

Suspending Judgment Altogether: Butler, Limit–Experience, and Critical Education

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The starting point of my reflections on Barbara Applebaum’s defense of a “poststructural” mode of criticality is the observation that we are both inspired by the work of Judith Butler, and more precisely by the essays she wrote in response to the problem of international terrorism, but that we come at the same time to a different understanding. Therefore, I consider another use of Butler’s latest oeuvre for thinking about the critical possibilities of education, arguing for a form of criticality that is, so to speak, a fourth type next to the three modes Applebaum identifies. I hope that these reflections address the questions she raises at the end of her essay.

What struck me in Applebaum’s essay is the absence of any reference to the work of Michel Foucault. Nevertheless, Butler’s essay on critique, which forms the background of her analysis, is actually an elaboration of Foucault’s particular view on criticality.¹ Therefore, I argue that we could conceive of an alternative perspective on the possibility of critique if we take the thought of Foucault, rather than that of Jacques Derrida, as a starting point. Arguably, elaborating on Foucault’s idea that *suspension of judgment is educational in itself*, critique might also consist in taking an attitude that allows for an *experience of self-expropriation* to happen, rather than in acknowledging that existing discursive norms and categorizations always imply exclusion.

Crucial to Applebaum’s argument is the distinction between forms of criticality that might be called “epistemological” (those concerned with the validity of judgments that we take for granted or with transcendental principles the truth of which we should admit to in order to have a rational discussion) and “ethical” forms of criticality, which are interested in the existence of metanarratives that, when not further investigated and debated, support social injustice. Whereas the first forms of critique consist in passing judgments (for example, as Jürgen Habermas does in relation to supporters of extremist forms of Islam, claiming that as long as they do not respect the essential preconditions for an open democratic dialogue, their voice should not be heard),² the latter form of critique demands a suspension of judgment. We should realize that we can speak, communicate, and thus pass judgment *only* because we share assumptions that usually remain hidden or are, at least, not the object of discussion and are contingent in nature. Roughly speaking, it is *the lack of recognition* of this contingency that excludes the possibility of other ways of thinking and speaking from being tolerated. Therefore, we should confront ourselves with the limitations that our own judgmental apparatus implies toward the possibility of alternative forms of human existence. We should, as Derrida answers to Habermas, not immediately judge the other, that is, traditionalist Islamic culture,

in our terms, but see in the event of 9/11 an opportunity to be vigilant, and to question our “enlightened” perspective.³

Suspension of judgment, as Applebaum argues, is very relevant for social justice education, as it might reveal “what is unthinkable so that new possibilities become available to consider.” Indeed, a very worthwhile educational cause. Nevertheless, in the end, not all possibilities are equally desirable: so, for example, atrocities should be exposed and condemned, without however reinstalling a First World discourse. And here, as Applebaum shows in the last part of her essay, a major problem turns up: a judgmental perspective seems necessary after all, even it is far from clear how to reconcile this demand with a poststructuralist type of criticality.

My suggestion here is to rethink *the whole idea of social justice education and what the exact role of suspension of judgment consists in*. In Applebaum’s view, “suspension of judgment” is a necessary step, a technical precondition, for achieving educationally relevant aims. We should recognize the “limits of [our] most certain ways of knowing” in order to realize a more just social life. Stated otherwise, social justice education should begin with taking into account hegemonic judgmental apparatuses, then stimulate to hold all judgment in suspension so that we become able to see that we are prisoners of our own thought, leaving intact, however, the possibility of passing judgments which seem necessary, without the bias of existing metanarratives. Suspension of judgment is thus *functional* in view of a higher educational stake at which we should aim.

However, suspension of judgment could, as Foucault suggests, also be understood as *educational in and of itself*.⁴ Education, as Foucault tells us, is perhaps not about leading young people toward a future world we as educators believe to be more just or humane, but about *the experience itself* that, indeed, everything can be different. We can think and live otherwise, and to experience this is an intrinsically educational moment. We get “educated” in the etymologically original sense of this word: we are being “lead out”, we are exposed, we are out of position. Education is no project that is instrumental to an already established objective, such as social justice, but rather something that refers to the possibility of “limit experience.”⁵ This concerns an experience in which we find ourselves in a state of *utmost potentiality*. Any established order is interrupted and precisely this grants the possibility of the coming into being of what is really new. Allowing that these moments might happen is the object of a “critical ethos” that stands next to the three forms of criticality Applebaum describes. It is also the starting point of Butler’s text on criticality.

This critical ethos is opposed to what Butler (referring to Theodor Adorno) calls “moral narcissism.”⁶ With this expression she indicates that the taking of a judgmental perspective always leads to an assertion of one’s own position in life. Therefore, *even if* such a perspective shows that we were not aware of being confined by a contingent discourse we wrongly took as necessary valid, our own “sovereign” position as critical human beings, nevertheless, gets affirmed. This is because an ethics of acknowledgment is implied, which leaves the position of the ethical subject intact. Opposed to this, as Butler analyzes in her book on 9/11 and the precariousness

of life, certain experiences of vulnerability radically interrupt this narcissistic logic and render us utterly dispossessed.⁷ The right response, so she seems to argue, has to do with living through this condition of self-loss and experiencing to the full that we are out of position. More concretely, she points to a register of *corporeal experience* that is connected to physical injury or the loss of a beloved one. In these cases it does not make any sense to stick to the idea that we are in possession of the meaning of our own existence. “The body has [an] invariable public dimension.”⁸

I believe that Butler’s ideas on corporeal ex-position might offer a way of conceiving of a critical education that transcends existing formats.⁹ It should, however, be admitted that Butler does not develop her argument in a straightforward way, as she also states that we have to recognize the condition of human vulnerability and see it as a resource or foundation that will guide us in the realization of the most humane world thinkable. This, of course, is not in line with her assertion that the experience of being out of position as “public flesh” constitutes *in itself* a critical momentum. Corporeal expropriation is not about *acknowledging* that we better not pass judgment because of the violence implied in hegemonic discourse and in view of facilitating as yet unthinkable ways of living. On the contrary, in this experience we are out of position altogether. This means that any logic of judgment becomes inoperative and that *in this experience itself* the possibility of a real transformation of ourselves and of society might be granted.

Otherwise stated, Butler’s reflections might offer a way to conceive of an alternative critical education that is *not* a social justice education that demands a temporary suspension of judgment as a means for establishing a more just society. It would *rather* take completely seriously the “public” experience of corporeal expropriation, which *intrinsically* opens the possibility of a future that is wholly unforeseeable.

1. Judith Butler, “What Is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue,” in *The Political*, ed. David Ingram (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 212–26.

2. Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 1–24.

3. *Ibid.*, 85–136.

4. Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981–1982*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 134.

5. Michel Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 32–50.

6. Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham Press, 2005), 105.

7. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004).

8. *Ibid.*, 26.

9. See Joris Vlieghe, “Judith Butler and the Public Dimension of the Body: Education, Critique and Corporeal Vulnerability,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 44, no. 1 (2010): 153–70.