters may lack a degree of concreteness. We have sketched the anatomy of what Nietzsche, Freud, Klein, Rawls, and Adorno take guilt-feelings to do, what they feel like, or what their political valence might be. However, we have not in sustained terms drawn out the question of guilt *for what*? Though Adorno gives us resources to think of objectification, omnipotence, and reified consciousness as being part and parcel of capitalist domination, he is speaking about many different but interrelated forms kinds of harm, which include physical violence, the violence of misrecognition, or the effects of other diverse forms of domination. For Adorno, we assume guilt for so much that it might seem we inevitably lose sight of the specific instances of domination in which we are implicated, who is harmed, and critique might look like in concrete terms. How exactly are we to bring this discussion down to earth? Can we still think with Nietzsche, Freud, Klein, Rawls, and Adorno on the nature of guilt-feelings but make their thought speak to more concrete and specific relationships of domination or injustice?

This chapter aims to synthesize the previous reflections on "liberal guilt" and guilt from a critical theoretical perspective and address the concrete situation of racial domination in the United States. In so doing, this chapter seeks to clarify the concept of "white guilt" and the behaviors we associate with it, pushing against the Nietzschean-Freudian paradigm as the main interpretive method for approaching these feelings. In short, if we follow the Kleinian framing, we yield a much more textured account of this relatively unstable emotional state among members of a dominant group, one that features vacillations between paranoia and genuine solidarity, as well as potential combinations of the two. Likewise, the inchoate reparative impulses that stem from guilt-

feelings also vacillate between manic gestures that seek immediate expiation and attempts to real and lasting reparation. The purpose is not to simply apply a Kleinian framework in the context of racial domination and inequality, but to see how an analysis of "white guilt" actually reveals the necessity of working with Kleinian categories if we wish to grasp our object of inquiry in clearer terms.

The question of "white guilt," its anatomy, its motivations, and its social effects, are incidentally pressings question in the United States today, particularly since the George Floyd uprisings of 2020. On one hand, as we will see, activist groups and scholars have decried "white guilt" as an impediment to real solidarity in this context. It is either self-indulgent or politically useless. At the same time, we have seen elements of the political right critique these same activist groups for re-writing history such that white students supposedly feel guilty for things over which they have no control. This view has become explicitly encoded in legislation on a vast scale across the United States, as state governments have taken it upon themselves to ban pedagogy that makes use of "critical race theory" at the K-12 level. "White guilt," and even guilt as a political emotion writ large, is therefore an object and site of contestation in struggles over racial justice. Therefore, we must clarify what exactly we are speaking of when we refer to this emotion as an object of critique or a cultural phenomenon more generally.

Contemporary criticisms generally place "white guilt" as a function of "whiteness" itself. For example, in "Whiteness as Guilt," Marissa Jackson-Sow conceptualizes whiteness as Janus-faced. On one hand, it is an identification that thrives on self-perceptions of "innocence and valor."[422] On the other hand, it is fundamentally a relation of domination actualized with reference

[422] Jackson-Sow, "Whiteness as Guilt," *UCLA Law Review* 69 (2022), 115.

to a subjugated other. On this account, whiteness projects innocence while simultaneously continuing the practices that reinforce racialized hierarchies. In her words, "whiteness wants the pleasures of guilt and the appearance of innocence."[423] Understanding whiteness, therefore, requires accounting for a double movement, as it on the one hand produces expressions of purity or moral probity alongside the tacit protection of undue material and symbolic advantage.

This observation undergirds the most skeptical analyses of the value of acknowledgment[424] and "white guilt"[425] in the context of struggles for racial justice. In short, the structure of "whiteness," insofar as it is indeed an investment, permits limited expressions of concern as it relates to a racialized other, mobilizing hollow, fleeting, or self-indulgent gestures that take as their preoccupation the status of the white conscience rather than the reality of racial domination and the suffering it produces. Here, "white guilt" is not a challenge to "whiteness" but rather its purest embodiment. Whatever guilt is expressed has as its end not justice, transformation, or genuine repair, but expiation for the white subject terrorized by the prospect of their own implication in a political project that produces structural benefits and advantages on the basis of racialized identities. What appears as acknowledgment is actually defense.

I suggest that asking the question of what "white guilt" is and what it does leads us to more than one potential response. The purpose of this analysis is not to develop ways of eliminating or producing certain emotions in a polity, but rather to understand which kinds of guilt there are and

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[423] *Ibid*.

[424] Jennie Ikuta, "On the Uses of Acknowledgment for Injustice: Disavowal and Deflection in Baldwin's Thought," *Polity* 54, no. 3 (2022), 435-456.

[425] See, for example, Liam Bright, "White Psychodrama," *Journal of Political Philosophy*, (2022); Shannon Sullivan, *Good White People: The Problem with Middle-Class White Anti-Racism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014).

what those who feel implicated in forms of racial injustice tend to do with these emotions when confronted with them. In so doing, I claim it is possible to find “white guilt” as a means of reconstituting “whiteness” in some circumstances, and in other circumstances a dissonance that disturbs a pattern of identification and makes possible certain kinds of solidaristic practice.

Taking as its point of departure the wave of “anti-critical race theory” (anti-CRT) legislation of the past two years, this paper begins by explaining the explicit revolt against “white guilt” encoded in such legislation through the lens of Kleinian psychoanalysis. In short, the legislation reveals a quintessential example of a “paranoid-schizoid” vision, whereby inchoate anxiety in the face of a perceived challenge to a structure of identification is staved off through processes of projection, denial, idealization and splitting.. In this imaginary, guilt-feelings are not considered internal expressions of moral or political responsibility. They are perceived as persecutory acts of victimization that endanger an idealized sense of self that must remain unaffected by critical reflection in order to remain pure.

Next, the chapter explores how this operation is repeated in more outward-facing expressions of guilt that contain the trappings of acknowledgment. In short, “white guilt” as it is typically analyzed in literatures on “whiteness” is not the antithesis of the right-wing revolt against guilt but is paradoxically a repetition of the same paranoid-schizoid operation, this time replacing violent denial in favor of hollow gestures of self-expiation without a more sustained acknowledgment of implication or benefit. At the core of these self-regarding expressions is the animating spirit of “whiteness,” the desire to move smoothly in space without impediment or dissonance.[426] Whatever guilt is felt from this position is expressed in hopes that the moral status

[426] Sara Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness”, *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (2007): 149-168.

of the white subject can be restored back to equilibrium through a hollow, cathartic gesture, such that they can once again return to moving freely in a state of perceived innocence. Like the right-wing revolt against guilt as such, “white guilt” features a similar attachment to moral purity, disavowal, and defense, this time shrouded in the shallow appearance of acknowledgment. Though there might exist some degree of political possibility within “white guilt”, insofar as there is indeed a depressive element embedded in it, it seems that its paranoid features override that possibility.

Yet, as I have noted, guilt from the paranoid-schizoid position is but one expression of a multifaceted emotion if we follow Klein. If we use the depressive position as an analytical tool, we might also identify different expressions of guilt that calls into question idealized forms of attachment and leaves space for acknowledgment, ambivalence, responsibility, and a sense of history. From this position, an “ongoing democratic labour of recognition and repair” is made possible.[427] However, we must then ask the question of what the nature of this reparative work actually is or could be. Along Rawlsian lines, this reparative project could be stuck in a liberal mode, emphasizing the gestural acts of apology, confession, or exchange. Here, “white guilt” would take on a reformist character, rejecting the idea that reparation, following Táíwò, must be a constructive and transformative project if it is to be anything at all.[428] Or reparation could take on a dynamic and deeply critical character, following Adorno’s reflections. Here, Adorno writes a script whereby guilt-feelings bring into social life a restless negativity, which in turn actualizes a transformative critical agency. Though Adorno’s critical account is the most generative and potentially productive, it is worth considering that negative dialectical critique in not intended to

[427] McIvor, *Mourning in America*, xii.

[428] Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò, *Reconsidering Reparations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 4.

generate any kind of collective action. In other words, Adornian guilt might conceptualize a dissonance that facilitates critique, but it does not bring us together with others to actively attempt to build a new social order through political organization. This particular script for "reparative" action, though useful, might itself require a kind of supplement that allows for collective initiatives to develop new norms or new organizational spaces and arrangements that address a specific structure of domination.[429]

It could be suggested that far too much is riding on guilt as a motivating factor for political action. In response, I do not under any circumstances wish to imply guilt-feelings are the only affect that would bring people into political life. Indignation, anger, shame, rage, love, sympathy, disgust, humiliation, paranoia and an admixture of countless other emotions all thrust people into diverse forms of political engagement. The purpose of this intervention is to consider what it might mean if we, instead of assuming guilt is a fixed dead end of politics, add it to this list of active emotional states and consider which kinds of political possibility might reside in this specific emotion itself. This does not at all mean guilt should be encouraged as a political strategy to fight injustice, which is a problem I will address in the conclusion. Rather, my suggestion is that it is an emotional state that, when felt, might speak to a potentially productive dissonance that can be cultivated as an entry point into broader struggle.

The chapter pursues interrelated claims on the nature of this possibility. First, the depressive position, and depressive guilt specifically, is not a simplistic key to cultivating forms of cross-racial solidarity but is better conceptualized as a moment that invites forms of interpretation that can actualize the potentially transformative acknowledgment, responsibility, and

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[429] For a conception of repair that has a transformative and collective vision at its core, see Ali Aslam, "The Politics of Repair," *Contemporary Political Theory* 22 no. 1 (2022): 3-23.

reparative action embedded in the position itself. Second, whatever moments of "depressive guilt" emerge among white subjects in the contemporary United States tend to reflect a specific kind of anti-racist vision, namely the "privatization of racial responsibility," a depoliticized form of anti-racist practice that centralizes interpersonal communication and individual gesture at the expense of more robust account of structural domination.[430] Responding to this, the paper stakes a third claim, namely that the depressive position must be filled in with a distinctive kind of narration that names racial domination as a politics that can be contested and challenged. In other words, the problem of "white guilt" from the depressive position is not that it is inherently self-abasing and counter-productive, but rather that it is not politicized "through narratives addressed to political subjects and linked to collective action."[431] This is not to suggest that guilt should be the central emotion that guides anti-racist practice, nor is this a roadmap for how solidaristic action should proceed specifically. Instead, this paper analyses the complexities of how this emotion works in the specific context of racial domination in the United States. In short, instead of strictly thinking of guilt as a limitation and impediment, these reflections suggest we could conceptualize it as one possible means of fostering a distinctively democratic solidarity.

I. Guilt as Persecution:

In 2021 there emerged a movement in state legislatures and municipalities throughout the United States to ban from public education the instruction of "critical race theory." These

[430] Jared Clemons, "From 'Freedom Now!' to 'Black Lives Matter': Retrieving King and Randolph to Theorize Contemporary White Antiracism," *Perspectives on Politics* (2022): 1-15.

[431] George Shulman, "Acknowledgment and Disavowal as an Idiom for Theorizing Politics," *Theory & Event* 14 no.1 (2011), 11.

initiatives were set in motion by the Trump Administration's Executive Order 13950 of September 20th, 2020, which, though now reversed, declared it "policy of the United States not to promote race or sex stereotyping or scapegoating in the Federal workforce or in the Uniformed Services, and not to allow grant funds to be used for these purposes."[432] Clearly a response to the political energy of the George Floyd uprisings of 2020, this document represents an attempt to stem the tide of discourses that place racial oppression at the center of political conversation, singling out "blame-focused diversity training" that "perpetuates racial stereotypes and division" through "coercive pressure to ensure conformity of viewpoint" as culprits behind this political mobilization.[433]

In response, the Executive Order prohibited federal promotion of "divisive concepts," which are said to produce "discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex."[434] This phrase is repeated in nearly all the major pieces of "anti-CRT" legislation that have passed in statehouses so far, including Alabama's HB9, Texas's SB3, Tennessee's HB5, and others. The executive order is no longer in effect, but its vision and central concerns are encoded in legislation that is arguably more far-reaching, as "anti-CRT" bills dictate the character of public K-12 history curricula in large portions of the United States. Rather than abating after the passage of these bills, the struggle against "critical race theory" or the empty signifier of "wokeness" is intensifying at a rapid pace, absorbing into its attacks on LGBTQ+ identities.

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[432] Executive Order 13,950, "Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping," *Federal Register* 85 (188) (2020): 60683-60689, 60685.

[433] *Ibid*, 60684.

[434] Ibid, 60685.

In any case, as it relates specifically to the crusade against "critical race theory," the bills are revealing insofar as they centralize the emotional life of the student, leading them towards certain interpretations of their own emotional states. Such legislation implicitly stakes certain claims about what it is appropriate or inappropriate to feel when students learn history, as well the mechanics of how such feelings arise. As the bills suggest, "discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress" do not arise naturally but rather in response to direct attribution of blame or "scapegoating" by representatives of a "malign ideology." Feeling guilt for being white or being a man, one of the supposed goals of this "malign ideology," suggests the student is subject to a persecutory power that manipulates their conscience, implanting within them an unnatural feeling that they are wrongly to blame for past (or ongoing) racial or gender-based domination.

In this vision, American history, properly communicated and properly understood, should clearly transmit and instill some feelings rather than others. Against the supposed guilt-tripping of "critical race theory," the Executive Order spells out a conception of American history that is fully idealized. The consistent appeals to American exceptionalism throughout the document betray an uncritical and idealized kind of patriotic attachment that at its core "refuses to countenance the perception of any flaws or limitations" in the nation and its history as a "love object."[435] The appropriate orientation to the past and to the national unit itself is one of pride or exclusionary self-love. We are left only to marvel at how "America has made significant progress toward realization of our national creed" rather than reveal where the "national creed" still goes unrealized.[436] Note

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[435] Wendy Brown, "Political Idealization and its Discontents," in *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005), 28. For a complementary account, one that does not make use of Freudian categories but nonetheless conceptualizes patriotism writ large as a form of idealization and idolatry, see George Kateb, "Is Patriotism a Mistake?" *Social Research* 67, no. 4 (2000): 901-924.

[436] Executive Order 13,950, 60683.

how this is an explicit attempt to insulate the student from one of Adorno's entry points into the experience of dissonant guilt-feelings, namely moment whereby one recognizes the extreme gap between the ideals a society professes and their complete negation or lack of realization. Students are meant to feel assuaged before they can ever experience a moral dissonance, cutting off moral feelings at the pass. Indeed, moral emotions are not part of this idealized historical reflection at all, since there are no significant enduring injustices that would provoke such dissonances. If anything, the purveyors of the "malign ideology" of critical race theory are the real perpetuators of racism, as they stand against "the inherent and equal dignity of every person as an individual" by resentfully inventing enemies out of thin air.[437]

There is a richness to this mystification. It replays familiar tropes of American innocence and an idealized conception of the American nation redeemed. In this imaginary there is also an implicit relationship established between the desire to be free of guilt (and other moral emotions) and the desire to build an idealized sense of self on a collective and individual level. This is not simply a matter of desiring not to know something. It also constitutes an active severing of the link between the individual and the history of domination that shapes the conditions they inhabit, in favor of building safe ownership over an idealized history as an object of attachment. At stake is of course the important question of what American students know about their history as it relates to the character and persistence of racial domination, but also how Americans, particularly white Americans, come to feel themselves to be in history. In other words, the spate of "anti-CRT" legislation brings to the fore the question of what it means to be affectively attuned (or not attuned)

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[437] *Ibid*.

to the history and persistence of racial domination, and how certain emotions, particularly moral emotions, orient certain populations politically in relation to that history.

This can easily be read through a Kleinian lens as a paranoid-schizoid operation, one in which a particular image of the American nation and American history as such is conceptualized as an object to be protected from an aggressive onslaught, and must as such be completely idealized as flawless. If we recall, Klein's assumption is that paranoid-schizoid operations are brought about by an existential anxiety that calls forth defenses that can construct rudimentary and transitory forms of psychic stability by assigning to objects stable attributions of either pure good or pure bad. One element of this process, known as "projective identification" entails the attachment of the internal threat of destruction, self-destruction, and deprivation outwards onto one object, which is cast as "endangering" and purely threatening. [438] The stable, hated, and threatening object is simultaneously split from a fully idealized object that serves as the foundation for the construction of a core sense of self. This explains the weddedness to a certain sense of American identity and American history in the face of a group that is literally characterized as "malign" and by implication somehow not part of the "real America," a persistent trope in right-wing discourses. At stake is not a policy agenda but a sense of identity and selfhood in the face of a distinctively existential threat.

As we noted in the first chapter, processes of splitting and projection characteristic of the "paranoid-schizoid" position are fundamental elements of both "normal development" and "abnormal object-relations."[439] Paranoid-schizoid states, along with its featured "primitive mental

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[438] Ogden, *The Primitive Edge of Experience*, 44.

[439] Klein, "Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms," 9.

mechanisms" of "denial, splitting, projection and fragmentation," represent initial footholds for subsequent development, but are ideally gradually overcome through processes of integration.[440] The sense of omnipotence that comes along with the process of manipulating objects to fulfil the functions of abjection or idealization, is shed to make way for feelings of ambivalence, realism, or "ordinariness."[441] However, the "anti-CRT" legislation firmly entrenches the dualistic and split worldview, inhabited solely by persecutors and persecuted. Against this existential persecution, anything can be justified. No guilt is felt towards those accused of endangering this structure of idealization.

The value of reading this through a Kleinian lens becomes even more apparent when we take up Thomas Ogden's claim that in the paranoid-schizoid position the individual develops a certain relationship with historical time, and comes to see themselves not as embedded in a complex history, but fully detached from it, omnipotently able to rewrite the past and one's perception of it in order to maintain a sense of innocence and attachment to an idealized object. Unable to relinquish certain idealized attachments and develop a sense of ambivalence, the "paranoid-schizoid" world is characterized by a constant "Orwellian rewriting of history" to protect a structure of idealization.[442] At its core, this means that the relationship to objects that make up one's social and emotional world are not subject to evolving interpretation or growth, but are instead subject to radical reversals of emotional intensity that are geared towards the protection of certain idealized identifications.

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[440] Segal, "From Hiroshima to the Gulf War," 131.

[441] See Caflisch, "When Reparation is Felt to Be Impossible: Persecutory Guilt and Breakdowns in Thinking and Dialogue about Race," *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 30 (2020): 578–594.

[442] Ogden, *The Primitive Edge of Experience*, 80.

"Anti-CRT" legislation grants us an insight into how this functions on a broader scale of collective, historical time. This legislation suggests that an idealized vision of American history is itself an object that requires protection against the forces that threaten to destabilize a structure of identification. The purity of American history as an object cannot countenance any critique or revelation as something otherwise than what it is assumed to be. Implicit here is that the self is not embedded in an unjust set of inherited circumstances, but instead remains outside of such conditions, unwilling to take on a sense of historical responsibility save for the burden of maintaining a sense of sovereignty and ownership over history itself as an object. The unearthing of the profound legacies of slavery in the United States, rather than coloring an individual's ambivalent sense that they may be inheritors of something unjust, instead becomes evidence of a "malign ideology," the real racism, that threatens the integrity of the self and its idealized objects of attachment. To honestly grapple with history and to see oneself as embedded in a legacy of injustice would mean dissolving the "constructed boundaries that reinforce identity," which are maintained through splitting and denial.[443] This constitutes an "epistemology of entitled domination", in which history is not shared and worked through in an ongoing and fraught political process, but is owned as a morally pure object to be defended in the face of annihilation.[444]

This is concretized in anti-CRT campaigns, but we can find this as a recurring posture of white Americans in the United States when faced with the prospect of implication in racial domination. The possibility of seeing oneself as a participant in messy enduring historical injustices rather than omnipotently and purely outside of them is an essential means of creating a

[443] McIvor, "The Struggle of Integration," 84.

[444] Donald Moss, "On Having Whiteness," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 69 no. 2 (2021): 355-371, 358.

reckoning within the white conscience. However, this is a fundamentally terrifying prospect. As James Baldwin writes in "The White Man's Guilt":

> …the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally *present* in all that we do…And it is with great pain and terror that one begins to realize this. In great pain and terror one begins to assess the history which has placed one where one is, and formed one's point of view. In great pain and terror because, thereafter, one enters into battle with that historical creation, Oneself, and attempts to re-create oneself according to a principle more humane and more liberating: one begins the attempt to achieve a level of personal maturity and freedom which robs history of its tyrannical power, and also changes history."[445]

Baldwin's fundamental assertion surrounds the capacity of white Americans not to adopt any kind of concrete and emancipatory political vision, but instead to recognize a simple truth, namely the idea that we exist within a historical continuum of injustice, it pervades our life whether we know it or not, and that through the struggle to integrate this fact into one's consciousness there is a possibility to write a new political future. Yet, this is merely a prospect. As it stands at the time of Baldwin's writing, the average white American experiences a certain dissonance in their own self-narration in relation to racial domination, but revert to a classic instance of "persecutory anxiety":

[445] James Baldwin, "The White Man's Guilt," in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays* (New York: The Library of America, 1998), 722-723.

> This is the place in which it seems to me, most white Americans find themselves. Impaled. They are dimply, or vividly, aware that the history they have fed themselves is mainly a lie, but they do not know how to release themselves from it, and they suffer enormously from the resulting personal incoherence. This incoherence is heard nowhere more plainly than in those stammering, terrified dialogues which white Americans sometime entertain with that black conscience, the black man in America. The nature of this stammering can be reduced to a plea: Do not blame *me*, I was not there. I did not do it. My history has nothing to do with Europe or the slave trade. Anyway, it was *your* chiefs who sold *you* to *me*.[446]

The dim awareness of one's implication appears immediately stifled, reflexively staved off through projection. The paranoid anxiety that one must bear to acknowledge reality becomes too great, and a desire to restore an idealized sense of self is achieved by turning the tables. It is in reality "the white man" that is innocent, and "the black man" who is in the grips of a profound misapprehension, or even a denial of responsibility. Fast-forwarding almost 60 years, anti-CRT legislation essentially codifies this form of projection as law.

The nexus between guilt, history, and idealization we find in the individual in the paranoid-schizoid position is not, however, automatically filled in with substantive political content. This represents an orientation towards relationships in the world rather than substantive political visions. Importantly, however, the form of political messaging that the anti-CRT campaign represents is a way of interpreting a somewhat inchoate racial anxiety among individuals and

[446] *Ibid,* 723.

produces and reproduces it as a shared anxiety that can run on a broader paranoid-schizoid script. From this vantage point, group messaging emphasizes guilt not as a feeling that naturally arises when one is confronted with a certain kind of knowledge of one's undue benefit or responsibility to answer for a given harm, but is instead cast as a weapon that is directed from outside by a racialized group that threatens an idealized attachment and sense of self. Here, it is the *persecutor* who is in reality guilty of all they supposedly declare the persecuted to be. Feelings of responsibility are therefore interpreted as targeted acts of victimization from a group that embodies the worst of what they accuse of others. As such, any guilt invariably becomes coded as an emotion to be defied in the face of a political enemy. Whatever might have been productive in a sense of guilt, namely a feeling of vulnerability, implicatedness, or responsibility, is perpetually foreclosed as paranoid-schizoid organization repeats itself by interpreting the emotion as something to be defied or something that functions as a weapon from without. The stakes thus go far beyond questions of political and legal responsibility for what Jeffrey Spinner-Halev calls "enduring injustices," of which American racial domination could surely be an example.[447] At stake is always the integrity of a broader terrain of a shared identity that is cultivated and reinforced through certain forms of political messaging.

II. "White Guilt":

As noted, the fact that anti-CRT legislation has opened the sense of guilt as an object and site of political contestation presents an opportunity to rethink how this emotion works. The goal

[447] See Jeffrey Spinner-Halev "From Historical to Enduring Injustice," *Political Theory* 35, no. 5 (2007): 574-597.

is not to affirm "white guilt" against political orientations that disavow the significance of the moral emotions or historical responsibility entirely. This would, among other things, suggest that anti-racist politics is simply a matter of "having the right kind of feelings, or being the right kind of subject," namely a perpetually guilty one.[448] In other words, the goal is not to make a claim that this or that emotion in itself is a fixture of a morally upright politics and therefore an end in itself. A more fruitful inquiry interrogates how "white guilt" may not be a static political emotion with a fixed essence, but is instead much more variegated, producing diverse sets of actions and orientations that can be channeled politically in different ways.

However, critical literatures approaching "white guilt" center their analysis on a few fixed observations. The first is that guilt is inherently an unsuitable motivation for political action, particularly structurally transformative kinds of anti-racist solidarity. According to Rodney Coates, expressions of "white guilt" are inevitably hollow, indicative of a "psychological reductionism" whereby political action is, if anything, limited to expressions of embarrassment and sympathy geared towards seeking personal absolution rather than structural change.[449] Though Alexis Shotwell leaves a door open by "accepting a certain kind of bad feeling can be important for producing meaningful solidarity across difference," she writes in the same vein as Coates, suggesting that, in anti-racist activism, guilt "shuts down action," marking an individualized "non-transitive inner space, a dead end" from which little productive work can emerge.[450] Here, the

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[448] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 195.

[449] Rodney Coates, "Racial Hegemony, Globalization, Social Justice, and Anti-Hegemonic Movements," in *Handbook of the Sociology of Racial and Ethnic* Relations, ed. Herman Vera and Joe Feagin (New York: Springer, 2007), 319-342, 320.

[450] Alexis Shotwell, *Knowing Otherwise: Race, Gender and Implicit Understanding* (University Park: Penn State UP, 2011), 73.

guilty white subject is gripped by self-obsession, as guilt-feelings propel them not to enact justice, but to expediently assuage their conscience. As opposed to shame, so says Shotwell, guilt as a moral emotion lacks an inter-subjective and critical character, yielding little by way of productive confrontation with broader questions of identity or situatedness in a system of racial domination.

In these literatures, any guilt-centric politics invariably produces a cycle of behavior in which the main drivers of action are the desire to assuage and placate the consciences of white subjects without affecting the material reality of racial domination. Through hollow gestures of repentance emanating from a sense that one unduly lives at another's expense, implicated white subjects re-center themselves as the primary focus of attention. This brings us to a second element of the critique of "white guilt," namely that it produces and reproduces whiteness, insofar as action is oriented towards enabling the white subject to slide back into a sense of comfort in the world after a dislocating experience of disorientation and despair. Taking Sara Ahmed's formulation of whiteness as an ability "to move with comfort through space, and to inhabit the world as if it were home," a guilt-centric politics geared towards re-instating a lost sense of comfort is simply an engine for reproducing the forms of identification that anti-racist activists are trying to destabilize or dissolve.[451] The aim of such a politics is *catharsis*, salvation, and purification rather than solidarity.

This is concretized through "The Repenter," one of Liam Bright's "character archetypes." For Bright:

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[451] Ahmed, "The Phenomenology of Whiteness," 159.

> The Repenter is driven overwhelmingly by guilt, a desire that their personal behaviour and environment not be associated with racism…but no great desire to change the material basis of the society in which they live. A brutal reminder of black vulnerability to death at the hands of the state will thus first and foremost activate that guilt in a visceral way, leading to heartfelt distress. They will wish to signal their extreme disapproval of police behaviour and induce organizations they are associated with to do the same – for instance perhaps their work place could be made to issue a statement affirming that black lives matter…while committing to uphold anti-racist practices in its own behaviour.[452]

Bright claims "beyond sloganeering and support for piecemeal reform…they are unlikely to push for large scale change. Guilt is assuaged…by their personal actions towards the good and the disassociation of their organizations from anti-racist animus."[453] This figure expresses outrage and understands that they may have responsibilities in the face of these injustices in the abstract, yet the central motivation behind all action is the manic desire to be freed from guilt, not necessarily to repair. This is to say that "The Repenter" is beset by an admixture of both paranoia and solidaristic impulses, but primarily paranoid ones. Bright's archetype seems to grasp at symbolic actions to return to a state of moral purity, which may hold until another egregious expression of racial domination shocks the conscience into a cyclical repetition of disapproval followed by ineffectual gestures of repair. Left unchanged is the materiality of racial domination.

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[452] Bright, "White Psychodrama," 12.

[453] *Ibid*

Jane Caflisch notes that under certain circumstances there is a tendency for "white liberal self-idealization" and "self-reproach" to "function as two sides of a coin", both exhibiting a certain kind of exceptionalism.[454] Drawing on Klein's notion of "persecutory anxiety," Caflisch discerns a guilt operating from the "paranoid-schizoid" position that marks the self as either wholly good or wholly bad, vacillating between irredeemable guilt and pure innocence. Here, we encounter Benjamin's reading of Sontag once again. This dynamic, which for Klein is rooted in an inability of the relatively immature ego to bear the emotion itself, features on one hand the experience of guilt as an unbearable and persecutory attack on one's idealized sense of self, leading to breakdowns in thinking and emotional processing, and gradually a flight from this guilt and despair into the refuge of innocence or a cycle of extreme self-denigration. In this drama the "concern for the other," as well as a capacity for self-reflection, is invariably lost.[455]

Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang might describe "The Repenter's" behavior as a purely paranoid "move to innocence," though it has all the observable trappings of a genuine feeling of responsibility. By experiencing persecutory guilt as an annihilating attack on their sense of self, the inheritor and beneficiary of racial domination languishes in their own "self-positioning as simultaneously the oppressed and never the oppressor."[456] Grasping at attempts to "escape or contain the unbearable searchlight of complicity," thereby freeing themselves from their own conscience, the settler makes hollow gestures towards "reconciliation" hoping that they offer some

[454] Caflisch, "When Reparation is Felt to Be Impossible," 579.

[455] *Ibid*, 585.

[456] Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1-40, 9.

degree of "reprieve" for *themselves*.[457] Once more, "white guilt" is an antithesis of solidarity, a feeling that does not meaningfully resist undue power and privilege, but instead re-centers the white beneficiary as the central figure in a quest for redemption or self-actualization.

We can immediately see how the intensely "paranoid-schizoid" tendencies reflected in the anti-CRT are also mirrored in the phenomenon of "white guilt." Both "white guilt" and the revolt against "white guilt" produce some similar behaviors, namely disavowal, the excessive regard for the status of the white conscience, and an overarching desire to maintain a certain moral purity in the face of systematized injustice. To this we might add our point of departure from the previous section, an implicit flight from the weight of history into a pure state where one no longer feels the burdens of implication, nor the weight of political and moral obligation to others. As the anti-CRT revision of history thwarts any ability to see oneself as implicated in or a potential beneficiary of forms of racial exploitation or domination, "The Repenter," after recognizing a sense of implication for a fleeting moment, grasps at gestures to effectively "expunge from history" the sense that one is directly or indirectly responsible for the harm of others, or a beneficiary of certain forms of racialization.[458] Both figures are to varying degrees invested in removing themselves from the burden of feeling embedded in a historical continuum of domination, the former by denying history itself, and the latter by imagining that either self-abasement or knowingly hollow gestures are enough to purify themselves and erase a fleeting sense of implication. "Whiteness" as a sense of comfortable entitlement to material benefit remains untouched, guilt-feelings being immaterial to efforts to address the reality of racial domination.

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[457] *Ibid*.

[458] Ogden, *The Matrix of the Mind*, 23-24.

We could conceptualize “white guilt” as a species of “liberal guilt,” with its emphasis on a return to equilibrium and gestural actions of repair, as well as its commitment to a certain form of identification that cannot be relinquished. What emerges out of this contradiction is, as we noted in Chapter 3, a sense that one is implicated in harm but still committed to an overarching identificatory structure that places limits on what can be done in response, thus producing an irreconcilable dissonance that leads to either manic gestures to rid oneself of the dissonance, or a kind of despairing moral paralysis. So, “The Repenter” as a character archetype features a kind of admixture of both paranoia and an expressed solidarity that makes possible only specific reparative gestures. “The Repenter” is therefore beset by a kind of blockage that cannot be neatly overcome, and places certain limitations on what they might be able to contribute to forms of cross-racial solidarity.

This is admittedly a compelling account, one that has visible manifestations. However, in response to Bright’s framing, we could say that fixing this figure as an *archetype* suggests there is no possibility of movement from repentance towards more efficacious political work. In other words, “The Repenter,” or the figure in the throes of “liberal guilt” remains there without the possibility of vacillation between different, and potentially productive feeling states. Additionally, it seems that for Bright guilt itself is part of the blockage that keeps the subject in a state of nervous excitation. In response, we are invited to ask how, and if, there are different forms of guilt that might make possible a clearer path towards more productive political action.

## III. Guilt, History, and Action in the Depressive Position:

In her study of the Platonic conception of shame, Christina Tarnopolsky reorients scholarly discussion of moral emotions as follows:

> …I argue that the questions about the place of shame in contemporary democracies should not be how do we get rid of shame or how do we reinstitute it, but what kinds of shame are there and what should we do with these different types of shame?[459]

Instead of privileging one moral emotion over another or attempting to rectify an overemphasis on certain discourses of moral disapprobation, if we follow Tarnopolsky we should ask if there are different types of guilt that direct people towards different kinds of political behaviors. When literatures on whiteness critique "white guilt," they are primarily referring to guilt as an element of a primarily paranoid-schizoid operation, which in turn revealing a lingering conscious or unconscious investment in whiteness as a kind of social and political standing. As a result, actions associated with this socio-psychological state aim to shake off feelings of implication to return to a state of moral purity. The question is whether this critique of "white guilt" is a stand-in for a generalized critique of guilt as a moral emotion as such, or if it is directed towards one kind of guilt that we associate with certain behaviors.

Explicit in some of the most vociferous critiques of "white guilt" is actually the notion that there is a "white guilt" that is stultifying and one that is potentially productive. This is a feature of Audre Lorde's classic "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism." Lorde writes:

> Guilt is not a response to anger; it is a response to one's own actions or lack of action. If it leads to change then it can be useful, since it is then no longer guilt but

[459] Tarnopolsky, "Prudes, Perverts and Tyrants," 469.

> the beginning of knowledge. Yet all too often, guilt is just another name for impotence, for defensiveness destructive of communication; it becomes a device to protect ignorance and the continuation of things the way they are, the ultimate protection for changelessness.[460]

We can find a similar and telling ambivalence towards this emotion in the work of Shelby Steele, who is situated in a vastly different tradition in African-American political thought. In "White Guilt", he remarks:

> Guilt that preoccupies people with their own innocence blinds them to those who make them feel guilty. This, of course, is not racism, and yet it has the same effect as racism since it makes blacks something of a separate species for whom normal standards and values do not automatically apply.[461]

Steele goes on to claim that "white guilt" expresses more of a desire for redemption after the "archetypal Fall" of whiteness in the 1960s than a posture that seriously invested in "black uplift."[462] Its essence is self-importance, arrogance, and escapism. And yet, Steele notes that this can be contrasted to a different kind of guilt, that of "the guilt of genuine concern," which

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[460] Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 124-133, 130. See Caflisch, "When Reparation is Felt to Be Impossible" for a complementary interpretation.

[461] Shelby Steele, "White Guilt," *The American Scholar* 59, no. 4 (1990): 497-506, 503.

[462] *Ibid*, 498.

takes an "honest concern" in "black development."[463] The former kind of "white guilt," ends up reproducing whiteness, insofar as it is invested in staving off "the threat of disorganization" and then reconstituting and redeeming the white subject as innocent and pure.[464] The latter, however, contains a different kind of political possibility latent within it. It is outward-oriented, horizontal, and a potential start of political engagement rather than its terminus.

Following Klein, we could identify this as a guilt operating from the depressive position. As we have shown, Klein considers the depressive position as "a normative or aspirational position of maturity," as the omnipotent paranoid-schizoid defenses that characterize the fledgling and unstable self are gradually, though always only partially, transcended to make way for a process of integration of the parts of the self and other that were violently misrecognized as either wholly good or wholly bad.[465] This relinquishing of omnipotence makes space for a capacity to experience a degree of ambivalence in one's attachments. This ambivalence creates an inherent appreciation for plurality, as the self and other are no longer stripped of their complexity through processes of idealization or abjection, but are identified as "whole objects" that embody a diversity of different and conflicting attributes that cannot be omnipotently manipulated as extensions of the self.

If the depressive position features a process of renunciation, whereby previous paranoid-schizoid object ties are relinquished to make way for the acknowledgment of others as "whole objects," it is fundamentally imbricated with a capacity to mourn. For Kleinians, mourning introduces two interrelated processes into psycho-social life, the first being "historical memory,"

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[463] *Ibid*, 504.

[464] Moss, "On Having Whiteness," 368.

[465] McIvor, "The Cunning of Recognition," 252.

the ability to reflect upon one's situatedness within a historical continuum that prevents one from omnipotently rewriting oneself out of history or magically expunging from history a particular occurrence or action.[466] Second, the renunciation of omnipotence characteristic of the depressive position relates to the ability to see individuals and things as separate from oneself. They are not objects that can be seamlessly manipulated to fit a particular structure of idealizations or abjection but are instead seen as subjects that can be harmed and can suffer at the hands of another. It is because of this recognition that individuals acquire a normative sense of responsibility for their "thoughts, feelings, and behavior" in relation to others.[467]

If the paranoid-schizoid elements of "white guilt" produce a self-regard that grasps at absolution in the face of an annihilating, persecutory anxiety, its depressive elements shake off an excessive concern with "the survival of the self" and instead introduces a concern for the "injury to and loss of" another.[468] The introduction of this intersubjective element into psycho-social life, though it can admittedly be fleeting and unstable, makes feelings of guilt not merely expressions of concern for one's own moral status, but genuine expressions of value for another whom one may have harmed in the past or present. Rather than relying on omnipotent defenses or cathartic release from the discomfort of this knowledge, guilt in the "depressive position" features an impetus or urge to make reparations to the damaged other. In other words, in the "depressive position" the subject engages in the open-ended and difficult labour of mourning, reparation, and acknowledgment, as one recognizes one's boundedness to a past that cannot be immediately

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[466] Ogden, *The Matrix of the Mind*, 82.

[467] *Ibid*, 83.

[468] Segal, *Melanie Klein*, 127.

shaken off. It features a degree of suffering, but it is, as Klein notes, a potentially productive suffering, one that remakes the self and reconfigures the relationship we have to our objects of attachment in the world.[469]

As we noted in the first chapter, positions are not experienced in their pure form. The depressive position features some paranoid elements and vice versa. As a result, there is not a strict dualism at play, where one either experiences guilt as "the guilt of genuine concern," a depressive guilt, or the persecutory guilt concerned with restoring innocence, a more paranoid operation. There is in some sense an admixture and set of gradations that we can track as it relates to this feeling. However, when the depressive elements genuinely destabilize the overarching form of attachment to "whiteness" or a similar structure of identification, there may be a more robust kind of political possibility in play. What matters, then, is how the broader political culture colors what we do to make sense of the more solidaristic elements of "depressive" guilt feelings and act upon them.

Klein's positions do not in themselves provide us with substantive political visions. They are merely ways of organizing the self and our relationship to objects of attachment. It is instead broader political scripts that activate and politicize these emotions. Though we could say that the guilt of the depressive position activates the subject's "innate desire" to repair a damaged object,[470] this is an orientation that is colored by existing social and cultural practices that determine what reparation is supposed to look like, as well as the exact nature of the harm at stake. In other words,

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[469] See Klein, "Mourning and its Relation to Manic-Depressive States"

[470] C. Fred Alford, "Melanie Klein and the 'Oresteia Complex': Love, Hate, and the Tragic Worldview," *Cultural Critique* 15 (1990): 167-189, 175.

the character of depressive guilt, acknowledgment, and reparation, is already a product of a pre-existing social and cultural field of action and interpretation that determine its shape.

IV. A Politics of Guilt?

Since the George Floyd uprisings of 2020, we have seen a renewed emphasis among white Americans to contest the terms and categories of the “racial contract” in the United States. The forms of anti-racist action undertaken in response have been diverse, though perhaps not as long-lasting as many would hope. Nonetheless, it is no small thing that the largest demonstrations in American history took place in the summer of 2020, with clear cross-racial solidarity as a strong element of these actions. In many cases, it is also clear that the tenor of the activism has avoided casting the struggle in liberal terms, challenging the presuppositions of any consent-based or exchange-based model of justice in favor of more radical initiatives towards abolition. In short, there appears to be some relatively widespread willingness, even enthusiasm among white people in the United States to challenge the racist past and present of American society.

It is worth noting, however, that anti-racist activism, which in many cases purports to contest the liberal mode of political engagement and some of its basic assumptions, ends up reinscribing many of them. What appears as a radical engagement not only with the falsity of American mythologies related to equality and freedom, but also with one’s implication in the ongoing catastrophe of racialized violence can in the end simply serve as a means of its reproduction. This is the case with certain strains of white anti-racism, some of which may be cynical, and other elements of which can be well-meaning but politically ineffectual. In relation to the anti-racist practice that is well-meaning, it is crucial to analyze the forms of narration that guide and channel the emotional life of the white subject in response to their feelings of implication. In

other words, I am suggesting the broader narrative terrain that colors how people make sense and act upon their own feeling states is a decisive factor in explaining how depressive guilt is given political force in relation to a specific injustice.

We could describe the conditions under which white anti-racism is developed and actualized as "neoliberal." This is significant insofar as neoliberal capitalism is not simply a regime of accumulation, but a more substantive political-theological vision that aspires to be a "holistic worldview" complete with a "moral ethos" as well as a policy vision.[471] Within this dominant frame, categories like guilt or responsibility are endowed with their own specific meaning. For example, the neoliberal moral vision divests individuals of notions of collective responsibility, collective action, and shared democratic accountability in favor of a conception of the subject as an investor in the self who is solely responsible for capitalizing their worth in the marketplace.[472] Here, "blame for social problems" is invariably individualized as a personal failing instead of a matter of structural advantage or disadvantage.[473] Thus, the neoliberal subject is divested of political power save for their status as an entrepreneur of the self, while tasked with assuming moral responsibility for their potential failures as a competitive, self-commodified subject.

This represents a reproduction of some of the ideas developed by Rawls, but also a qualitative shift in relation to them. For Rawls, the individual is the main unit of analysis and their status as moral subjects is granted significant attention. Additionally, as we noted, the exchange model of guilt and reparation has a marketized and commodified conception of suffering.

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[471] Adam Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons: On the Political Theology of Late Capital* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. 2018), 6.

[472] Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Brooklyn: Zone Books. 2015), 131-132.

[473] Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons*, 2.

However, the qualitative shift comes through if one considers the neoliberal self as an object of investment itself, as well as the degradation of any idea of the commons or the common good. Here, neoliberalization instantiates a process of emotional script writing, in which basic moral feelings are coded with certain meanings and produce certain behaviors in response. This is not to say that the proliferation of a neoliberal moral ethos directly facilitates total subjectivation, but rather that it provides a kind of culture in which our interpretation of our emotions tends to run on scripts that legitimate the broader neoliberal economic vision. Put differently, neoliberalization doesn't necessarily produce and instill in us specific emotions. Instead, following Adam Kotsko, we could say that neoliberalization exploits our already-present moral intuitions and places them in service of the legitimation of a particular regime of accumulation.[474] Scripts are therefore the patterns of emotional behavior that can be written and re-written according to the socio-political context in which they are experienced.

This pre-existing terrain facilitates the "*privatization of racial responsibility*", a behavior on the part of white liberals, partially as a function of their class position, that privileges anti-racist actions that are either symbolic or in any case would not impinge upon the accumulation of capital.[475] Whatever moves beyond this is illegible as productive anti-racist action. The result is that a set of individualized symbolic or aesthetic actions become the center of gravity for anti-racist activity, which is simultaneously a conscious or unconscious self-investment. In line with a broader neoliberal vision, this emotional script places the individual as the sole responsibilized actor who takes on the task of aesthetic anti-racist practice, while the structural character of racial

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[474] Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons*, 42.

[475] Clemons, "From 'Freedom Now!' to 'Black Lives Matter'," 3.

domination in the form of racial capitalism remains mystified and nonetheless in effect. The diagnosis and prescription for racial domination is therefore narrated broadly as a problem of individual activity undertaken in a political vacuum. All that is necessary for anti-racist practice to develop is the right kind of behavior undertaken through processes of personal acknowledgment, followed by specific individual or interpersonal outward-facing actions. Whatever guilt is felt for one's vague sense of racial benefit is inevitably channeled into a set of behaviors that are gestural and confessional, even if there appears to be a relinquishing of one's attachment to whiteness as such.

This is exemplified by Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism*, a work that takes as its aim to "compel acknowledgment" by encouraging white readers to engage in introspective self-examination about their socially advantaged position in a system of racial domination such that they are motivated to engage in anti-racist action.[476] Though this kind of anti-racist ethos cannot be localized to one site or location, it is noteworthy that DiAngelo's work is typically implemented in the context of workplace trainings, suggesting that this anti-racist vision is already circumscribed to fit neatly within a certain class structure, reproducing the terms and vision of neoliberal politics more broadly. As a result, the distinctly political stakes to any anti-racist practice would be downplayed in favor of a safer prescription of behavior modification among employees, or citizens as stakeholders more broadly.

[476] Ikuta, "On the Uses of Acknowledgment," 436. Ikuta persuasively argues, however, that these works are based upon a faulty assumption that acknowledgment automatically produces action in response.

More important, however, is the substance of the analysis. In her work, DiAngelo engages in a very particular form of emotional script-writing, coding the feelings of implication white people might feel and the nature of the response that these feelings might produce. DiAngelo claims the following:

> White people do need to feel grief about the brutality of white supremacy and our role in it. In fact, our numbness to the racial injustice that occurs daily is key to holding it in place. But our grief must lead to sustained and transformative action. Because our emotions are indicators of our internal frameworks, they can serve as entry points into the deeper self-awareness that leads to this action. Examining what is at the root of our emotions (shame for not knowing, guilt for hurting someone, hurt feelings because we think we must have been misunderstood) will enable us to address these frameworks. We also need to examine our responses toward other people's emotions and how they may reinscribe race and gender hierarchies. Our racial socialization sets us up to repeat racist behaviour, regardless of our intentions or self-image.[477]

Here, DiAngelo sketches an emotional confrontation with one's sense of self, potentially through an acknowledgment of guilt or other moral emotions, as a pivot point upon which transformative action can take place. It is only through genuine introspection that we can engage in any outward oriented anti-racist action. At this moment DiAngelo gives an account of how acknowledgment

[477] Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why it's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 137-138.

creates a dissonance that upsets a pattern of identification and permits a breakthrough of action. This much appears inoffensive and resonant with a Kleinian account of the depressive position more generally. However, the active, outward facing element of DiAngelo's account centers not on *political* solidarity, but instead lingers on cultivating a constant hyper-awareness of one's own "racial socialization," which needs to be kept in check and unlearned through the training of interpersonal behavior. Though DiAngelo gives an important account of the structural dynamics of racial domination early in the book, all anti-racist action in response is narrated as aggressively depoliticized. As DiAngelo's framing goes, upon acknowledgment of their implication in the perpetuation of racism towards others, the white subject is initially struck by an emotion such as discomfort, guilt, or compassion. In response, such feelings can, through training, ideally provoke "reflection," "apology," "listening," "engaging," or "believing."[478] In practice, these behaviors are gradually given texture and operate as practical "assumptions" that have at their core a transformative potential. The goal of actualizing these assumptions in everyday situations has the potential to "interrupt racism in various ways," as the white subject has the tools to "minimize…defensiveness," "demonstrate…vulnerability," "allow for growth," "ensure action," "interrupt privilege-protecting comfort" and "build authentic relationships and trust."[479] When actualized, this constitutes "the ability to repair."[480]

This represents a very particular dialectic between guilt and reparation, one that, instead of emphasizing distributions of material power and undue racial benefit, conceptualizes action as

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[478] *Ibid*, 141.

[479] *Ibid*, 143.

[480] *Ibid*, 146.

individual and interpersonal relationship-building verging on apolitical sentimentality. The white subject is implicated in racial domination not through structurally engrained material advantage, but strictly through forms of socialization, which, through their acknowledgment and confrontation, can produce feelings of liberation, eagerness, or excitement.[481] On offer is the prospect of self-transformation by which a white individual passes through ignorance towards the light of a particular kind of anti-racist practice, with little reference made to the political structures that would require reform or transformation. Anti-racism is at its core limited to work on the self, and it is for reasons like this that some have explained the popularity of Kleinian categories of guilt and reparation as symptomatic of the neoliberal turn, as it traffics in a depoliticized language at the expense of more robust visions of socio-political transformation.[482]

This is not to say that the impetus towards guilt and reparation in the "depressive position" is an inherently individualizing posture that cannot possibly be mobilized towards certain political ends. The issue, if we take DiAngelo's work as symptomatic of neoliberal anti-racism, is that it fails to name racial domination as a genuinely political problem. It is simply taken for granted as a totalizing presence that can only be acknowledged rather than critiqued or challenged as part of a democratic process. The only action that can be taken in response is a depoliticized attentiveness to behavior, a certain kind of re-investment in the self. Yet, if we follow Ogden and assert that DiAngelo's account of anti-racist practice is merely one possible "interpretation" of the depressive position, one that is suffused with the language and vision of neoliberal depoliticization, it is

[481] *Ibid*, 149.

[482] For this compelling and provocative thesis, see Elisabeth, Stuelke, *The Ruse of Repair: US Neoliberal Empire and the Turn from Critique* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2021).

possible to consider that the depressive position could be reinterpreted and an emotional script can be re-written such that it names racism as a political problem that can be articulated and challenged through political means, which is to say that it can be reinterpreted as a problem that is "contingent and therefore potentially subject to transformation" through democratic struggle.[483] This re-writing and re-narration would not yield a concrete recipe for what constitutes "correct" practice, which Rawls and DiAngelo do but in different ways, but it opens up the "depressive position" as a political space in which the subjective feeling of guilt can meet "unsentimentalized political (and even historical) analysis" that can cultivate, guide, or complicate reparative impulses against the "privatization of racial responsibility".[484]

Such an "unsentimentalized political analysis" need not provide a dogmatic diagnosis and rigid set of unalterable prescriptions for racial domination, but should rather name racism as "*itself* a political system, a particular structure of formal or informal rule, socioeconomic privilege and norms for the differential distribution of material wealth and opportunities, benefits and burdens, rights and duties" that can be conceptualized as an object of contestation and critique.[485] Here, the "white majority" does not necessarily require constant need of behavioral corrective at the micro level, but must instead recognize themselves "beneficiaries of a system of racial domination" that places them in a socio-political hierarchy whereby they live at the expense of racialized others.[486]

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[483] Jacob Schiff, "Confronting Political Responsibility: The Problem of Acknowledgment," *Hypatia* 23, no. 3 (2008): 99-117, 113.

[484] Carolyn Laubender, "Beyond Repair: Interpretation, Reparation, and Melanie Klein's Clinical Play-Technique," *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 20, no.1 (2019): 51-67, 65.

[485] Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithica and London: Cornell University Press. 2022), 3.

[486] Charles Mills, "Racial Exploitation and the Wages of Whiteness," in *What White Looks Like: African-American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question*, ed. George Yancy (New York and London: Routledge. 2004), 25-54, 48-49.

This places at the center of political analysis the question of power, material benefit and distribution rather than strictly individual comportment. Central here is not the question of who white people are but rather what white people *do* to either accept or reject the central terms of what Charles Mills calls the "racial contract." This requires attending to one's position of undue advantage resulting from a "history of systemic exclusion and structurally differentiated treatment" and then "asking ourselves what conceptual and theoretical moves will be necessary to redress it."[487] This is not a roadmap for reparation, but it does identify it as a political problem that requires democratic struggle and collective social transformation in response.

Obviously, this is not a simple process. There are engrained habits and identifications that will need to be worked through. Weddedness to class position and status hierarchies also serve as a persistent impediment to productive engagement with *any* political affect generated by the problem of racial domination.[488] These make the reversion back to intense paranoia or the cycle of "liberal guilt" a very real possibility. Additionally, it is possible to remain stuck in kind of mainstream anti-racist practice that adopts some of the fundamental assumptions of liberal and neoliberal narration. Nonetheless, we have resources to consider how depressive guilt serves as a dissonance that invites political interpretation, producing an opportunity to reconfigure how we engage with the problem of racial domination.

What is ideally cultivated in a politics of the depressive position is not the hope of future expiation, nor a guide for individual comportment, but rather a clearer sense of the nature of the

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[487] Charles Mills, "Theorizing Racial Justice," *Tanner Lectures on Human Values* (2020), 13.

[488] For contemporary political psychology research on this, see: Christopher Sebastian Parker and Howard Lavine, "Status Threat: The Core of Reactionary Politics," *Advances in Political Psychology* (2024): 1–25.

injustice and the aims of engaging in the ordinary and messy collective work of reconfiguring the structures of rule that produce relations of domination. Here, the subjective feelings of guilt, historicity and ambivalence are not shed, but are linked with the collective concerns of structural domination, implication and material benefit. This is not to say that guilt should be the foundation of a politics as if it is a first principle. The foregoing analysis simply suggests this form of "'white guilt" can be conceptualized as a dissonance out of which moments of political possibility can emerge.

VI. Concluding Remarks:

"White guilt" is a complex cultural phenomenon. In some sense, it is not any one thing. In its more paranoid-schizoid mode, it expresses an overwhelming anxiety that is staved off through defense or the frantic search for some kind of catharsis. In its less extreme iterations, it can feature inchoate senses of solidarity, they are inevitably eclipsed by one's attachment to some kind of benefit. This might mean a quick gesture of solidarity that can help return the subject to a state of moral equilibrium. In a more depressive mode, it can facilitate acknowledgment, a desire to repair and an awareness of the self as embedded in history. Yet, these emotional states do not immediately crystalize into a politics, though the former makes probable expressions of enmity and the latter expressions of responsibility. Instead, these positions invite forms of political narration that make sense of the feelings at hand and lead the subject towards certain actions in response. Anti-CRT legislation, for example, is an expression of enmity as a function of a paranoid-schizoid orientation, encouraging the ideal subject to protect "history" and a sense of self from perceived enemies. However, depressive guilt, insofar as it is expressed among white people in response to ongoing racial domination in the United States, is largely narrated in a way that depoliticizes potential anti-

racist action. What might it mean, in response, to re-politicize this emotion? Following interpreters of Klein, we can think of the "depressive position" as a set of tendencies that can be re-narrated and re-scripted such that it couples subjective feeling with an analysis of structural domination and collective power which directs and gives texture to the ambivalence, desire to repair and feelings of responsibility that are inherent in the position itself. Perhaps "white guilt," at least in some instances, presents itself as the potential start of political engagement rather than its dead end.

## Chapter Six: Conclusion

*A Few Reflections*

At the time of this writing, I live in Los Angeles, California. As is the case in many cities in the United States, the poorest areas of Los Angeles are not simply geographically circumscribed. The inhabitants of these spaces are also actively sacrificed in order to maintain the smooth functioning of the city at large. Nowhere is this clearer than in the areas of public health and environmental policy. For example, the Los Angeles County Health Agency's Center for Health Equity reports that in Los Angeles, the

> highest level of pollution coincides with communities already burdened by poverty and lack of sufficient infrastructure to support health, such as parks. It demonstrates the disparity across the county where the communities burdened by a disproportionate share of environmental pollution also face socioeconomic and health challenges.[489]

The brief fact sheet proceeds as follows:

> Existing inequities related to environmental hazards are the result of multiple complex factors both historical and contemporary. These include land use decisions that predominately place low-income communities of color in close proximity to polluting industries, and patterns of commerce and transportation corridors. These

[489] Center for Health Equity, "Environmental Factsheet". Los Angeles County Health Agency, 1.

> multiple sources of pollution then trigger cumulative and synergistic exposures, which exacerbate asthma and disproportionately impact health. Communities face additional risks when regulatory agencies fail to put the health of the population at the center of their decision-making and fail to provide sufficient regulatory oversight.[490]

It feels trite to even bother pointing this out in 2024. The imbrication of environmental, racial, and class injustice is well known, and it is clear that climate change is set to only exacerbate existing inequalities and potentially entrench authoritarian and violent responses to the crisis tendencies of a warming world.[491] However, what documents like this reveal, and what life inhabiting a specific social position in a major American city inevitably concretizes, is the fact that the everyday actions of "an implicated subject" in a place like Los Angeles aid in the consolidation of relatively extreme differentials in suffering. This is to say that even using the built space in particular ways, like driving on major freeway, is an instance of how one acts, mostly by reflex and habit, to reproduce a given material system of domination whereby some actively live at the expense of others. And as Adorno suggests, it is impossible not to forget this fact, which in turn heaps another moral and political burden on the subject in question. This is the guilt of the action or inaction in relation to a suffering other, and the guilt of forgetting, neglecting, or disavowing this relation. As Ferguson might put it, it is a disavowal of indebtedness.

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[490] *Ibid*, 2.

[491] A perfect encapsulation of this dynamic can be found in: Andreas Malm and the Zetkin Collective, "Skin and Fuel," in *White Skin, Black Fuel: On the Danger of Fossil Fascism* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2021), 315-398.

The purpose of this example is not to actively place blame or to "guilt-trip" certain residents of Los Angeles or any other American city for that matter, but instead to draw attention to the fact that injustice is something that many of us do and uphold each and every day. It is even something that some of the most unfree in the US enact and re-enact if we broaden our aperture to global capitalism writ large, where the purchase of cheap goods in the US means exploitation in East Asia and the global south. This does not mean that it is imperative to feel guilty if one actively participates in a social arrangement that arbitrarily metes out differentials in harm. However, *it is not inappropriate to feel guilty in these instances*. If guilt is the moral emotion that might draw our attention to concrete actions or inactions that produce recognized harms, then it is not a misapprehension or an individualized and self-regarding delusion to feel guilty for certain actions that are part of our everyday experience. This guilt is not the malaise of the tragic Freudian subject, who is destined to live with the limitations brought about through sociality as such. This is instead the guilt Adorno identifies. We are quite simply bound up in a political order whereby we actively aid in the perpetuation of domination and the reproduction of differentials in suffering. What is necessary, then, is the transformation of that order. And guilt may be the dissonance that provides us an entry point to do this.

On Kleinian terms, if we come to recognize the violence in the attachments and patterns of behavior to which we have become accustomed, we can slip in and out of a set of differing responses, namely a paranoid avoidance, an ambivalent recognition of one's participation in a given harm and then a movement back to a state of psychic equilibrium, or a more earnest reparative and critical responsiveness towards the suffering other. Where we might find ourselves in this nexus of potential feeling states, none of which are ever pure or permanent, is dependent on our material circumstances, the strengths of our attachments, our social position, or ideological

conditioning. Regardless, each of these feeling states don't simply metabolize guilt-feelings in specific ways, but they also contain within them their own horizons of political possibility. Paranoid-schizoid orientations will lend themselves to the reproduction of Schmittian forms of psychosocial organization, in which guilt is felt as a persecutory threat from an enemy, reinforcing defenses of a particular set of attachments. More depressive orientations might contain within them different metabolizations of guilt-feelings, which lend themselves to more transformative forms of political action if they can be narrated on terms that might challenge a set of political conditions rather than reproduce them.

If this is the case, then the question seems to be how these dissonances could be cultivated when there are countless different blockages that keep "the implicated subject" from recognizing their position through guilt-feelings or any other moral emotion, particularly if there is a reinforced structure of biopolitical division between rights-bearing subjects and those cast out of this structure of rights and subject to particular forms of vulnerability. In this context, how exactly do people actually come to see themselves as implicated in domination and injustice? How do potentially productive guilt-feelings arise in the first place? There are indeed ways to deliberately induce certain feeling states that might have some kind of political valence. We do, after all, live in an era where "shaming" is a seemingly popular means of eliciting moral emotions from political or cultural figures. Whether it is productive is an open question. Nonetheless, disgust, indignation, rage, fear, or other negative emotions are obviously mobilized for activist purposes. However, attempting to actively elicit guilt seems like a mostly counter-productive, maybe even abusive enterprise that could affirm Wendy Brown's worry of reinforcing an individualized blame structure in a given society. Moreover, it is most likely a recipe to place people in a more persecutory posture, not in a feeling state that could be productive in any sense. It also ends up centering the

"implicated subject" in an unhelpful wany, rather than directing attention to those who are on the receiving end of the differentials in suffering under consideration. As a result, thinking through the main topics of this study and asking a set of "how to" questions in relation to guilt seems like a clear dead end. Actively "guilt-tripping" is simply not a viable political practice.

If we simply follow Kleinian analytic insights, as we have been through the course of this study, the onset of the depressive position, and depressive guilt specifically, is characterized by the recognition of another as a "whole object" that has or can be harmed rather than a screen upon which certain feeling states are projected. This is, in a more political theoretical parlance, a process of humanization, the outcome of which is ideally the ability to see others as simply ordinary individuals who do not reside existentially idealized or denigrated on the other side of an inaccessible boundary, but are instead regarded as subjects worthy of genuine care or concern. The admittedly anthropocentric characterization need not be taken as the essence of Klein's reflections. Though psychoanalysis will tend to privilege the relational ties of human relationships, for better or worse,[492] the care and concern out of which depressive guilt might emerge could certainly be directed towards the non-human.[493] However, what needs to be analyzed in this context is not

[492] The work of Harold Searles has engaged this question from a psychoanalytic perspective, but it still remains an undercurrent in psychoanalytic work. For a helpful sketch of this tradition of thinking, see: Katie Gentile, "Animals as *the* Symptom of Psychoanalysis Or, The Potential for Interspecies Co-Emergence in Psychoanalysis." *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 19, no. 1 (2018): 7–13.

[493] If we follow Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto, caring is a "*species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible*. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web." Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto, "Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring," in *Family: Critical Concepts in Sociology Volume II*, ed. David Cheal (London: Routledge, 2003), 29-54, 34. This provides a clear possibility to integrate the non-human in any working definition of care or caring.

necessarily what we are doing when we are caring, but instead how we can explain the shift from the omnipotent manipulations of the paranoid-schizoid position to the reparative posture of the "depressive position." In other words, the primary concern here is how we come to see certain things in the world as objects of care such that we might feel something for them if we are implicated in harming them.

To this question, I cannot see how there could be a generalizable answer. Klein will most compellingly provide us with reflections on the fact that *we do* experience shifting positions and what these positions look like, not the specific conditions in which we might slip from one feeling state to another. However, we should not be satisfied with the idea that this is a random or unknowable process. As the study has suggested, the object-relations approach will take as its point of departure the subject as they are within existing relationships, the boundaries of which are malleable and expandable. The aim is not to get people to exercise their capacity to fashion abstract moral principles within these associations, as it is for Rawls, but instead to give people a greater sense of how their actions impact those with whom they share a specific relational tie. Here, we could take our cues from the sub-discipline of "care ethics." This approach to ethics is less about solving moral problems or fabricating clear and rigid principles, but is instead geared towards cultivating a sensitivity to "what is happening around us."[494] In other words, there is no clear way of directly making someone care for someone or something, but there is a way of centralizing the concrete impacts of what "the implicated subject does in relation to a given problem, which in turn might help make people alive to the suffering of others (or at least more alive than they once were). The enormity of this task itself shouldn't be understated. If, as Adorno suggests, "coldness" is still the central element of bourgeois subjectivity, there is an engrained myopia, thoughtlessness, and

[494] May, *Care: Reflections on Who We Are*, 55.

remoteness that needs to be broken through in order to facilitate a productive awareness of our implication in the suffering around us. If there is any possibility that guilt could aid in a justice-oriented politics, or aid in the development of non-exploitative forms of indebtedness, it is this barrier that must first be broken. And even then, this is when the real work of any transformative politics *begins* rather than ends.

This all might appear as hopelessly naïve. Too much is riding on ordinary subjects feeling specific moral emotions when it seems clear that many people are simply closed off to the possibility of acknowledgment, let alone the likelihood that they might act on it. Is it even true that if we could only attune people to the impacts of what they do, then they would inevitably feel some kind of dissonance that would make them contest a political order? It is worth recalling that the aim of this work has been to take up the question of the "implicated subject," the "beneficiary," or the complicit figure. My intention is not to stake claims about hardened perpetrators of direct violence and the hope that they might feel some degree of remorse for their actions. The "implicated subject," on the other hand, is a figure that I take to be more receptive to certain moral and political appeals in relation to their subject position, and is in some sense reachable in a way the direct perpetrator is not. This is not to say implication automatically means a degree of sympathy to a justice-oriented politics. This is not the case by any stretch. However, I take it to be a potentially unstable and ambivalent position, at least for some who inhabit it. It is therefore a site of potential political mobilization, and the sense of one's implication might contain within it a diverse set of feeling states that can be narrated and politicized in productive or counter-productive ways. As the study suggests, guilt is one of these feeling states.

Certainly, it is not my intention in this project to give neat prescriptions, nor is it to claim that this or that specific emotion is the key to any sort of justice-oriented politics. Additionally, it

is certainly beyond the scope of this project, and perhaps any project, to stake firm claims about the exact nature of the connection between feeling and action. However, this study gives us reason to think that guilt-feelings are worth introducing back into a political theory of emotions, not as the foil to political action, though they may serve this function in certain instances, but also as its potential engine. What matters, then, is what we do with them.

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