**John Rawls and Liberal Guilt**

1. **Introduction:**

What is “liberal guilt”? In the American political imagination, it is a concept and feeling met with almost universal derision or denial. In one sense, the term conjures images of an individual gripped by a mystification, one who imagines, narcissistically perhaps, major political pathologies to be a simplistic matter of individualized failure or transgression rather than structural design. For some, it indicates the reduction of political action to a vulgar, self-abasing sentimentalism that allows the subject to exude moral concern without having to engage in the labor of political action and organization.[[1]](#footnote-1) In a more benign sense, some might consider this particular political emotion as simply a misguided way of making sense of the world, a search for moral agency amidst misfortune and a sense of lost control.[[2]](#footnote-2) Synthesizing many of these criticisms, Raymond Geuss, in his recent *Not Thinking Like a Liberal*, suggests that guilt is a fixture of the liberal vision of political life, which is a function of certain supposedly liberal presuppositions about the centrality in politics of individual conscience, lawfulness, and conformity. For Geuss, “liberal guilt” (a term which he might regard as redundant) is all at once a mystification, indicative of a disposition towards obedient pliability, and a “bad motive for action” (p.88). As a result, for those invested in a politics of emancipation, “liberal guilt” therefore requires correction of some kind, either a more hard-nosed or “serious” approach to political action, or a rethinking of how one interprets the sources and operations of political domination. In the broad sense, however, it is not an enviable or desired position, but rather what Ellison (1996) would describe as “symptomatic” (p.345), a product of a set of conditions and political dispositions that may be particular to the liberal tradition, but are not *owned* or even *described* by the tradition or its adherents.

Interestingly, scholars like Ellison (1996) and Wonham (2020) have attempted to explain the phenomenon of “liberal guilt” by developing a genealogy that traces its roots to Enlightenment sentimentalism and the practice by which one identifies with the pain of others. However, in these studies, there is less an emphasis on how liberals think about guilt *per se*, but rather how one’s sense of implicatedness in the suffering of others gets channeled into a host of other emotions like embarrassment, regret or dejection that are all *related* to guilt. This begs the question of how liberal theorists explicitly conceptualize guilt as a political emotion in particular, and how they narrate guilt-feelings as having a certain valence and political function. In other words, we are still left with the question of what liberal theorists believe guilt is, what it does, and when it is an appropriate emotion to feel.

Absent in discussions of “liberal guilt”, oddly enough, is the work of John Rawls. This is striking for one major reason. Rawls has a rather robust conception of the self and focuses a substantial portion of *A Theory of Justice* on tracing out the origins and character of guilt-feelings as cornerstones of what he would come to call “the sense of justice”. This is to say that Rawls’s has a relatively sophisticated account of the moral emotion in question as a constitutive part of his broader liberal vision. Though Rawls of course does not have much to say about “liberal guilt” as a cultural phenomenon, his version of liberal theory gives an indication as to how a major strain of this contemporary political tradition interprets and writes a script for guilt as a specific moral emotion. For our purposes, returning to Rawls may give us leverage to rewrite an account of what “liberal guilt” is and what it does, how it manifests both in theory and practice. In no sense is it my intention to *reclaim* “liberal guilt” as a generative or positive experience, nor is it breathe new life into Rawls’s project, but rather to interrogate and pry open a concept in need of rethinking. This rethinking may open new possibilities for study of political emotions more generally.

In so doing, this paper will stake the following claims: First, Rawls provides us with an underappreciated account of guilt-feelings outside of the standard Freudian paradigm. Rather than imagining guilt as a function of fear and anxiety in the face of and external and internalized authority, Rawls, implicitly following Melanie Klein, provokes us to think of guilt as a natural emanation of love relationships and at its core reveals itself as an expression of solidarity and fellow-feeling. Not only this, Rawls imagines guilt to be a function not only of individualized transgression or harm within these relationships, but also an expression of passive implicatedness, whereby one feels oneself to live at the expense of others. Moreover, against prominent theorists like Arendt (2003), guilt for Rawls is an eminently *public* and outward-facing feeling, one that originates naturally in and among associations of human beings and has a regulative political function. Second, despite this potentially generative insight, I argue that Rawls continuously circumscribes this emotion to fit the terms of his liberal vision more broadly. In this sense, we could speak of Rawls as developing a distinctive theory of liberal guilt, a narrow way of seeing the emotion that is meant to affirm a certain liberal commitment to consensus, justification, and a very specific kind of commitment to the alleviation of suffering. For Rawls, guilt functions according to a kind of script that can practically actualize the broader components of a liberal vision. In other words, I will attempt to explore what makes Rawls’s reflections on guilt distinctively *liberal*.

Last, the paper will approach the lingering question of the relationship between Rawls’s ideal theory of moral sense and the more common understanding of “liberal guilt” as an everyday emotion. In other words, the central question is how a re-reading of Rawls allows us to see this political emotion differently. Here, the paper will argue that the problem with liberal guilt, both in Rawls’s ideal theory and in contemporary political practice, is that it is unable to tolerate a sense of prolonged moral impasse or dissonance, reaching desperately for ineffectual gestures appear to create reconciliation. The problem with “liberal guilt”, therefore, is not that it is necessarily impotent or narcissistic. To the contrary, I claim that this particular emotion is a complex moral and political sense that one benefits at the expense of others who suffer needlessly. Yet, “liberal guilt” in Rawls’s account and as a type of concrete political sensation has an impoverished conception of reparation, one that constitutively cannot seem to conceptualize political action *beyond* a narrow notion of penance or confession that restores an equilibrium back to the subject’s sense of self. In other words, the problem is not guilt itself, which can be a rather sophisticated moral and political attunement to injustice, but rather what it means to repair amidst conditions of broad systematic injustice. Whatever “moral paralysis” that emerges as a feature of “liberal guilt” is not a function of guilt itself, but rather symptomatic of a confrontation with the wrongful assumption that injustices can simply be “repaired” as part of what Dienstag (2006) calls a redeeming “compensatory narrative” (p.269).

On this reading, “liberal guilt” is a potential expression of genuine solidarity that doesn’t have a clear means of actualization, though it tends towards individual gesture. Yet, this suggests that what might come out of this initial feeling of implicatedness is multivariate. Reparation can be boiled down to an individual gesture, but it can also be *further* *politicized* into something larger and potentially more effectual. Important for our purposes is not parsing out what these avenues of repair might be, but rather stressing the overarching point that “liberal guilt” as a negative emotion, both in the cultural and psychological sense, has a set of diverse traits and valences that go underappreciated. As noted, our task is not to recode this emotion as a positive experience, but rather, following Cvetkovich (2012, p.2), to “depathologize” this negative emotion so we may take it seriously as distinctive kind of engagement with the world, ones that has effects on how we think about broader political concepts.

1. **Guilt and the Inner Life of Justice:**

If, as Forrester (2019) has suggested, the story of Rawls’s re-writing of the terms and vision of political philosophy is indeed “a ghost story, in which Rawls’s theory lived on as a spectral presence long after the conditions it described were gone”, it is reasonable to raise the question of what *to do* with Rawls’s philosophical project, given that it may not speak to a set of political circumstances beyond those produced it (p.xi). Since *A Theory of Justice* provided a politics for the *Trente Glorieuses* at the moment of its eclipse by neoliberalism, we might wonder what the theory has left to provide during the contemporary eclipse of liberalism itself. The crisis of liberalism is in other words also a crisis of scholarship on Rawls, and it is yet to be seen whether the theory lives on as a “Fabergé Egg”, left to be marveled for its intricate detail but functionally useless (Roberts, 2021), or still yet provides guidance and orientation for members of a liberal-democratic polity in need of clarification of their own political commitments during moments of political stress (Lefebvre 2021, p.7). What is living and what is dead in Rawls’s theory will obviously remain an open question for some time, with its fate invariably bound with the fate of liberalism.

Nevertheless, this question of utility can be sidestepped by approaching Rawls in a rather different vein recently illuminated by Marasco (2021), which concerns the way that *A Theory of Justice* “*produces* its objects” of contemplation and action, specifically the liberal subject and its emotional inner life (529).[[3]](#footnote-3) The attempt to give an account of this “production”, however, does not mean that we are merely providing the anatomy of a fantasy. Rather, the aim is to better understand how Rawls’s substantial account of liberalism’s inner life is in some ways indicative of how liberals tend to deploy and think about certain emotions, and it is also a guide for understanding concrete political behaviors in the present, specifically the phenomenon of “liberal guilt”. This is to say that Rawls does indeed create a kind of artificial and abstract liberal subject who is dutifully capable of carrying out the dictates of justice, but the construction of such a subject can tell us something about the relation between liberalism and guilt as a moral and political emotion more broadly, as well as insight into how liberals act politically. Therefore, the ideal liberal subject that Rawls “produced” is in many ways abstraction, but it is also an insightful reflection and potential guide.

Despite his explicit claim that *A Theory of Justice* is a “theory of moral sentiments” (TJ 44), scholarship on Rawls’s inquiry into affect, attachment and sensation still remain undercurrents rather than dominant strains of commentary on his project.[[4]](#footnote-4) Nonetheless, the paradigmatic framing of Rawls as a strict rationalist and neo-Kantian has been challenged by compelling studies that have at the very least placed Rawls “between two Enlightenments” (Frazer, 2007), the sentimentalist and the rationalist, and have succeeded in unearthing in his work the centrality of the affective categories of care (Okin, 1989), love (Mendus, 1999) and even fear (Alford, 1991). These studies, which have produced a lineage of work revealing a broad instinctual and affective basis for certain moral behaviors, have opened up a broader view of the Rawlsian subject as embodied and bound to a set of affective dispositions (Banerjee and Bercuson, 2015, p.216).

While it may be true that Rawls’s “conception of the self is actually remarkably substantial” (Alford 140), the emotional life of the subject is nonetheless evaluated on rather narrow economic terms. This is to say that while Rawls fleshes out the character of emotions (moral or otherwise) in great detail, these emotions are given a particular function so as to validate the “stability” and self-regulatory character of the broader theory, with the end goal of demonstrating that “justice as fairness generates its own support” without relying on the injunctions of a sovereign (TJ 399). Human emotions, be they envy, love, shame, resentment or fear, are therefore inevitably explored in relation to *what they do* for the broader theory, and how they derail or maintain the possibility for a just society according to justice as fairness. We could say that for Rawls, the emotions seem to lack a life of their own, as they are consistently given a relatively rigid script, circumscribed and qualified so as not to exceed the limits and equilibrium that justice as fairness requires.

For Rawls, guilt is a part of this psycho-social economy, which is to say that it too has a broad stabilizing function. Yet, Rawls’s specific characterization of this rather elementary moral emotion is striking nonetheless, insofar as it is in many ways a substantial deviation from the standard Freudian account that served as the foundation for countless reflections upon the origin of moral feelings. The Freudian account of guilt is tragic, but tragic in a very specific sense.[[5]](#footnote-5) In Freud’s anthropology, it is an intergenerational burden resulting from the belated regret of an original crime, the fallout of which produced not simply strict prohibitions in the forms of repressive and authoritative taboos and laws, but a very particular relationship with law itself. The birth of law, so says Freud, is concomitantly the birth of an unconscious *desire and need to obey* for the purposes of expiation and “penance”, which in turn represents an uncritical re-investment in the law itself (Freud, TT, p.181). But this same relation, which is reproduced through the microcosm of the Oedipus complex, is more fundamentally one of anxiety and fear. The sense of guilt broadly speaking manifests as a fear of an external authority in the form of the parent or a parental imago and by extension their injunctions, as well as a fear in the face of this same authority when internalized in the form of the ego and super-ego (Freud, Civilization, p.759). Likened to an authoritative “categorical imperative” by Freud in *The Ego and the Id*, internal and external demands produce an anxious, sometimes self-abasing excitation in the subject that binds them to a law that cannot be reasoned with or questioned (Freud, EI, p.31). Any perceived violation of authoritative command, in thought, deed or intention, elicits anxious feelings of guilt.

A rudimentary constellation of concepts emerges out of Freud’s reflections. Guilt is fundamentally linked with lawfulness and obedience to authority, vertical rather than horizontal relationships that are affectively charged with anxiety, fear and a tendency towards self-punishment. But Freud is not only explaining how we, through the operations of conscience, come to treat ourselves “in the manner of a repressive other” (Assoun, 2000, p.141), but he is also giving a broader account of humanity’s haunting by a tragic affliction. The birth of conscience, as it is for Nietzsche, is the originary enactment of violence directed inwards, and its aftereffects in the form of basic human sociability are potentially more agonizing than they are fulfilling. The ambient sense of “dissatisfaction” and “malaise” that emerges out of the oftentimes unconscious fear and anxiety in the face of authoritative limitation is the price of social life (Freud, Civ, p.764).

While Freud emphasizes the tragic nature of the modern guilt complex, Rawls tells an alternative story about guilt as a capacity that facilitates a certain kind of human autonomy and decentralized fellow feeling, which in turn stabilizes just political arrangements without appeal to an authoritative law.[[6]](#footnote-6) In order to flesh out this alternative, Rawls moves directly *against* as well as *through* Freud, first by rightly attributing to Freud a particular attitude towards the process of moral learning:

He holds that the processes by which the child comes to have moral attitudes center around the oedipal situation and the deep conflicts to which it gives rise. He moral precepts insisted upon by those in authority…are accepted by the child as the best way to resolve his anxieties, and the resulting attitudes represented by the superego are likely to be harsh and punitive reflecting the stresses of the oedipal phase. Thus Freud’s account supports the two points that an essential part of moral learning occurs early in life before a reasoned basis for morality can be understood, and that it involves the acquisition of new motives by psychological processes marked by conflict and stress. It follows that since parents and others in authority are bound to be in various ways misguided and self-seeking in their use of praise and blame, and rewards and punishments generally, our earlier and unexamined moral attitudes are likely to be in important respects irrational and without justification (TJ 402).

The Freudian subject is at the nexus of competing authoritative forces that are constantly delivering approbation and punishment in ways that are opaque to the child, and perhaps even opaque to the adult. Quite simply, Rawls is rightly characterizing Freud’s subject as hopelessly entangled in attachments and desires whose origin points are unknown and are difficult to justify on what Rawls would consider to be reasonable moral terms. Freud’s account of moral learning is, for Rawls, not really an account of the conscious development at all, but is instead an attempt to explain how certain behaviors become unconsciously sedimented rather than actively and consciously cultivated. The Rawlsian guilt-complex, as we shall see, is meant to be reflective of a subject that is able to make discernable and defensible moral judgments rooted in a natural sense of active solidarity with others, and not a residue of arbitrarily and opaquely imposed “moral motivations”. In other words, Rawls holds out a degree of hope that we may, to an extent serviceable for a just political order, *know ourselves*.

Rawls’s issue with Freud is not strictly of an empirical nature, but is also related to philosophical disposition. As Deigh (1982) implies, the philosophical pessimism of Freud conflicts with Rawls as a theorist of possibility, and his rather optimistic desire to build a subject capable of coming to certain constructive conclusions when situated in the “original position” (TJ 405). The Freudian account quite simply cannot give Rawls what he wants his subject to have, namely self-knowledge and a capacity for autonomous action. As a result, Rawls opts to draw from a repertoire of thinkers who frame moral learning as “not so much a matter of supplying missing motives as one of the free development of our innate intellectual and emotional capacities according to their natural bent” (TJ 402). The result is to build up a theory of development that is in many ways contrary to Freud’s. Staking his position in line with those of Rousseau, Kant, Piaget and, as Gališanka (2016, 2019) notes, Wittgenstein, Rawls claims:

We have a natural sympathy with other persons and an innate susceptibility to the pleasures of fellow feeling and self-mastery, and these provide the affective basis for the moral sentiments once we have a clear grasp of our relations to our associates from an appropriately general perspective. Thus the tradition regards the moral feelings as a natural outgrowth of a full appreciation of our social nature. (TJ 402-403).

Here, moral sentiments like guilt, shame or indignation are *natural* sentiments, at first latent but gradually and actively cultivated through a process of self-actualization and care within schemes of social cooperation. They are not the result of a disfiguring process of internalization, anxiety and fear, but rather a by-product of natural, solidaristic behaviors that emerge within social arrangements in which we find ourselves. With clarification, they lead us to the principles of justice (Gališanka, 2019, p.3).

Before mapping the content of Rawls’s reflections, it is crucial to note that while he is insistent that he is taking up “speculative psychological questions” (TJ 399), it is in these sections of *A Theory of Justice* where his theory has a concreteness that it might lack elsewhere. Rawls’s arrival at his “three psychological laws”, which are in reality “three parts representing the development of three forms of guilt feelings” (SJ, 100), synchronously track with a re-appraisal of Freud *within psychoanalytic circles*, suggesting Rawls was receptive to shifting empirical and theoretical currents within psychoanalysis and child psychology. As Forrester (2019) makes passing reference to Rawls studying Melanie Klein, for example, one finds the actual substance of this influence by recalling how both deviate from Freud in a very concrete sense (p.9). As Winnicott (1958) notes, Klein’s innovation “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” (p.25). Five years later, Rawls would make a claim that is functionally identical to that of Klein ([1952], 1975), namely that “guilt feelings are…part of what defines a relation as one of love and trust” (SJ 101). The shift away from thinking of guilt as anxious obedience and towards imagining it as a function of a particular kind of loving attachment is not just speculation, but a further development of theoretical tendencies already underway in other disciplines, psychoanalysis in particular. From these alternative sources, Rawls fleshes out the anatomy of a different kind of emotional life for a different kind of political subject.

*2.1 Rawls and the Process of Moral Learning:*

Rawls’s story about the origins and character of guilt-feelings unfold first through an account of the dynamic and communicative interplay between child and adult (authority guilt), next between adults in associative ventures (association guilt), and last between citizens and principles of justice (principle guilt). In the case of “authority guilt”, Rawls begins by grounding his inquiry in a set of assumptions. He claims that the dynamic between parent and child is quite obviously one of authority and subordination, but more importantly for Rawls is the idea that it is characterized by both love and trust. Interestingly, however, is the idea that love and trust are not strictly given in the case of the child, but are rather cultivated over time through certain behaviors. For Rawls, we may assume that parents love their children, but it is only in time that children come to love and trust their parents. He notes that “although the child has the potentiality for love, his love of the parents is a new desire brought about by his recognizing their evident love of him and his benefiting from the actions in which their love is expressed” (TJ 406). The birth of this relation of love and trust between parent and child *begins* with expressions of love on the part of the parent, and are gradually reciprocated by the child once they recognize their parents to “not only to be concerned for his wants and needs, but to affirm his sense of the worth of his own person” (TJ 406). This, for Rawls, is the basic anatomy of a love relationship. It is manifest in behavior, it is reciprocal, and it evinces a concern for the intrinsic *worth*, and not just material well-being, of another.

The guilt-relation in this parent-child dyad is only present if it is first established as a love relation. So says Rawls, the child tends to accept parental injunctions not strictly because parents are in a position of power and are capable of striking fear into the child, but more substantially because they are viewed as love objects to whom love is reciprocated in kind. It is only out of this dynamic that the child develops a particular relationship with the transgression of moral injunctions. For Rawls, recognition of one’s transgression naturally begets not repression or acting out, but attempts at confession and reconciliation (TJ 407). This reconciliation, we must assume, does not *transform* the relationship between child and parent, though it does aid in their moral development but it rather motivates the child to implicitly restore a relation of equilibrium that once existed. Guilt therefore has a certain kind of active quality that is in line with Flanagan’s (2021) notion of “disciplining emotions”, but it runs on a very particular decentralized script that Rawls himself is trying to write for a stable liberal democratic polity. For Rawls, the child does not dissemble, lash out, self-flagellate or deny, but instead demonstrates a tendency to atone to return to a position of reciprocated love.[[7]](#footnote-7) And it is only *out of love* that the child does this.

As the child grows into adulthood and becomes embedded in more diverse forms of association, the relation between moral agents becomes more horizontal. In the second phase (association guilt), Rawls imagines, similar to the first phase, an intersubjective arrangement through which certain capacities are gradually cultivated. Here, assuming that an individual has a capacity for fellow-feeling, Rawls places the individual in a just scheme of cooperation in which the guiding rules are public and considered to be just. It is through participation in this mutual arrangement that certain feelings of friendship and trust emerge, which in turn binds participants to one another through an affective tie. In this sense, Rawls does not believe participation in his hypothetical association to be a matter of sterile rule-following, but is rather a matter of exercising some degree of fraternity and solidarity with fellow participants within a schema of rules. One feels indebted and attached to others within the cooperative scheme by virtue of their shared participation within it.

Understanding guilt in this context requires the elaboration of two interrelated phenomena: first, the temporal sequence Rawls attributes to this moral experience, and second the nature of the harm that elicits guilt-feelings. First, Rawls notes that “(association) guilt” is experienced only once feelings of mutual trust and affection are established, and an individual “fails to do his part” within the cooperative scheme (TJ 412). This means that an emotional tie of fellow feeling precedes guilt, but it is also the solidaristic precondition for it to emerge at all. Rawls’s general approach here is, as Forrester (2019, p.36) and Chambers (2021) rightly note, broadly circular. There must be a just arrangement to foster the sense of justice, which can then in turn be applied to reinforce a just arrangement through the original position. However, for our purposes the temporal sequence is noteworthy nonetheless, insofar as it highlights how Rawls takes pains to detach guilt-feelings from the strict process of rule-following. What elicits guilt is the sense that one has caused undue harm to an individual to whom one has an attachment, not that one has necessarily violated a law.[[8]](#footnote-8) This, as we will discuss further, begets an attempt at repair through apologies and penance, which consequently re-establishes a return to a stable order. The temporal sequence, then, is the cultivation of affection and fellow-feeling between participations, a transgression that begets guilt-feelings, and then the desire to repair such that an originary relation between participants is restored.

Next, we are left with the question of harm. Though Rawls appears to think of harm and guilt in a relatively straightforward way (one person might physically and deliberately hurt another), he also seems to attempt to broaden the spectrum of what constitutes harm to include certain indirect relationships and actions. On this subject, Rawls speaks about guilt as an attentiveness to “the burdens that fall on others” within a social arrangement, or a sense that one has failed to participate in an association such that others do not suffer unduly (TJ 412). This is not necessarily an account of a direct harm, but the recognition that one may live and act at the expense of others with whom one shares a social and political association. In this sense, we are permitted to think that guilt is a natural response to a sense of failure to ameliorate certain unequal distributions as they arise, or a response to the perception of unduly benefiting from an associative arrangement that does not adequately consider the needs of others. On this reading, we could say that Rawls is even attempting to think through in a rudimentary way the category of what Shklar (1990) might call “passive injustice”, or what more contemporary scholars like Rothberg (2019) refer to as “implicatedness”.

Once Rawls moves to “principle guilt”, the final stage of moral development for the liberal subject, he assumes that we have inherited a set of behaviors and traits. First, from the previous two “psychological laws” that grant us a corresponding sense of guilt, we acquire “cooperative virtues: those of justice and fairness, fidelity and trust, integrity and impartiality” (TJ 413) as well as “attitudes of love and trust, and of friendly feelings and mutual confidence” (414-415). The innovation of “principle guilt”, however, resides in the need to explain and clarify our natural, moral feelings in associative ventures and articulate them not according to contingent circumstances or in reference to our personal attachment to individuals, but rather to generalizable principles that are implicit in associations but not yet made explicit, namely the two principles of justice. This constitutes a motivational and affective shift for Rawls. “Principle guilt”, from which we derive the broader “sense of justice”, draws from the solidaristic energies built in association and channels them towards principles that are known to secure the mutual benefit and well-being of others with whom we have no personal relationship. The two principles, insofar as they advance human interests, are meant to be objects of desire themselves. It is at this stage where Rawls speaks about “guilt in the strict sense”, a guilt that refers to generalized precepts rather than contingent attachments (TJ 415).

Principle guilt, and thereby the sense of justice, requires a degree of imagination to work. But what exactly is Rawls asking his subject to imagine and enact? In the first two stages, the individual develops certain natural sentiments like love and affection, out of which moral emotions emerge. As associative ventures take on a shape that roughly conforms to the principles of justice, the sense of justice emerges once we see ourselves and others benefit from these rules (TJ 429-430). The principles that produce such a benefit are invariably extended as governing principles to those with whom we do not have a direct relationship, and are the objects of attachment in and of themselves, insofar as they secure the well-being of others. However, this does not mean that Rawls is equating moral maturity with uncritical rule-following, though, as McIvor (2016) notes, Rawls inevitably ends up idealizing the “original position” and “public reason” as a “superordinate agency” that functions as a law. However, in this context Rawls is rather asking us to imagine that the principles incubated in association do indeed advance human flourishing, and once they are generalized, their violation still produce harm. In other words, the principles, if not followed, do not produce a guilt reaction because they are simply moral rules that compulsively require compliance, but instead that they are tested and understood to generate a degree of human well-being, making their violation in some sense an indirect cause of harm to others. Though our mature moral selves act from “principle dependent desires”, Rawls requires that we never lose sight of the fact that the principles themselves cannot fully be abstracted from the impact they have on real individuals.

The sense of justice, of which “principle guilt” is a large component, is the backstop for Rawls’s theory. It is the irreducible assumption that Rawls needs to build justice as fairness. It is not only the minimum capacity required for participation in the “original position” (SJ 99), but it is a foundation of what makes people actual human beings. As Rawls notes, to lack a sense of justice is to “lack a part of our humanity” (TJ 428). This justificatory appeal to “who we are” is, as Honig (1993) notes, a practice of producing and consolidating of the subject presupposed in the theory (155), insulating it from the “disruptions of politics” (135) that could undermine the capacity of the constructed individual to choose the output principles Rawls wants us to reach. Here, the familiar “agonist” critiques of Rawlsian liberalism from Wolin (2016) or Mouffe (2005; 2009) have much to say. Rawls’s attempt to provide an economic account of guilt is indeed a function of the broader liberal tendency to dissolve the political into a style of politics that privileges equilibrium and management over contestation and power.

What concerns us here, however, is not necessarily the problem of “liberal guilt” as a symptom of a general “displacement of politics” or a misrecognition of politics as a matter of expressing discrete moral judgments. Rather, for our purposes, the problem lies in the relationship of liberal theory to human suffering, specifically the way that liberalism, and Rawls’s theory in particular, envisions a subject capable of fully understanding its feelings, acting upon them, and alleviating the more agonizing moral feelings through gestures of restitution. In other words, the problem with liberal guilt in theory is not that it is self-abasing, self-indulgent, or non-political, but rather that it neatly presupposes that certain harms can be easily repaired, and that suffering can be readily grasped as having a specific and discernible cause that can be quickly mitigated, thereby re-establishing a kind of political equilibrium. The problem is not Rawls’s explanation of the origins and character of guilt-feelings (e.g., that they indicate a natural relation of love and trust rather than fear, that they are action-oriented, etc.), but instead in how Rawls neatly assumes that gestures of repair can produce certain intended effects. The next section will pursue the question of what might we might reclaim from Rawls’s “three psychological laws” if the assumption of easy, streamlined repair cannot be made, and enduring suffering presents the liberal subject with a continuing impasse rather than a simple opportunity to restore fixed consensus.

1. **Liberalism, Suffering and Impasse:**

Rawls is not typically considered a theorist of suffering. The references he makes to pain and suffering throughout his corpus are typically discussed briefly, insofar as he makes explicit attempts to build a subject capable of responding to and alleviating the suffering of others.[[9]](#footnote-9) Here, there is a rather typical leveling and narrowing of human suffering as something that is intelligible, has a discernible cause, and can be readily acknowledged and stopped. But Rawls also insists upon the idea, similar to Freud, that the price of entry into a just political arrangement is the agony of having to experience certain moral emotions. He writes:

Now the moral feelings are admittedly unpleasant, in some extended sense of unpleasant; but there is no way for us to avoid a liability to them without disfiguring ourselves. This liability is the price of love and trust of friendship and affection, and of a devotion to institutions and traditions which we have benefited and which serve the general interests of mankind (TJ 428).

This constitutes an acknowledgment that the moral emotions (guilt, shame, resentment, indignation, etc.) are a kind of suffering, an unavoidable affliction that comes along with living with one another peaceably and justly. To disavow these natural moral inclinations is in some sense a process by which we relinquish our own humanity. In an almost uncharacteristic passage towards the end of *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls reaffirms this through the metaphor of a love relationship:

Those who love one another, or who acquire strong attachments and to forms of life, and the same time become liable to ruin their love makes them hostages to misfortune and the injustice of others. Friends and lovers take great chances to help each other; and members of families willingly do the same…Once we love we are vulnerable: there is no such thing as loving while being ready to consider whether to love, just like that. And the loves that may hurt the least are not the best loves. When we love we accept the dangers of injury and loss…Now if these things are true of love as the world is, or very often is, then a fortiori they would appear to be true of loves in a well-ordered society, and so of the sense of justice too. For in a society where others are just our loves expose us mainly to the accidents of nature and the contingency of circumstances. And similarly for the sentiment of justice which is connected to these affections (TJ 502).

To feel invested in the well-being of others in the way that justice as fairness requires is not a matter of simple mutual benefit, but also of mutual liability. To feel attached to others in society is equally fulfilling as it is potentially agonizing. But suffering the weight of moral feelings is one way we register the humanity in others as well as our own. If we can find any semblance of ambivalence in Rawls’s theory, it may be here. At the same time, Rawls’s account of the origins of the sense of justice assumes that suffering is never really a permanent, lingering, complex affliction, but rather a matter of stimulus-response that is invariably geared towards resolution. In its most simplistic formulation, an individual who is harmed actively suffers such that this suffering elicits a moral response from others in society, who in turn simply rectify an injustice, eliminating both the suffering of the harmed and the moral suffering of the bystander or offender.

Abbas (2010) suggests that this way of thinking about suffering is typical of liberalism as a family of political ideas. Indeed, for Abbas, what unites liberals *as liberals* is “the commitment of each of its variants to the cause of managing and abating human suffering” (p.10). This “commitment”, however, is only intelligible on a set of terms that serve to naturalize and reinforce an abstract model that is meant to produce varying degrees of mutual, justifiable consensus.[[10]](#footnote-10) In practice, so says Evans (2021), this attitude has found its purest expression in liberal humanitarianism, which casts the global victim as a sacred object whose suffering valorizes a certain imperative to act on liberal terms and through liberal categories. This is a process by which the victims, be they refugees, internally displaced persons, or the impoverished have their suffering rendered intelligible through a liberal vision, and are “admitted” or “included” into a liberal international order through operations that produce out of this suffering a rights-bearing individual who can express themselves through sanctioned channels. For Abbas, and implicit in Evans’ account, liberalism has its own moral and political vision whereby the “suffering are admitted into liberalism on preset terms, and where entry into a sphere or arena requires registering at the door with an assigned role, relinquishing any matter and materiality not relevant to the operations of liberal justice” (Abbas, 42).

What does this mean concretely? Abbas claims that it is typical of liberal thought, particularly contemporary liberals like Shklar and Rawls, to strip the subject down and rebuild it so it can perform certain mental, emotional and physical operations that their brand of liberalism, even Shklar’s pessimistic “liberalism of fear”, requires. In the case of Rawls, the moral drama in *A Theory of Justice* evinces a process whereby suffering is registered as pain that has a discernable injurious cause, which in turn valorizes rights that can rectify the injustice and render it “fit for trade” (Abbas, 45). What makes Rawls’s moral vision work on its own terms is the very idea that the liberal self can easily objectify and quantify its own suffering and the suffering of others such that it can produce a political response that brings all participants back to a state of harmonious consensus. Any form of suffering that cannot be registered on the pre-fabricated terms produced at the outset is invisible. Harm is dehistoricized, compressed and abstracted so as to make it manageable. As it relates to guilt, it is assumed that injury and the guilt-feelings it elicits in the in party responsible can used as a kind of currency. In exchange for my apology or gesture of restitution, your suffering dissipates and my moral discomfort is assuaged.

What is the exact effect of the rather neat, economic characterization of guilt as public feeling? Our purpose is not merely to point out the narrow, quantitative character of the emotional life of Rawls’s subject, but also to explain how this might pose a problem for Rawls on his own theoretical terms. Take, for example, his initial framing of authority guilt as a dynamic between parent and child. In this simple dyadic interaction, the child violates a relationship of love and trust and therefore naturally feels a sense of guilt. This guilt is expiated through a few different avenues, namely a vague conception of “reconciliation” through the acceptance of parental injunctions and the modification of behavior. After expiation we return to equilibrium. When we move further to association guilt, as noted, Rawls encourages us to imagine more complex relations of indirect and direct harm. These could include a direct violation of someone’s bodily integrity, but also the more indirect notion that we may feel guilty for “the burdens that fall on others” through a failure to act. This sense of failure, or a sense that one lives at another’s expense, represents a leap in how Rawls considers the nature of injustice. It is not simply a matter of direct harm, but rather a relation whereby one passively benefits unduly in an associative arrangement that may or may not be just. Once again, Rawls sketches the tools we have at our disposal, namely “reparation” and the “willingness to admit that what one has done is unfair (wrong) and to apologize for it” (TJ 412). Here, an association’s consensus-based equilibrium has been restored. This same emphasis on conduct-modification as a restorative, reparative tendency is at work when Rawls speaks about “principle guilt” and the more mature “sense of justice”. He notes:

When plagued by feelings of guilt, say, a person wishes to act properly in the future and strives to modify his conduct accordingly. He is inclined to admit what he has done and to ask for reinstatement, and to acknowledge and accept reproofs and penalties; and he finds himself less able to condemn others when they behave wrongly. The particular situation will determine which of these dispositions are realized…(TJ 423)

As Rawls gradually imagines more complex forms of harm and more complex social arrangements, the tools at our disposal to make good the harm we’re supposedly responsible for remain relegated to vague notions of repair or a simple modification of behavior. Once we are presented with a relatively significant theoretical insight, that guilt is an action-oriented quality and a distinctively *public feeling* that we experience *in relation to others*, Rawls limits its active component to personal gestures assumed to have the force needed to restore or recalibrate the institutions that secure the principles of justice. The elements of this assumption, though necessary for Rawls’s rarified ideal theory, appears to lack a kind of commensurability. The liberal subject’s guilt, regardless of scale, source and degree, is always made good by an individualized gesture. Whatever suffering or injustice endures after this gesture is enacted cannot be accounted for on these terms. This is to say that Geuss (2002) is not necessarily correct that “Rawls has no theory of political *action* or agency” (p.330), but it is surely true that whatever action Rawls imagines, including civil disobedience, is circumscribed, individualized and presumed to have the function of producing stability rather than re-creating the terms and vision of politics itself.

We could say, then, that the set of noteworthy assumptions built into this liberal vision of suffering are two-fold. First, it features an economy of suffering in which harm is interpreted as having a discernible cause, and this harm can be quantified and alleviated on terms such that a social equilibrium can be reached or restored. Second, the unit of analysis is the autonomous individual, capable of generating acts of repair that actually do the concrete moral and political work of alleviating this harm. This kind of action is not necessarily transformative, but rather geared towards bringing the subject in line with an existing just arrangement or slightly modifying that arrangement. At each stage of argument, this account features a compression and narrowing of experience to fit within a vision of liberal politics.

Though Rawls is not claiming that this is how human beings act in all cases, he is claiming that citizens of liberal democratic polities, as a function of the various existing associations and groupings that refine their moral and political engagement with the world, contain within them the capacities to affirm and act upon the principles of justice. In this sense, Rawls is consistently giving an account of “practicable political possibility” (JF 4). We are endowed with an ability to take responsibility in a particular way, and we are afforded opportunities to do so at any given time. The task of political philosophy is to help us make clear to ourselves what kind of just order may be feasible taking individuals as they are. Nevertheless, Rawls’s sketch of this capacity, even when it features all of the elements needed to secure justice, still remains rather one-dimensional.

This may be a reason to jettison Rawls’s theory altogether as something that meaningfully explains core aspects of human experience. Surely, as Alford (1990) has noted, there are other reasons to be skeptical of Rawls’s liberal psychology, as it is predicated on a narrow notion of reciprocity that presupposes that we can only “love others to the degree that they mirror, confirm, and respect” our “self-esteem” (p.52). This means that there is an unacknowledged exclusionary element in Rawls’s psychology that suggests affection and solidarity can only be expressed towards those who affirm our own sense of self. As Ahmed (2004) has perceptively noted, a politics that affirms love as a binding force for an in-group can easily produce a hated object in the form of the “other”. This reproduces what Táíwò (2021) has described as Rawlsian liberalism’s “selective conscience” an inbuilt tendency to centralize domestic, in-group concerns at the expense of obligations owed to those outside of a domestic polity. As a result, underlying Rawls’s naturalistic assumptions of human sociability may reside a disavowed narcissism.

These are very real limitations of Rawls’s project. However, where Rawls’s vision seems to meet its limit is particularly instructive if we wish to parse out the anatomy of “liberal guilt” as an everyday emotion. Similar to how Rawls frames his own vision of guilt, Ellison (1996) claims that “liberal guilt” in the everyday is a potential indication of “identification with another person”, an “identifying-with” another whom one values (p.357). It is elicited not necessarily through direct harm, but through more complex senses of moral indebtedness, the feeling of “being implicated in systems of domination and with the subsequent awareness of the emotional instability produced by this ambivalent position” (p.350). However, the resultant “moral paralysis” (Wonham 2020) that appears to be characteristic of this emotion goes mostly unexplained except through assertions, following Rorty, of a broader tendency of the modern democratic subject to express a generalized “self-doubt” and humiliation about their feelings of ethical implicatedness. Perhaps this “moral paralysis” could be better explained through the limitation that Rawls faces in his ideal theory, the recognition that one cannot simply eliminate the problem of implicatedness through gestures of individualized repair. This is to say that Rawls identifies feelings of guilt as very real acknowledgments of implicatedness that contain within them an impetus to act upon feelings of solidarity and towards repair. “Liberal guilt” in the everyday sense is where this ideal sentiment meets the concrete conditions of impasse, where suffering is not immediately alleviated upon confession and where the possibility and practice of genuine reparation is not fully understood or certain.

*3.1 Rethinking “Liberal Guilt”:*

If we take “liberal guilt” as our object of inquiry, we are invariably turning away (though not fully away) from an analysis of the unconscious and moving further towards problematizing expressions of guilt themselves. The political problem at hand is therefore not necessarily the repression of guilt and its channeling into pathological behavior, a common theme in psychoanalysis, but rather the problem of a supposedly misplaced expression of a moral feeling. Yet, what do we take as a concrete example of “liberal guilt”? The fact that the term remains something of an epithet for both right and left commentators makes this difficult to describe, but generally the term is used to describe outward-facing expressions of regret, apology and acknowledgment as having benefited from a particular social arrangement, be it class inequality or racial injustice. Typically, these expressions are regarded mostly as hollow, impotent or disingenuous depending on the individual in question, merely ways of expressing a virtuousness without doing anything. The claim has recently been leveled in popular commentary against everyone from pop stars[[11]](#footnote-11) to foreign-policy-makers of the imperial core[[12]](#footnote-12), and has regularly been cast as a narcissistic impediment to genuine political mobilization[[13]](#footnote-13). In each of these framings, guilt is an expression that stands as the antithesis of properly *political* and *emancipatory* action.

Here, “liberal guilt” is simply a scandal that needs to be identified and corrected. However, how can the theoretical resources we’ve discussed help us read this emotion differently? Rather than beginning from the point that claims “liberal guilt” to be self-serving and disingenuous, it could be more fruitfully read through Rawls as an emotion stemming from a sense of failed solidarity that emerges once an individual is confronted with the knowledge of one’s direct or indirect participation in an arrangement that causes others to suffer. “Liberal guilt” therefore begins after acquiring an understanding that one participates in a certain kind of harm. Here, guilt is not a *source* of knowledge, but rather a response to a sense of implicatedness that one cannot deflect or un-know. Yet, if we once again take a cue from Rawls that a liberal script emphasizes acts of reparation through apology, penance, acknowledgment or confession as appropriate responses to what is in reality a much more complex, embedded, and enduring problem, we can better understand *why* “liberal guilt” functions the way it does. When confronted with the reality of our participation in the systemic injustices of, say, global capitalism or racial violence, gestures of acknowledgment can only read as hollow. And once met with conditions of real impasse, that guilt might simply languish as what Robbins (2016) calls “unproductive guilt”, an unactualizable “responsibility for the suffering of others that finds no satisfactory outlet in action that might lessen that suffering” (p.37). This is where the sense of implicatedness meets conditions of political impasse.

“Liberal guilt” is therefore what Ellison calls “symptomatic” in a dual sense. It is symptomatic of liberal thought, insofar as it does not have adequate theory of change and political action in relation to moral sense. And it is additionally symptomatic of present political conditions in western democracies, in which the feeling of implicatedness in structures of domination is potentially deep and omnipresent in addition to being difficult to change. As such, if we take this emotion to be problematic in some way, it does not stem from the fact that guilt as such is somehow “non-political”. Rather, it prompts us to examine the political and ideological terrain upon which the emotion is expressed and channeled. From such a vantage point, it is possible to read this emotion not as narcissistic posturing, but a genuine expression of solidarity amidst conditions of implicatedness, where the question of what it means to repair is uncertain and channeled into some behaviors rather than others. Perhaps we could think of “liberal guilt” not as a hopeless pathology, but as the beginning of a process of political solidaristic political engagement that can be made and re-made. The question of how this solidarity is to be actualized is simply a matter of ongoing political contestation and debate.

What, then, are liberal subjects supposed to do with very real feelings of implicatedness? If there is no attainable equilibrium whereby suffering can simply be alleviated through gestures of repair, then how is this predicament to be navigated? On some accounts, this question might lead us directly back to Freud’s *Civilization and its Discontents*. Low-level guilt is simply a tragic affliction that needs to be managed by cultivating healthy ambivalences or strengthening the ego. Our suffering in this way is simply an inexpiable price to be paid for entry into social life itself, and we cannot necessarily make this suffering end by restoring a kind of healthy social equilibrium through proscribed actions. Nonetheless, Freud’s reflections contain a depoliticizing element that we want to avoid. To think of guilt as free-floating tragic affliction means that it is omnipresent and ambient rather than directly *responsive* to social conditions that can be otherwise changed.

A different account might abandon the liberal assumption that there can be a neat quantification, exchange, and expiation of suffering, but also abandon the Freudian account of a depoliticized suffering. The above discussion might place us in a position to acknowledge that guilt-feelings remain a capacity that can thrust individuals to make politicized gestures of repair, or perhaps engage in larger transformative movements to push for more vast social change, while simultaneously divesting ourselves of illusions that justice can ever be attained, or suffering ever fully expiated. Perhaps the phenomenon of “liberal guilt” is not necessarily a theoretical or practical dead end, but rather the starting point of more sustained reflections on the political valence and emancipatory potential of the moral feelings themselves.

1. **Conclusion:**

Our task here has not been to revive guilt-feelings as a normative prescription for how we *should feel* in our daily life, but instead to take certain kinds of guilt-feelings as objects of inquiry in and of themselves. The proliferation of commentary on “liberal guilt” prompts us to approach this social phenomenon not merely by way of critique, but to substantively engage with these feelings as expressions of a certain kind of political vision within the circumstances common in western democracies, the United States in particular. Rawls’s work in particular provides us with a starting point to re-engage guilt-feelings as significant aspects of political life, and gives us a frame of reference for what guilt is supposed to do as part of political practice. Of we follow Rawls, we are afforded the ability to read into this emotion something more than the typical Freudian framing suggests. Rather than an expression of fear before a demand, we might think of guilt as an expression of solidarity with an individual to whom one has an attachment, and an acknowledgment that one may have been directly or indirectly responsible for the suffering of another. Rawls’s account breaks down in a number of ways as he proceeds, but taking it as a potentially instructive framing of how a certain vision of liberals approach guilt as a moral emotion is analytically useful for how we might consider the character of “liberal guilt” as an everyday experience. “Liberal guilt”, rather than being a useless narcissistic gesture, may contain an underappreciated solidarity that is channeled through acts of individualized repair (apologies, acknowledgment, acts of confession, etc.). We can read this dynamic as symptomatic of both a liberal political vision, as well as the concrete conditions of impasse that make it unclear how feelings of guilt can be channeled into more politically transformative practices.

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1. Talal Asad (2007) considers guilt as “a sensibility” to be a curious hallmark of American liberalism in the sphere of foreign policy (18). For Asad, feeling guilt for carrying out violence is a kind of currency, a mark of moral and political superiority in relation to racialized others for whom moral suffering supposedly carries less significance (37). We might notice a similar translation of this sentiment in other areas of political life. Liberal guilt could therefore be considered a prop that serves as a marker of superior status. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Shklar (1990) for this argument. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rawls is forthright about this constructed element of his theory. In “Justice as Fairness: Political, not Metaphysical”, he writes that Justice as fairness starts from the idea that society is to be conceived as a fair system of cooperation, and so it adopts a conception of the person to go with this idea” (JFPM, p.397). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rawls continues that *Theory* is a “theory of moral sentiments (to recall an eighteenth century title) setting out the principles governing our moral powers, or, more specifically, our sense of justice”, thus reiterating that at its core *Theory* is an inquiry into the life of sensation. (44) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Produce quote p.764 in Civ and its Dis [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. David McIvor (2016) levels a compelling challenge to this element of Rawls’s project. McIvor claims that for all of Rawls’s concern for providing a decentralized account of political stability, Rawls invariably relies on a set of authoritative and idealized practices (the “original position” and later “public reason”) that function akin to a Freudian conception of the superego (p.68). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In Kleinian terms, we could say that Rawls imagines the subject to be in an almost permanent “depressive position”, in which the active-oriented and reparative quality of guilt-feelings are not only prominent, but characterized as the most natural responses to transgression. Whereas the Kleinian subject naturally vacillates between paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions, the Rawlsian subject reliably performs the functions that make consensus and equilibrium possible. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Rawls clarified this in his paper “The Sense of Justice”, when he explained that the in the authority guilt and association guilt are connected with an actual natural attitude toward certain particular persons”, not necessarily towards rules. (SJ 105) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See “Justice as Fairness” (1999b) and “Justice as Reciprocity” (1999d). Include quote. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Waldron (1987) for an elaboration of liberalism as a doctrine committed to a “respect for the capacities and the agency of individual men and women, and that these commitments generate a requirement that all aspects of the social should be made acceptable or be capable of being made acceptable to every last individual” (128). Geuss echoes a similar sentiment, claiming that “What is distinctive about liberalism isn’t, therefore, so much its openness to pluralism as its view that all societies should be seen as capable of consensus, despite a lack of homogeneity in the manners, beliefs, and habits of their members” (p.326). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/01/28/when-white-people-admit-white-privilege-theyre-really-just-congratulating-themselves/> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <https://jacobin.com/2013/09/good-wars-real-or-imagined/> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. <https://www.currentaffairs.org/2017/01/the-scourge-of-self-flagellating-politics> Also see <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/oct/03/why-do-we-feel-so-guilty-all-the-time> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)