

Making White Guilt Fitting

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws on the non-fiction writings of James Baldwin to introduce a novel conception of white guilt that is consistent with standard philosophical views that guilt is fitting only in cases of direct moral culpability while addressing practical criticism that white guilt is at variance with the aims of social justice movements. Taking on Baldwin's perspective on whiteness as a subjective choice, I develop an Identity-Based Account of white guilt describing the emotion as tracking culpability for a pernicious form of self-identification. My central claim is that white guilt is fitting because in experiencing the emotion, one is simultaneously recognizing the role their own identity plays in providing a source of justification for actions that sustain a system of injustice. Conceived in this way, responses to white guilt demand taking part in corrective political action as a means of moral self-creation.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

In the wake of the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and others due to police and vigilante actions, there has been a noticeable shift in racial sentiments among white individuals in the US and globally, leading to increased reports of white guilt. This paper explores the concept of white guilt as a negative, self-conscious emotion experienced by white people in response to their behaviors, attitudes, or perceived racist injustices. It addresses two main concerns: the appropriateness of white guilt when many white individuals lack direct culpability, and the effectiveness of outcomes driven by this guilt in combating racial injustice. Drawing on James Baldwin's writings, the paper proposes a novel understanding of white guilt, focusing on white individuals' self-perception rather than their actions.

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On the other hand, people who imagine that history flatters them are impaled on their history like a butterfly on a pin and become incapable of seeing or changing themselves, or the world.

This is the place in which it seems to me most white Americans find themselves. Impaled. They are dimly, or vividly, aware that the history they have fed themselves is mainly a lie, but they do not know how to release themselves from it, and they suffer enormously from the resulting personal incoherence.

– James Baldwin, *White Man's Guilt*

Introduction

In the aftermath of the heinous killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and numerous other Black individuals at the hands of police officers and white vigilantes, there has been a discernible shift in racial sentiments among white people in the United States and abroad. Drawing from quantitative data from the 2016 American National Election Studies,¹ psychologist Lisa Spanierman observes that 38.5% of white respondents experienced at least “a little” guilt about their “association with the white race,” 29% about “the privileges and benefits they receive as a white American,” and 40.3% about “social inequality between white and Black Americans.”²

Statistics like these are indicative of white guilt: a negative, self-conscious emotion that white individuals may experience in response to their own behaviors,

¹American National Election Studies. (2016). ANES 2016 Pilot Study Questionnaire Version 20160218. University of Michigan & Stanford University.

²Spanierman, L. B. (2022). Notably, respondents identifying as "liberal" or "very liberal" indicated their awareness of white privilege and their experience of white guilt, in contrast to moderates and conservatives, who did not report these sentiments.

attitudes, or perceived racist injustices, both historical and contemporary. The observations recorded in Spanierman's study shows that a significant portion of white individuals in the U.S. may grapple with a sense of responsibility concerning racial disparities and inequalities even though they may not bear direct responsibility for structural and historical discrimination. This conclusion is at odds with standard accounts of guilt provided in the literature on philosophy of emotion. Here, the central assumption among philosophers is that guilt is not *fitting* in cases where an agent does not bear the requisite degree of moral culpability for a given harm.³ Since systematic forms of inequality and injustice seem to be the result of embedded structural and institutional biases, not the culpable actions of particular agents, it appears that guilt is not an appropriate response in these broader contexts.⁴

What is more, scholars working in social and political philosophy are skeptical of the possibility that white guilt can be an effective tool for political projects aimed at addressing contemporary forms of racism.⁵ Alexis Shotwell and Michelle O'Brien argue that affective responses to whiteness and white privilege can be so paralyzing that it discourages white people from taking action altogether.⁶ Others like Linda Martín Alcoff and Terrance MacMullan contend that white guilt is a misguided affective response that motivates ineffective and even counterproductive action.⁷

³ Darwall (2009); Scanlon (1998).

⁴ Milazzo (2017)

⁵ Alcoff (1998), Lipsitz (2011), MacMullan (2022), Newton (2020), O'Brien (2003), Sullivan (2012) (2014)

⁶ Edgington (1999); Newton (2020); O'Brien (2003); Shotwell (2011)

⁷ Alcoff (1998), MacMullan (2022), Milazzo (2017), Sullivan (2012)

Instead of understanding white guilt as an emotion that tracks culpability for actions, I argue that we should see it as tracking culpability for a pernicious form of self-identification. My central claim is that white guilt is *fitting* because in experiencing the emotion, one is simultaneously recognizing the role their own identity plays in providing a source of justification for actions that sustain a system of injustice. Conceived in this way, responses to white guilt demand taking part in corrective political action as a means of moral self-creation.

In developing my account, I draw on the non-fiction writings of James Baldwin.⁸ Baldwin shows us that the emancipatory potential of white guilt is contingent upon how white people relate to their sense of guilt when they experience it. Furthermore, Baldwin's work attunes us to the very limitations of white guilt's usefulness while providing a way to leverage its transformative power for good.

The paper proceeds as follows. In Section 1, I consider the theoretical worry that white guilt is a mistaken emotional response to racial inequalities. Since many white people are not sufficiently culpable for racial inequality, white guilt does not seem fitting on the standard account of guilt. In Section 2, I examine practical critiques of white guilt that question the extent to which the emotion can be considered a *useful* tool for our political aims. Here, I consider the potential moral and political pitfalls of responding to white guilt improperly. In Section 3, I draw from Baldwin's insights on whiteness as a

⁸ My paper seeks to add to recent projects linking scholarship on James Baldwin with contemporary issues in political philosophy, the philosophy of race and social epistemology. See Glaude, E. S., Jr. (2020). *Begin again: James Baldwin's America and its urgent lessons for our own*. Crown. and McWilliams, S. J. (Ed.). (2018). *A political companion to James Baldwin*. University Press of Kentucky.

'false identity' to provide a descriptive *Identity-Based Account* of white guilt that centers around the role white identity plays in justifying extant forms of racial injustice. In Section 4, I use this 'Baldwinian' account of white guilt to address the theoretical and practical concerns developed in Sections 1 and 2. I argue that white guilt's fittingness stems from a culpable form of self-identification. Identifying *with* whiteness legitimizes a source of immoral justification for racial oppression. Conceived in this way, responses to white guilt demand self-creation in the form of corrective political action.

Section 1: Is White Guilt Fitting?

The term 'white guilt' describes the sense of culpability a white person may experience when acknowledging how various forms of racial injustice continue to persist in their country or even around the world.⁹ Crucially, one does not need to feel that they are directly responsible for creating conditions of racial injustice to experience white guilt. Rather, people may feel white guilt simply because they recognize that they have benefitted from unearned racial privilege, or even because they feel a sense of responsibility regarding the racist attitudes of other white people.

Understood in this expansive way, white guilt is at odds with what I will call the *standard account of guilt*.¹⁰ According to this account, which is endorsed by Stephen Darwall, T.M. Scanlon, and David Velleman,¹¹ among others,¹² guilt is not fitting in cases where

⁹ Vice (2010).

¹⁰ I take this term from Zhao and MacKenzie (2023).

¹¹ Darwall (2009); Scanlon (1998); Velleman (2003).

an agent does not bear the requisite degree of moral culpability for a given harm. In this section, I explain the theoretical challenges that must be addressed if white guilt is to be considered a fitting emotional response to systemic racial inequality on the standard account.

§1.1 The Standard Account of Guilt

Emotions are experienced in response to how an agent represents a specific object or event.¹³ When philosophers talk about the *fittingness* of an emotion, they are concerned with whether an agent's representation warrants or justifies a particular emotional reaction.¹⁴ Fear is a *fitting* response to a tiger because tigers are dangerous but an *unfitting* response to a stuffed tiger because they are harmless.

On the standard account, perceived culpability is a constitutive condition of feeling guilt: one simply cannot feel guilty without feeling culpable or otherwise responsible for some harm.¹⁵ For example, one may feel guilty when reflecting on a time they insulted a friend in the middle of a heated argument or for lying to a coworker to skip out on a job. Furthermore, for that guilt to be fitting, one's perception must be

¹² For other endorsements of the standard account, see Wallace (1994) and Rawls (1999)

¹³ Throughout this paper I'll be assuming a cognitivist theory of emotions: emotions represent some target object as having a certain property. (Tappolet 2016); (Zhao 2020)

¹⁴ D'Arms & Jacobson (2000, p. 746)

¹⁵ T. M. Scanlon (1998 p.271); Stephen Darwall (2009 p.71). Various versions of what I refer to as the standard account sometimes describe this condition in terms of moral responsibility or blameworthiness in relation to a specific wrongdoing. For the objectives of my paper, these variations in terminology are not significant.

accurate—that is, one must actually be culpable. And so, guilt is *fitting* when one has insulted a friend but *unfitting* if the argument happened only in a dream.

White guilt, however, is not a matter of a white person feeling culpable for some harm. On the contrary, to feel white guilt, an agent’s sense of culpability must be perceived to follow from some feature that is tied to their racial identity. Some cases of white guilt play well with the standard account. Consider the guilt that white people feel when they realize that they’ve internalized some racist stereotypes. For example, they may clutch their purse or check their wallet as a person of color passes by or give a compliment that insinuates an insulting assumption (“You are so articulate!”). Here, the standard account can explain why their guilt is fitting: they’re culpable for not overcoming stereotypes that are morally bad to harbor.

But many cases of white guilt do not seem to play well with the standard account. This is because white people can also experience white guilt when they recognize the racist behavior of *other* white people, or when they recognize that they are the beneficiaries of unearned racial privileges.¹⁶ As an example, consider the critical reflections of Samantha Vice writing about what it is to be white in a country like South Africa:

It is difficult to avoid thinking of oneself as guilty just by being white, irrespective of directly racist actions, and irrespective of whether one was responsible for acquiring whitely habits. One is—even if unavoidably—a

¹⁶ McIntosh (2020)

continuing product of white privilege and benefiting from it, implicated in and enacting injustice in many subtle ways; it seems to me that feelings of guilt are appropriate.¹⁷

Given that white people do not actively choose to be recipients of privilege, Vice's example does not seem to be a matter of culpable action. And so, it's not obvious how Vice's guilt would be fitting on the standard account.

To be sure, there are moves that standard account endorsers can make at this juncture. For instance, they could point out that the standard account can accommodate cases that do not involve direct blameworthy action, namely, cases of inaction, negligence, and complicity.¹⁸ To demonstrate, consider the case of Amy, an English teacher who overhears a group of students planning to cheat on an upcoming math exam. If the students end up getting away with cheating, then it would be fitting for Amy to feel guilt on the basis of having not reported them to the principal. Or consider Ben, a company executive who catches wind that their business engages in tax fraud to garner extra profits. If Ben ends up receiving a big bonus as a result of the company's shady dealings, then his guilt is fitting. After all, he decided to turn a blind eye to wrongful acts because it was in his interest to ignore them.

In this sense, someone who endorses the standard account could argue that guilt may be a fitting reaction to white privilege insofar as white people are aware that inequalities persist to their own benefit. The underlying notion that motivates this line of

¹⁷ Vice (2010 p.328)

¹⁸ Shiffrin (2017 p.202)

thinking is commonly referred to as ‘white complicity’.¹⁹ White complicity denotes the active or passive engagement of white individuals within frameworks of racial inequality and discrimination, particularly when such individuals derive advantages from these structures or fail to challenge them. It acknowledges that racial injustices are perpetuated not only by those who actively engage in discriminatory practices but also by individuals who passively support or benefit from these practices through their inaction or complacency.

I grant that some cases of white guilt can be explained by the standard account in the way sketched out above. I think, however, that we have good reasons to dismiss the possibility that white complicity is sufficient for white guilt. For starters, many of the people who purport to experience white guilt most acutely are precisely those who are actively conscious of the impacts of systemic racial injustice.²⁰ According to the white complicity story their guilt would be unfitting because they are the ones most engaged in efforts to dismantle these unjust systems and least likely to passively benefit from or support them. It seems to me to be the wrong result that white guilt is, for the most part, only fitting for those who do not purport to feel it and a mistaken emotional response for those that do.

Secondly, it must be acknowledged that one cannot simply disassociate from the benefits associated with being white. Racialized privilege and disadvantage are considered to result from social structures that are beyond the control of individual

¹⁹ Applebaum (2017).

²⁰ McIntosh touches on this throughout her work. See McIntosh, P. (2020).

agents.²¹ Moreover, profiting from white privilege does not require active allegiance to white supremacist parties or ideologies.²² White people will continue to benefit from racist actions regardless of whether or not they commit or work against these actions.²³

Because there is little room for maneuvering out of the power relations embedded in whiteness, we cannot conclude that white people are morally culpable for being complicit in them. As such, if we want to explain why white guilt is fitting on the standard account in the case of white privilege, we cannot rely on white complicity.

§1.2 Guilt by Association

We can't turn to straightforward notions of culpability to explain why white guilt is fitting. And so, we need to find another way to explain why feeling guilty makes sense for white people. With the limitations of culpable negligence and complicit benefit in mind, perhaps we might consider the fittingness of white guilt from another angle, beginning first with a recognition of who one is rather than what one has, or has not, done. Perhaps white guilt is fitting in virtue of an agent's association with the actions of their ancestors who may have been involved in slavery, colonization, segregation, or other forms of racial oppression.

²¹ Leonardo (2009 p.111)

²² Biko (2002 p.23)

²³ Nakayama & Krizek (1995 p.302)

However, according to the standard account, experiencing guilt by way of mere association is virtually unintelligible. After all, one hasn't done anything wrong simply by having family lineage that can be traced back to slave owners or by having a grandfather who fought on the side of Germany in World War II. Just because a person is related to a group with a morally troubling past, it does not follow that they are in any way morally culpable for that past.

What is more, guilt by association leads to some unappetizing and even absurd conclusions. Consider cases in which Black individuals descend from slave owners who raped enslaved women. It is clearly misguided to assume that these individuals should feel guilty in the first place, and absurd to conclude that such guilt could be fitting.

If we can't justify guilt by association, and we can't make sense of white guilt on the standard account, perhaps we need some third account of guilt's fittingness conditions. Alternatives to the standard account that do not hinge on a sense of culpability may be helpful in explaining why white guilt is *fitting*. For example, Sandra Lee Bartky argues for a conception of guilt that is not simply an emotion of self-assessment but also a "moral-existential predicament" that obtains when the "structure of everyday life places the relatively privileged in a morally compromised position" whether or not this is known from an agent's perspective.²⁴ More recently, Michael Zhao has argued for a conception of guilt cast in terms of causal responsibility. On this view, guilt is fitting not only in cases where an agent has done something wrong, but also in cases

²⁴ Bartky (2002)

where they take themselves to be causally implicated in bringing about a bad state of affairs.²⁵

Whether or not these accounts can explain white guilt is an open question. Regardless, one serious advantage of the standard account is that it explains how guilt functions as an effective tool for corrective action. It's common to perceive the distressing experience of guilt as a form of self-punishment we inflict upon ourselves when we believe we've committed a wrongdoing.²⁶ The standard account can easily explain why this punishment is justified: after all, the person feeling guilty *did something wrong*.²⁷ Recognizing self-punishment as justified becomes a motivating factor for individuals to engage in self-corrective measures. Conversely, unjustifiably subjecting oneself to punishment may foster resentment rather than facilitating meaningful corrective action. This consideration doesn't provide a knockdown refutation of non-culpability tracking accounts of guilt, but it does suggest that abandoning the standard account is seriously costly.

Section 2: Is White Guilt Useful?

Even if we bracket concerns about white guilt's fittingness, we must still grapple with the question of whether it is morally beneficial and practically efficacious. Critics of white guilt have argued that it is not useful for addressing political problems because it so often

²⁵ Zhao (2020)

²⁶ Portmore (2019)

²⁷ Nussbaum (2006 p.207)

leads to inaction.²⁸ Further, even in cases where guilt *does* prompt white people to act, it may be argued that their actions tend to be either misguided or counterproductive. Here I will address some of these concerns. I will argue that, while the criticisms leveled against white guilt are forceful and worthy of consideration, they are far from decisive.

§2.1 Concerns of Inaction

Does white guilt lead to action? Skeptics often turn to the testimony of those that purportedly experience white guilt to bolster the claim that the emotion is paralyzing, leaving allies without a clear sense of how to effectively focus their political efforts. To provide just one example, consider the anonymous testimony of a writer who shared their experiences of white guilt to the New York Times in 2018:

I don't talk about my feelings because it's hard to justify doing so while people of color are dying due to systemic racism and making this conversation about me would be again centering whiteness. Yet bottling it up makes me feel an existential anger that I have a hard time channeling since I don't know my place. Instead of harnessing my privilege for greater good, I'm curled up in a ball of shame.²⁹ How can I be more than my heritage?³⁰

²⁸ Shotwell (2011, p.89); Zach (1999 p.81)

²⁹A relevant clarification to make concerns the distinction between white guilt and white shame. Though a thorough treatment exceeds the scope of my paper, I take for granted a general distinction present in the psychological scholarship on emotions (see Grzanka et al. (2020) and Tangney et al. (2007)): Where guilt is operationalized as negative, unpleasant feelings about one's actions, behavior, or attitudes, shame is operationalized as a more unpleasant and painful emotion that targets the entire self. The primary differences in degree and target can be characterized as: "I feel bad about what I did," versus "I hate myself."

The immobilizing aspects of white guilt as presented here indicate the dangers that follow what critics claim is an over-personalization of systemic problems.³¹ Some go as far to claim that the paralyzing effects of white guilt are in fact a ‘best case scenario’. At worst, the emotion can function as a misleading endpoint of assumed anti-racist efforts.³² Critics worry that white guilt prompts a self-acknowledgement that one has effectively ‘disassociated from racist structures’, interpreting the emotion as an indication that one is no longer involved in practices that sustain racial inequalities.³³ False claims of noninvolvement have the dual effect of ostensibly alleviating guilt and discouraging further action: ‘Feeling guilty is enough’.

Though it is undeniable that some white guilt has this paralyzing effect, we cannot use particular individuals’ testimony to establish that the emotion is practically useless on the whole. After all, it is not unheard of for individuals to become consumed by a sense of *standard* guilt in a way that prevents them from acting. But this doesn’t mean that it’s inefficacious to feel guilty in response to one’s wrongdoing. Indeed, in many cases, guilt functions as an impetus for healthy, self-correcting behavior.

Importantly, researchers have found that some degree of guilt is likely positive inasmuch as it promotes prosocial behavior, unlike shame which tends to coincide with other maladaptive feelings and behaviors. As such, clearly marking the distinction between white guilt and white shame is paramount for both projects in critical philosophy of race and emotion as well as for ongoing psychological research on racial emotions.

³⁰Strayed, C., & Almond, S. (2018) p.2

³¹ Shotwell (2011) p.86

³² O’Brien (2003) p.22

³³ O’Brien (2003) p.22

Psychological studies support the notion that guilt, including white guilt, can be a catalyst for positive, self-corrective actions. These studies have shown that the anticipation of guilt in moral dilemmas often leads individuals to avoid engaging in morally questionable behaviors.³⁴ Furthermore, guilt has been observed to influence students' intentions regarding academic misconduct, suggesting that enhancing the anticipation of guilt can act as a deterrent against unethical actions.³⁵

Still, it's fair to question whether or not white guilt is analogous to standard cases of guilt. To make this challenge clear, recall that the sense of guilt experienced by Amy and Ben is rooted in specific, localized harms: Amy failed to notify the principal about the cheating scandal, and Ben knowingly benefited from unscrupulous business practices. Because of this, realizing the corrective potential of their guilt is straightforward: they just need to address the harms they feel responsible for. White guilt, on the other hand, is a response to systemic issues that individual agents are powerless to prevent. As such, it's not obvious what specific wrongs those who experience it can be called on to correct.

The argument that white guilt is disanalogous to more 'run of the mill' experiences of guilt is strong but not decisive. The presence of effective responses to white guilt may be challenging to identify, but this just means that the onus will be on proponents of white guilt to explain how it can be morally efficacious.

³⁴ Svenson, O., & Nilsson, A. (2016). Temporal Distance and Moral Concerns: Future Matters. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 145(3), 275-287.

³⁵ Curtis, G. J. (2023, May). Guilt, Shame and Academic Misconduct. *Journal of Academic Ethics*, 1-15.

§2.2 Concerns of Ineffective Action

Critiques of white guilt are not limited to claims that the emotion encourages inactivity. Indeed, some arguments against white guilt's political effectiveness presuppose that the emotion leads to counterproductive action.³⁶ Here, critics worry that white guilt can have an individuating effect, focusing solely on how individuals feel personally and obscuring the complex realities of structural racism.³⁷ Leaving the social and structural dimensions of racial inequality unexamined may lead to superficial gestures instead of long-term commitment to racial justice.³⁸

To understand how this criticism is meant to work, consider the arguably 'superficial' political involvement that developed alongside a dramatic spike in purported experiences of white guilt during the height of the BLM protests in June of 2020.³⁹ At the time, millions on social media, many of whom were white, took the initiative to express support and solidarity with the Black community. On June 2nd, 'Blackout Tuesday', over 28 million users posted black squares with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter as a presentation of allyship with the movement.⁴⁰ As soon as September that same year, surveys indicate that white support for the movement began decreasing toward levels

³⁶ Alcoff (1998), Moore (2018)

³⁷ Lipsitz (2011) p.2

³⁸ Sullivan (2014 p.128), Another criticism concerning ineffective action is presented in MacMullan (2022). Here it is argued that habits of white guilt encourage cultural appropriation, whereby white people try to fill the cultural void of false white history as well as distance themselves from whiteness as an identity.

³⁹ Spanierman (2022)

⁴⁰ Ho, Shannon. (2020) A social media 'blackout' enthralled Instagram. But did it do anything?. NBC News.

prior to George Floyd's death.⁴¹ While many were up for 'doing their part' by calling attention to the very real problem of police brutality, they were not willing to go so far as to question the structural and social underpinnings that sustain white advantage.

The fact that white support for the BLM movement was ineffective at challenging the core of racial inequalities in the United States exemplifies the potential for white guilt to turn anti-racism efforts into a narrow pursuit of white moral redemption. What is more, there is still a question as to why white support dwindled in the months following the June protests. The criticism that white guilt tends to center around minority disadvantage rather than the structural issues that undergird that disadvantage is particularly pointed. As publicity around police brutality waned, so too did white peoples' active interest in being a part of the solution. Only when disadvantage is salient do we see white guilt present itself through action.⁴²

Why is it that white people tend to fixate their sense of guilt around a responsibility for disadvantage rather than for structural issues that undergird that disadvantage? An answer to this question will account for the conditions that prevent white guilt from being more effective. It should explain why it is that when white guilt is experienced, the emotion tends to center around the misfortune of the disadvantaged rather than the mechanisms which sustain systemic advantage.

⁴¹Marquette University Law School Poll. (2020). Black Lives Matter Protests in Wisconsin: Summary. RPubS.

⁴² Sullivan (2012)

Section 3 Baldwin on Whiteness and Guilt

I've so far covered two challenges facing white guilt. The theoretical challenge is to provide an explanation as to why white guilt is a *fitting* emotional response to persistent forms of racial inequalities in line with the standard account of guilt. The practical challenge is to explain how white guilt can be useful for the aims of social justice movements that meet the concerns of inaction and ineffectiveness.

To address these challenges, we need to get clear on what white guilt is. White guilt is not merely the guilt felt by a person who happens to be white. Roughly, white guilt is guilt one feels *because* they are white. In other words, for an agent to experience white guilt they must take themselves to be culpable for some wrong in virtue of their whiteness; the identity generates sentiments of culpability. Two questions naturally follow: what is whiteness? and how might an agent feel guilty in virtue of it?

I aim to provide an answer to these questions drawing inspiration from the non-fiction essays of James Baldwin. My goal in this section is to take Baldwin as a starting point for providing a descriptive account of white guilt that is intelligible under the standard account. First, I present Baldwin's conception of whiteness as involving an *objective* and *subjective* sense drawing closely from his 1984 essay '*On Being White... and Other Lies*'. Afterwards, I use Baldwin's insights to provide an *Identity-Based Account* of white guilt that describes the emotion as tracking a sense of culpability a white person feels when they believe that their 'whiteness' is being used to justify racist actions and inequalities. Finally, I show how this guilt can be *fitting*: in identifying as

white in the subjective sense, an agent is culpable for legitimizing the source of justification that undergirds racist action.

§3.1 Whiteness as a 'False Identity'

The first step in fleshing out my account of white guilt is to provide a conception of whiteness that can explain how an agent can be morally culpable for being white. To do this, I'll consider some of Baldwin's remarks on the origins of the white racial identity, how it developed, and its function.

According to Baldwin, "whiteness" is not a matter of biological differences in melanin production but rather a social identity that has been historically employed as a tool for maintaining dominance and justifying racial inequalities. More specifically, Baldwin attunes us to a conception of the white identity that has an objective and a subjective sense. In its objective sense, whiteness is a matter of being subject to benefit from the oppressive social practices that constitute America's history of anti-Black violence and racial subjugation. In the subjective sense, whiteness is a matter of holding beliefs about one's membership to a social identity that functions to "justify" such practices. As I will show in the next section, it is the latter subjective sense of whiteness that is sufficient to generate the requisite moral culpability for white guilt's fittingness.

In his 1984 essay '*On Being White... and Other Lies*' Baldwin locates the origins of the white identity in the inhumane treatment of Black and indigenous peoples: "White

men — from Norway, for example, where they are Norwegians became white: by slaughtering the cattle, poisoning the wells, torching the houses, massacring Native Americans, raping Black women.”⁴³⁴⁴ Here Baldwin is attuning us to a conception of the identity grounded in systemic practices intended to secure material and social benefits for Europeans in America at the expense of others. Europeans *became* white by way of active participation in practices which constitute the foundations of social institutions that provide social and material privileges to those with lighter skin.

By defining whiteness in terms of the active engagement in practices which explain extant forms of systematic racial inequality, Baldwin provides an objective conception of the identity that is determined by a relation between one’s skin color and facts about America’s oppressive history. An individual is white insofar their skin color marks them as a beneficiary of material or social privileges that can be traced back to social institutions formed by way of racially oppressive practices like slavery. Conversely, one is non-white insofar as these social and material privileges are limited or withheld in virtue of their skin color.⁴⁵

Characterizing whiteness in the subjective sense demands we shift attention to an aspect of Baldwin’s conception of whiteness that centers around how the inhumane treatment of Black and indigenous peoples was “justified”. In his 1964 essay “*The White Problem*”, Baldwin remarks on the epistemic dimension of systematic forms of Black

⁴³ Baldwin, *On Being White and Other Lies (OBW)*. p.168.

⁴⁴ Underlined text is Baldwin’s emphasis.

⁴⁵ Note to be developed: I think Baldwin’s insight here also provides a way of thinking about racial ambiguity. A person is more-or-less white depending on the social and material privileges they receive in a variety of social contexts.

dehumanization writing that “the only way to justify the role this chattel was playing in one’s life was to say that he was not a man. For if he wasn’t a man, then no crime had been committed.”⁴⁶ Here Baldwin claims that oppressive social practices like chattel slavery required the telling, and believing, of lies. As presented in the passage above, Baldwin thinks that such lies involve false narratives that define whiteness as the basis of human value: to fall short of being fully white is also to fall short of being fully human.

By focusing on the lies told to justify Black subjugation, Baldwin is uncovering another sense of whiteness that centers around a relation between self-conception and historical facts. In ‘*On Being White... and Other Lies*’ Baldwin provides some insight on this front writing that:

This necessity of justifying a totally *false identity* and of justifying what must be called a genocidal history, has placed everyone now living into the hands of the most ignorant and powerful people the world has ever seen: And how did they get that way? By deciding that they were white. By opting for safety instead of life. By persuading themselves that a Black child's life meant nothing compared with a white child's life... And in this debasement and definition of Black people, they debased and defined themselves.⁴⁷

There are two key takeaways from this passage. For one, in describing whiteness as a *false identity* Baldwin is not denying the history of oppressive action that makes whiteness intelligible as a marker of privilege, rather, he is denying the legitimacy of the

⁴⁶ Baldwin, *The White Problem (WP)*. p. 98

⁴⁷ Baldwin, *OBW*. p.166

beliefs which serve as a source of justification for such actions. According to Baldwin, acts of anti-black violence demand an adherence to a set of lies regarding white superiority and the inferiority of people of color. Whiteness is “false” in the sense that the white identity is defined by an intentionally erroneous distinction between “white” and “non-white” peoples that serves the sole purpose of justifying practices of racial subjugation.

A second takeaway falls out of Baldwin’s description of whiteness as a “decision”. Again, it is important to note that Baldwin here is not claiming that whiteness in the objective sense is a matter of choice, one cannot simply decide to be subject to the racial privileges that follow from a history of racial subjugation. On the contrary, Baldwin’s remarks suggest a distinction between *identifying as white* in the objective sense of acknowledging that one is marked for social privilege in virtue of their skin color and *identifying with whiteness* in the subjective sense of endorsing one’s status as a member of a false identity.

This latter point is made clear when Baldwin writes that “it’s not the Negro problem, it’s the white problem. I’m only black because you *think* you’re white.... As long as you think you’re white, there is no hope for you”⁴⁸. Again, this claim underscores Baldwin’s concern for the active role individuals play in perpetuating the ideology of white racial superiority by failing to examine the justificatory function associated with a false identity. It is this latter, subjective sense of identification that Baldwin treats as

⁴⁸ Baldwin, *WP*. p. 98

morally significant. Being white is “absolutely, a moral choice” because “there are no white people”, rather, a group of people that have legitimized an identity that’s sole function is to justify extant forms of racial inequality.

In sum, Baldwin provides a conception of whiteness that has both an objective and subjective dimension. Being white, in the objective sense, denotes that one’s skin color marks them as beneficiaries of social and material privileges that trace back to practices of oppression and anti-black violence. Being white in the subjective sense, entails a decision or choice to continue associating with a ‘false identity’ that provides justification for racist action. With this conception of whiteness in mind, I’ll move to providing an explanation for how white guilt may be fitting in line with the standard account.

§3.2 Identity-Based White Guilt

Taking Baldwin’s conception of whiteness as a ‘false identity’ as a starting point, I’ll now provide a description for how a recognition of racial injustice can spur emotions of guilt in white people that are fitting in line with the standard account. Recall that, on the standard account, perceived culpability is a constitutive condition of feeling guilt: without feeling culpable, or otherwise responsible, one simply cannot feel guilty. For the guilt to be fitting, it must be that the agent’s sense of culpability is accurate, that they are indeed culpable for the wrong they feel guilty for.

As noted, before, white guilt is distinguished from ‘garden-variety’ forms of guilt because an agent’s sense of culpability is perceived to follow from their being white: the racial identity generates sentiments of culpability. Baldwin gives us a way to explain why an agent feels morally implicated in virtue of their whiteness and how they are in fact culpable. Inspired by Baldwin, I will be arguing for the following account of white guilt:

Identity-Based White Guilt: White guilt is the emotional response that follows from a recognition of how one’s identity functions as a justification for extant forms of racial injustice.

The first step in fleshing out this account is to explain the central wrong that white guilt is tracking. On my account, white guilt is not tracking culpability for any particular action *per se*, but rather culpability for legitimizing a social identity that provides justification for such actions.

As Baldwin points out, being white in the subjective sense serves the sole function of providing justification for racist action. As a straightforward example consider the ways in which ‘White pride’ is utilized as a ‘reason’ for violence and bigotry. According to a recent study by the Southern Poverty Law Center, the number of white nationalist groups reached a historic high of 155 chapters in 2019 as sentiments that national belonging should be determined by race become even more deeply embedded in the United States’ broader political right.⁴⁹ This is perhaps best evidenced by the recent uptake in alt-right movements that actively deny the existence of structural racism like

⁴⁹ White nationalist. (n.d.-b). Southern Poverty Law Center.

the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers.⁵⁰ Examples like these show how subjective identification *with* whiteness continues to provide reasons to act in ways that exacerbate racial injustice: *being white* provides justification for xenophobic beliefs and practices against non-white people who are perceived to be “foreign” or “outsiders”.

Given that subjective identification in the form of white pride tends to go hand in hand with explicit acts of racism, there is little question as to why guilt would be fitting in such cases. However, those who harbor sentiments of white pride are, more often than not, among the least likely to purport experiencing white guilt: their pride implies a belief that there is nothing morally problematic about being white in the first place. This touches on a puzzle introduced in Section 1, namely that those who purport to experience white guilt most acutely are often actively conscious of the impacts of systemic racial injustice. Avoiding the counter intuitive result that white guilt is only fitting for those who do not purport to feel it requires an explanation for how even those who are most engaged in efforts to dismantle unjust systems may nonetheless be culpable for being white in the subjective sense.

In *White Man's Guilt*, Baldwin provides an example of what such a wrong may amount to in cases that fall short of an explicit endorsement of white racial supremacy exemplified by white pride. Reflecting on the common inclination among white

⁵⁰ Though these groups do not publicly espouse white supremacist agenda, many members have been linked with white supremacist organizations. Notably, Proud Boys founder Gavin McInnes publicly stated in a 2003 New York Times article that, “I love being white and I think it's something to be very proud of. I don't want our culture diluted. We need to close the borders now and let everyone assimilate to a Western, white, English-speaking way of life.” Grigoriadis, V. (2003). The Edge of Hip: Vice, the Brand - *The New York Times*.

individuals to shy away from critical self-examination regarding the history of their racial identity, Baldwin directs our focus toward widespread claims of ‘white innocence’—the idea that one is not accountable for past or present forms of racial discrimination since they bear no *personal* responsibility for them. Considering how such claims often occur within the “stammering, terrified dialogues which white Americans sometimes entertain with the black conscience” Baldwin writes:

“The nature of this stammering can be reduced to a plea. Do not blame me. I was not there. I did not do it. My history has nothing to do with Europe or the slave trade. Anyway it was *your* chiefs who sold *you* to *me*. I was not present in the middle passage. I am not responsible for the textile mills of Manchester, or the cotton fields of Mississippi. Besides, consider how the English, too, suffered in those mills and in those awful cities! I *also* despise the governors of southern states and the sheriffs of southern counties, and I *also* want your child to have a decent education and rise as high as capabilities will permit. I have nothing against you, nothing! What have you *got* against me?”⁵¹

As highlighted in the last section, Baldwin is primarily concerned with moral culpability not for one’s being white in the objective sense of benefiting from past injustices, rather for one’s being white in the subjective sense—of *choosing* to identify *with* whiteness. Here, Baldwin examines instances where individuals occasionally experience guilt or moral discomfort because they are socially or materially advantaged due to their race only to explain such feelings away with appeals to their personal blamelessness. Indeed, the stammering pleas of innocence are depicted here as defensive reactions that result

⁵¹ *WMG*, p.

from a perceived mismatch between the wrongs an agent feels responsible for and the control they have over these wrongs: “I feel bad, but you shouldn't blame me! Afterall, I'm not like the others, I'm on your side!” As such, this passage uncovers what Baldwin takes to be a form of subjective identification driven by the desire to hold on to the white identity and its benefits, despite an earnest awareness of how the identity functions to marginalize people of color. This suggests that an agent can represent themselves as morally culpable for being white in the objective sense while satisfying the conditions of culpability by *choosing* to be white in the subjective sense.

To see how, recall that, on Baldwin's view, the *sole* function of whiteness in the subjective sense is to provide justificatory grounds for extant forms of racial discrimination. When an agent represents themselves as culpable for being white in the objective sense, they represent themselves as being morally responsible for the practices of oppression and anti-black violence which explain the relationship between skin color and elevated social or material status. However, it is in virtue of having identified with whiteness that their sense of culpability is accurate: in such cases, one is simultaneously recognizing their role in legitimizing a source of justification that sustains a system of injustice.

What follows from this analysis is an identity based conception of white guilt that is fitting under the standard account: when an agent witnesses or is reminded of past or present events that exemplify cases where their identity functions as a justification for injustice, a sense of culpability follows—it is the racial identity with which they identify,

rather than any particular things that a person has done, that generates the emotion in the first place. However, it is in virtue of having identified *with* whiteness that their sense of culpability is accurate: in such cases, one is simultaneously recognizing their role in legitimizing a source of justification that sustains a system of injustice.

So far, I've laid the groundwork for an analysis of white guilt that is fitting according to the standard account of the emotion. In the next section I'll apply the framework covered here to address both the theoretical and practical challenges facing white guilt in line with the examples covered in Sections 1 and 2.

Section 4 White Guilt Reconsidered

White guilt faces two primary philosophical challenges. First, it is not clear how it could be *fitting*, given that it is a species of guilt that does not (paradigmatically) involve culpability. Second, it seems practically inefficacious, either because it leads to *inaction* or because it leads to *ineffective* action.

In this section I argue that the *Identity-Based Account* can explain why white guilt is both *fitting* and *practically efficacious*. Accepting Baldwin's conception of whiteness as a choice allows us to see how the sense of culpability that a white person feels when reflecting on white privilege and the wrongful actions of other white people is actually an indication of *their own* culpability: in experiencing white guilt, one is simultaneously recognizing their role in legitimizing a source of justification that sustains a system of

injustice. Furthermore, Baldwin helps us see how overcoming habituated forms of subjective identification demand that one engages in a process of self-creation that involves sustained and meaningful forms of political action.

§4.1 Fittingness as Subjective Identification

As a quick refresher, the *Identity-Based* account describes white guilt as an emotion that develops when an agent represents themselves as being morally culpable for wrongs that rely on the white identity for justification and the guilt is fitting just in case an agent subjectively identifies *with* their whiteness. Put another way, sentiments of culpability are generated by an earnest awareness of how the white identity functions to marginalize people of color. This sense of culpability is fitting insofar as an agent expresses a desire to hold on to the white identity despite the role it plays in perpetuating racial injustice.

In Section 1, I noted two paradigm sources of white guilt that call into question the extent to which white guilt can be considered fitting in line with the standard account. The first involves a sense of culpability for wrongs attached to white privilege while the second involves a sense of culpability for the wrongful acts of other white people. To illustrate how the *Identity-Based Account* can explain why these examples are *fitting*, I will first provide an example of how subjective identification functions in each case before explaining how such forms of subjective identification with whiteness function to sustain the very practices that generate sentiments of guilt.

White Privilege: The pervasiveness of white privilege in the United States is no mere accident, it's a consequence of de jure racial segregation that is ultimately sustained by institutional biases and inequitable public policies. Tax expenditures and loopholes reinforce generational wealth, keeping money 'in the family' for those who had the ability to accumulate it.⁵² School funding systems based on property tax revenue offers educational opportunities for the well-off while hindering the social mobility of those living in underprivileged neighborhoods.⁵³

Experiencing white guilt about racial privilege entails a recognition that the structural aspects which underpin systematic privilege have their origins in a history of white supremacy and racial subjugation. Agents represent themselves as culpable for contributing to the persistence of white privilege due to the fact that their racial identity functions as a source of justification for the structures which sustain it. The kind of subjective identification that may develop in response to such recognition can take the form of an appeal to a strong personal work ethic: "Things don't just come for free because I'm white; I worked hard for what I have."

Moving forward, I'll now consider a second example of white guilt as it applies to the wrongful acts of other white people.

Police Brutality: To make intelligible the experience of guilt that may follow witnessing the kinds of actions attached to racially motivated police brutality, let's consider the

⁵² Bhutta, N., Chang, A. C., Dettling, L. J., & Hsu, J. W. (2020).

⁵³ Allegretto, S., García, E., & Weiss, E. (2022).

emotion as a response to the chilling video of George Floyd's murder. In this case, a white person may represent themselves as culpable for the brutality that culminated in Floyd's death not because they take themselves to be responsible for the physical acts depicted in the video *per se*, but rather because they take themselves to be responsible for what "justified" the act. Their sense of culpability follows from a recognition of the role their identity plays in explaining why the brutality occurred: whiteness "justifies" the use of excessive force against people of color.

Just like the case of white privilege, subjective identification occurs in response to a recognition of guilt: one looks for ways to maintain a sense of personal innocence while simultaneously preserving their sense of whiteness. The nature of subjective identification, then, may appear in the form of a distinction between "good" white people and "bad" white people: "Chauvin is not representative of me, I am not *that kind of white person*."

Analysis: In both cases, it is the *decision* to subjectively identify with whiteness makes one's sense of culpability fitting. In *White Privilege*, an agent feels culpable for the systematic inequalities that operate to their benefit and so attempts to retain a sense of "whiteness" that isn't defined by unjustified privileges but rather by hard work. Their sense of guilt is fitting because, in attempting to retain a sense of whiteness, an agent actively legitimizes a subjective sense of identity that serves no other purpose but to

justify existing material and social inequalities—to be white *just is* to be marked for privilege in virtue of one’s skin color.⁵⁴

In *Police Brutality*, an agent feels culpable for pervasive forms of anti-black policing at the hands of white officers and so attempts to distance themselves with an appeal to a distinction between “good” and “bad” white people. One’s sense of guilt is fitting due to the ways in which the distinction obscures and reinforces the underlying motivation for practices of brutality. Practices of racially biased policing are justified out of a concern for the interests of “white people” generally. As such, identifying oneself as a “good white person,” functions to legitimize the sources of justification for such practices: doing so affirms the existence of a group identity whose interests are worth considering.

One notable complication of the *Identity-Based* account brought out by this analysis concerns the question of white guilt fittingness the first time it is registered by an agent. Notice that in both cases, the act of subjective identification is described as occurring *in response* to a recognition of culpability, not prior to it. This raises a question, if an agent’s sense of culpability is only fitting after they have subjectively identified with their racial identity, is white guilt fitting when first experienced?

I am prepared to accept that the *Identity-Based* account tacitly implies one’s sense of culpability is not immediately fitting on the standard account when it is initially

⁵⁴ By “*just is*” I mean to refer to whiteness in the objective sense.

registered by an agent but rather *becomes* fitting. However, I take this to be a feature of my account and not a bug.

An intuitive explanation for why white guilt is not experienced by every white person follows directly from the objective/subjective distinction in my account. For starters, not all who identify as white in the objective sense will identify *with* their whiteness in the subjective sense: a white person raised in a racially diverse neighborhood where reverse cultural contexts predominate may identify in the former but not the latter sense. In such a case, we would not expect for an agent to experience guilt when witnessing an act of police brutality: due to their upbringing, they may “see themselves” in the victim of the violence as opposed to the race of the officer.

In contrast we can imagine a case involving another agent who, having been raised in a predominantly white community, has spent more time around people that resemble the officer rather than the victim. In cases like these, an initial experience of guilt seems natural but only due to contingent features of an agent’s upbringing.

The upshot of this intuition is that *some* form of subjective identification appears to be a prerequisite for an initial experience of the emotion but that it falls short of what is required for moral culpability. Restricting *fitting* forms of white guilt to only those in which an agent attempts to “hold on” to a sense of white identity allows us to preserve a moral symmetry between the two cases above without giving up on the notion that some self-imposed forms of subjective identification are morally wrong.

§4.2 Usefulness as Self-creation

I have so far argued for a conception of white guilt's fittingness that centers around the ways in which white people choose to relate to their racial identity but have yet to address the practical concerns covered in section 2. Here Baldwin offers us insight: the point of realizing that one's guilt is fitting is not for white people to stew in the emotion, nor is it to encourage finding new ways to rehabilitate whiteness. It is rather to utilize white guilt as a catalyst for self-creation. In his 1965 essay *White Man's Guilt* Baldwin brings this point out in a passage worth quoting at length:

[T]he great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally *present* in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations. It is with great pain and terror that one begins to realize this. In great pain and terror one begins to assess the history which has placed one where one is and formed one's point of view. In great pain and terror because, therefore, one enters into battle with that historical creation, Oneself, and attempts to recreate oneself according to a principle more humane and more liberating; one begins the attempt to achieve a level of personal maturity and freedom which robs history of its tyrannical power, and also changes history.⁵⁵

Baldwin thinks that such a process begins with a recognition of history as a force that is painfully, *literally* present so that it can be changed. This involves a re-evaluation and

⁵⁵ *White Man's Guilt*. (p. 411) Baldwin's emphasis.

redefinition of one's sense of identity, moving away from seeing whiteness as a central or defining aspect of the self. Importantly, this kind of self-creation is no armchair affair, but the devil is in the details. In the place of a general account regarding what self-creation entails, I'll home in on some general principles to defend against the challenges raised by critics beginning first with the concern that white guilt often leads to inaction.

First, I previously noted that critics worry that individuals experiencing white guilt may struggle to find appropriate ways to act within their racial identity, resulting in stagnation and emotional paralysis. Such responses make sense given that it is the racial identity with which an individual identifies, rather than any particular thing that a person has done, that generates their sense of guilt. To be sure, Baldwin helps point out that continuing to identify with whiteness limits the extent to which white guilt can be considered useful. Insofar as an individual is concerned with addressing racial injustice within the framework of their identity, their sense of culpability will follow.

Responding to white guilt with the intent to forge a new identity avoids these concerns. Action taken in response to the emotion must occur simultaneously with a conscious effort to renounce whiteness. This approach shifts an agent's focus away from trying to be a "good white person" to an active rejection of the subjective aspects of whiteness that perpetuate racial injustice. In embracing transformative, rather than rehabilitative, action, an agent can overcome the passive indecision that follows from white guilt by embracing experiences that challenge their own sense of identity.

According to the second criticism, white guilt leads to responses that are short-lived and self-indulgent. The root concern behind these criticisms is that white guilt is an emotion that tends to center around the presence of disadvantage rather than the source of systemic white advantage: 'white people only feel guilty about how others have less, not about how they have more'. When white people interpret their guilt to be about what others don't have it makes sense that they respond ineffectively. As long as they are not reminded of it, the emotion fades and so far, as they've 'given enough' their duty is satisfied.

However, insofar as an individual's sense of white guilt is *fitting*, their sense of culpability resides in how they conceive of themselves. Self-creation is a self-conscious process that steers clear of the superficiality often associated with traditional responses to white guilt. Examples include engaging in actions that entail direct exposure to diversity especially in reverse cultural contexts where one is in the racial minority. Bearing witness in contexts where injustices are being ignored or denied. And fostering authentic relationships based on mutual respect, shared interests, and personal values rather than differences in racial identity.

Conclusion

My interpretation of white guilt presents a way to conceptualize the emotion that centers around culpable forms of self-identification. Drawing on James Baldwin's insights, I reinterpret white guilt as an emotional response connected to the identification with

whiteness as a 'false identity.' This shifts the focus to the systemic role of white identity in perpetuating racial injustices. In light of Baldwin's considerations, I have proposed a transformative approach, viewing white guilt through the lens of Identity-Based guilt. This perspective not only elucidates the complexities of white guilt but also suggests pathways for meaningful change.

The implications of reinterpreting white guilt are both theoretical and practical. I argued for an interpretation of the emotion that meets the conditions of the standard account of guilt, emerging from an awareness of systemic racial injustices and the privileges linked to being white. In addressing the practical concerns facing white guilt, I focus on its tendency to cause paralysis and to lead to actions that concentrate on the immediate disadvantages of BIPOC, resulting in ineffectiveness. Practically, white guilt offers a pathway for white individuals to transform their engagement with racial injustices, shifting from passive acknowledgment to active self-creation and redefinition of their identity.

However, this exploration also raises new questions and leaves some issues unresolved, particularly concerning a more robust description of how individuals within systemic structures can effectively disengage and redefine their identities. This opens avenues for further philosophical engagement regarding how identity-based approaches to racial emotions like guilt can contribute to other areas of social justice.

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