

Vulnerability and Responsibility: *Judith Butler's Political Rendering of Levinasian Ethics*

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Otherwise than being! It is this shattering of indifference—even if indifference is statistically dominant—this possibility of one-for-the-other, that constitutes the ethical event.

Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre-Nous*

Emmanuel Levinas radically decentres ethics to become a responsibility that is no longer willed by the subject but rather unequivocally demanded by the Other. In this system, judgment and reason are secondary to one's responsibility in the Face of the Other, who dispossesses and undoes one's "self" in making its ethical demand. Despite the intimate relationality in this face-to-face encounter, Levinas acknowledges that the world's multiplicity necessitates a diminishment in what would otherwise be an all-consuming responsibility to the Other; justice must be implemented and a state must be established for the sake of judging individuals when one persecutes another. The only way for this political body to remain ethical is through an acknowledgement of its prior origin in the interhuman order of one's responsibility to the Other. All told, Levinas' political investigations are rather vague. Nonetheless, Judith Butler elucidates key ambiguities and weaknesses in Levinas' account, crucially transforming his basic idea through the incorporation of psychoanalysis. Butler's conception of our embodied selves as fundamentally vulnerable and exposed is ultimately the concretization Levinas' ethics needs in order for it to contain a true possibility of reshaping politics such that responsibility to the Other is inseparable from the actions of the state, imposing an absolute limit on gratuitous suffering.

Levinas reconceptualizes ethics from the traditional Western model premised on humans as autonomous, particular individuals living together in a genus of abstracted unity.¹ A being in this system possesses a will to live freely. The negative consequence of this liberty is that it seeks to suppress the freedom of any other whose

¹ Emmanuel Levinas, "Uniqueness," in *Entre Nous: Essays on Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998): 189.

interests limit his or her own. This results in a reciprocal alterity of I's that can only lead to "an eventual war of each against all."² By Levinas' understanding, the Western tradition overcame this predicament through rational discourse, in which individuals in the genus could freely consent to the exercise of justice as the objective arbiter of each man's will.³ Levinas' pejorative use of the word "beings" rather than "humans" reflects his aversion to Martin Heidegger's use of the term, which Levinas interprets as being entirely self-inflected to the point of violence, where "[beings] affirm themselves 'without regard' for one another in their concern to be."⁴ The philosophical privilege that was intended to uphold peace among the persons in this system came to be challenged by the recognition of man's recent atrocities—imperialism, two catastrophic world wars, genocide, the Holocaust, and so on. An anxiety had developed as a result of this bad conscience "about the legitimacy of suffering inflicted on some by the irrefutable logic of things... [a] kind of scruple about surviving dangers which threaten the other."⁵ Levinas demonstrates the way in which suffering had become a datum of this consciousness, immensely disquieting in its unassumability, its refusal of all meaning.⁶ Nonetheless, it is in the Face of the Other who is in pain that a way out of pure suffering is offered: the interhuman order.

In "the half opening that a moan, a cry, a groan or a sigh slips through—the original call for aid—" the Other summons me above all, to answer for his death, and therefore his life.⁷ In my response to his call, there is a push past the logical formality of reciprocal alterity, through the violent perseverance of being, to a more primary alterity guarded by a responsibility apparently forgotten for most of history.⁸ Levinas impresses upon us that abject suffering finds meaning only when it causes me (*le moi*) to suffer in the face of it, to take it upon myself to release the other from pain. Even the idea of suffering as it was traditionally understood had come unravelled. There is no theodicy, whether in the form of a "supra-sensible" metaphysics or Providential God, to account for a pain so gratuitous, absurd, meaningless.⁹ Altogether, the rationally organized population of beings within a genus proved capable of unparalleled suffering through political acts detached from all ethical imperatives. It is precisely to this rupture that Levinas is responding with his reimagined understanding of responsibility, one that is asymmetrical rather than reciprocal, where being is expanded, undone, and dispossessed rather than contracted and contained. Herein lies the possibility of uniting politics and ethics once again.

Levinasian ethics begins to reconceive community fundamentally at the level of "me" and the single Other. This is described first as "responsibility" for the

² *Ibid.*, 190.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, "Preface," XII.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁶ *Ibid.*, "Useless Suffering," 91.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁸ Levinas, "Uniqueness," 194.

⁹ Levinas, "Useless Suffering," 96.

neighbour, though in a later interview Levinas states that it is only a harsher word for “love,” which itself is better to be understood as a “taking upon oneself of the fate of the other.”¹⁰ Levinas is fond of using the following quotation from Dostoevsky: “We are all guilty for everything and everyone, and I more than all the others.” In this statement he finds an assertion of the inalienability of one’s responsibility for the other. The Face that regards me elects me; subsequently I am utterly unique insofar as my responsibility to act for the other cannot be curtailed or transferred to another person. It is because of this election that I am an irreplaceable one-for-the-other. Following this analysis, Levinas is inclined to rephrase Dostoevsky’s quotation as the following: “All men are responsible for one another and I more than anyone else.”¹¹ One would remain unequivocally tied to this other were it not for the fact that human multiplicity implicates a third-party, thus complicating our primary relationality. Yet the necessity to arbitrate between others is precisely for the sake of that original responsibility. To do so, the one who is incomparable before me and surpasses my powers of judgment must nonetheless be compared, and this necessitates justice. From that first love of my neighbour evolves a wisdom of love, to use Levinas’ reversal of “philosophia,” that limits my responsibility by allocating the necessary act of judgment to a tertiary, objective system—the rule of justice.¹² As such, “[j]ustice requires and establishes the state,” comparing individuals as citizens and not at the level of the face-to-face.¹³ This marks a return to politics by way of my responsibility to the other before me, distinguished from the political philosophy of the genus in which individuals consent to have their freedom checked by reason.

Levinas warns us, however, that while the interhuman perspective can subsist through a political order, it is equally liable to be lost within that system when the “astonishing alterity of the other has been banalized or dimmed down to a simple exchange of courtesies.”¹⁴ To counteract this, Levinas emphasizes that the just state depends on the human who does not allow his action to be guided by the imminent threat of such banal courtesy. If there is to be an ethical state, he argues, there must be a reminder of the essential human uniqueness—not only in the subject who is elected by the Other, but also in the Face that regards it as such—from which we derive “resources that cannot be deduced, nor reduced to the generalities of a legislation. [These are the] resources of charity that have not disappeared beneath the political structure of institutions: a religious breath or a prophetic voice.”¹⁵ It is up to the prophetic voice of the just man to un-conceal the Face from which our primary sociality originates.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, “Philosophy, Justice, and Love,” 103.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹² *Ibid.*, 104–5.

¹³ Levinas, “Uniqueness,” 196; “Philosophy, Justice, and Love,” 105.

¹⁴ Levinas, “Useless Suffering,” 101.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, “Dialogue on ‘Thinking-of-the-Other,’” 203.

In order not to pass over the obvious religious tones in Levinas' ethics, it is worthwhile to say a word on the Jewish tradition that informs his philosophy. He states outright in the interview, "Philosophy, Justice, and Love," that "The idea of an ethical state is biblical."¹⁶ This may be drawn back to the summons of the Other, which places a singular demand on a subject and impinges upon it an unalterable responsibility. In this face-to-face encounter, Levinas writes that the "word of God" is inscribed on the face of the Other, and he also employs the terminology of election here.¹⁷ This calls to mind the figure of Moses in Jewish theology, who alone comes closest to "facing" God and who is remembered above all for delivering the commandments. This Law is given not just as a means of prescribing justice in the community, but also as a sign of covenant renewal, emphasizing God's election of Israel, an act often depicted as one made out of love. These two terms, love and justice, appear in Levinasian ethics. Responsibility to the other is a complex kind of love out of which wisdom emerges, one employed by justice to arbitrate between one's incomparable others in a world of multiplicity. Even as the idea of God in Judaism is associated with justice, his principal attribute is mercy and in this way love must temper the hand of justice.¹⁸ This carries through to Levinas' understanding of the state as that which must necessarily register the Face of its citizens, of the neighbour one loves and is beholden to, in order for it to remain ethical. Individuals who possess a "prophetic vision" to remind the judges and statesmen of this primary, asymmetrical responsibility are those who understand ethics as that which is fundamentally for the other-than-one-self, who understands this "holiness" as the unassailable value.¹⁹ One need not be inspired by God to exhale this "religious breath"; in fact, it is the individual who is most acutely affected by his fellow man in the world that can produce this consciousness at all. We see another example of Levinas analyzing ethics in the light of the Jewish tradition without restricting his principal idea to that particular community in "Useless Suffering." Briefly, he argues that the faithfulness Emil Fackenheim proposes for Jews after Auschwitz can be extended on a universal plane. Despite the end of theodicy, because of the end of this theodicy, humanity *must* continue "in a faith more difficult than before," without the comforting idea of useful suffering. To dismiss this task risks abandoning the world with cruel indifference to misfortunes of a magnitude that defies all prediction.²⁰

¹⁶ Levinas, "Philosophy, Justice, and Love," 106.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Levinas, "Uniqueness," 196; "Dialogue on 'Thinking-of-the-Other,'" 203.

²⁰ Levinas, "Useless Suffering," 99.

In this overview of alterity and politics in Levinas' philosophy, there are certain weaknesses or gaps that must be addressed. Judith Butler critically engages with three important implications of his ethics in her own work on responsibility to the other and its relation to the state. To start, if the relation to the Other entails an unequivocal responsibility, we must understand why this stands even when the Other persecutes me, or others, which Butler investigates in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005). Next, one will recall that the just state can only be maintained as much as it acknowledges the primacy of the interhuman order, the responsibility of one in the Face of the other. Another perplexing aspect of Levinas' philosophy is the matter of how the Face is to be represented at all, especially by those prophetic voices that must remind judges and politicians of the ethical origin of the state. In addition, Levinas describes a curious ambiguity in the Face, in that its bare exposure, the tenuousness of its own survival, simultaneously entices me to murder it while uttering that fundamental commandment, "Thou Shalt not Kill."²¹ In response to the question of representation, Butler examines in the essay "Precarious Life" what it means for the Face to be—not as any particular human face, but rather in the significant condition for humanisation at all. She uses these observations to highlight the consequences of the government's control over images, which powerfully shapes the public's conception of a "grievable" life. Finally, in "Violence, Mourning, Politics," Butler addresses the ambiguity of the face, specifically the way in which we are all exposed to others, undone by others, through our feelings of grief, desire and rage. In this common vulnerability lies the resources for restructuring political community to be once more responsive and responsible for the sufferings of others, and more reflective of its fractured individuals, who would no longer be understood as strictly delineated beings. Similarly, Butler shows the boundaries between nations to be confounded as well, a permeability that, if recognized, could lead to a reconception of international relations that draws ultimately from the primary susceptibility of one before the Face of the Other, which stands at the core of Levinasian ethics.

Giving an Account of Oneself contains a section on the pre-eminence of the Other and the I's responsibility towards it in the work of both Levinas and psychoanalyst, Jean Laplanche. Butler scrutinizes why the Other who persecutes me is still one for whom I become unconditionally responsible. First of all she clarifies that this responsibility is not the result of an act that I brought upon myself, through my own deeds.²² The prehistory, or "preontological," state of the subject involves a passive formation of the "me," not by any act of my own will or choice, indeed before the "self" capable of those activities even emerges.²³ It is not a matter of what I do but

²¹ Levinas, "Philosophy, Justice, and Love," 104.

²² Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 84.

²³ *Ibid.*, 87.

rather what is done to me at the level of my primary susceptibility. Levinas further defines persecution as “the precise moment where the subject is reached or touched without the mediation of the logos.”²⁴ By “logos” he means consciousness or principle, thus before we are self-conscious, our being takes form in the accusation by the Other, hence the accusative term “me” rather than the nominative “I.” Proceeding from this is the inauguration of my “self,” which is now capable of grasping phenomena in the world, demarcating the active passivity of sensation that Levinas distinguishes from the absolute passivity one experiences in suffering. Butler takes care to show that this initiation of a sense of my “self” involves at the very start a sense of the Other within whose persecutory regard I begin to form.

As discussed in “Philosophy, Justice, and Love,” Levinas believes the election of the subject in the Face of the Other is the moment it is distinguished as a unique, irreplaceable individual due to the immutable responsibility he or she bears towards the Other. He argues that the subject in this position is able to substitute himself for every man but no man can take his place insofar as he holds himself indisputably beholden to the Other; again one recalls Levinas’ declaration that “All men are responsible for one another and I more than anyone else.”²⁵ *Giving an Account of Oneself* expands on this notion of substitution, for after my persecution by the Other, “something places itself in my place, and an “I” emerges who can understand its place in no other way than as this place already occupied by another. *In the beginning, then, I am not only persecuted but besieged, occupied.*”²⁶ If we are fundamentally constituted by the Other, the ethical demand placed on us must always be in operation with respect to the persecutor. Indeed Levinas stresses that it is more precisely the Other who brutalizes me that bears the Face and makes its irreducible claim on my person to begin with.²⁷ Rather than interpret this relationality as an impossible burden, Butler claims that this unwilling susceptibility can become a resource of ethical response to the Other, that although this vulnerability was no choice of our own, it forms the “horizon of choice,” grounding our responsibility to the other in an absolute way, leaving no room for doubt.²⁸

The question of representing the Face is also taken up in Butler’s work. The Face for Levinas is not of any human kind, and indeed it is unrepresentable in the sense that it is a *datum* that cannot be assumed by one’s consciousness. Nonetheless Butler recognizes it as the possibility of humanization, without which the Other would seem too remote to inspire response and responsibility in the subject. She

²⁴ Quoted in *Ibid.*

²⁵ Levinas, “Philosophy, Justice, and Love,” 107.

²⁶ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 89.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 90.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.

then brings attention to those normative schemes that determine certain lives as liveable, certain deaths as grievable. Personifying individuals as “lesser humans” may entail strategically crafting their public image, or else may provide “no image, no name, no narrative, so that there never was a life and there never was a death.”²⁹ Butler argues this derealisation of loss obscures the suffering of others, muting the original cry for aid that besieges us before we reconstitute ourselves as inexorably responsible human beings. To put a stopper on what would otherwise call for mourning, the experience of which opens us to our primary dependency on others, removes the possibility of using these common affects as resources to guide our responsibility towards the Other.³⁰ The challenge is to interrogate images as they filter through the media, and perhaps more significantly to search for the ones that do not, such that the precariousness of life can be represented in humanized form. Only then can ethical outrage be generated for the Other, inciting political action even or especially when the government has forgotten its origin in the interhuman order. The prophetic voices can maintain justice only if they are aware of the Faces calling out for help in the first place.

Whether or not Levinas promotes this ethical model for political bodies around the world is debatable. We have already discussed the religious tones in his ideas, which appeared more as useful descriptors for the relation to the Other than as measures to restrict his philosophy to the Judaic tradition. He even proposes that Fackenheim’s call for faithfulness among Jews after Auschwitz ought to be mandated for humanity as a whole. At the same time, Judith Butler illuminates certain aspects in his thought that require a careful consideration of the universality of his claims. She begins by pointing out Levinas’ response to questions regarding the place of the Holocaust in his ideas of persecution and responsibility. To summarize, he sees the event as lying at the core of Judaism and Israel itself, leaving the latter term unambiguously identified as either the people or the land in Palestine.³⁴ Butler points out that this direct connection between the Nazi genocide and the sufferings of Israel exclude Jews in the diaspora and those against Zionism. It also fails to register Israel as a persecutor in its own right—the displacement of 700,000 Palestinians in 1948 is a strong example of this. In addition, to claim persecution as an essential feature of Judaism ignores suffering in its historical context, which can lead to confusion between the preontological moment of persecution and the “culturally constituted ontology” of Jewishness.³² More explicitly still, Butler quotes Levinas in *Difficult Free-*

²⁹ Judith Butler, “Precarious Life,” in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, (London: Verso, 2004), 146.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 149-150.

³⁴ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 93.

³² *Ibid.*, 95.

dom as claiming that his ethics can only emerge from the Judaeo-Christian milieu: “[the] rise of the countless masses of Asiatic and underdeveloped peoples threatens the new-found authenticity” of Jewish universalism.³³ As opposed to denouncing his theory outright, Butler cleverly defends his ethics by turning it on Levinas himself.

Butler argues that the blow Levinas has struck against our expectations for a universally applicable philosophy must be taken as an act of persecution in its own right; hence, we have been addressed and given an unalterable responsibility towards him. Butler goes on to explore how our primary susceptibility to the Other, which lies at the core of Levinas’ ethics, may be used as a resource to guide our behaviour towards others. In particular, she instils elements from Laplanche’s psychoanalytical argument of the Other’s primacy within our psyche to draw out the embodied affects of our vulnerability. Essentially, like the process of ever-going substitution of myself by the Other who besieges me, Laplanche sees self-consciousness as “always driven...by an alterity that has become internal, a set of enigmatic signifiers that pulse through us in ways that make us permanently and partially foreign to ourselves.”³⁴ The key distinction between this interpretation and Levinas’ is the consideration of primary impressionability as inciting a response from the subject, for example as helplessness, anxiety, fright or desire, in contrast to an utter passivity.³⁵ By accounting for the ways we are given over to the other as physical bodies constantly exposed to the violence or tenderness of others, Butler explores mourning and desire as universal qualities that may crucially allow us to question and reconsider ourselves as political beings living in a time of increasing global contact.

“Violence, Mourning, Politics” builds on Levinas’ concept of the Face as a site of ambiguity, which not only cries for aid but solicits murder by exposing the precariousness of its life. In Butler’s essay, “[l]oss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure.”³⁶ These are common experiences of mankind, the primary susceptibility articulated by Levinas concretely expressed through instances of physical, emotional and psychical undoing. Butler consistently emphasizes our skin as that barrier so easily crossed by the touch of tenderness and malice alike. Writing in response to the attacks on September 11th, Butler wonders how an awareness of our risky exposure to others could have changed the Bush administration’s reaction to the events. Instead of working through the shock of this massive security breach, the United States sought to salvage its “imagined wholeness” and deny its own vulnerability.³⁷ Just ten days after the attacks, the president announced an end

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Judith Butler, “Violence, Mourning, Politics,” *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 4 (2003), 10.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

to mourning and a call to retribution. Butler sees this as a fear of grieving, of acknowledging the penetrability of America's protective borders, out of a belief that to do so would suggest one's powerlessness. To the contrary, disavowing loss ignores recognizing our primary susceptibility out of which we establish a collective responsibility for one another. It ignores the inexhaustible resources of our charity, the love of the neighbour, and that most basic form of response to the call of the Other.³⁸ Butler concludes this article by discussing how borders between nations have become blurry in a way that is reminiscent of the indistinct separations between my self and the Other by whom I am undone. She describes this as an auspicious sign; it is one we infer that portends the possibility of a transnational ethics of the Other, which will see our primary susceptibility as a resource, as the "horizon of choice" and the hard terrain of our unalterable responsibility to one another.

In conclusion, Emmanuel Levinas' reimagining of ethics on the order of one's asymmetrical responsibility before the Other is itself made in answer to the address issued by the excruciating events of recent history. He registers a breakdown in the ancient model of reciprocal alterity among individuals in a genus, which curbed their violent and exclusionary freedom by a communal consent to the governing rule of reason. The devastations of the 20th century showed very clearly that politics and ethics could be separated, that from this division a limitless violence could be released, causing gratuitous suffering for its own sake. Levinas offers an ethical grounding that precedes the state, taking place between the self and the Other. The irrevocable responsibility I assume when the Face of the Other regards me precedes all judgment. Only with the introduction of the third-party does justice become necessary as an arbitrator between my incomparables.

Judith Butler's interpretation of Levinas untangles some of the more ambiguous elements of his thought, such as the representation of the Face and its strategic dehumanisation by political powers, of which one must be mindful. Most importantly, she takes the primary susceptibility of the Levinasian subject and incorporates an account of our *embodied* vulnerability to the other in grief and desire. By situating the self in concrete, physical terms, she creates a more relatable account of Levinas' unfaltering, asymmetrical responsibility to the other, one that can be established on a universal basis. It is from the fact that we are always already given over in part to the Other, and that the boundaries delineating one human from another are much more blurred than expected, that she argues political rights need to be reimagined to accommodate this relationality. By introducing this idea of confounding boundaries to nations at large, Butler opens the possibility of implementing our susceptibility to the Other on a global scale. It is only in Butler's appropriation and interpretation

³⁸ *Ibid.*

of Levinas' ethics on beings-for-the-other that we see the real challenges facing its actual application. At the same time, her attention to our embodied vulnerabilities more powerfully suggests the possibility of reimagining community inasmuch as this common experience is recognized as an inexhaustible resource rather than a weakness to be covered over.

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