**On Failures of Human Solidarity: Rethinking Guilt as a Political Affect**

Although the shrewdest judges of the witches and even the witches themselves were convinced of the guilt of witchery, this guilt nevertheless did not exist. This applies to all guilt.

* Friedrich Nietzsche[[1]](#footnote-1)

From my personal point of view, 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.

* D.W. Winnicott[[2]](#footnote-2)

Why did we feel guilt? Once everything was over, the awareness dawned on us that we had done nothing, or not enough, against the system into which we had been absorbed.

* Primo Levi[[3]](#footnote-3)

**1. Introduction:**

Contemporary interventions on global justice have demanded a revaluation of a set of central political categories related to culpability. Michael Rothberg (2019), for example, in detecting a certain impoverished and “underdeveloped vocabulary” in contemporary theories of “power, privilege, violence and injustice”, has sought to move beyond the unhelpful distinctions of victim, perpetrator and bystander in favor of the category “the implicated subject”, a frame that takes into account the various practices not punishable by law that *indirectly* contribute to forms of domination. Bruce Robbins (2017), likewise, imagines “the beneficiary” as a new conceptual tool to think through the implicatedness of political subjects within a network of global exchange that solidifies a set of political and economic hierarchies, eschewing traditional Marxian categories of worker and bourgeois. From a more traditional lens in continental philosophy, Simona Forti (2014) has brought attention to the untenability of persistent binaries of “absolute” perpetrator and “absolute” victim that fail to account for the realities of distinctly *biopolitical* forms of subjugation that destabilize those categories and blur their boundaries.

These emergent frameworks engage at the conceptual level and leave relatively underexplored the distinct *experience* of implicatedness in rapidly solidifying forms of domination, be it the intensification of pre-existing inegalitarian dynamics of global capitalism or the persistence of forms of racial subjugation. Perhaps more pointedly, many of these interventions imagine which kinds of affects are *not* suitable as a means of building solidarity and generating political possibilities amidst this domination. Pity and resentment, for example, can and have “galvanized popular social and political movements” in the twenty-first century, but remain relatively impotent affects in effectually resisting neoliberalism, for example (McKean, 2020, p.213). From a similar vantage point, Rothberg dedicates significant energy to problematizing the category of guilt, with its tendency to individualize and carry to mind matters of law, towards the “less legally and emotionally charged terrain of historical and political responsibility”, the former of which can provoke unhelpful “feelings of denial and defensiveness in proximity to ongoing conflicts and the unearned benefits that accrue from injustice” (20).

Rothberg’s reluctance to deploy a discourse of guilt in favor of “implicatedness” is in one sense a function of the former category’s tendency to generate an emotion-laden moral confusion, an assertion resonant with Arendt’s well-known reflections on the distinction between guilt and responsibility. Can we really apply the label “guilty”, or even worse, claim that someone *should* *feel* guilty, for a certain injustice in which they played no *direct* role? At once, we are immediately confronted with the substance of Rothberg’s objection. If this discourse is activated, we are unwittingly placing ourselves strictly in the realm of *legal* accountability, or we are grappling with a set of affectively charged categories that prove more cumbersome than helpful. In another sense, Rothberg’s unwillingness to deploy a discourse of guilt is perhaps a result of the weight of the affect itself in the western tradition, as it carries with it the profound resonances of Christian self-punishment and Freudian pathologization, not to mention, from a more contemporary frame, resonances with neoliberal responsibilization and the individualized burdens of assuming deeply moralized risks and failures in market society.

This study takes the position that a revaluation of guilt as a distinctly political affect is needed, and does so by taking a step back from the immediate questions of direct and indirect culpability for particular injustices, or even the multi-layered dimensions of implicatedness, and instead examine what *function* guilt as an affect has had in modern political theory. This intervention will make a set of interrelated claims, the first explaining contemporary political theory’s profound inheritance of the Nietzschean and Freudian paradigm that frames guilt as a bodily experience that in effect has a policing function, producing a subject geared towards conformity with an internalized fictitious moral (and political) imperative. In short, the Nietzschean and Freudian paradigm links guilt with uncritical and even pathological *obedience* and self-abasement in relation to an internalized law emanating from a particular source of authority. The feeling of guilt, if we can generalize, is here textured as a failure to obey, an intrapsychic tension but one that is always related to some kind of imposed standard from the outside. Though immensely generative, as the study will show, this perspective is but one way of framing guilt, albeit a deeply influential one for political theorists. However, from a different angle, there are perspectives on guilt that preserve the affect as a means of highlighting the bodily experience of failing to mitigate the suffering of others, sometimes in defiance of existing political and moral imperatives. This makes guilt not an act of individualized self-punishment, but something akin to an expression of human solidarity that has a certain emancipatory valence, binding it to rather than separating it from the supposedly more “political” notion of responsibility.

Through the work of both Karl Jaspers, Primo Levi and more contemporary interventions in psychoanalysis, the paper will interrogate this alternative aspect of the relationship between guilt-feelings and determine how we can theoretically place guilt as an experience that eminently features a kind of expression of cosmopolitan solidarity, and even a kind of resistance. Both Jaspers and Levi present to us a shift in how we approach guilt from a distinctively political perspective. If Freud and Nietzsche sought to answer the problem of how guilt functions as a broad tool of self-maltreatment, Jaspers and Levi are invested in treating it as something that opens up possibilities for new forms of cosmopolitan solidarity. Though both perspectives signify a failure of some kind, the former is bound to obedience, compliance and self-punishment, whereas the latter is bound to resistance, solidarity and a constructive expression of human value. However, crucially, for this latter kind of guilt to foster a productive and active political engagement, a pre-existing political outlet must be visible. In other words, how feelings of guilt get channeled, and whether they become pathological and “persecutory” or reparative, is indeed a political matter.

Our purpose here is not to displace one conception with the other, since both are analytically useful. Rather, the purpose of this study is to bring into view a more complete range of affects that we may consider politically meaningful as contemporary global challenges demand certain kinds of international solidarity. In other words, the task is to *pluralize* the ways that we imagine guilt as having a political function, or as being a precipitate of political power. In so doing, our task is to cut across the grain of more influential perspectives that take guilt to be political only insofar as it fosters obedience and self-punishment, or even to be a distinctively inert, apolitical, personal affect. In short, the task is to ask what it is that guilt *does* through certain figures in the western tradition. Probing this question will hopefully permit us to not simply think through guilt at a conceptual level, by evaluating its relationship with broader categories of responsibility, but also to interrogate the diverse contours of the affect itself, and which kinds of politically meaningful experiences it brings into view.

**2. An “Inexhaustible, Unpayable” Debt:[[4]](#footnote-4)**

“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” (WP 294). At once, we are confronted with a central challenge in Nietzsche’s critique of morality. Morality is not necessarily a fiction, though Nietzsche claims that there are “no moral facts whatever” (TI, p66).[[5]](#footnote-5) 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 (WP 314). 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 thinkers 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) (Assoun, 2002, p.xxxvlii).[[6]](#footnote-6) Tracing the origins of feelings of guilt, whether characterized in the Freudian vein as an anxiety coinciding with the punishing “*fear of the super-ego*” (Freud, 1995, p.764) or in the Nietzschean vein as man’s brutal “will to think himself punished” (GM, p.529) for all the misfortunes that befall him, are all attempts to explain, as Butler writes, “both the subordination and becoming of the subject” (Butler, 2003, p.13), the construction of a juridical identity grounded in a predisposition to obey.

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*. 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.

Nietzsche’s story in effect begins with a mockery of social contract theory. The entry into society is not borne out of a recognition of shared interest, 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” (GM, 16). 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.[[7]](#footnote-7) It was not until man “found himself finally enclosed within the walls of society and peace” (GM, 16), 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 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” (GM, 17). 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” (GM 17).

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 (GM, 17). Deleuze (1962, p.129) and Assoun (2002, p.141) 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-feelings (GM 15). As Aaron Ridley (2005) writes, this moment in the *Genealogy* 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” (p.36).

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 (GM, 6). 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 (GM, 6). 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’” (GM, 15). Guilt is here 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.[[8]](#footnote-8) Upon this terrain, the sufferer of bad conscience, now guilt, becomes receptive to the Christian ideal that one remains guilty before God, guilty at birth, and guilty before a holy law. The subject therefore wallows in pain, but also *interprets* his pain as a matter of an unimaginable failure that can never be atoned for.[[9]](#footnote-9) 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” (GM p.529).

Guilt enters into Nietzsche’s frame in the form of what Leiter (2019 p.76) 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 interpretation or *explanation* of an affect. Nevertheless, it is *still* a reflex that has been bred and transmitted phylogenetically. The 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 the *Nachlass* as “absolute obedience, machinelike activity, avoidance of people and things that would demand instant decisions and actions” (WP, p.28). 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 (D, p.10). 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 creating a subject who 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 (D, p.44). 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 (D. p.21). 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.

Here we encounter a rudimentary constellation of concepts that helps elaborate on our “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 and then *internalized* law. Wolin’s (2004) notable assertion that Nietzsche’s distinctively “political” innovation lies in his “identification of culture as the primary site of political contestation” is perhaps missing Nietzsche’s innovation as a theorist of obedience and political *inaction* as much as he is a theorist of cultural creation and will (p.473). Not only this, but Nietzsche explains the *investment* in one’s own subjection as an almost physical imperative, opening up discussions of the psychic economy as an explanation for this investment. Additionally, and in many ways 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 a legal imperatives, be they issued by states or priests.

2.1. Freud and Deferred Obedience:

The Freudian frame is not exactly identical to Nietzsche’s, but as noted, it 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. Through each author we are also presented a seemingly unbreakably cycle through which unconscious feelings of guilt don’t only produce suffering, but also a psychic *investment* in that suffering. The familiar Nietzschean frame of guilt as inhibitive, passive and also in some sense fictitious is repeated in Freud. And crucially, both Nietzsche *and* Freud allow us to sidestep the question of “guilt, for what?” and instead center our analysis on what guilt *does*.

Freud’s speculative cultural anthropologies in *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism* have surely not passed muster has historical studies, yet they serve the purpose, as does Nietzsche’s *Genealogy*, of “permitting *history* to arise where *immediate* *understanding* may not” (Caruth, 2016, p.12), 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 orienting point to reflect on forgetting and “inaccessibility” itself (p.19).[[10]](#footnote-10) 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 subjects the subject, so to say. What emerges out of this speculation is an explanation of the concomitant “beginning of society and of the sense of guilt” (Freud, 1989b, p.186).

We may begin with Freud in the same way we began with Nietzsche, which is once more by highlighting the mockery that is made of social contract theory. Again, rather than a matter of reaching self-interested determination that civil society is more advantageous than the state of nature, Freud rather asserts that the social bonds that “cement” society are primarily affective senses of shared guilt that emerge out of a “father complex” (Assoun, 2002, p.147). The bond that we have towards law, and indeed each other, is therefore not of a rational kind. We are rather bound by a set of forces “that are passed on unconsciously through evolution and history” (Zaretsky, 2016, p.98) and emanate out of what Freud calls “deferred obedience” (Freud, 1989b, p.178).

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 its appearance, which in this instance coincided with the remorse felt by the whole group. (Freud, 1989b, p.177-178)

What is crucial to note is that for Freud, unlike Nietzsche, the capacity to feel guilt precedes its instantiation as a socio-political and legal imperative to obey. The original guilt relation was felt strictly as a familial matter but *became political* 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 the crime of his overthrow and diminish the feelings of guilt that emerged therefrom (TT, p.180). But this still amounts to a denial, as the worship of totems emerged as *substitutes* for the father himself. 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 that gives the “elimination of the primal father” the force of having “left ineradicable traces in the history of humanity” (TT, p.192).

This is the originary Oedipal scene. 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.[[11]](#footnote-11) The super-ego, the component of psychic life that functions as conscience and moral voice, is produced through the Oedipal scene and comes to function *as a law* and a fixed, unchallengeable standard that has a dual purpose of setting an idealized standard and also determining prohibitions (EI, p.30). The force through which these standards are imposed, for Freud, corresponds to the severity of self-reproach, or the “unconscious sense of guilt” later on in life (30). 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 super-ego (EI, p.50, CD, p.756). The resonance with Nietzsche is becoming clearer, as both are attempting to explain not only what guilt does, but the reasons we remain bound to it, namely the subject’s misrecognition of self-punishment as having an expiatory function rather than serving as a means to further bind the subject to an imperative. In other words, the subject cannot see that punishing oneself for not adhering to a moral law *deepens* the investment in the law and the pain of failure itself.

How exactly does the super-ego speak to us when it speaks? For Freud and his interpreters, it always speaks through command. It is not to be reasoned with, nor can it be simply ignored.[[12]](#footnote-12) Since it is an internalized representation of a parental figure rather than an actual individual, 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 super ego as having the quality of a categorical imperative, which, when not met, produces relentless self-reproach (EI, p.49). Butler’s (2006)) famous reading of *The Ego and the Id* describes the ego-ideal (or super-ego) 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. In this way, pronouncements of the super-ego build the subject set to conform in a particular way, with significant implications for how sex and sexuality are developed and maintained, and keep the subject in a state of relative self-abasement and obedience before a demand. This does not always register as guilt per se, but rather, as Freud notes, a state of relative malaise and low-level illness (CD, p.764; EI p.50).

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. Additionally, each framework is constructed around the function of prohibitions in the forms of laws, which are internalized and proceed to regulate behavior. The practice of blaming or punishing oneself in the face moral imperatives is cast as an experience of guilt, which is not sequenced by either thinker as a discrete response to individualized acts, but is rather conceptualized as a *tendency* *to obey* by consistently imagining oneself as punished or threatened by punishment. Guilt therefore serves as something akin to a policing mechanism, an affective demand that gears a subject towards a deeply personal, individualized obedience directed towards an external (and then thoroughly internalized) standard.

2.2. The Paradigm’s Persistence:

This paradigm still has substantial theoretical force. Brown’s (1995) seminal conceptualization of the “wounded attachment” operates by framing guilt and *ressentiment* as weapons that in effect bind political actors to their own subjection (70). The “slave revolt” in morality that instantiated guilt and meekness as values while “reproaching power and action themselves as evil” eventually produces a subject “deeply invested in its own impotence” (70). This linkage of guilt with obedience and subjection is also repeated in Butler’s (2003) accounting of both subjection and subject formation as functions of power. Though Butler imagines the regulative dimensions of psychic power to be “vulnerable” as sites of resistance (p?). The paradox of the psychic life of power, as Butler writes, is that subjection produces a subject that at the same time “becomes the guarantor of its resistance and opposition” (14), meaning that there is space in which the subject can exceed the originary and “active” forces that attempt to keep it bound to an externalized and then internalized demand. Though Butler (2003; 2018) makes interesting references to Kleinian guilt that operates far afield from the typical Nietzschean and Freudian paradigm, this is only referenced in passing as a possible alternative framing. The bulk of Butler’s work still remains wedded to an implicit or explicit linkage of guilt with obedience and self-punishment.

In a more concrete sense, what exactly does this framing enable contemporary critical perspectives to see? Butler’s critical use of Freud allows us to see the punishing self-blame for deviating from heteronormative desire as a function of an external imposition rather than a natural occurrence. The same imposition is also visible along the specific axes of race and class, both of which are noted by Fanon, for example. Guilt on the part of the colonized is a facet of colonial and racial subjection, a noted hallmark of Fanon’s (2008) critical psychiatry, but it is also a marker of specific aspects of class domination. As Fanon writes of the birth of the “time clock” as a mechanism of workplace surveillance and control, he notes the “moral notion of guilt” is introduced into the workplace (2018, p.374). This kind of surveillance is predicated upon the assumed bad faith and malintent of the worker, who cannot shed this assumption no matter what (374). The feelings of guilt for not having worked hard enough are produced by certain standardized mechanisms of control.

Yet, these critical perspectives constitute just one example of the persistence of this particular framing of guilt. Arendt’s (2003a, 2003b) well-known insights related to guilt’s distinctively personal rather than political character, as well as its fictitious and unserious quality when expressed by those with only indirect or temporally displaced relationships with grave injustices.[[13]](#footnote-13) Arendt makes additional assertions related to guilt’s strictly “self-regarding” character, maintaining that it is in some sense a form of suffering that is inert, unrelated or inhibitive of action, or simply narcissistic (Alweis, p.310). Though she did not in any way associate herself with the psychoanalytic tradition and did not appear to reveal an indebtedness to Nietzsche’s specific reflections on guilt, she in fact appeals to a claim that can be found in that very paradigm that stresses how imagining oneself guilty for something someone hasn’t *directly* done is in effect an act of “solidarity with the wrongdoers”, perhaps even an act of misguided identification (Arendt, 2003a, p.148). At the very least, Arendt’s reflections related to Nazi crimes reveal her deep aversion, as King (2015) notes, for “German pietistic *Innerlichkeit*” that “diverted attention from the need for Germans to respond to their past with concrete action rather than wallowing in guilt” (p.162). Here, guilt is not only a kind of moral misrecognition, but a completely inert affect, one that simply produces hollow self-abasement rather than action. Indeed, it is fully compatible with uncritical obedience.

Guilt, for Arendt, has no real worldly character. It does not signify a solidaristic relationship, as does the concept of responsibility, but rather blinds one to the world outside oneself. Though drawing on the tradition of the early Frankfurt School rather than the work of Arendt, Vasquez-Arroyo (2016) draws this same conclusion, taking guilt to invariably “cast a political question in personal terms” and neglect “the imperatives of political action” and the distinctly political questions of structural injustices (2016, p.xviii). Certain recent interventions on Adorno in particular[[14]](#footnote-14) have called into question whether or not Vasquez-Arroyo’s claims about guilt are in fact incompatible with the basic commitments of the early Frankfurt School, but deeply thoughtful contributions on the nature of political responsibility today remain bound to a certain theoretical *tendency* that places guilt as a personal matter, an inert or self-defeating affect that may even be a distraction from the more fundamentally political matters of responsibility.

**3. Guilt, Intersubjectivity and Value**

What might it look like to destabilize, or rather *pluralize* this dominant framework? Rather than imagining guilt to be fundamentally linked with self-punishing obedience and the internalization of a powerful norm, how might an alternative perspective highlight guilt as a *critical* affect rather than a fundamentally *uncritical* one? In other words, can we imagine guilt as active, intersubjective and critical rather than passive, individualized, and obedient? Taking on this enterprise means constructing a parallel set of literatures to open up a set of experiences that we can observe as politically relevant. From the work of Karl Jaspers and Primo Levi, and through a set of contemporary psychoanalytic perspectives, we might reconfigure guilt as having an active, reparative function that makes it intimately bound with, rather than separate from, the supposedly more “political” notion of responsibility.[[15]](#footnote-15) More broadly, this account of guilt is characterized by a feeling that we experience for living at the expense of a suffering other, past and present, and engaging in a process of rectifying that injustice.

The purpose here is not to produce an injunction to feel something, but rather to critically engage with and make political sense of an experience. As Carlo Ginzburg (2019) writes of shame, of guilt we might say it “is definitely not a matter of choice: it falls upon us, invading us – our bodies, our feelings, our thoughts – as a sudden illness. It is a passion placed at the intersection between biology and history” (p.35). This, as noted, means that we are in a position to explain what an affect *does* since we don’t have a say in whether we feel it or not, rather than to claim that one should or should not feel a particular way in a given situation.

3.1. Guilt and Solidarity

In framing his fourfold typology of guilt in *The Question of German Guilt*, Karl Jaspers writes the following about “metaphysical guilt”, the last concept in his schema:

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 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 (Jaspers, 2000, p.26).

This is the Christian, “pietistic *Innerlichkeit*” of which Arendt (and Nietzsche, from a different angle) warned. An overwhelming feeling of guilt among someone who had technically not done anything wrong is an implicit undermining of any kind of ability to make distinctive judgments about culpability generally. For Arendt, this expression of guilt can only be metaphorical, and even when deployed metaphorically, has a tendency to create a dangerous confusion between the *genuinely* culpable and the sentimentalism of the self-indulgent (Arendt, 2003a, p.147). Arendt’s (2011) early preference towards the category of “shame”, and then “responsibility” supposedly avoided this.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Yet, Jaspers’ depiction of metaphysical guilt opens up a relation that the previous iterations of guilt as obedience, or even self-punishing identification with power only eclipse. The idea inherent in Jaspers’ framing is horizontal and intersubjective, and concerns a failure stemming from inaction rather than action. It takes as its point of orientation not obedience to an external law, but rather a *natural* human concern for the well-being of others, and highlights one’s deeds or inactions has having an impact on another in a concrete way. Having failed to act to secure the life of the other, to whom I discover myself as bound to *through* the experience of feeling this distinct form of guilt, is for Jaspers equivalent to being “guilty of being alive”, an expression of something akin to survivor’s guilt (p.66). The interpretation of this kind of survivor’s guilt as a misapprehension or identification with the victimizer, as chronicled by Leys (2007), could be better described not as a misidentification or internalization of power, but rather an “identification with the dead victims” of a given injustice and an expression of one’s boundedness to another (p.53).

The most extreme and perhaps most famous expression of this is chronicled by Primo Levi. As Levi writes in *The Drowned and the Saved*, the liberation of Auschwitz did not provoke in him and his fellow inmates a great relief, but instead a feeling of great “shame – that is, a sense of guilt” (p.2459). Levi understands that in a rational sense, he has no reason to feel such shame. He was not in any way culpable for the crimes of the Nazis, but nevertheless such feelings persisted. Levi describes the origins of these feelings as follows:

It is more realistic to accuse oneself or be accused by others of having failed in terms of human solidarity. Few survivors feel guilty for having deliberately injured, robbed, or beaten a fellow prisoner: people who committed such acts…repress the memory. On the other hand, almost everyone feels guilty for not coming to the aid of another person. The presence beside you of a fellow prisoner who is weaker, more unprepared, older, or too young, pestering you by asking for help or by simply ‘being there,’ which is already asking for help, is a constant feature of life in the camps. The request for solidarity, for a kind word, a piece of advice, even just a sympathetic ear, was permanent and universal, but it was rarely satisfied” (p.2463).

From a distinctly different and unspeakably more personal and visceral vantage point, Levi is in effect expressing Jaspers’ notion of “metaphysical guilt” without the abstract, Christian metaphysics. In a concrete sense, Levi knows himself to have failed, even in these most extreme circumstances, to have expressed solidarity with others who suffered alongside him. And it is not a guilt that stems from obedience, but rather a failure to *disobey* in service of others, hence Levi’s explanation: “Why did we feel guilt? Once everything was over, the awareness dawned on us that we had done nothing, or not enough, against the system into which we had been absorbed” (p.2462).

For both Levi and Jaspers, this experience of guilt did not produce an inert practice of self-punishment, nor the “static, compulsive, self-punishing guilt of the neurotic”, but instead an “animating, creative guilt” geared towards transformation and reparation (Leys, 2007, p.53). Levi’s practice of bearing witness, of bringing to life the figures whose names would otherwise have been lost to history, and Jaspers’ attempts at sketching a “purification through reparation” (Jaspers, 2000, p.113), a process of both inner and outward-oriented transformation based on acknowledgment and “the consciousness of solidarity and co-responsibility” that are foundations of human liberty (p.114-115). In other words, these particular guilt-feelings are not necessarily neurotic in the Freudian sense, or fundamentally geared towards obedience in a Nietzschean vein, but rather an active process of moral and political creation in the aftermath of a concretely perceived failure to *value* the other through an act or through inaction.

Our intent is not to hold up these unbearably painful and visceral expressions of guilt as something that we should hold up as models. Rather, our purpose lies in taking them seriously as moral and political experiences that express a rather underappreciated side of a deeply complex affect, namely guilt as an affective foundation for dynamic notions of both responsibility and solidarity, and simply a fiction or misapprehension that vertically binds us to an external imperative. In other words, Jaspers and Levi point us towards an experience that must be taken seriously as an alternative framing of how guilt functions, what it does and what kinds of relations it can make visible.

3.2. A Different Kind of Psychoanalysis

Contemporary work in psychoanalysis has, through the use of the work of Melanie Klein and her heirs, attempted to explain the potentially “constructive” and reparative aspects of the negative affects like guilt, and imagine their origin points outside of, or rather *before*, the Oedipal triangle. Klein (1975a, 1975b) grants us an alternative origin story, so to say, one that is resultant less of an externalized imposition of a powerful injunction, but more an acknowledgment of primitive infantile love impulses that have an element of outward-oriented aggression towards the mother. The recoil of from this aggression forms a distinct positionality in the infant, known as “the depressive position”, a point from which the infant directs an identificatory *concern* for the other and engages at efforts towards a loving repair (Klein, 1975b). This, as Winnicott describes, is a “most important development in human individuals, the origin of the capacity for a sense of guilt. Gradually as the infant finds out that the mother survives and accepts the restitutive gesture, so the infant becomes able to accept responsibility for the total fantasy to the full instinctual impulse that was previously ruthless” (Winnicott, 1984, p.23). This is a moment of intersubjectivity, where one acknowledges not only the feelings of another through identification, but also the inherent destructive impulses inside oneself that have the potential to harm the other. Klein frames this as an “enlargement” of Freud’s understanding of the force of the Oedipus complex in the development of conscience, but this is in many ways an alternative way of understanding the relation between morality, power and action (Klein, 1975a).

However, Klein does not foreclose upon the notion of guilt as punitive, inert self-abasement. Though, as Caflisch (2020) notes, the “depressive position” is the locus of most discussions of guilt that center on “capacities for integration, concern and repair”, but this positionality can easily give way to forms of “persecutory guilt”, characterized by “resentment, despair, fear, and self-reproach” rather than an impetus to repair (p.583). Klein’s famous distinction between the “depressive position” and the “paranoid-schizoid” position is operative here, the former being the site of a potentially reflexive, reparative impetus and the latter being the site of defensiveness or a pathological self-beratement. Ideally, Winnicott (1984) imagines a healthy processing of guilt from Klein’s perspective to result in a “benign circle” originating from the “depressive position”, beginning with “(i) instinctual experience, (ii) acceptance of responsibility which is called guilt, (iii) a working though,” and ending with “a true restitutive gesture” (p.24). From this perspective, Winnicott’s uptake of Klein makes possible an alternative constellation of concepts in relation to guilt, namely one that encompasses concern, solidarity, reflexivity and self-reflection, and potentially notions of justice. Guilt, as Winnicott (1986) later writes, therefore has a potentially “constructive” element.

This framing has political implications in a dual sense. First, the very intersubjective character of this framing of guilt cuts across the grain of the Nietzschean-Freudian paradigm. Whereas Nietzsche and Freud imagine all guilt to originate from a failure to obey a law and resulting in a practice of individualized or potentially pathological self-abasement that facilitates further pliability on the part of the subject, the Kleinian framing of guilt as a function of the “depressive position” allows for an alternative story of guilt being bound up with a natural intersubjectivity and sense of indebtedness to the other. Rather than emphasizing obedience to a law, we produce a more horizontal relationality that has at its core a deep self-awareness and awareness of suffering outside of the self, a suffering that an individual may be implicated in perpetuating. From Jaspers and Levi in particular, we could say this kind of guilt registers a debt that we live or lived at the expense of another, which can actively thrust us into critical, justice-oriented political engagement. Recent interventions (Allen, 2021) have also highlighted the deeply important implications Klein’s work has for perspectives in critical theory, particularly as they relate to recognition or acknowledgment.

Second, and in tune with contemporary psychoanalytic scholarship on present and historical white supremacy (Grand, 2018; Caflisch, 2020), the nature of the reparative act, especially for what Spinner-Halev (2007) calls “enduring injustices” (i.e. historical crimes whose repercussions endure in the present), is textured by political discourses and potentially by political power itself. Whether there are outlets for a reparative act, or whether or not one expresses a sense of guilt from the “depressive position” or feels guilt to be “persecutory” is indeed a matter of how political actors message the nature of the injustice, or if it goes acknowledged at all. Additionally, what constitutes an adequate reparative act is a matter of political messaging. The inert and oftentimes self-righteous but exculpatory “liberal guilt” (see Benjamin, 2002 or Lorde, 1981) or self-abasing “white guilt” are not merely matters of psychic positionality but also matters of how one sees oneself as a political actor, and how one imagines a particular injustice to have arisen and why. For example, if one sees contemporary racism as a matter of individualized, discrete acts rather than systematically-engrained, structural forms of domination, the kind of resulting reparative act will be different, and may even be determinate for whether or not one adopts a reparative stance at all.

In other words, from this framework of guilt we can parse out two important political implications, the first being that guilt can have a deeply intersubjective, justice-oriented character, which *binds* it to efforts of political action rather than separates it from them. In defiance of the Nietzschean-Freudian paradigm, it doesn’t emphasize obedience, but rather critical engagement and self-awareness. Second, how guilt is processed, and whether or not it lingers in punitive self-reproach or can be translated into a kind of reparative act, is a matter of what a political horizon of possibility looks like and what is socially deemed to be an adequate response. This yields a set of theoretical insights that bring guilt and political responsibility not as opposites, or guilt not necessarily a mere pathological function of a tendency to obey, but a kind of responsiveness to a concrete situation in which one recognizes their implicatedness in the suffering of others. We might say that guilt can be an engine of engagement rather than its opposite.

This pluralization of perspectives on guilt produces a profound shift in how political theorists might encounter the topic of guilt and guilt-feelings. The Butlerian perspective, for example, takes as its point of departure the Nietzschean and Freudian framing and asks a question of how affective experience is a function of an operation of power that binds a subject to a moral or political imperative. The alternative, more Kleinian-oriented perspective, which itself has corollaries in say, the work of Jaspers or Levi, frames guilt as a natural orientation towards reflexivity and reparation rather than an experience of a self-abuse in the face of a law. At the same time, whether or not guilt becomes pathological (persecutory) or reparative is indeed a function of politics, and how the subject is taught to interpret one’s own experience of implicatedness, and which kinds of avenues of reparation (if any) are at a subject’s disposal. The latter frame asks a different political question, which is not how guilt-feelings invariably facilitate obedience, but rather under which conditions they can be channeled towards a productive political end.

**4. Conclusion:**

Contemporary political theory, particularly work that concerns itself with political action, generally assumes that guilt is an inert, deeply harmful affect that inevitably paralyzes rather than creates an impetus to act. This assumption, which is in many ways an inheritance of Nietzsche and Freud’s reflections on guilt, takes guilt to be a function of power, an internalized mechanism that guarantees obedience to an imposed norm or law. Understanding guilt as a political force means making sense of it in its pathological form, and interpreting how it reproduces a scene of domination. This study takes the view that this is but one way of thinking through a deeply multifaceted affect. We may just as easily take a different perspective on the politics of guilt, one that defies guilt’s reflexive linkage with obedience and instead conceptualizes it as an experience geared towards acknowledgment, reparation and self-reflexivity in the aftermath of failing to secure a natural human solidarity.

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1. Nietzsche (1974, 250) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Winnicott (1984, p.25) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Levi (p.2462 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Deleuze (2014, p.141) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Worth noting is here is Freud’s echoing of this basic assertion in *Totem and Taboo*, particularly as it relates to feelings of guilt. He writes: “What lie behind the sense of guilt are always *psychical* realities and never *factual* ones” (Freud, p.1989b, p.197-198). Of course, this does not make a sense of guilt any less real. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 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*” (WP 514). For Freud, the moral injunctions delivered by the super-ego 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.” (Freud, 1989a, p.30-31) What we consider to be laws (moral, or for Nietzsche, even scientific) mask relations of power. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Dienstag (1997) keenly notes that Nietzsche “is quite careful to refer to presocial, unremembering humans as animals” (p.116). 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In *The Will to Power* Nietzsche remarks that in this scenario “pain has been robbed of innocence” (WP, p.166). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 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. Take Nietzsche’s assertion in *Dawn*: 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” (2011, p.58). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Caruth is speaking here about *Moses and Monotheism* in particular but her account has applicability to *Totem and Taboo* and conceivably the *Genealogy*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Freud (1989a) notes the following on this matter: “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” (16). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Phillips (2015) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Take for example Arendt’s remark towards the end of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*: “It is quite gratifying to feel guilty if you haven’t done anything wrong: how noble! Whereas it is rather hard and certainly depressing to admit guilt and to repent. The youth of Germany is surrounded on all sides and in all walks of life, by men in positions of authority and in public office who are very guilty indeed but who *feel* nothing of the sort. The normal reaction to this state of affairs should be indignation, but indignation would be quite risky – not a danger to life and limb but definitely a handicap in a career. Those young German men and women who every once in a while – on the occasion of all the *Diary of Anne Frank* hubbub and of the Eichmann trial – treat us to hysterical outbreaks of guilt feelings are not staggering under the burden of the past, their fathers’ guilt; rather, they are trying to escape from the pressure of very present and actual problems into a cheap sentimentality” (Arendt, 2006, p.251). This has an interesting resonance with certain psychoanalytic perspectives on guilt as self-indulgent. See Caflisch (2020) for a review of these perspectives. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Allen (2021) and Bernstein (2004), for example. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Leeb (2018) for a sophisticated account of the untenability of this distinction. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Schaap (2001) for elaboration of this development. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)