

Moving Beyond the Blame Game: Subverting Privilege

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By interrogating blame as a way of continuing a conversation on moral responsibility in education, Barbara Stengel has provided a helpful shift in focus for the discussion. This conversation began with Barbara Houston's Presidential Address in 2004, in which she raised questions about the restraints imposed on education for social justice by classic liberal moralities.¹ Responses by Dwight Boyd and Haesoon Bai continued the conversation, and were followed by a contribution from Barbara Applebaum.² Toward the end of her essay, Stengel pleads for us to work together to move beyond simply blaming the individual. She raises for our consideration, but leaves unanswered, two questions about the relationship between agency and responsibility, and that between agency and morality. I will bring her unaddressed question about agency and responsibility into play, alongside the question she does address. I would argue that any suggestion that we can separate individual and societal agency disregards the role privilege plays in the construction and maintenance of responsibility.

Stengel defines morality as the ability to respond in a fitting way, to be a responsible person. When a response is not fitting, our tendency is to fix blame — to hold someone responsible. Stengel concludes that blaming itself is immoral when it gets in the way of mutually beneficial transformative action. In moving to that conclusion her argument introduces helpful distinctions between three faces of blame: the punitive, the delineational, and the relational. The first face of blame, the juridic or punitive is about calling to account. Stengel notes that fear motivates this kind of blaming because it emphasizes free will and individual accountability. How does punitive blaming reinforce hegemonic performances of race, gender, and class? In situations where punitive blaming positions a person of privilege against someone who is marginalized, is it possible to see individual performances apart from the inequities of power and voice? As Stengel implies, in relationships based on privilege, punitive blaming is not helpful, because it leaves individuals mired in historical tensions not of their own choosing.

The second face of blame, defensive or delineational, is about distancing or delineating oneself. At some times competitive, others defensive, delineational blaming maintains one's distinct identity by focusing on the actions of another in the interest of safety and self-preservation. Here, too, free will is emphasized and fear is the motivator. Stengel shows how this type is built on individual identity anxiety. However, seeing delineational blaming as individual, rather than social or systemic, seems problematic. Might not women, people of color, gay men and lesbians, and the differently-abled find that to delineate and distance themselves from hegemonic practices is to rehearse freedom? Could it be that sometimes the only way to get to the transformational is through the process of delineation? Might we lose an essential dialogue if we deny a role to this mode of blaming?

The third face of blame that Stengel introduces is the socio-developmental or relational, where one blames only to assist. The one blaming invites the collaboration of the blamed, and includes the blamed in the possibility of a transformed social ecology. Stengel clarifies the inter-relatedness that displaces a concern for free will and names love as the motivator. As Stengel describes relational blaming, both blamer and blamed are invited to be cognizant of the vast web of relationships in which they live. To be responsible is to stand in the circle of Stengel's relational face of blame, not caught in the trap of atomistic thinking, but free to respond in transformative ways.

In looking at morality by placing a focus on blaming, Stengel helps address questions raised by Houston about how moral discourse makes meaning. She brings the effect of morality into the everyday by addressing fears, insecurities, and social contingency. Following up on Houston's proposal regarding time perspective, Stengel shows how punitive and delineational blaming get trapped in retrospectivity, while relational blaming has, as an end in view, the future well-being of the social matrix. I would add that both punitive and delineational blaming also get trapped in known and unknown histories of power, and caught up in the performance of gender, race, and class. Applebaum and Boyd both remind us that we are up to our necks in moral issues for which the modern liberal sense of individual morality is not adequate. We are complicit in a matrix of relationships and histories that are too easily dismissed by the hegemonic moral structures of our culture. Introducing mutual causality into the conversation, Bai points us beyond atomistic visions to see interconnectedness shaping our lives and responsibilities.

A further strength in the relational approach to blaming is that it addresses Boyd's concern that liberal morality typically centers on the autonomous individual. Stengel demonstrates how punitive and delineational blaming are, in fact, a way of reinforcing individualistic manifestations of the hegemonic morality. Punitive and delineational blaming generally translate to punitive and delineational morality and policy, which as educational strategy, subverts the tendency to any sense of inter-relatedness, and keeps the person self-concerned. We might do well to remember that Bai encourages us to include in our circle of concern, not only human interaction, but also interaction with all of nature. A shift toward the relational becomes a strategy for decentering the individual. Bai reminds us that the dominant forms of morality see self-identity as preceding relation. This priority of the self can only reduce morality and blaming to guilt, regret, and defensiveness, all of which serve to paralyze. Until we move away from an individualistic approach to responsibility and blaming, we will not be free to educate toward a new social consciousness.

However, Houston, Boyd, and Applebaum remind us of questions we easily avoid. Connecting the notion of blaming to the role of privilege might keep us focused on the social justice issues at the heart of this discussion. How does the identity of the blamer (or the blamed) complicate the situation? What happens when the blamer is in a position of privilege and power and the blamed is not? Or vice versa? What happens to agency when the interaction is between teacher and student?

Black and white? Male and female? Gay and straight? Abled and disabled? Citizen and immigrant? How is an educator to manage a classroom situation where a socially naïve, white student, with a false consciousness regarding race, recites a folk-tale that is laced with racial epithets, about which he is totally unaware, in an ethnically diverse classroom? Is competitive blaming unavoidable at such a point? Is blaming not, often, a recital of privilege, especially in cases of punitive blaming? Stengel's shift to the relational suggests a recovery of the precedence of the socio-developmental over the sense of self-as-individual, thus opening the possibility of a self-in-relation motivated by responsive and responsible contingency. These dynamics of privilege are ignored at our peril.

Peter Singer calls for a transition from an ethics centered on self-interest to an ethical standpoint that sees the self as involved in the world and related to the whole, by way of the immediate.³ This transition must address not only the psychological (the concern of the punitive and defensive models), but the social and ecological as well. Singer hastens to remind us that, while pragmatist, feminist, and post-modern thinking will resist any morality that sees fixed universal truth embedded in our nature, re-direction away from self-interest might open up a different unifier, an ethic of compassion, rooted in an understanding that suffering is universal. The relational morality Stengel calls for would assist what Singer sees as the discarding of self-interest-as-motive and the expansion of the subjective to embrace one's situated-ness. Refusing to collaborate with blaming subverts the performance of privilege. Otherwise, we are stranded in a concern for the individual, with only peripheral reference to social and environmental contingencies, and might never move to a place where social responsibility arises effortlessly from educational work.

Stengel calls for us to discard the punitive and delineational models and endorse the relational model to promote the social conception and development of morality. This is a helpful turn in the conversation, as long as we are honest about privilege. There is indeed something left of responsibility here: the construction of a socially conscious morality that is essential for addressing social inequalities, which must always be the end in view.

1. Barbara Houston, "Taking Responsibility," in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2002*, ed. Scott Fletcher (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2003), 1–13.

2. Dwight Boyd, "Glass Snakes vs. Groupals: Who Is the Responsible Subject?" in *Philosophy of Education*, ed. Fletcher, 14–18; Heesoon Bai, "Taking One's Place in a Moral Universe," in *Philosophy of Education*, ed. Fletcher, 19–22; Barbara Applebaum, "On 'Glass Snakes,' White Moral Responsibility and Agency under Complicity," in *Philosophy of Education 2005*, ed. Kenneth R. Howe (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2005), 149–157.

3. Peter Singer, *Writings on an Ethical Life* (New York: Ecco Press, 2000), 269–272.