

Relations and Uncertainty

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Barbara Applebaum, in advancing a use of ignorance in social justice education, has provided us with a very good critique of Cynthia Townley's position and augmented it nicely with Judith Butler's desire for an opaque, relational subject, rather than the transparent "I" of classical ethical theories. I am going to spend some time critiquing Townley for a slightly different reason and then argue that relationality, in this instance, is less about a conception of the subject per se and more about how to create and maintain relational responsibilities. I am not convinced that intentional ignorance is the answer, nor do I think rumination on a single pronoun is a compelling approach — the opacity of the subject, signaled by "I" or anything else, is less at issue than relationality in the midst of uncertainty.

New work in agnatology has given us a few key categories of ignorance: deception, lying, insufficiency, attentiveness to one thing but not another, and so on. Jennifer Logue¹ has also cued us into ignorance, denial, and self-deception via her work with psychoanalytic theory, Sharon Todd² has cautioned us to not paper over the otherness of the other. Audrey Thompson,³ as well as Kathy Hytten and John T. Warren,⁴ have pointed out the ways white people try to avoid direct confrontation with their race-based ignorance.

Townley adds to this a conscious reason to want to preserve a stance of ignorance, if only to subvert the tendency to make judgments about things we, in various positions of dominance, both try to do too often and have no basis on which to make. Townley does not want the dominant to ask judgment-related questions to minorities because those questions are an act of power, not inquiry. The dominant, she argues, should listen, trust, and be willing to engage with others in relationships that keep those dominant out of the know. Her main concern, I think, is not that subjectivity is incomplete and relational, but instead that judgment and relationality do not mix. I have two worries, probably more, one of them goes through a feminist critique of communitarianism and the other emerges out of the circuit of accusation-subjectivity that Butler is playing with. My final thought is somewhat happier and returns to the relationship of desire and recognition Butler discusses.

Townley parallels communitarian arguments suggesting that relations of love should be outside the circuit of justice and judgment. Because, they argued, intimate relationships require a commitment to give and take that justice would sever with its demand for less-warm-and-fuzzy things like equity, intimate relationships needed to be guided by things other than judgment and justice. By installing a similar public-private divide in relations of difference, Townley may create, however unintentionally, a situation where instead of thinking what we might owe one another in terms of relational justice, we slide into relational (dis)comforts where epistemological challenges or — one assumes — any other kind of challenge would just disturb the

relationship. At that point, we are not in a relationship at all — we are either in the position of the one who knows or we are the one who is just going to stay ignorant and trusting.

Is taking someone's word without verification fully possible? On a simple level, without some interaction, we are not in relationship. On another level, each utterance concretizes the identity position of the one speaking and so concretizes the subject's position as well. In the end, this sounds more like stultified subjects than relationships. The kind of trust Townley describes does not engage both subjects and thus, at a certain point, is not a trusting *relationship*.

If we follow Townley, it may be that recognizing ignorance will function the same way guilt does: it is another alibi to go no further. I think behind this project is the intention to ensure that going further with knowledge is necessarily intersubjective and that the arrogant perception of the dominant does not rush to learn culturally appropriate ways of knowing or the ten tricks that will get you to know what queer is if you are not, but rather to embrace that moment of unknowing as an indication of positionality. Like Applebaum, I worry a bit that unknowing becomes the sort of reward of these encounters with difference and that laziness, further, gets confirmed as the appropriate response to a lack of certainty about something someone else knows. According to Townley, only the oppressed or disadvantaged in the relationship are called to account, even if that process is passive. That is, the oppressed are called into using the discourse of truth and so have the responsibility for their utterances in a way that the ignorant and trusting person will never have. The trusting one becomes something of a blank and so avoids an account of position and an engagement with another on anything other than a passive listening.

Does Butler solve this problem by indicating that if we are all in ethical relationship, we are involved in discourses that call us to account, and that the opacity of those engagements define ethics? Even within the broader point, there are still, I think, differences among kinds of accesses to knowledge and willingness to think about how one is situated in discourses. I am not saying this can ever be complete, of course, but what staying in ignorance as one is hailed as a white person, for instance, does is make the connection between subjectivity and responsibility more fragile. That is, the subjectivity of whiteness emerges through the accusation of the limits on what white people can know — they cannot, for instance, engage in the same kinds of judgments that people of color can when discerning a situation in which whiteness is at play. But limiting the work of responsibility, that is, taking particular practices of knowledge out of the possibility of circulation and reflection, whiteness emerges and is told to stay as stupid as it can. I can see this going two ways, the first I think is reasonable and has implications for a lot of work done on whiteness and complex subjectivity, the second leads to paralysis that then leads to more accusation and shifts whiteness out of relationship and into ever more shallow self-interest that always fails. The first way this evacuating the subject of whiteness from response might go is to make it apparent that whiteness is a position occupied not

a subjectivity that can become relational — it is a structural, subjective, and relational dead end. Responsibility has to come from work against the position itself, not the subject.

The problem, it seems to me, with making whiteness a kind of subjectivity and maintaining this new kind of ignorance Townley is advancing is that once someone is told to be responsive but not be responded to, the asymmetry itself creates a scene of accusation to which there can be no response and thus, there is no relation — there is no one there to relate to. Butler rejects the idea that relationality and subjectivity can only emerge through accusation and instead wants to tie relationality to desire for recognition, a desire that becomes a desire for desire, and hence unattainable and a subject that becomes an occasion to think about how the subject is constituted and in what context and relation.

Butler does offer an account of the subject that is rooted less in accusation and more in longing and desire; a subject who wants see who else is out there and find out what they might do together. Less interesting is her argument about the opacity of the subject but more useful is the interrogation of the kinds of subjectivity available, even if our tentative judgments about the limits of our self-understanding are not always certain. Her use of Michel Foucault helps us to see what kinds of subject positions are historically available given our positionalities and complexities. Responsibility is not reliant on an opaque subject, it is reliant, I think, on a situated subject that longs to move with others into potentials for relationality but also stalled by its situatedness — it does not know where this desire will take it in relation but the openness of the longing — whether this is ignorance or something else — keeps those relationships in play. But the criticality of its examination of its situatedness and relational desires does not stop — this is an active subject/relationship. Opacity is the main concern only if one is obsessed with the “I” instead of moving into desire for difference and change.

1. Jennifer Logue, “The Unbelievable Truth and the Dilemmas of Ignorance,” in *Philosophy of Education 2008*, ed. Ronald David Glass (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2009), 54–62.

2. Sharon Todd, “On Not Knowing the Other, or Learning *from* Levinas,” in *Philosophy of Education 2001*, ed. Suzanne Rice (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2002), 67–74.

3. Audrey Thompson, “Contempt and Its Alibis” (annual meeting of the American Educational Studies Association, St. Louis, Missouri, Presidential Address, 2011).

4. John T. Warren and Kathy Hytten, “The Faces of Whiteness: Pitfalls and the Critical Democrat,” *Communication Education* 53, no. 4 (2004): 321–339.