The Problem of Misplaced Focus, or More About Me

Kathy Hytten
Southern Illinois University

When teaching students about systems of privilege, I am always amazed both by how quickly "MAME" talk surfaces and by how tenaciously my students hold on to it. It begins in the moment when they seem only able to focus on themselves, what I like to call the "More about Me" syndrome or MAME.[1] It happens most when we explore the issue that drives Barbara Applebaum's reflections: what it means to be complicit in systems of privilege, to participate in racism without realizing we are doing so, and without "wanting" to be responsible, at least in part, for its reproduction and perpetuation. While the ways in which students focus on themselves vary, the MAME comments are all too familiar. "It is not my fault." "I feel so guilty and ashamed." "I'm a good person; I treat everyone with respect." "I'm not like those other whites." "I can't be held responsible for the actions of previous generations." "Tell me what I am supposed to do." "I'm embarrassed that I didn't see this before." The theme that cuts across all these comments is a focus on the self, on our own affective reactions, thoughts, feelings, and experiences, when confronting complicity in social injustice. While the sense of guilt born of recognizing this complicity can compel us to reconsider our everyday performances and to explore issues of power and privilege more deeply, it more commonly seems to be incapacitating. As Beverly Tatum bemoans, this guilt frequently "immobilizes rather than empowers and too often becomes self-indulgent while the racial *status quo* goes unchallenged."[2]

It is against the backdrop of these MAME experiences that I enter Applebaum's very provocative reflections on the need for a new conception of moral agency in the face of complicity in social injustice, one that rejects the necessity of an autonomous core identity from which to act for social change. Applebaum articulates the fundamental problem extremely well. She shows how traditional conceptions of agency, responsibility, and blameworthiness, when predicated on liberal individualism, can blind us to the ways in which we are always already caught up in social systems not of our making. That is, when we can only see ourselves as well-intended, good, nonracist people, we lose sight of the ways in which our actions/choices can get in the way of changing unjust systems. For example, many of us aim to be colorblind, often a "non-negotiable element in a non-racist creed," yet our refusal to "see" color and to acknowledge that race matters not only "fails to erase institutionalized racial hierarchies, but it leaves us without tools for thinking about them."[3] Liberal individualism allows us to view social realities as a sum of individual choices, as if a social system, organization, or structure is simply "a collection of people, and everything that happens in it begins with what they each think, feel, and intend."[4] Through her appeal to Judith Butler, Applebaum provides the reader (and her students) with a different, potentially empowering and enabling way of thinking about the self: as constituted by, and situated within, systems, but not determined by them.

In exploring the issue of what "agency under complicity" might look like, Butler's work is certainly useful. As Applebaum so thoughtfully shows, Butler provides different lenses for seeing how we are all implicated in social systems such as racism, in spite of our good intentions otherwise. Moreover, Butler's performative sense of identity opens up alternative possibilities for agency and social change. For her, identity is not fixed or essential; rather, it is a "stylized repetition of acts."[5] Thus one is not a racist; rather, racism gets constituted through our actions and discourses, through the everyday performances in which we engage. Performing our race differently can produce effects that may thwart the reproduction of racism, at least temporarily, and thus might open up possibilities for re-creating social systems in more equitable ways. These performances may include such things as privileged people talking less and listening more in mixed groups, disrupting white racial bonding by not laughing at racist jokes or responding in ways that call attention to the racism, challenging myths of meritocracy and equality of opportunity, or making different choices about the people we choose to live and work among. Importantly, the assessment of these performative choices is not based on our intentions but on the kinds of effects that are levied by these actions. Thus Butler helps us shift the focus away from ourselves and onto the impact and consequences of our actions. This is perhaps one of the greatest strengths and potential contributions of her work.

In appealing to a performative, nonessentialist sense of identity, Applebaum seeks a more productive way of conceptualizing the type of moral responsibility needed to ground social justice efforts. She wants us to see that, regardless of our intentions, our choices and identities can never be outside existing power structures and cultural practices, or, as Dwight Boyd might say, we are always inextricably immersed within our "groupals."[6] As much as those of us who are white would like to transcend our implication in systems of privilege and white supremacy, we cannot. The best we can do is learn to see more clearly the ways in which we are caught up in these systems and experiment with different everyday performances in the face of this implication, with the hope that some of these may cause systemic ruptures that open up new possibilities. Yet, we can never be certain that our actions will have the impact we imagine. Here Applebaum's closing caution that we need to be constantly vigilant, self-reflexive, and even uncertain about our actions is important, especially so that our sense of ourselves as "good" people does not prevent us from seeing how our choices can actually serve to further entrench racism.

While I really like Applebaum's vision of agency under complicity, I am somewhat troubled by how it potentially positions our students. In particular, I worry about the upshot of telling students to be less certain and less confident when they engage in social justice work, especially when we have already destabilized their sense of self by telling them their intentions are not central. Even though this caution is important, where does this leave them? What do they have left to hold on to that will compel them to engage in social justice work at all, particularly given that the ultimate white privilege is the ability to do nothing? We want students to be cautious and reflective, but we also want them to stay engaged in social justice efforts even

10.47925/2005.158

when these are difficult, uncomfortable, and fraught with uncertainties. Here I wonder if focusing our efforts on articulating a sense of agency might be part of the problem, particularly given that framing problems of social injustice in terms of agency may actually contribute to maintaining a more self-absorbed focus. We generally interpret agency as our power within social spheres, as our capacity to bring about certain desirable consequences. Agency thus cannot help but be tied to the phenomenon of MAME and seems inevitably to lead to talking about things like choice, responsibility, blame, and accountability, the very things we want to problematize. As an alternative, I wonder what possibilities might arise when we foreground moral urgency instead of moral agency.

In talking about moral urgency, we call attention to the very real problems of social injustice in the world — problems linked to racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, and the like. We focus on these problems, over and above our individual responsibility for them. It seems to me that one way we can disrupt the misplaced focus on self is by helping students first see the gravity of suffering and pain in the world before we ask them to position themselves within, or in relation to, this suffering. Ideally, this may help them to foreground problems of injustice while they struggle with questions of agency and responsibility. It is not that these latter questions are unimportant; rather, we need strategies for keeping them from being all-consuming. While I really appreciate Applebaum's vision of agency under complicity, I fear that our students might need something more compelling to hold on to. Supplementing her powerful notion of moral agency with a conception of moral urgency is one possibility.

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1. Thanks to Amee Adkins for help in coining this term.

2. Beverly Daniel Tatum, "Lighting Candles in the Dark: One Black Woman's Response to White Antiracist Narratives," in *Becoming and Unbecoming White: Owning and Disowning a Racial Identity*, ed. Christine Clark and James O'Donnell (Westport, Conn.: Bergin and Garvey, 1999), 61.

3. Audrey Thompson, "Colortalk: Whiteness and *Off White*," *Educational Studies* 30, no. 2 (1999): 141, 144.

4. Allan G. Johnson, *Privilege, Power, and Difference* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 84.

5. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 179.

6. Dwight Boyd, "Glass Snakes vs. Groupals: Who Is the Responsible Subject?" in *Philosophy of Education 2002*, ed. Scott Fletcher (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2003), 14–18.

10.47925/2005.158