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White privilege, psychoanalytic ethics, and the limitations of political silence

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ABSTRACT: The moral and philosophical interrogation of white privilege remains an imperative in post-apartheid South Africa. Whereas the critique of whiteness involves both philosophical and psychological scrutiny, subsequent calls for white political silence and withdrawal have yet to be subjected to adequate psychological analysis. This paper offers such an analysis by questioning, firstly, the idea of appropriate emotions for white South Africans (shame, guilt, regret), posing instead the problems of mimed affect and neurotic goodness. White approaches to guilt-alleviation and political passivity are queried, secondly, via the claim that such agendas lead all too easily to types of white exceptionalism and condescension, respectively. The ethical problems of political silence and withdrawal - implied superiority, non-participation and an unequal 'rights of silence' - provide a third area of questioning. The paper ends by introducing the Lacanian ideas of subjective destitution and identification with the symptom. These concepts throw a critical light on disavowals of white privilege and provide a novel means of thinking how white narcissism might be relinquished.

Precarious morality

Let me begin by expressing my appreciation for Vice's (2010) essay, 'How do I live in this strange place?'. The moral and philosophical interrogation of white privilege that she undertakes is both necessary and overdue. More than this,

the paper gives voice to a question - indeed an anxiety - which, although not often explicitly stated and often subliminal in form, might nonetheless be said to be omnipresent for many white South Africans: what is my moral and political role, my subjective purpose, in a country whose frightening racist history and contemporary socio-economic structures continue to benefit me? What moral position is available to me in light of the ongoing divisions and structural inequalities which characterize the post-apartheid present? More succinctly yet: how is one, as a white subject, to place one's self relative to the varying and insidious forms of white privilege?

In what follows I wish to take up a number of themes introduced by Vice in a critical and yet collegial manner. I feel a kinship with her undertaking, and I would as such prefer it if my remarks be read in a devil's advocate capacity, as contributions, possible extensions and respectful differences to, from, the argument she has so courageously broached. I note this from the outset in order to avoid the situation – not terribly difficult to imagine – in which white South Africans get caught in a situation of 'moral one-upmanship', each attempting to be somehow more progressive, or, less complicit in white privilege, than the other.

One way of making a contribution to this debate, of enriching the terms of the current discussion, is to draw on a different theoretical vocabulary. The disciplinary basis I work from, while certainly philosophical and political in its import, is predominantly psychological, indeed, psychoanalytic in its underpinnings. My objective here is to utilize a series of psychoanalytic notions and thereby develop a number of paradoxical assertions that differently frame Vice's arguments and their possible consequences. Here it is worth noting that Vice's consideration of white privilege includes a pronounced psychological dimension; she speaks of unconscious and somatic habits, and indeed cites Sullivan's (2006: 4) mention of 'mental and physical patterns of engagement...without conscious attention'. By contrast, her subsequent thoughts on political silence and humility involve far less psychical consideration, little by way of the exploration of the unconscious vicissitudes of these qualities. It is this gap which motivates much of what is to follow.

In thinking through many of the issues that Vice discusses, I have taken inspiration from Lacan's (1992) *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* which, at least in my

reading, remains wary of ethical systems held in place by rewards, motives or values derived from (what we might gloss as) social-symbolic capital and ego benefit. This is an approach to ethics which, as is appropriate for the clinical domain, takes its lead from a questioning and interrogation of - yet nonetheless also a *fidelity to* - subjective desire. The disconnect thus signalled, that between an ethics of subjective desire and a broad moral programme, will prove important in the argument to follow. Likewise important is the disjuncture between what one 'should' feel (the terrain of appropriate moral and political affects) and what individual subjects in fact *do*.

Mimed affect and neurotic goodness

Vice's paper tackles the topic of appropriate emotions. Although 'guilt, regret and shame are appropriate emotions for white South Africans to feel' she observes, 'shame better captures the identity and phenomenology of the white South African self than the others' (2010: 332). It is unlikely, she continues, 'that a white South African will be in a situation in which shame is not called for' (332). In the feeling of such affects, moreover, 'one is feeling as one ought to' (332). This last phrase sounds rather like a prescriptive moral position, one which although possibly politically (and historically) justified, seems very much at odds with the evident reality of many white South Africans who, apparently, feel no such thing. This in itself does not of course disturb Vice's argument; the fact of *what is* and the ethical prospect of *what should be* are perhaps of necessity different. What is problematic though is the prospect of duplicity that emerges in view of the following statement: 'Living as a self one is ashamed of or regrets is morally more decent in this setting than living with a self one is comfortable with' (333). This would seem to open the door onto - indeed, it potentially invites - a type of affective posturing, whereby one aims to feel the right feelings, to exhibit adequate degrees of shame, guilt, regret so as to attain a degree of redemption. One should not too quickly here assume that feelings are authentic, that a given affect is, in and of itself, a form of truth.

Without by any means dismissing the importance and role of affect within the clinical psychoanalytic setting, we should bear in mind the Lacanian

warning that one should never naively trust affect. 'Anxiety is the only affect that does not lie' Lacan (1962-1963) famously insists. Like Freud, Lacan's (1962-1963) cautioning to analysts is that emotions are continually subject to displacements, to substitutions of object, to evasions. So, what I profess guilt over is very possibly not the real cause of my guilt; my anger with a given person in a given situation may very possibly be a carry-over from an earlier event. Likewise: remorse is often more a side-effect of guilt than a real instance of contrition. Furthermore, the moral distaste I exhibit toward a given situation – as in Hegel's idea of the beautiful soul - may divert attention from how I unconsciously take pleasure in precisely what I disavow. Emotions, in short, do not always indicate what they appear to.

Emotions, thus, can be mimed, learnt, 'authentically' experienced even whilst they are fundamentally instrumental in their aim. The psychic complexity of feeling comes to the fore here, certainly so in view of notions which suggest that feelings can be detoured through others ('out-sourced' as in Lacan's discussion of professional mourners, or Žižek's (1989) description of 'inter-passivity') or spread in a contagious manner in a mass settings. If we accept two basic psychoanalytic premises, namely that 'truly felt' emotions can nonetheless prove deceptive, and that given affects are not the truth of my own subjective desire, then to place our faith in the moral hope of appropriate feelings would seem misguided.

In fact we veer dangerously close in this respect to a 'neurotic' model of goodness, one in which a given subject knows what the morally-affective appropriate stance is, and attempts to conform to it, even if it requires the repression of a contrary subjective stance. This is not to foreclose the possibility that there may be true affects of subjective desire (as in the case of anxiety). It is rather to argue that this would be the exception to the rule, and to assert that there is typically a mismatch, a contradictory relation between unconscious desire and ego-centred affects. The classical Freudian model of neurosis is supported in this way: the repression installed by outward conformity to given cultural requirements (here of appropriate affects) is precisely what – in certain subjects - maintains contrary desires, *allows them to persist* rather than being externalized or worked-through. The unfortunate outcome of encouraging or insisting upon an appropriate affective stance

might thus be to nurture precisely the opposite (even if less than conscious) disposition.

Ethical complications emerge here. We know from Vice's argument that 'living as a self one is ashamed of...is morally more decent in [the setting of white privilege]... than living with a self one is comfortable with' (333). We might reverse this declaration. Surely it is more decent in the case of the white subject who is genuinely neither shameful nor regretful, to admit as such, to occupy *this* subjective position rather than for them to feign such affects, to disingenuously enact the appropriate posture due to the pressure of moral prescription or the gains of (super)ego rewards? We might ask then: is there not something false, indeed, a sense of ethical failure, in feeling what it is prescribed that we do feel? Might there not in fact be a degree of (moral, political) honesty in admitting a far more recalcitrant set of feelings, and would this not ultimately be preferable insofar as it at least potentially opens up to the prospect of deliberation and discussion in ways which affective conformity effectively avoids?

Guilt-alleviation

Vice also takes up the issue of responses to guilt. It may be apparent from the foregoing discussion of psychoanalytic themes that I do not object to the idea that 'direct work on the self is...required', and that I am in agreement that 'not every [white] person ought to respond as a political animal...that not every response need be an outward action' (334). This being said, two brief observations should be made about 'guilt-response'.

Firstly, reactions to guilt, despite the gestures of reparation that may flow from them, are often fundamentally self-serving, a means of alleviating one's own psychic discomfort. We should not blind ourselves to this possibility – and this is not an argument I take up with Vice – that many moral and political projects are at basis driven by the ego-needs of a given subject. Making such a claim does not necessarily amount to a dismissal of such projects, although it does pose an important question. If the political enterprise is one which hopes precisely to interrogate white privilege (which importantly, is both psychical and material in nature), then is the end-point of

white guilt-reparation, of whites 'feeling better about themselves', really a viable political objective? Surely there is a risk here that the very need to respond to white guilt – presumably a white rather than a black imperative – tips a politically-progressive undertaking into something far more insular and self-serving? Furthermore, might the insularity of such an objective not end up potentially re-inscribing a type of white sanctification, a form of white distinctiveness, even as it points the way to ostensibly moral virtues of humility and silence?

A second observation: if one is desperately motivated to offer reparations, to make amends, precisely due to the subjective pains of one's own guilt, then perhaps *not doing so* represents the proper ethical response. Indeed, if the reparative act is most fundamentally concerned with salving one's own pain, or indeed with *self-redemption*, then we are entitled to ask whether it constitutes a genuinely ethical act at all. What this might mean is that in many instances the pain of guilt is itself – odd as it may sound - the best response to guilt. Likewise, one appropriate way of living with shame is not, as dictated by reflex response, to dilute or avoid it, but simply *to live with shame*. There is an intimation of this idea in Vice's comment that 'to accept shame [might be] appropriate and troubling' (p. 338). Moral progress, that is to say, is not attained by the need to avoid bad feelings, certainly not by a hasty turn to the work of self-redemption.

One is reminded in this respect of Edward Said's (2003) discussion of the discomforts and pain of a state of cosmopolitanism which precisely suspends such palliatives of self-redemption. The cosmopolitan experience is deeply troubling; it holds neither the promise of subjective singularity nor of any 'feeling better'. Never tantamount to a 'project of identity', cosmopolitan subjectivity, for Said (2003), is akin to 'a troubling, disabling, destabilizing secular wound' that permits 'no recovery, no state of resolved...calm' (54). Extrapolated to the terms of the current debate we might say that Said's argument is that white South Africans need live with the puncturing of white narcissism, and, moreover, that this wounding should persist as a permanent condition, beyond hopes of easy subjective redemption.

Condescension and passivity

Vice makes the claim that for white South Africans 'reducing one's presence through silence and humility seems right', that 'recognizing their damaging presence, whites [should]... try...to make themselves invisible and unheard' (335). She continues, in a key passage: 'One would...refrain...from airing one's view of the political situation in the public realm, realizing that it is not one's place to offer diagnoses and analyses, that blacks must be left to remake the country in their own way' (p. 335). Although this is not of course what Vice intends, there is a certain condescension that can be read out of these words: 'blacks must be left'. (This is not for whites to decide, surely?) There is thus, potentially, a tacit recuperation of white agency at work here.

Vice has no doubt in mind here the longstanding historical power of whiteness; she is thus referring to a ceding of an unjustified political dominance. What nonetheless lingers in such pronouncements, and it is perhaps even more overt in Taylor's (2004) comments that Vice cites, is a trace of paternalism. Taylor's discussion of silence as signalling 'one's willingness to receive the other's struggle to find words...[as] part of listening for a voice' (239) evokes nothing so much as the role of a teacher guiding a student.

I emphasize the two above examples not to take the authors to task nor to pronounce the failure of their respective arguments, but rather to demonstrate the difficulties inherent in the position of a type of active passivity. In fact I am much in agreement with Taylor's critique, that to claim there is nothing I have to say, to deny one's social connection, to refuse to examine one's self by means of political participation, is 'a paradigmatically whitely thing to do' (2004: 32). One might make an aligned point by stressing that not all subjects are equally placed in respect of this project of claiming moral humility. If there is an evaluative dimension to this humility, a factor of recognition, then it leads – very possibly – to a type of inequality in respect of *who exactly* is able to make such its moral claims. More bluntly put: the danger of this approach is that it leads all too easily to a type of privilege all of its own, to a type of moral exceptionalism.

Clamorous silence

Vice has been careful to qualify the political silence that she proposes as a viable moral choice for white South Africans. There is nonetheless an odd assumption here: by not speaking, by not contributing, one nonetheless makes a contribution, one essentially does the right thing. Inasmuch as such a 'not speaking' constitutes a gesture, it remains a kind of positivity, indeed, an action, or, for the cynical amongst us, a call for attention, a noticeable absence. This is a problem that Lacan's (1992) *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* repeatedly returns to, namely that of how an absence, a subtraction, an apparent negation nonetheless implies (and in some instances magnifies) a presence, a desire, a type of enjoyment. How then does one offer silence without making a show of it, without one's principled silence becoming in effect a grand gesture? The claim can be made that one achieves a greater speaking power by precisely by remaining quiet.

Although Vice's proposed political silence is perhaps of a different order, it is worthwhile making a few brief clinical observations which make apparent how 'silence speaks louder than words'. The person who insists upon silence in social settings is one, very typically, who engenders anxiety in others for the good reason that others never know that s/he is thinking. Silence, furthermore, like any ostensibly passive act, is often a very effective form of aggression, indeed, of hate (Winnicott, 1949). It is often tantamount to a type of self-exemption, a self-aggrandizing form of detachment, as in the case of a member of a group who fails to enter into dialogue, who steps outside the bonds of reciprocity. The link between silence and grandiosity might be closer than we think. To not speak means never to be corrected; silence connotes all too easily the distance of superiority. Silence and modesty are not then as harmonious a pair as they may at first seem.

It pays here to think about the sociality of silence. In this respect we can say that silence only ever has meaning in the context of a potential dialogue; silence is not the act of an isolated individual, it does not possess a locus of one. As such –the ramifications of this point are not taken seriously enough by Vice - silence needs to be understood in terms of *how others receive it, what it means to them*. The very gesture of silence, however well-intentioned, is all too often the proof that one takes one's own interests above those of one's prospective interlocutors. One might imagine a sarcastic (and in some senses

appropriate) response to the gesture of silence: 'No, your silence is not required... thanks for asking. In fact, your silence is not permitted. Who are you to claim the right of silence?' We might return here to the teacher-student pairing mentioned above: if one is genuinely willing to take a secondary position, to learn from another, then to speak, to participate, to ask questions, is surely more an indication of modesty than is silence.

To not speak of course is also to fail to participate in forms of dialogical practice that theorists such as Freire (1973) and Habermas (1990) each in their own way see as foundational to counter-acting the effects of power, domination, or instrumental forms of control. For Freire and Habermas alike, the answer is not to shut-down the prospect of dialogue, but to find the appropriate structures of dialogue through which equality may be attained. In this respect it is not so much a commitment to political silence that is called for, but rather a speaking position proportionate to one's *representative* – i.e. minority - *status* as a white subject in a post-apartheid context. This makes for a less dramatic commitment than the 'clamour of silence'. One attains a less remarkable position by being a small voice than by being the voice – so noticeable for its absence - that has exempted itself from the set of possible contributors.

Subjective destitution

I want to close with a few brief reflections on the last lines of Vice's paper, which read as follows:

For white South Africans, work on the self, done in humility and silence....might be one way of saying that I am not merely a product of what is worst about me and a refusal...to be fully defined by it (340).

It is surely here that the difference between a Lacanian-inspired psychoanalytic ethics and the ethical perspective adopted by Vice is most apparent. The plausible truth of these words, the disavowed admission that *one is a product of white privilege*, that *one is in some senses fully defined by it*, is held in suspension by two negations ('I am not', 'I refuse'). It is worth noting that I am

using the 'disavowal' in the precise psychoanalytic sense (Freud, 1991) – appropriate I think to how it is used in Vice's conclusion - of an acknowledgment combined with a refutation. The holding in suspense of the full ramifications of such an admission – which of course are so admirably explored in the course of the paper – leads us to ask: has one adequately explored the multiple different ways in which this state of affairs may not only be true, but more true than we had hitherto imagined? Does the provision of such a get-out clause – “Surely... I am not merely a product of white privilege, nor wholly defined by it?” - signal that the self-exploration, the psychical dissection of one's own complicity in privilege, has not in fact gone far enough?

Lacanian theory provides a series of concepts with which to describe the end of a psychoanalytic treatment. Although I do not aim here at a strict technical deployment of these terms, they can be used to pose an ethical alternative to Vice's optimistic conclusion, one consonant with clinical Lacanian practice. The first concept in question is the idea of the identification with one's symptom. Of the various possible readings of this notion, one comes to the fore, namely the idea that a refused or disavowed identification (an “I am not that”) is perhaps the surest way to *maintain* an identification. Helpful here is Freud's (2001) insistence that the provision of a 'not', a negation, allows a repressed signifier to be stated, to be spoken and in fact preserved. As in the proverbial case of a young man who insists “I am nothing like my father”, an analyst is justified in suspecting that such negated identifications indicate that an identification is in fact still firmly in place, and that it will persist, its tenacity proportionate to the energy with which it is denied. If the negation enables the identification (indeed, the symptom) to be preserved, then the only route ahead is to 'go all the way', to embrace it fully, to accept that it lies at the very heart of one's subjectivity, that it is foundational to who one is. It is only in this way that one can begin the task of separating oneself from the identification, that one 'works it through', traverses the various investments it implies. Only by acceding to the hitherto unimagined extent of such an identification (“I am nothing but...”) might the subject lessen the stranglehold of this influence, becoming, through an 'over identification', something distinct from it.

What would it mean then for white South Africans to take seriously what is denied in Vice's closing lines, namely that in many different ways (and more

perhaps than we have yet imagined), whites *are* a product of what is worst about them (white privilege), that they *are* fully defined by it? (And it is to Vice's credit that she formulates – even via the qualification of negation - so blunt a proposition). The second Lacanian notion of interest here is the idea of 'subjective destitution'. Subjective destitution connotes the state ideally attained by the end of analysis whereby one has surrendered the *agalma*, that is, the secret treasure of 'that in me more than me', Lacan's *objet petit a* as object cause of desire, or, differently put, that *je ne sais quoi* property which defines what is most loveable in me. To surrender this object effectively 'desubjectivizes' the subject. It means not only to have deflated one's narcissistic fantasies, but to have foregone one's imagined transcendence of what is most base about one's self, to accept one's status as excremental remainder (Žižek, 2001b). 'At this stage' notes Dunand (1995), 'ethical principles have to be reconsidered, since they were up until then, just another way of finding approval or love as compensation for whatever renunciations the subject had imposed upon him or herself' (255).

Even a cursory reading of the above lines is enough to suggest the aptness of this clinical goal to a political reassessment of 'whiteness', a fantasmatic and narcissistic imaginary of self-redeeming properties if ever there was one. Subjective destitution names thus a condition in which one has precisely foregone the attachments to any potentially transcendent qualities. It is a state of ego-dissipation where one might truly hear and accept what is most terrible about myself and the symbolic-historical heritage that I am heir to. Perhaps this is the necessary first step that needs be achieved if whites in South Africa are adequately to understand the legacy of white privilege and their ongoing roles (and investments) within it.

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