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## Review

# Butler and Ethics

Moya Lloyd

Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 304pp., ISBN: 0748678840

*Contemporary Political Theory* (2017) **16**, 422–425. doi:10.1057/s41296-016-0067-x; advance online publication 15 September 2016

Moya Lloyd's edited volume *Butler and Ethics* represents a valuable contribution to scholarly literature on the work of Judith Butler. One merit of the volume is that, far from speaking in a uniform voice, the authors take up a diversity of positions on Butler's thought, diverging with respect to the value of central concepts (such as recognition, livability, grievability, and vulnerability), the status of normativity and Butler's 'ethical turn,' and the strength or radicalness of her politics. Common themes include the role of affect in ethics, the relationship between politics and ethics, political demonstration, contestation, or appeal, and Butler's appropriation of other thinkers (e.g., Althusser, Levinas). The volume also performs the helpful service of forging connections between Butler's more recent work (e.g., *Giving an Account of Oneself*, *Frames of War*, *Parting Ways*, and *Dispossession*) and the concepts at the heart of her earlier work, such as performativity, intelligibility, and subjection.

The relationship between affect and ethics in Butler's work is addressed by Rushing's and Schipper's essays. Rushing asks if Butler's contention is that we need to 'restructure our senses' to generate ethical responsiveness, then how does such restructuring occur (p. 79)? She concludes that Butler's work lacks a crucial component – an account of 'the *motivation* to dwell in vulnerability, resist aggression' and assume responsibility (p. 80) – but can be supplemented effectively by resources from virtue ethics (concepts of character, virtue, and habit). Although Schippers lauds the role affect has in foregrounding the relationality of the ethical subject and 'the visceral dimensions of global dependence and interdependence,' she critiques Butler's view for a lack of 'normative plausibility' (p. 92). Here again the connection, or alleged lack thereof, between feeling and responsibility and the motivational gap is highlighted, with Schippers inquiring as to 'how ethical responsibility becomes an affective demand' (p. 102) and 'under what conditions should I *feel* ethically responsible toward others' (p. 109).

Mills raises similar questions in her reading of Butler. She interprets Butler as offering an ethics grounded upon failure, namely the self's opacity to itself, rather than upon constitutive relationality. As a consequence, Mills argues that Butler's



ethics runs into problems. First, responsibility must be understood as ‘primarily a responsibility for oneself’ (p. 42) and so, given this ontology, Butler ‘cannot give an account of why we are compelled to respond to the claim of others’ (p. 58). Second, the focus on shared vulnerability and substitutability ‘risk[s] tying Butler’s ethics to the reintegration of otherness within the order of the same’ and thus rendering it closer to more traditional ethical theories, which require a common characteristic as a foundation for normativity (p. 59). On this point, as with the prior essays, I would have liked to see further development of the critical claim: *how* does the stipulation of a common vulnerability operate to impose sameness? How does this view contrast with Jenkins’ view that ‘[f]ar from being what we already recognise as “the common condition of humanity” ... precarious life is the very site of the “inassimilable” that perpetually bears the potential to break norms apart’ (p. 128)? Too often, even in these rich essays, the common academic tendency is to engage in extended exposition but at the cost of leaving critical claims underdeveloped.

A frequent point of reference throughout the volume is Bonnie Honig’s critique of a ‘*mortalist* humanism,’ the product of an ‘ethical turn’ that evades politics to focus on survival and corporeal vulnerability, and which Honig (2010, p. 1) associates with Butler. The essays by Gies, Jenkins, and Lloyd all rebut this critique in various ways and so query the relationship between politics and ethics (see also Kramer, 2015). Gies does so by taking up the figure whose influence is often cited as a source of Butler’s purported depoliticization: Levinas. Gies offers an alternative vision in which Levinas’ account of language as a site of dispossession offers us resources for contending with miscommunication and misunderstanding in political contests over the terms of livability, and so for ‘imagining remedies beyond those that merely attempt to reassert control, ownership and authority’ (p. 31). Jenkins locates the joint work of both ethics and politics in ‘the *response* to an event of *contestation*, an *address* initiated when’ an appeal for recognition is made; such an event is ‘a demand for pluralisation’ (pp. 123, 137). Unlike other contributors who view Butler’s attentiveness to a shared vulnerability as a return to a problematic universality or commonality, such as Chambers (p. 213) and Mills (p. 59), Jenkins sees Butler’s politics of ‘sensate democracy’ as one that contests both the assumption and the present configuration of universality. For Jenkins, politics and ethics differ in their focus: political engagement happens through ‘provocative claim[s]’ (p. 124) and the ensuing contestation over what can be expressed, perceived, and understood in the public sphere, and ethics, along Foucaultian lines, is a practice of critique, especially of norms and the procedure of evaluation itself (p. 132). Yet underlying both is the ontological supposition of precarious life as potentiality (p. 129) and the attendant implication of ‘transformability’ (p. 132): thus, ethics and politics are different, but thoroughly interconnected practices of transformation.

Lloyd, in contrast, meditates on the distance between Butler’s ethics and politics in exploring Butler’s account of corporeal vulnerability. *Contra* the common view



that finds Butler's politics lacking, Lloyd concludes that Butler's discussions of ethics are unhelpfully abstract in contrast with her discussions of politics, which center on actual, concrete conditions of precarity (p. 185). Thus, her essay returns to the questions about how to motivate ethical responsiveness and responsibility raised by Mills, Rushing, and Schippers. Lloyd's interpretation answers, albeit perhaps unsatisfyingly for those who want more from Butler, the questions raised by the other authors: Butler has no desire to supply such accounts of motivation, compulsion, or obligation. Indeed, because ethical responsiveness and ethical action are 'largely non-consensual[,] impossible to anticipate or control, 'it is [also] impossible to know, categorically, what triggers that responsiveness in the first place beyond the general existential propensity for dispossession' (pp. 183–184). Thus, Lloyd contends, it is difficult to discern how to undo discursive frames that impede ethical responsiveness. It seems that this lack is a product of the abstractness of Butler's ethical thinking.

A number of the contributors draw attention to the importance of the concrete in at least two senses: first, attending to the concrete material conditions of people's lives and the reality of protest that stems from those conditions; second, theorizing so as to avoid claims that have an aura of generality or universality. Walker's compelling analysis of the concepts of 'the human' and 'dehumanization' calls for attention to the concrete in the first sense by challenging the assumption that injustice is rooted in failing to perceive others as human. Butler's concern with how lives are rendered unintelligible, unlivable, ungrievable, unrecognizable, and/or derealized 'presumes that the solution ... depends upon the recovery, recognition, and making-visible of the humanness of the other' (p. 145). Walker contends that this solution resolves the tension in Butler's work between 'survival and a desire for subversion[,] which can be interpreted as a tension between ethical and political aims, in favor of a general project of ensuring survival via representation and visibility (p. 146). In contrast, Walker argues that those who do not conform to dominant norms are not invisible but rather are made 'more visible as aberrations from and threats to the dominant normative practices[,] a view more consistent with Butler's earlier articulation of the disruptive power of performativity (p. 151). Thus, the aims of politics and ethics, subversion and survival, can be conjoined when we begin from the actual, specific experiences and protests of particular people, which are testaments to and assertions of how much they matter: political action in dire conditions is a mode of subversive survival.

Chambers' contribution draws attention to the absence of the concrete in the second sense by criticizing Butler not for what her work lacks but more specifically for removing an account of social formation from the thinkers to whom she refers (p. 196). He offers a convincing analysis of Butler's interpretation of Althusser's scene of interpellation in *The Psychic Life of Power*, maintaining that she decontextualizes the interpellative address and so reduces it to 'a philosophically abstract theory of subjection' (p. 204). Butler must thus fill the space of the social and, more recently,



does so with an ontology of vulnerability (p. 194) that Chambers contends reduces the social to what ‘is not merely me’ (p. 208), leading Butler to a liberal political philosophy (p. 211). Chambers associates these decontextualizing, generalizing, and dehistoricizing moves with the genre of philosophy (see pp. 195, 206), which, in light of the work of philosophers of the concrete such as Marx, Althusser, and Foucault, seems an odd contention in an otherwise well-argued essay.

Thus, like Mills, Chambers finds Butler’s recent ethical work uninspiring and more traditional than it intends to be. I might ordinarily be inclined to contest this reading of Butler in a review such as this one, but the emphasis the essays in this volume give to actual lives and concrete socio-historical circumstances prompt me to ponder what the ultimate value of this kind of highly theoretical challenge would be. The attention throughout to the concrete and politics is admirable, yet, on the whole, the main concerns raised are theoretical ones about the adequacy of Butler’s work. Accordingly, the volume will be of particular value for academics engaged with the aforementioned theoretical issues and sets the stage for further constructive work on effective forms of political contestation, strategies for dealing with impediments to ethical responsiveness, and means of affective transformation. Indeed, Lloyd effectively concludes that Butler refrains from offering a solution to the problem of how to ‘overcome ... normative constrictions’ (p. 186). We might speculate that this refusal on Butler’s part is due not only to an eschewal of specific prescription but also to a ‘turn’ to activism and away from theoretical adequacy, whatever that looks like. Regardless, we need not be satisfied with what Butler offers us; however, we might wonder whether Lloyd’s conclusion (and the concerns about moral motivation and obligation) points us not to the insufficiency of Butler’s ethics but rather to the place where theory invariably ends and other practices of living must begin.

## References

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