Vulnerable in a Job Interview

Butler's Relational Ontology of Vulnerability as a Response to (Neo)liberalism

Nanna Hlín Halldórsdóttir

Dissertation towards the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

In recent years, the concept of vulnerability has gained momentum both in feminist philosophy and as an interdisciplinary concept. The philosopher Judith Butler is well known for exposing how hidden ontological assumptions permeate social institutions and discourses. In this dissertation, her philosophy in and around the 2005 book *Giving an Account of Oneself*, is read as an affirmative account of a relational ontology of vulnerability, which is vital for thinking ethics and politics together. Vulnerability is hence neither understood as a negative trait nor as a new ideal to aspire to. The subtlety of Butler's account culminates in the way the epistemic vulnerability of opacity not only establishes this form of social ontology but offers a new ethical perspective with relationality at its heart. I explore this "turn" to vulnerability as a response to the individuation of the neoliberal period and as a desire to realise a space for difference, multiple subjectivities and supportive collectivity in social terms.

However, why is this not happening? Why is it so difficult to present us as vulnerable to others and to acknowledge vulnerability? It will be argued that the social and historical conditions of the present need to be taken into account for a viable transition from an ontology of liberalism to an ontology of vulnerability. The need to appear as an "invulnerable subject" or the "possessive individual" in capitalist labour systems – to *promise* an employer that one is an able worker – affects one's possibilities of being vulnerable. You cannot "come out" as a person with chronic illness in a job interview. Even in the case where an employer is likely to hire you, you would not take the risk of exposing such vulnerability, if you find yourself without livelihood.

Feeling vulnerable in a job interview is thus presented as an illustrative example of this present-day paradox of being vulnerable in various ways but being structurally required to present oneself as a desirable and able worker. I locate the potential to alter this ontological condition – which forces us to appear invulnerable – in

the contemporary feminist revolutions such as the 2015 emotional revolutions in Iceland called Beauty Tips and #freethenipple, and the recent international #metoo revolution.

Ágrip

Berskjölduð í atvinnuviðtali:
Tengslaverufræði Judith Butler sem viðbragð við (ný)frjálshyggju

Síðustu ár hefur hugtakið *berskjöldun* (e. *vulnerability*) átt miklu brautargengi að fanga bæði í fræðalandslagi femínískrar heimspeki og sem þverfaglegt hugtak. Heimspekingurinn Judith Butler hefur vakið eftirtekt fyrir að benda á hve gagnrýnislaust sé gengið út frá ákveðnum mannskilningi og verufræði í samfélaginu, t.d. hvað varðar kyn, og hvernig þessi verufræði viðhaldi ráðandi samfélagsgerð. Í þessari doktorsritgerð er heimspeki Butler túlkuð í bókinni *Giving an Account of Oneself* frá 2005 og tengdum verkum sem *tengslaverufræði berskjöldunar* (e. *relational ontology of vulnerability*) og er því haldið fram að þessi verufræði sé nauðsynleg til að skilja og betrumbæta samspil siðfræði og stjórnmála í samtímanum. Berskjöldun er hvorki skilin sem neikvæður eiginleiki né sem ný gerð af hugsjón sem maður ætti að sækjast eftir. Hin þekkingarfræðilega berskjöldun sem felst í hugmyndinni um *óminni* (e. *opacity*) liggur ennfremur til grundvallar þeirri siðfræði sem fylgir í kjölfar verufræðinnar. Ég greini þessa vaxandi orðræðu berskjöldunar, sem Butler er hluti af, sem svar við einstaklingshyggju nýfrjálshyggjunnar og sem ákall á breytta samfélgsgerð þar sem hægt er að birtast í berskjöldun sinni, lifa með henni og styðja aðra til slíks hins sama.

En af hverju er þetta ekki að gerast? Af hverju er svona erfitt að birtast öðrum í berskjöldun sinni og gangast við því að við upplifum okkur svo? Ég færi rök fyrir því að huga beri að félagslegum og sögulegum aðstæðum í vestrænum löndum með það fyrir augum að umbreyta hinni ráðandi verufræði frjálshyggjunnar í verufræði berskjöldunar. Á þessum sögulega tíma þarf manneskjan að birtast sem hin *ósæranlega sjálfsvera* (e. *invulnerable subject*) eða sem hinn *eignarvæddi einstaklingur* (e. the *possessive individual*) til þess að geta selt vinnuafl sitt í skiptum fyrir laun í kapítalískri formgerð framleiðslu. Þess vegna er ekki hægt að koma fram sem langveik

manneskja í atvinnuviðtali. Jafnvel þótt atvinnurekandi væri líklegur til þess að ráða þá manneskju myndi hún ekki taka áhættuna á að afhjúpa slíka berskjöldum ef hún virkilega þarf á lífsviðurværi að halda. Hin langveika manneskja í atvinnuviðtali er þannig sett fram í ritgerðinni sem birtingarmynd þeirrar þverstæðu samtímans að fólk er berskjaldað á margvíslegan hátt en samfélagsformgerðin gerir þeim vart kleift að birtast samtímis í berskjöldun og sem æskilegur starfskraftur. Möguleikar á tengslaverufræði berskjöldunar og á breyttum mannskilningi eru þó fyrir hendi og eru að mínu mati að finna í þeirri umbyltingu sem finna má í hinum nýlegu femínísku byltingum, bæði í tilfinninga byltingunum sem áttu sér stað á Íslandi 2015 og í hinni alþjóðlegu #metoo-byltingu.

List of Abbreviations

Books by Judith Butler:

GT: Gender Trouble.

GAO: Giving an Account of Oneself

UG: Undoing Gender

PL: Precarious Life

PLP: Psychic Life of Power

FW: Frames of War

DPP: Dispossession: The Performative in the Political

JB: Judith Butler, **AA**: Athena Athanasiou

Books by others:

RN: Relating Narratives – Adriana Cavarero

US: Unbecoming Subjects – Annika [Yannik] Thiem

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Preface

I grew up in a post-feminist world, as we believed equality was already acquired. We had a female president in Iceland when I was a child and we laughed at how my mother was not allowed to learn woodcraft in school, being a girl back then, in the big, bad and oppressive past.

In this post-feminist, neoliberal world, I got used to defining equality in terms of competition; that all of us should just have equal *opportunities* to compete. If we worked hard and built up resilience, this fair and equal system guaranteed rewards for our merits. I learned early on to fault myself for not faring better, at the same time as I was socially constructed and encouraged to have ambitions towards jobs in which my individual name would shine. Making a living out of "jobs" in which my personal creativity would prosper was the ideal: being an artist, documentary maker or a writer, rather than becoming one of the many anonymous pre-school teachers or workers in the service industry—that is, if I did not take more of a "money-road" and become a lawyer. These examples show that I hold a position of privilege; from my comfortable and supportive "middle-class" background, I could naively believe in the liberal idea of equality of opportunities that did not give an account of unequal relations of power. Those without these privileges are probably not as easily fooled by the "equal" game of competition, experiencing it as harsh and inhumane.

The economic crash in Iceland in 2008 tore down this worldview, and I felt like I had been fooled by the "common sense" within my own society. Thus, the logical action was to turn my theoretical gaze towards Marxism; a turn shared by many others. Although my post-feminist "certainty" had certainly begun to crumble little by little by this point, the political awakening following the economic crash furthermore helped me to see the gender dynamics of the culture of intertwined financial powers and politics that led to the crash. In the midst of political protests and public uproar in Reykjavík and London, we, the students, rejected our birth-right to

consumerism and believed we were attacking all hierarchies...except that my *felt sense*, my intuition told me we were not really doing it. We were forming the personal identities of activist-academics without looking at our micro-environment. We had yet to realise the multiple ways the personal is political.

After this experience, I started to ponder the limits of formal equality and what actual equality could feel like. As a MA-student of philosophy at Kingston University in London I was one of the few women amongst male peers, and soon I really started to question and reflect upon the dynamics of the classrooms, as well as our relationships. Why was I being so anxious about speaking my mind? Why was it so difficult for me to ask "silly" questions? Why did I experience this shame of pronouncing something inaccurately in English, as well as shame about my Icelandic accent? These anxieties were shared by my fellow students, but we did not have the conceptual means to connect our protests on the streets against unfair structures to our immediate experiences of being situated within these same structures. Soon I discovered that these complex power dynamics of the classroom were being illuminated and criticised within feminist philosophy.

It was, however, my experience of becoming chronically ill in 2009, which got me to think about vulnerability in relation to the present-day labour structures of capitalism. I was, and I continue to be, stuck between systems of livelihood. Without a categorical recognition of a "disease", my illness of ME/CFS does not provide me with disability benefits, and yet I cannot attend an actual work-place from nine to five (nor anything close to that). Even though I have a mild version of ME/CFS and a considerable "cultural capital" as a university student, the fact that I cannot take whichever job is on offer subjects me to a heightened state of precarity, and produces an anxiety within me about my future prospects. Furthermore, I am repeatedly surprised by how difficult it remains to tell people about my condition. For a long time I avoided speaking about it in any "public" encounter, even casual ones. I was afraid that merely mentioning my illness would make others feel uncomfortable, and I was also afraid it would somehow affect my "viability" as a subject, that I would be seen as a broken commodity.

When your body constantly feels and aches, yet you pretend to be strong and invulnerable, you cannot help but feel like a utter "fake".

At the same time, it has been tremendously empowering to follow bed-ridden ME/CFS patients‘ struggle for a recognition of the disease as well as a greater knowledge of ways of living with it. The ways of learning to live with my disease mostly come from such peer-to peer/patient-to-patient online communities, in which people support each other and generously share knowledge with the hope that others will be able to manage a sense of wellness. The ME/CFS community knows all too well the difficulty of living with this condition, too many people have been unable to go on and committed suicide. At the same time, these online communities have been a life-safer for many, both as a way out of isolation and because of the sense of shared understanding of being (stuck) in these vulnerable and difficult circumstances, which majority of people do not understand. Even though many of these people are either bed-bound or house-bound, they have shown diverse ways of contributing to society, being active and exercising their own agency whilst lying in bed. I think appreciating and acknowledging their contribution is of greatest importance.

My life as a doctoral student has not always been easy, but this journey has been extremely rewarding. Through my studies I have met many wonderful people and I have gotten great opportunities. I am very happy to be part of the academic community that has been developing around feminist philosophy at the Univesity of Iceland, this community has given me great support.

I am very grateful for the financial support I have acquired in order to complete my studies, especially the two doctoral grants I acquired from *The Icelandic Centre for Research* (Rannís), one of which was through the 2015 project-grant *Feminist Philosophy Transforming Philosophy*. I am also thankful for having received two *Erasmus+* grants for residencies at *Helsinki University* in 2014 and at the *Center for Interdisciplinary Research and Gender Studies* at *Technische Universität Berlin* 2015-2016. I am furthermore grateful for the travel grants I got from the *Intergender Research School* in order to attend doctoral courses and conferences in Linköping and Berlin, 2012-2014. I am also very grateful for having been able to

particpate in the COST-action *New Materialism: Networking European Scholarship on "How matter comes to matter"* and for the travel grants I received in order to attend conferences and working-group sessions in Barcelona, Porto and Warsaw 2014-2016.

I would like to thank my colleagues from the research-project *Feminist Philosophy Transforming Philosophy*, Ole Sandberg, Steinunn Hreinsdóttir, Erla Karlsdóttir, Dr. Guðbjörg R. Jóhannesdóttir and Dr. Eyja M. Brynjarsdóttir, for a great collaboration both in terms of producing a supportive research environment as well as on the different collective projects, such as publishing the 2016 diary on female philosophers and organising the 2017 conference *Feminist Utopia: Transforming the Present of Philosophy*. I would also like to thank Dr. Emily Blakelock for her great copy-editing and thoughtful comments on my dissertation.

I would like to dearly thank the members of my doctoral committee. Being able to converse with Dr. Hanna Meissner about Butler's work during my residency at TU Berlin was of great importance to me. Dr. Björn Þorsteinsson has been a great support throughout the whole doctoral process, extremely helpful as an editor, and last but not least, our conversations about philosophy and social change have been very productive for my work.

I am greatly thankful to my supervisor Dr. Sigríður Þorgeirsdóttir for directing me in the ways of structuring a PhD-project and writing a dissertation, for being very supportive through the different stages of my doctoral studies, and I am deeply thankful for her encouragement to find and to trust my own personal voice and to philosophise through my individual experiences. It has been of outmost importance for me to be able to do philosophy in this way.

I would like to thank all my friends who have been there for me, listening to my struggles with the PhD-project and coming up with great suggestions, especially my friends Gústav Adolf Bergmann Sigurbjörnsson, Valgerður Pálmadóttir, Dr. Olga Cielemecka, Daniel Nemenyi, Davíð Alexander Corno and Áslaug Einarsdóttir. Finally I would like to thank my family dearly for all their support and help. My brothers, Bjarki Gunnar Halldórsson and Björn Reynir Halldórsson have been very supportive. I would not have been able to finish this doctoral dissertation if it were not for the endless love and support

from my parents, Guðrún Þ. Björnsdóttir and Halldór Reynisson. Great parts of this dissertation were written in the South of Iceland, either in Skálholt or in my father's summer-house, and the tranquility and beauty of these locations greatly helped my writing process.

I would have been so happy if my grandmother Bíbi – Jakobína Finnbogadóttir would have been able to see me finish the process of becoming a doctor. Her lifelong encouragement and support for me to enjoy and work firmly on philosophy, literature and art, has made me the person I am today. Fortunately, she witnessed me becoming a mother to my son Omid in 2016. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my boys: my partner Navid Nouri, and my son Omid Ari Nönnu-Navidsson. It was wonderful to have a little baby boy in the midst of writing a PhD-dissertation, but also very difficult. I am very thankful to Navid for all his love and support through this, and the way we have been able to balance the different elements in our lives and make a beautiful home and family.

Introduction

In this dissertation, the aim is to read Judith Butler's "ethical turn" as an affirmation of a relational ontology of vulnerability, responding to the prevalent ontology of the subject of (neo)liberalism. The main point of reference will be Butler's book *Giving an Account of Oneself* published in 2005.[1] I read her work in the context of feminist philosophy, as part of a feminist response to the hyper-individualised concept of the subject in neoliberalism.[2] Liberal ontology places responsibility on individual shoulders and does not encourage systems of support and collectivity. As a response, the relational ontology of vulnerability can provide supportive collectivity— but social and systematic recognition is needed for that to happen.

Thus, I argue that the social and historical conditions of the present need to be taken into account for a viable transition from an ontology of this form of individualism to an ontology of vulnerability. This could help to explain why it is so difficult *to be* vulnerable, in whatever way one feels vulnerable. Understanding the need to exchange (and keep exchanging) one's labour-power under the current conditions of capitalist production—to *promise* an employer that one is an able worker—affects one's possibilities for being vulnerable. Accordingly, by offering an illustrative example of feeling vulnerable in a job interview, I will suggest where we need to develop political strategies so that this ontological transition can take

[1] Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005). Hereafter referred to as *Giving an Account*.

[2] Neoliberalism has been subject of extensive discussion for the last few decades, producing a vast body of literature spanning many disciplines and subjects. In this dissertation I mostly follow the feminist critique of liberalism and neoliberalism, especially those under the influence of Michel Foucault and his 1979 lecture series *The Birth of Biopolitics*, such as Wendy Brown and Johanna Oksala. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015); Johanna Oksala, *Feminist Experiences: Foucauldian and Phenomenological Investigations* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2016).

place.[3] I conclude by showing that the seeds of this ontology have certainly been planted, especially in the emotional, feminist revolutions taken place for the last years such as #freethenipple as well as #konurtala in Iceland, and #metoo internationally. How to harvest that energy towards a collective system of livelihood, which would allow people to sit comfortably in their vulnerabilities is the task at hand.

A relational ontology of vulnerability

One of the major themes of feminist philosophy is to cast a critical light on the tradition of Western philosophy, especially in terms of its underlying patriarchal and oppressive ontological assumptions about the human subject. This critique is historically a fairly recent theoretical enterprise, corresponding to the rise of neoliberalism as the prevalent ideology in Western countries, and to that of global capitalism.[4] Simultaneously, a feminist critique of subject conceptions of liberalism (and most recently neoliberalism) has been carried out along with *affirming* certain kinds of ethics and politics by posing other sets of ontologies, based on what has historically been associated with the feminine. Accordingly, an increased emphasis on notions traditionally related with the feminine is evident in this work, both in terms of criticising how they have conventionally been used and in a quest to reclaim and redefine them. Examples of this theoretical activity, which will be a subject of discussion in this dissertation, are Carol Pateman's exposure of the hidden stories of *The Sexual Contract* as well as Linda Gordon's and Nancy Fraser's

[3] My example will be the case of a chronically ill person desperately needing a job and thus giving an account of herself as an able, healthy worker instead of "sharing" this vulnerability that above all else, conditions her life. Another, perhaps more common, example is being pregnant in the job interview; and more generally being a woman of reproductive age trying to acquire a means of subsistence in the job market. This latter example will be engaged with in the second chapter of this dissertation, which shows that the logic of liberalism is essentially gendered.

[4] An example of pioneer works commencing this critique are without doubt Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason* (London: Routledge, [1984] 1993) and Susan Moller Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

genealogical account of dependency.[5] The liberal subject, who is supposed to be utterly independent, is a normative ideal producing a certain kind of ontology, an understanding of the "human" subject that can not account for the fact that the subject always relies on having been cared for, born in a primary dependency. This impossible ideal is felt everywhere in the lived experience of "concrete" humans of Western societies, such as when one takes care not to expose a weak spot amongst the mates or when one performs as an able employee at the job interview despite a having a chronic migraine that affects one's ability.

Butler has increasingly become established as one of the contemporary thinkers with the prospect of achieving a canonical status, often related with the works of Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud and more recently post-structuralist thought in general, i.e thinkers critiquing the self-coherent subject in post-Kantian, "continental" philosophy. This critique is continuously executed in relation to what is frequently called either a bourgeois or liberal ideology, corresponding with the establishment of industrial (and later financial) capitalism.[6] Yet Butler's works are not commonly read in this connection and she is frequently accused of either being a liberal thinker of individual freedom of choice, or one

[5] Linda Gordon and Nancy Fraser, "Genealogy of Dependency: Tracing a Keyword of the US Welfare" *Signs*, Vol 19, No.2 (Winter 1994); Carol Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Standford University Press, 1988). An example of the ethics of care would be Eva Feder Kittay, *Love's Labour: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999); an example of Marxist feminism would be Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004).

[6] In terms of ideology, the terms bourgeois ideology and liberal ideology are frequently used interchangeably, as they describe the same social mechanisms, which favour and reproduce the ruling class of societies based on capitalist production, namely the bourgeoise. Liberalism, however, has many rather diverse connotations, most of which share a demand for (or a belief in) the benefits of freedom for the individual and a free market. The relationship between liberalism and capitalism is also complex: the two are strictly speaking not the same, as there can be a "crisis" in capitalism which does not result in a crisis of liberalism and vice versa. Although the conceptions of these "ideologies" are in constant need of clarification (which is outside of the scope of this dissertation), I follow the feminist path of performing a critique of liberalism and neoliberalism, and I am performing this critique a few decades into the hegomony of neoliberalism, yet during times when its hegemony appears to be in crisis.

who lacks engagement with economic issues.[7] In a debate with Nancy Fraser on whether her works were "merely cultural", lacking material and economic analysis proper to critical theory Butler asks: " is it possible to distinguish, even analytically, between a lack of cultural recognition and material oppression, when the very definition of "personhood" is rigorously circumscribed by cultural norms that are indissociable from their material effects?"[8] The relational ontology at the core of Butler's "ethical turn" is a vigorous attempt not only to criticise the "personhood" dominated by the liberal subject, but to be *responsive*, to respond with an ontological framework (of intelligibility) that makes space for different ways of being vulnerable. Johanna Oksala, who shares a commitment to Foucauldian analysis and an emphasis on historicity with Butler, suggests a *feminist ontology of the present* in her book *Feminist Experiences*.[9] In line with the feminist emphasis on examining personal experiences philosophically by pondering the historical present, Oksala enquires phenomenologically into the contemporary field of possible experiences.[10] This does not only apply to some broader field of "neoliberal social structures" but also to one's own personal formation of a self; how the "I" perceives the experiences I am having. In reading Butler's philosophy as a relational ontology of vulnerability my aim is to offer such a feminist ontology of the present.

The following reading argues that the social and the individual are accounted for in Butler´s ontology of the subject. She places a great emphasis on how we are formed through social structures, which are made up of multiple, substitutable, anonymous

[7] The Fraser-Butler debate is frequently referred to when Butler is accused of a lack of engagement with capitalism, and especially with the work of Karl Marx. Kevin Floyd has pointed out that references to Marx often seem to underlie her work although a direct engagement is lacking. An example of this is the conceptual use of *reification* in *Gender Trouble.* Kevin Floyd, *Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Fraser, Nancy, "Heterosexism, Misrecognition, and Capitalism: A response to Judith Butler", *Social Text* no. 52/53 (1997): 279-289, Judith Butler, "Merely Cultural", *Social Text* no. 52/53 (1997): 265-278.

[8] Butler, "Merely Cultural", 273.

[9] Oksala, *Feminist Experiences*, 6.

[10] Ibid, 8.

others. Nevertheless, the *frame* of choice, the "first" approach to articulate and explain what makes up complex systems – increasingly on a global scale – is the "I" who gives an account of oneself, the "I" who is addressed and addresses others. In an interview with Stuart J. Murray, Butler affirms that the *scene* or manner of address marks a starting-point in her theoretical analysis.[11] Every new human being that is born into the world is "addressed" in a specific way by the (at least minimally) caring other, according to the context of that other, and *that* is how we come to know and understand the social and ethical norms that shape our being.

The critical theorist

The reason I choose to engage with Butler's work is a certain philosophical depth of her analysis: vulnerability, dependency and opacity are not neatly categorised terms, but demand a thorough theory of the "self" and its unconscious underpinnings.[12] This form of analysis cannot be done outside of the historical context of ethics and politics. The self is essentially relational, formed through social norms, while the fact of our primary opacity means that we never have a fully self-transparent account of that formation.

Butler is best known for her monumental book *Gender Trouble* (1990), which helped inaugurate queer theory and shifted the course of debates within feminism.[13] Although the book is most renowned for its theory of gender performativity and its analysis of the heterosexual matrix, a critique of the metaphysics of substance and

[11] Stuart J. Murray, "Ethics at the Scene of the Address", *Symposium* vol. 11.2 (Fall/Automne 2007), 420-421.

[12] The "self" is far from being a straightforward concept. As Dan Zahavi argues, there can be multiple kinds of "selves" at work at the same time, even in a particular theoretical framework. Butler's use of the concept of the "self" is mostly within the context of continental philosophy, especially in accordance with the role psychoanalysis plays within that tradition, although Foucault's works both regarding the subject and the "care of the self" also influence Butler's use of the concept. Dan Zahavi, "Hið margslungna sjálf: Sjónarhorn reynslu og fræða", *Hugur* vol 24, (2012); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 3: The Care of the Self* (London: Penguin Books, 1990).

[13] Moya Lloyd, "Introduction", *Butler and Ethics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 3.

of the ontology of liberalism are also strong components. Ontological analysis is present throughout her work during the same period but, according to Stephen K. White, the first signs of her affirmation of an ontology can be detected in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997).[14] White describes the ontology of the subject in that book as "interpellative kinds of beings," as Butler critically engages with Louis Althusser's theory of interpellation, describing how the subject comes to "be" whilst answering the call of the policeman (the representative of the state and its repressive and ideological state apparatuses) formed as the subject who answers that call.[15] Articulating the scene of interpellation corresponds to Butler's emphasis on *the scene of address*, especially in terms of giving an account of oneself although, unlike Althusser, Butler enquires into the *failure* of these different addresses. Like Althusser Butler theorises about the subject and its formation, but (unlike Althusser) she also enquires into *the human* in her current work.[16]

To describe (or at least ponder) the "the human subject" is an ethical enterprise which simultaneously changes the individual the human. In this context, Butler follows Foucault's analysis of how juridical power produces the subject it subsequently represents (GT.2), as can seen at the very beginning of *Gender Trouble*. Moya Lloyd notes that both Foucault and Butler view ontology as political, which means that the political form of the society we find ourselves in conditions our possibility of being viable subjects.[17] Butler

[14] Stephen K. White, *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strenghts of Weak Ontology in Political Theory* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), 103.

[15] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London and New York: New Left Books/Verso, 1971).

[16] The difference between "the subject" and "the human" is both diverse and complex. The main difference may lie in the fact that "the subject" is a broader notion that does not necessarily need to apply to individual humans, whilst "the human" refers to a member of "human species" or humanity and as such is both used descriptievely (to the extent that is possible) such as in biology and in a more value-laden and ethial use as can be seen in the use of "human rights". I engage further with the concept of the "subject" in the second chapter and with the notion of the "human" in the third chapter.

[17] Moya Lloyd, *Judith Butler: From Norms to Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 73-74.

furthermore notes that she addresses a specific historical context characterised by classical liberalism:

> The prevailing assumption of the ontological integrity of the subject before the law might be understood as the contemporary trace of the state of nature hypothesis, that foundationalist fable constitutive of the juridical structures of classical liberalism (GT.4).

According to this form of analysis, to merely posit an ontology (of the subject) means that you transform that very same idea; it is not possible merely to *describe* the human-subject or the world.[18] Butler, along with most poststructural thought, critically views ontology as political in this manner. She is relentless in exposing hidden normative assumptions concerning the human, especially in her earlier works in which she is a fierce critic of hidden ontological assumptions. For this reason, she has also been wary when it comes to developing her own ontology, conscious as she is of the risks of prescriptive implications of such a descriptive account. In order to develop an ontological theory she has turned to ethics whilst recognising her commitment to the critique and political philosophy that has characterised her work.

Accordingly, many of her readers refer to an "ethical turn" happening in and around the year 2000.[19] Whether or not Butler actually turned to ethics and hence, away from politics is, however, highly debated. Additionally the extent to which this might be called a turn to ontology remains a question. Birgit Schippers, for example, rather speaks about a turn to ethics *and* ontology in her *The Political Philosophy of Judith Butler*.[20]

The historical event of 9/11 2001, which shifted the international discourse on war and terror, is a frequent reference point in Butler's work, especially when she ponders what the intensive emotion of grief can tell us about "our being". In asking whose lives are grievable, Butler exposes the political dimension involved in

[18] White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 3. In accordance with this descriptive theory is always already normative.

[19] Lloyd, "Introduction", 3.

[20] Birgit Schippers, *The Political Philosophy of Judith Butler* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 29.

something as personal as grievability: the death of some lives are absent from public grieving, whilst others are prominent. Furthermore, she uses grievability to cast light on the ways in which we are always already ontologically relational, since the "I" senses that something is missing in herself when she grieves the other, and thus the "I" changes and becomes something/someone else through the process of grieving.

The ethical turn is marked by Butler's engagement with the work of Emmanuel Levinas, who radically shifts the perspective of ethics away from the "I" towards the concrete other, or the "you". Nevertheless, she continues to engages with the works of Foucault, who remained wary of philosophising about the other. Butler shows a strong commitment to theorising different forms of *resistance* (the notion essential to Foucauldian analysis of power, but which remains under-theorised in his work), and she also takes up his analysis of the paradoxical nature of subject formation, as the subject comes into being simultaneously through empowerment and subjection by modern forms of power in the West. There is a shift in psychoanalytical emphasis in *Giving an Account*, namely towards the work of Jean Laplanche, and his analysis of the way *primary dependency* forms the self, together with the fact that we are simply opaque concerning our own emergence in this world, an infantile opacity which continues throughout our lives. It is through her engagement with another philosopher, namely Theodor Adorno, that Butler's commitment to *critical theory* becomes apparent. It is via his moral philosophy that Butler finds a way of showing that ethics must essentially be bound to political analysis through the practice of critique.

As a consequence, a new tone is set in *Giving an Account*, containing a broad philosophical scope, offering an account that ties together the different sub-fields of philosophy such as ontology (metaphysics), epistemology, ethics and political philosophy. It does so through a commitment to conventional feminist issues such as dependency (although this is never clearly stated). Its value also lies in the philosophical depth of the argument, whilst simultaneously suggesting possibilities for social transformation. To critique

something like the ontology of liberalism or the liberal subject, a political analysis will not suffice, but needs to be joined to a psychological/psychoanalytical analysis, as ontology is deeply rooted in the psychic-sphere. To understand the formation of the subject and how a certain social ontology is established, an analysis of the psychic together with the social and the political is needed. This is exactly what *Giving an Account* does. The works published in the same time period, *Precarious Life* (2004), *Undoing Gender* (2004) and *Frames of War* (2009) complement the analysis of *Giving an Account* and are also the basis for the theme of this dissertation: reading Butler's more recent work as a relational ontology of vulnerability.

Judith Butler is obviously a living human being (unlike the majority of the philosophers studied in academic philosophy), who is still developing and growing as a philosopher. Vulnerability as a concept is of increased importance to her, more recently in relation to *resistance* to oppressive structures and politics. Although that connection is exciting, especially in terms of shedding light on the ontology of vulnerability, it will not be the focus of this dissertation. However, the conversational book *Dispossession: The Performative in the Personal* (2013)[21] in which Butler converses with Athena Athanasiou, will be of particular importance, as a major topic of their discussion is one of the main concepts which may be said to connect the foundation of liberal, political theory in seventeenth-century England to present-day neoliberalism, namely what C. B. Macphersons termed *the possessive individual.*[22]

It is worth mentioning that some of the secondary literature has greatly influenced my own reading of Butler, to the extent that this dissertation is a work of interpretation, joining my own reading of Butler with secondary literature, rather than a strict commentary on Butler's work. Works that highly influence my reading are Yannik Thiem's *Unbecoming Subjects* and Moya Lloyd's book *Judith Butler: From Norms to Politics* along with other works such as the edited

[21] Athena Athanasiou and Judith Butler, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

[22] C.B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011).

volume *Butler and Ethics*, Erinn C. Gilson's *The Ethics of Vulnerability* and Birgit Schippers' *The Political Philosophy of Judith Butler*.[23] These works highlight the depth and relevance of Butler's onto-ethical account. Furthermore, I am reading Butler's work in the context of feminist critiques of the liberal subject. In light of this, the following works influence my approach: Wendy Brown's *States of Injury* and *Undoing the Demos*, Carol Pateman's *The Sexual Contract*, and Johanna Oksala's *Feminist Experiences*, in addition to works of Cinzia Arruzza, Isabell Lorey and Silvia Federici who all engage with Marxist-feminism and the rising discourse on precarisation.[24] This literature is to some extent diverse, but my view is that the intersecting point is a critical and affirmative engagement and commitment to feminist philosophy´s understanding of subjectivity in terms of vulnerability.

Main concepts of the dissertation

This dissertation offers an analysis of the relational ontology of vulnerability, paying constant attention to its context in other sub-fields of philosophy such as ethics and epistemology. In terms of ontology, the main focus will be on the affirmative account conceptualised in light of experiences, states and conditions of vulnerability, although this analysis is executed in connection to how this emerging ontology is critically responding to the prevalent forms of liberal ontology (and its relation to capitalism and institutional state structures).

My emphasis will be on a *relational* ontology of vulnerability in accordance with the following reading of Butler's work: firstly, I claim that the focus on vulnerability emphasises a certain *openness* of the subject, it does not contain strictly defined boundaries determining internality and externality. Secondly, the subject is always beside

[23] Annika [Yannik]Thiem, *Unbecoming Subjects: Judith Butler, Moral Philosophy, and Critical Responsibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008); Erinn C. Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability: A Feminist Analysis of Social Life and Practice*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

[24] Isabell Lorey, *States of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*, (London: Verso Books, 2015); Cinzia Arruzza, "Gender as Social Temporality: Butler (and Marx)" *Historical Materialism* vol. 23.1 (2015).

itself, ec-static and dispossessed. Intensive emotions, such as grief, expose the relationality at the heart of the subject; there is no determined self-sense, and the many others that construct our lives (and social norms) simultaneously construct the constantly-changing sense of "me". Thirdly, given that we are born into an intensive, primary dependency that we cannot fathom in our memory, the epistemic vulnerability of *opacity* is always present in the subject-being. And fourthly, that although Butler increasingly theorises about the "human", she not only leaves its definition as an open question,[25] but the relationality and vulnerability at the heart of "being" could also apply to all non-human lifeforms as well as the environment and eco-system.[26]

Butler's post-2000 works have been described as a new and emerging humanism by Bonnie Honig, who reads her as a "mortalist" humanist, and Ann Murphy, who claims that Butler's humanism is corporeal.[27] I think, however, that it is important to emphasise the primacy of relationality, especially its transformative "nature," that we are always affected by others and the world, and this experience constructs our "becoming". Yet it must not be overlooked that *Giving an Account* gives primacy to the conventionally feminist emphasis concerning the human, namely the idea that we are born into radical dependency and we need the care of others. These notions of dependency, relationality and vulnerability are intertwined in that they respond to, and indeed oppose, the attributes of the prevalent subject at the core of liberal ontology. From a more "everyday" perspective, one might simply

[25] Schippers describes Butler's approach to the notion of the human as a futural concept where the human always remains a question and is never fully realised. Schippers, *The Political Philosophy of Judith Butler*, 50.

[26] Even if it is outside of the scope of this dissertation, it is worth noting that the relational ontology developed by Butler—although she does focus on the social existence of humans—is not logically inconsistent with a relational ontology of the material universe, such as Karen Barad's. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Haflway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 332-334.

[27] Bonnie Honig, "Antigone's Two Laws: Greek Tragedy and the Politics of Humanism", *New Literary History* 41 (2010): 1-33; Ann V. Murphy, "Corporeal Vulnerability and the New Humanism" *Hypatia* vol.26, no.3, (2011): 575-590; Lloyd, "The Ethics and Politics of Vulnerable Bodies" in *Butler and Ethics*, ed. Moya Lloyd (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 171-172.

ask: why do we even need to *utter* that we are born into dependency, given that all of us have gone through that experience? Such a question shows the political (and performative) gesture of an ontological theory; despite the everyday "fact" that we are all born into dependency, for some reason it feels highly important to acknowledge and emphasise these ontological features in the given historical present.[28]

The same can be said about vulnerability. Although philosophising about vulnerability has a long history (even dating back to nineteenth century pre-existential accounts of fragility and subjectivity), the systematic discourse on it as an ethico-political concept is fairly recent.[29] In the English-speaking world, Robert Goodin's book *Protecting the Vulnerable* (1985) seems to mark a certain birth of a discourse, and remains a frequent point of reference.[30] Care ethicists such as Eva Feder Kittay have critically engaged with Goodin's account in order to provide a more nuanced analysis of vulnerability, disability and dependency. Gilson argues that not only is vulnerability synonymous with dependency in Goodin's work but also that it is essentially defined in negative terms, as something one should try to minimalize.[31]

The strength of Butler's theorisation of vulnerability is that she does not define it either in negative or positive terms but rather as a certain openness to the world, which should not be taken out of its social and political context. I also endorse Catherine Mills' wariness

[28] Estelle Ferrarese, "Vulnerability: A Concept with Which to Undo the World as It Is?", *Critical Horizons* 17 (2) (2016), 150.

[29] In the introduction to *Vulnerability – New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*, three distinct approaches to theorising vulnerability are pinpointed. Firstly, within the *ethics of care*, which has upheld the normative significance of vulnerability insofar as we are either caretakers or in need of care for periods of our lives. Secondly, within the discourse on bio-ethics, which both investigates vulnerability as an ontological condition and in relation to detecting vulnerable groups. The third approach is Butler's account, which I argue is exceptional as an ontology in which the personal and the political are intertwined. Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers and Susan Dodds, "Introduction: What Is Vulnerability and Why Does It Matter for Moral Theory" in *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*, eds. Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers and Susan Dodds (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1-2.

[30] Robert E. Goodin, *Protecting the Vulnerable: A Reanalysis of Our Social Responsibilities*, (Chicago: University of Chicaco Press, 1985).

[31] Gilson, *Ethics of Vulnerability,* 25.

towards celebrating vulnerability, which could frame it as a new kind of ideal for the subject.[32] Rather, (systematically) acknowledging vulnerability ontologically as a part of the "human condition" will hopefully provide more space in which to be vulnerable, in whatever way one is vulnerable, and to allow one to manage one's life accordingly, rather than pressuring everyone to seek the same ideal.

In a sense, vulnerability in this reading is in line with what Charles Mills coins as non-ideal theory:[33] without viewing it as either negative or positive, it proposes that there are multiple, different ways of being vulnerable such that context always matters. Although the ethical consequences would be an "open" way of *being in one's vulnerability,* this does not mean one is encouraged to seek out vulnerabilities as if they were an ideal to be achieved.

There are multiple other concepts that intersect with vulnerability (such as the above-mentioned concept of *dependency*) which are important when it comes to understanding the ideological underpinnings of the ontology of liberalism. Precariousness and precarity are also intersecting concepts, often used synonymously with vulnerability in Butler's account, whilst at other times these two concepts mark the difference between shared and situated vulnerability. Precariousness represents the existential sense of finitude which is a shared condition of all humans, but precarity is the politically induced condition in which precariousness is maximised for some populations but minimised for others.[34] Vulnerability is a broader concept than precariousness in terms of marking a certain *openness to the world*.[35] Importantly,

[32] Catherine Mills, "Undoing Ethics: Butler on Precarity, Opacity and Responsibility" in *Butler and Ethics*, ed. Moya Lloyd (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 61.

[33] Charles Mills has criticised an idealised social ontology, which visualises human agents as having capacities that are unrealistic even for the privileged minority. The relational ontology of vulnerability one can read from Butler's work corresponds to what Mills calls non-ideal theory, which takes an account of people's actualities, the social situation they are in, such as structures of race and gender, and the struggles they are fighting. Charles Mills, "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology" *Hypatia* vol. 20, no.3 (2005): 165-183.

[34] Butler, Judith, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London and New York: Verso, 2010), 46 and Gilson, *Ethics of Vulnerability,* 44-45.

[35] Lisa Folkmarson Käll has drawn out elements of phenomenological inheritance within Butler's work, e.g. how her theory of performativity corresponds with the

precariousness is not an immediate given, but something that needs to be recognised. Although Butler herself chooses *precariousness* as the main concept of her ontology in *Frames of War*, I myself prefer to interpret her endeavour as an ontology of vulnerability, as it further develops the subject formation described in *Giving an Account*. I believe that it is the tracing of a subject's formation through the psychic, ethical and the political that really offers an alternative to the dominant ontology of liberal conceptions of the subject, rather than locating possible alternatives in a more conventional difference between shared and situational vulnerability, which precariousness and precarity offer.

Opacity is at the heart of this ontology and signifies, as Mills has argued, a kind of epistemic vulnerability.[36] The idea of opacity furthermore goes directly against the idea of the self-coherent subject; given that we cannot recall neither our own infantile origin nor every waking minute of our lives, self-coherency is out of the picture and we are epistemically vulnerable. Opacity furthermore gives rise to ethical responsibility in Butler's account; we both need to bear awareness of our own self-limits and to enquire into what the other wants, as we cannot know for sure.

"The precarious," which indicates an increasingly prevalent group of people in difficult or even dire social and economic situations, is a political concept that gained momentum through various social, political movements of the precarious in Europe in the first decade of the millennium.[37] Butler's account is certainly related to this discourse, especially in her more recent work that focuses on the resistance *in* vulnerability which physical bodies show by

phenomenological account of intentionality. Intentionality is a feature of consciousness but also of lived embodiment and always "directed towards something external to itself," as Käll explains. I think that the account of vulnerability as an openness to the world further confirms that this account of intentionality is quite influential in Butler's philosophy. Lisa Folkmarson Käll, "A Path Between Voluntarism and Determinism: Tracing Elements of Phenomenology in Judith Butler's Account of Performativity", *lambda nordica* 2-3(2015), 34.

[36] Mills, "Undoing Ethics", 49.

[37] Lorey traces the birth of the precarious movement to the Mayday parade in Milan on the first of May 2001. Emphasising that the precarious is not a collective subject easily unified, this movement has highlighted the invisible structures of corporatist organisations taking precarious working and living conditions as their starting point in an attempt to "organize the unorganizable". Lorey, *States of Insecurity*, 8.

gathering in protest in the public assembly.[38] Lorey suggests in her book *States of Insecurity* that precarisation is being normalised by the austerity politics that has dominated Western societies in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, but simultaneously that it has always characterised the social structures of these very same societies.

In order to examine the ontological forms of the liberal subject, I will make use of a thorough and fierce feminist critique of liberalism. What Wendy Brown stated in her book *States of Injury* in 1995 still applies today, more than 20 years later: "even as the familiar subject naturalized by the classical liberals is patently in crisis today, the possessive individualism of the liberal, civil subject is being affirmed from Beijing to Budapest."[39]

There are different approaches of defining "the subject" in question. In continental philosophy, it is often conceptualised as the sovereign subject, a notion that Butler often uses herself. In more recent literature on neoliberalism *homo economicus*—the self-interested subject of "late" capitalism—surfaces as the normative ideal to be criticised. In the fairly recent discourse on ableism, the same idea of the subject seems to appear, bearing a resemblance to the notion of the able-bodied worker in Marxist literature—an impossible ideal one implicitly "refers to" whilst performing as an invulnerable worker as in order to secure a job. Although these different notions offer various rich analyses of different aspects of the issues I am discussing here as the prevalent ontology of the subject at work in Western countries, I think it is important to note that to a great extent these different terms centre around the same phenomenon, despite the difference in framework produced by their distinct theoretical contexts. Bearing this in mind, the frame of Butler's approach is not strictly speaking economical (as is called for in the notion of *homo economicus*), and the frame is not a political science of the sovereign subject, nor is the frame exclusively the subject of disability studies etc. Her approach is more

[38] Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2015).

[39] Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 139.

transdisciplinary than notions tightly connected to theoretical disciplines indicate, and runs deeper, as a political ontology that combines ethics and politics.

However, two concepts of this subject will be consistently referred to throughout the dissertation; firstly, that of *the invulnerable subject*, describing the way people are encouraged to deny their vulnerabilities according to the present ontological landscape, and secondly, that of the *possessive individual*. The concept of the sovereign subject somewhat describes the problem at hand, but the reason for my preference for the notion of the possessive individual is the emphasis I would like to make on the fact that a critique of *property* is inherent in Butler's identity-critique. The possessive individual entails the notion of relating to the self as a property, which one can rent out in exchange for money in order to sustain oneself. This idea is the precondition for understanding the character of *naturalness* that being a wage labourer has acquired in our society. We are conditioned to relate to ourselves in a way which corresponds perfectly with our (more often than not) sole possibility for attaining a means of subsistence.

There is another dimension of the critique of liberalism, which is of equal importance for the analysis at hand. There is always a "hidden ontology" in the ontological forms of liberalism, one that Brown labels *femina domestica*, which is the very reason why the sexual contract secretly precedes the social contract according to Carol Pateman.[40] Although there remains only *one* subject-ideal in liberalism—as neoliberalism, along with post-feminism, makes apparent, encouraging women to appear as the possessive individual—the very logic of this ideal is gendered in such a way that it takes for granted the feminine role of sustaining and reproducing the essential conditions for living. The hidden "ontological figure" of *femina domestica*, which I will engage with in the second chapter, is an interesting intersection of the *ethics of care*, Marxist feminism and the feminist critique of liberalism. Accordingly, I will argue that although Butler does not situate herself along these lines of theory,

[40] Brown, *States of Injury*, 162, Pateman, *Sexual Contract*, 112.

her more recent affirmative, ontological steps towards a relational ontology of vulnerability are consistent with such feminist emphases. To focus on primary dependency, opacity and ways of being vulnerable is to respond with reference to the hidden ontology of *femina domestica*.

Additionally, corresponding to Butler's emphasis on recognition under the influence of the works of Hegel, vulnerability needs to be acknowledged. Proposing this form of relational and social ontology means that it *ought* to be actualised politically. One of the "political" aims of placing such an emphasis on opacity is to set the stage for the idea that ethics should always be accompanied by critique. We do not have a perfect overview of our lives; our lives do not have a coherence or a story-line, although we so often produce one through a consciously formed self-identity. Acknowledging opacity as our essential feature means that we should be careful in any claims we make concerning ourselves and the world. Consequently, we also do not have full authority to *know* what is best for the other. Being responsible therefore means being responsive, listening carefully to what the other is telling us. In line with Levinas' thought we are always already enmeshed in ethical relations, and Butler's analysis sheds light on that.[41]

What I want to argue is that we need to find ways to really transition from an ontological landscape that favours separate individual practices and the denial of vulnerability towards one that allows us to "come together" through comfortably "sitting in" our vulnerability, in order to transform the social structures that determine our ethical relations. As I argue, the acknowledgement of vulnerability and opacity is not enough; we also need to situate what it is that *individualises* liveability in the form of the job interview and prompts us to deny our vulnerabilities.

One could say that Butler's earlier works have been transformative outside of the scope of academic discourses via

[41] However, I do endorse Mills' wariness concerning whether the emphasis on precarity gives rise to an *ethical obligation* in us, and if it does so, what form that obligation would take. Mills, "Undoing Ethics"48.

queer activism focusing on troubling gender norms. Frequently referred to as the "politics of resignification," this political strategy does not (necessarily) focus on representational politics at a state-level but rather on the transformative possiblity of social movements. However, by exposing oppressive structures via political strategies happening at the level of social movements, these actions have transformative power on a broader social scale, such as in institutions at the state level. I think that a similar process needs to happen at the level of the job interview; social movements need to form strategies in order to expose how the interpellation of the job interview makes vulnerability difficult and forces people to perform as the "invulnerable subject".

Methodology

The method of this dissertation mainly consists in tracing philosophical arguments and concepts in the work of Judith Butler in and around the time of *Giving an Account*. I will read her work as belonging to a certain context, that of feminist philosophy, with the agenda of both redefining the discipline of philosophy and responding politically to the historical context we live in. My goal is to suggest ways of producing political strategies based on this ontology and ethics, so it can be actualised by firmly situating the analysis in the historic present.

My dissertation is written in line with the traditions of continental philosophy and critical theory, which place emphasis on ambiguity and the implicit rather than presenting clearly demarcated categories. Furthermore, these methodological approaches enquire into the power dynamics and ideologies within society. This can be clearly seen in my analysis of the job interview in terms of ideology. My methodology is also under the strong influence of transdisciplinary feminist scholarship, its critique of more conventional methodologies and its transformative perspective when it comes to exploring what it is *to be* and *know* in this world.

I aim to offer an account that views concepts and ideas historically. I want to enquire into why certain concepts and ideas gain prominence at each particular time and the way people (not only academics) perceive of them. This perspective is influenced by

works of Michel Foucault as well as by the historical account found within critical theory, such as in the work of the Frankfurt school. However, one cannot present this methodology without acknowledging that philosophy is essentially about thinking the relationship between the universal and the particular; one is always going to offer, to some extent, a generic account. This issue is important to bear in mind for evaluating Butler's work. I do endorse thinkers such as Kevin Floyd and Lloyd[42] in suggesting a more historical stance to Butler's philosophy. This is the basis for my enquiry into the reasons the discourse on vulnerability is currently gaining momentum, as well as my aim of finding ways to actualise Butler's ontology of vulnerability. However, I think one also needs to value *the applicability* of offering a generic account of the different and diverse global situations in which people are dealing with the consequences of the ideal of the possessive individual. Accordingly, we also need to see the transformative as well as inclusive possibilities of the generic account Butler offers.

What we think and what we produce is the result of the ways in which ideas call upon us through different life-experiences; often coincidentally, but still in a social and historical context.[43] Following Donna Haraway, I think it is fruitful to view knowledges as situated,

[42] Floyd, *Reification of Desire*, 82; Lloyd, *Judith Butler: From Norms to Politics*, 125.

[43] I frequently refer to a "we" in this dissertation, both as a matter of style and to refer to a general condition multiple people belonging to the same group (such as a nation-state) find themselves in. At the same time I realise the difficulty of any such placing of a "we", as such a form of an address subsumes multiple diverse subject positions into the sole position of the "we". The greatest difficulty I have come across with the "we" of this dissertation is the "we" of the West –western societies. On the one hand, I do not want to subsume the whole of the globe under the logic of liberalism and the interpellation of capitalism. On the other hand, the idea of the West itself can be exclusive, and by restricting my scope to societies of the West I certainly exclude many subject positions that need investigation. In the wake of the refugee crisis in and around 2015, it is both apt to examine the job interview in terms of being a refugee (often without the "right papers") as well as the similarity between the asylum interview and the job interview (here, the interview for social benefits would also fit the analysis). Although this dilemma of "the we" is beyond the scope of the dissertation, my hope is that I can further address this issue in my future investigations.

and that such an approach could even provide a "better" objectivity than the traditional subjectless perspective.[44]

I think that the reason for vulnerability becoming so central to my own investigations corresponds with my own situatedness. I became chronically ill in the wake of the economic crash in Iceland in 2008. That experience forced me to face my own elitist thinking and class prejudice. Although I have needed to fight (in other places) for the acknowledgement that my illness ME/CFD is physical, it may very well have been partly enhanced by the austerity politics in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis. My particular story of chronic illness may not be common, but stories of bodies breaking down under the pressures of the last decade are becoming increasingly common.[45] Anxiety appears to have become a standard concomitant for trying to survive in a work-system such as academia; Lorey actually speaks about *subjectivation of anxiety* in this context.[46] A generation of people who grew up with promises of a certain economic security, promises that a certain path and diligence would lead to a comfortable "middle-class" life, are realising they have been the proletariat all along.[47]

[44] Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", *Feminist Studies* vol. 14, no. 3. (1988): 575-599.

[45] Two different examples could be mentioned of groups breaking under these austerity politics. The more severe case shows how 2380 people died between 2011 and 2014 as they were deemed fit for work in a capability assessment (WCA) rather than getting employment and support allowance (ESA), the UK's form of disability benefits, which started in 2011 and is essentially connected to work capacity. Patrick Butler, "Thousands have died after being found fit for work, DWP figures show", *Guardian*, (August 27, 2015), https://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/aug/27/thousands-died-after-fit-for-work-assessment-dwp-figures, retrieved 07.10.2017. The other case concerns the fact that mental illness is on the rise in academia, which appears to be the direct result of an increasing workload. Claire Shaw, "Overworked and isolated – work pressure fuels mental illness in academia", *Guardian*, (May 8, 2014), https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2014/may/08/work-pressure-fuels-academic-mental-illness-guardian-study-health, retrieved 07.10.2017.

[46] Lorey, *State of Insecurity*, 27-28.

[47] Lorey notes that despite the waves of political protest in the aftermath of the 2008 world crisis, the normalisation of precarity is becoming the standard for people finding ways to deal with heightened social insecurity. She explains this with reference to people's fear of being replaceable. Lorey, *State of Insecurity*, 63.

Embodiment is furthermore of importance for my methodological approach; philosophy lives through bodies, it lives through my body, even though philosophical practice often seems to want to transcend bodily states. Therefore, I will not try to be a *dispassionate investigator*. I cannot be, as Alison Jaggar argues.[48] By trying to reflect upon why various social interactions act upon my body in a certain way (which does not seem to be in my control) such as in the case of my own illness, I came to the subject matter at hand; I searched for something that could make sense of my experiences and the issues people around me are dealing with, rather than being interested in a concept in a book of philosophy. Interestingly, Butler applies a similar methodology when she claims that "theory only registers what is already happening in a social movement ... I put into theoretical language what was already being impressed upon me from elsewhere".[49]

In line with the argument of this dissertation, I follow feminist methodologies in viewing the process of work (not solely the outcome) as ethical. I do want to endorse the feminist methods of criticising with care in an affirmative way. Rather than smacking systems down and burning down the house, I want to offer an affirmative reading of Butler's philosophy, as well as to detect the transformative spaces within oppressive structures and open up paths of possibilities both in theory and practise. Again, this is related to the issue at hand – although we are hailed as possessive individuals, interpellation is never totalising, there is always something that escapes, and often the hailing fails. If the interpellation of us as liberal subjects worked completely, it would be the end of us; in the end, the ontology of the possessive individual is unsustainable if it becomes all-consuming, as no one would perceive that it was in their interest to care for others or reproduce life. This dissertation is, accordingly, written with a strong commitment to

[48] Alison Jaggar, "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology", *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* vol. 32, issue 2 (1989), 154.

[49] Judith Butler, "There Are Some Muffins There If You Want...A Conversation on Queerness, Preariousness, Binationalism, and BDS" in *What Does a Jew Want? On Binationalism and other Spectres*, ed. Udo Aloni, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 206.

social transformation, with the belief that something needs to change.

Overview

My starting point will be “conventional” feminist issues: particular, concrete situations. My aim is to read from the scene of particular experiences to the structure of social universals in order to argue that Butler is a thinker of the relationship (or even glue) between the two; the tension of thinking and feeling as a particular living and breathing being, but one who is shaped by social universals. I believe that this tension characterises *Giving an Account,* which starts by quoting the moral philosophy of Adorno. Conscious of the great extent to which our lives are shaped by social universals, it is the perception and comprehension of a particular “I” that forms the starting point of the dissertation.

My analysis will begin by laying out the basis of Butler´s idea of the relational subject in chapter One, examining Butler’s engagement with Adriana Cavarero and with Jean Laplanche respectively.[50] The aim of this analysis is to flesh out the theory of the self as well as the “interpersonal” dimension of Butler’s relational ontology—how the “I” always comes to “be” through the address of a concrete “you”, even though the manner of this address is conditioned by social structures and norms. Cavarero develops an ethics of relationality, focusing on the particular “you” in each and everyone’s life. Every life is unique, and philosophy has overemphasised the *Universal Man* at the cost of concrete, bodily existence, particularly that of women.[51] Although Butler shares an emphasis on enquiring into the other with Cavarero, my comparison

[50] Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, trans. Paul A. Kottman (New York and London: Routledge, 2000) and Jean Laplanche, "The Drive and the Object-Source: Its Fate in the Transference," in *Jean Laplanche: Seduction, Translation, and the Drives*, ed. John Fletcher and Martin Stanton (London: Psychological Forum: Institute of Contemporary Arts London, 1992), 179-196.

[51] Cavarero is an interesting example of an feminist philosopher who has simultaneously criticised the “universal” approach of viewing the human in the history of Western philosophy, starting with Greek philosophy and the abstract individualism of liberalism. Olivia Guaraldo, “Thinkers that Matter: on the Thought of Judith Butler and Adriana Cavarero” *AG About Gender: International journal of gender studies* vol. 1, nr. 1, (2012), 97-100.

of their accounts shows that social norms and substitution is at heart of Butler's relational ontology; via the address of the "you" I am formed through the social norms that condition this address.

By looking at Butler's account of primary dependency and opacity, influenced by the psychoanalytic theory of Jean Laplanche, the depth of one's interpersonal relationality with the other will be analysed. The address is always, to some extent, *unwilled* and the messages we (as infants) perceive from others are enigmatic. An (affirmative) ontology emerges, placing emphasis on primary dependency in thinking relationality, which I will then examine in its connection to norms and normativity.

In chapter Two, the focus shifts towards social universals and the ways in which they are always already forming the subject, from the moment she enters this world. I begin the chapter by examining Butler's use of the notion of "relations" and relationality and then I connect this examination to the importance of norms and normativity within Butler's framework. The extent to which Butler views normativity as historically contingent is not always clear as she often describes the normative performance and its possible failure in a general, manner. However, she does adhere to a Foucauldian genealogical account of normativity and her account is logically consistent with it. This Foucauldian account is tightly related with the concept of the subject, and, in fact, the emergence of the liberal subject, which is analysed here in light of possessive individualism. By viewing Pateman's and Brown's feminist critique of liberalism I examine how the liberal ontology hides all the vulnerable and dependent aspects of life within the hidden figure of *femina domestica*, who makes it possible for the possessive individual to appear on the public sphere as invulnerable and independent. In order to acquire livelihood within the capitalist labour system, people need to appear as invulnerable and to think about themselves in a reified manner, as *labour power*. This increasingly applies to everyone, both men and women within the neoliberal rationality. The presentation of the liberal subjectivity[52] Butler is responding to will be

[52] I follow Balibar's, Cassin's and Libera's, "Subject" (Vocabulary of European Philosophers, Part I) in analysing the relationship between the different meanings of the "subject", e.g. how subjectivity can be seen as the ontological aspect of that concept. This is further discussed in the second and third chapter of this

used as a stepping stone to examining her own method of laying out a theory of relational and social ontology without producing a new ideal, i.e. with offering a prescriptive or normative conception of the vulnerable subject.

Following up on this discussion, Chapters Three and Four take a closer look at the interrelations between critique, ontology and ethics which help to explain Butler's intertwining of the ethical and political in her relational ontology of vulnerability. Accordingly, in the third chapter, Butler is introduced as a critical theorist, and in particular as a critic of liberal ontology and of the hidden assumptions of the human found widely within public discourses. The theory of the self, as outlined in Chapter One and Two, will now be ontologically analysed. The difference between a critical approach to ontology and an affirmative one will be clarified as well as how both approaches relate to ethics and politics. Butler's approach to the notion of the "human" will be analysed as well as the reason I emphasise relationality rather than sociality in characterising this ontology.

This leads us to a proper engagement with the ethical turn in Chapter Four, and the fact that critique has never ceased to be a strong component of that turn. I will look at Butler's engagement with Levinas' thought, but also with the thought of Adorno and his approach to the notion of the "human" in relation to the notions of *failure* and *fallibility*. Furthermore, I will suggest that Butler's aim is to radically shift the perspective away from that of more traditional ethical conceptions, such as Immanuel Kant's ethical imperative, as a guideline for clarifying ethical terms and for ethical thinking. This can be clearly seen in the idea of responsibility; if property is at the heart of the individual's sense of self as well as of her relations to others, responsibility will be compartmentalised to fit into atomised property-thinking. Responsibility is then transformed into a thing, an asset, a commodity which one can exchange for other commodified assets. But if ontology is thought of in line with vulnerability, as a certain openness to the world, a possibility for *responsiveness* to the other opens up, which is exactly how Butler redefines responsibility.

dissertation. Etienne Balibar, Barbara Cassin, and Alan de Libera, "Subject", *Radical Philosophy* 138 (2006).

Thus, the fourth chapter ends by looking at the role vulnerability plays in Butler's ethical account.

In the fifth and final chapter, vulnerability is analysed, both in the above-mentioned emerging theoretical discourse and as a response to the liberal subject. In this context, Gilson's notion of that subject as essentially *invulnerable* will be a special focus. One of the main ideological consequences of presenting an ontology of the liberal subject is to encourage people to present themselves as invulnerable:

> The denial of vulnerability can be understood to be motivated by the desire – conscious or not – to maintain a certain kind of subjectivity privileged in capitalist socioeconomic systems, namely that of the prototypical, arrogantly self-sufficient, independent, invulnerable master subject.[53]

Gilson also states that invulnerability solidifies a sense of control, which is, in the end, impossible.[54] The denial of being vulnerable is, according to this analysis, a common phenomenon, dangerous in ethical and political terms, showing the importance of an awareness of vulnerability for "undoing not just violence but oppressive social relations in general."[55] In accordance with this, I conclude the chapter by arguing that one of the main reasons this dangerous denial of vulnerability is socially reproduced is the way work is structured in Western societies. Most people are utterly dependent on "the capitalist" (be it in the private of the public sector of jobs) for their means of subsistence; they have no other way to sustain themselves. Thus, they need to present themselves in a certain way in order to be seen as attractive, able workers worthy of their wages. Part of this presentation consists in giving the impression of being *invulnerable*, or to avoid accidentally exposing certain kinds of vulnerabilities.[56]

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[53] Erinn C. Gilson, "Vulnerability, Ignorance and Oppression", *Hypatia* vol.26, no. 2, (2011), 312.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Ibid, 308.

[56] It is important to note that the possibility of appearing invulnerable is gendered in many diverse ways. For the most part women (especially from the global south) bear the invisible burden of various dependencies and vulnerabilities that can affect the balance of work-life and personal-life, and they are generally less likely to be

Giving an account of oneself happens at a certain *scene of address*; you are giving an account to another person. When Butler looks at Althusser's interpellation as a scene of address, it is to show how this "turn" produces you as a subject, because you have been formed as the subject who turns. However, I think that there is another "scene" which might be more illustrative in thinking subjectivities today. Namely, giving an account of oneself in *the job interview*, a scene most people in the West are subjected to sometime during their life-time, and which also takes place in people's minds whilst thinking (often desperately) about future prospects. Thus, the scene of the job interview is a contemporary example of the subject's necessary relation to the wider social system as well as the reason it can be difficult to appear vulnerable.

An awareness of vulnerability as well as a transformation towards an ontology of vulnerability is heavily obstructed by the job interview. The project of *being vulnerable* (without turning that mode of being into an ideal) thus needs to take into account ways to respond to this dominant scene of address –how to collectively respond to the indvidualising hailing of the job interview. The feminist revolutions of recent years are constructing a collective scene for such a response, and now is the time for the many to build collective systems of working together rather than remaining in competitive systems controlled by the few.

hired than their male peers. Not to mention that when care-work is commodified, it is generally low-pay, labour-intensive and most of the workers are women. Additionally, women are much more likely to develop chronic illnesses such as ME/CFS and Fibromyalgia and, at least according to 2015 statistics on disability claimants in Iceland, the majority of them are female, 10793 against 7253 males, or 60%. Tryggingastofnun, "Greining á orsök örorku eftir sjúkdómaflokkum árið 2015 ", https://www.tr.is/media/tolfraedigreining/Helsta-orsok-ororku-eftir-sjukdomaflokkum_2015.pdf, retrieved 14.03.2018.

1 “You” and “I” are born dependent

Philosophy is often viewed as a practice of presenting generic, abstract theories, proposing some kind of ethical, universal principles governing our lives. Yet, when the "here and now" of our particular experiences overwhelm our sense of self – such as when momentarily touching and smelling a flower – our self-conscious existence as a part of the category "human" or as a "woman" may dwindle. The relationship between a particular instance (be it phenomenon, identity or experience) and its “name” in language (or its categorisation) is the philosophical dilemma at hand. But how does this dilemma relate to our individual, personal lives as well as to the social, political structure we live in? How can we to account for our immanent experience, right here, right now, whilst articulating social conditions? How can we, for example, account for the immediate responses we perceive from our intimate others? How can we account for the immediate, exposed feelings we read in the faces of our intimate others whilst they openly deny them and appear to repress them? How do we know how to read these particular feelings in the first place? How do I begin to understand my own responses to someone I care about?

Feminist philosophy has made the concrete, particular body the centre or point of departure of philosophical reflection. Thinking through embodiment as well as through the felt sense of social encounters exposes the discrepancy that so often occurs between the uttered word which expresses one's state of being, and the exposed, physical appearance of this same person's body. But what accounts for this possible discrepancy between our words and appearances? Is it the case that in our everyday lives we, for some reason, try to deny any vulnerabilities that our bodies either hide so well or expose against our wishes?

In this chapter I commence my analysis of Judith Butler's work by pondering how she is a thinker of this "middle" between social universals and particular instances. This is important not only because it illustrates how multi-dimensional the relational ontology of vulnerability is, but it also shows how she is a thinker of the interrelation between ethics and politics. The present chapter, however, mostly engages with the dimension of Butler's ontology, which concerns a theory of the self, addressing the ways in which the singular being interacts with other singular beings and how that interaction establishes the self. A theory of the self mostly engages with the psychic life of a singular being but, as will be examined in later chapters of this dissertation, in Butler's framework, the psychic life can neither be taken out of context of politics or ethics.

The next step of the chapter consists in viewing how every new life comes into being by being addressed by another in this framework. Giving an account of oneself is a form of narration which happens at a specific scene of address. This shows the importance of the particular other in analysing Butler's relational ontology, but it does not mean that Butler views the subject as *unique* in the same manner as Adriana Cavarero does; substitutability is simultaneously at the core of this relational ontology. In order to examine this constant tension between particularity and universality, singularity and substitutability, I will compare Butler's *Giving an Account* to Cavarero's *Relating Narratives*, especially with regard to their use of the terms "you" and "I". Both thinkers place a special emphasis on the first opaque moments of everyone's life; the fact that we are born into this world *dependent*.

The first opaque moments of human lives are also of special interest to psychoanalysis, which will be examined next in connection to Butler's work. After that I view how Butler makes use of Jean Laplanche's ideas, and how she engages with his thought in *Giving an Account.* Laplanche establishes a theory about the origins of the human psyche through the implantation of the enigmatic message of the other, presenting an inherently relational account of the psyche.[57] He furthermore places emphasis on the epistemic

[57] Laplanche begins his investigation by examining Freud's theory of seduction, which Freud himself actually abandoned. Laplanche establishes a "general

vulnerability of *opacity*, the fact that we cannot recall our first moments of life, nor every waking minute of our lives. Next, I will examine how Butler's reflects upon how difficult it is to speak about choice given how we are born into primary dependency and infantile opacity.

Opacity is fundamental for understanding Butler's account of vulnerability, and it is often overlooked in the readings of her works that pay more attention to *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War* (as *Giving an Account* does not deal specifically with vulnerability or precariousness to a great extent).[58] In order to understand the complexity of the interrelation of ethics, politics and ontology in Butler's account it is important to note how opacity is at the heart of the ethical quest she undertakes with the new perspective of relational ontology of vulnerability.

1.1 Particular experiences and social universals

What is the lived feeling of precariousness, of being constantly exposed to insecurity? How does it feel to live with a constant anxiety regarding your state of health or without the possibility of a future, “a damaged sense of a future”? (DPP.JB.43). Enquiring into the lived experience of vulnerability is fundamental to Butler's ontological account and sheds light on how relationality happens simultaneously at interpersonal and structural levels:

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seduction theory", which seeks to explain the link between external events and psychic life. A major part of this theory is to understand trauma through the link between at least two scenes of a traumatic event, the event itself and in the later interpretation of the event. Cathy Caruth, "An interview with Jean Laplanche", *Postmodern Culture* vol.11, issue 2 (2001), http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/text-only/issue.101/11.2caruth.txt, retrieved 05.01.2018.

[58] The readings that concentrate on these books even accuse Butler of being a liberal thinker, as in the case of Julian Reid and Janell Watson, who believe that the politics of vulnerability Butler proposes enhances the security- and risk discourse revolving around the liberal state. In my opinion these readings compartmentalise Butler's understanding of vulnerability and precarity within a discourse of politics and overlook other dimensions, such as the importance of her theory of the self, which revolves around opacity. Julian Reid, "The Vulnerable Subject of Liberal War", *The South Atlantic Quarterly,* 110:3 (Summer 2011),770-779, Janell Watson, "Butler's Biopolitics: Precarious Community", *Theory &Event* vol. 15, Issue 2, (2012), muse.jhu.edu/article/478357, retrieved 24.04.2018.

> Emotional states do not exist in the abstract – they neither float freely in the objective world nor are they purely subjective phenomena. They emerge from the world and in relation to the world, and they never quite get free of the double valence.[59]

Our experiences are solely our own, yet, in making sense of them, we cannot but refer to ourselves as the "I" that is "common" to all of us; each of us is this "I". Philosophically, we could describe the problem at hand as the problem of singularity; how are we to speak about *how we are* in the world, separate or conjoined? This problem is at the heart of the theory of self that Butler develops in *Giving an Account*. Such theorisation is furthermore fundamental for the form of relationality that becomes prevalent in a given society. For example, one can argue that during the neoliberal period we are encouraged to think about ourselves as individual and separated, with the consequence that supportive relationality is not normalised.

Yet there are other dimensions of the problem of singularity that concern the relationship between particular experiences and social universals. Butler became renowned at the outset of her academic career as a critic of social universals as they appear in identity categories, such as the category of women (GT.2). Whilst she acknowledges the actual, social mark on one's skin that comes about by one's *being* being subsumed under a social category, she notes in her paper "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" that there is "nothing about femaleness that is waiting to be expressed; there is, on the other hand, a good deal about the diverse experiences of women that is being expressed and still needs to be expressed".[60]

Accordingly, she proposes an analysis of the critical genealogy of the category of "woman" rather than a "false" ontological expression of femaleness that has normative and essentialistic implications.[61] I can state that I am a woman and that I have certain

[59] Butler, Judith, "On this Occasion...", *Butler on Whitehead* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012), 8.

[60] Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution", *The Feminist Theory Reader*, ed. McCann, Carole R., and Kim, Seung-kyung (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), 429.

[61] Ibid, 428.

womanly experiences, but I cannot generalise about what it means to be a woman in a way that is universally common to all women, at all times and everywhere. Even though all women in a globalised, patriarchical culture may share enduring misogyny their experiences of it vary according to time, place and other conditions and variables.

As we see in *Giving an Account*, the task is to detect where social universals have become rigid, exclusive and perhaps oppressive. “The universal not only diverges from the particular, but this very divergence is what the individual comes to experience” (GAO. 8). Thus, one could say that the aim of articulating the relations between the concrete individual and the social universal in question is to examine whether *the practice of the universal* corresponds with the singular human being that comes to experience it, and whether, at the same time, the subject appreciates that her immanent experience is shaped by social universals or the wider structure. Butler seems to be tackling the latter point in the following paragraph:

> If my face is readable at all, it becomes so only by entering into a visual frame that conditions its readability. If some can "read" me when others cannot, is it only because those who can read me have internal talents that others lack? Or is it that a certain practice of reading becomes possible in relation to certain frames and images that over time produce what we call "capacity"? For instance, if one is to respond ethically to a human face, there must first be a frame for the human, one that can include any number of variations as ready instances (GAO.29).

According to Butler, reading a face, reading a reaction in the face of another, is a learned capacity set by a specific frame rather than a natural gift that some people have but others do not. And the learning happens by repeatedly being subjected to patterns of recognition, or being recognised in a specific way; by learning expressions that are *common* within a given culture. The smallest movements and bodily gestures, which we believe to be a mark of a trait of character of the person in question, are conditioned by a specific social frame and by the way that person identifies within that given frame. It may be easier to fathom the discursive, in the literal sense of a “pure” text or language, as constructed by social

universals (because concepts and words literally *are* universals), but throughout Butler's work, one can see that she is at pains to show that social universals seep into every aspect of our lives, that our senses are shaped by the social. In the example above, she is exposing the normativity of the visual field, which is the normativity of immanence. She is exposing the fact that the frame which communicates a human face is not only epistemologically constructed, but also saturated in power. Comprehending a particular human face can make different faces incomprehensible to us, and even not human (GAO. 29). The way knowledge and intelligibility are constructed is a question of power, because it allocates different subject positions to particular bodies, some of which even stand outside of that allocation, outside of the grid of intelligibility.

Bearing this in mind, the act of responding to a face, which at first seems so straightforward, turns out to be rather complicated. The level of difficulty multiplies when we move to the other end of the analysis: the big numbers, statistics, and structural analysis. How are we to appreciate that the numbers aren't just numbers but people? "[W]e are used to hearing, for instance, that quantitative methods reign in the social sciences, and that qualitative approaches do not 'count' for very much at all. And yet, in other domains of life, numbers are remarkably powerless" (FW.xx). If I find myself in the situation of one of 104,345 people at risk of death by volcanic eruption, the numbers do not mean much to me personally but the intensive feelings of those around me mean everything to me. This number however, means everything to the operating-team, which has the role of managing the risk of the same natural disaster.

In a conversation with Athanasiou in *Dispossession*, Butler examines the tension between the particular and the universal by arguing against separating the structure from its *instance,* as that would be a form of dualistic thinking (DPP. JB. 111). The structure needs its instance in order to repeat itself, according to Butler, but each instance happens in particular circumstances, and these instances are more tangible to the people experiencing them than any sense of structure. For example, if someone is subjected to a racist act, it would be of little consolation to the person experiencing

racism to be told not to pay attention to that particular act but to rather focus on the structures of racism (DPP. JB. 110-111). “If we extract the structure from the everyday, then we have produced an "inverted" world in which what happens at the level of structure is more important than what happens at the level of the instance” (DPP.111).

1.2 The “I” and the “you” of narration

In order to describe how we come to experience ourselves and others both Butler and Cavarero make use of the personal pronouns “I” and “you”. In fact, Butler is at least partly reacting to Cavarero’s relational ontology in *Giving an Account*. Cavarero's *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* establishes a theory of the self via narration on the grounds of each and every self’s relation to the particular others surrounding it. What is at stake is not solely a theory of the construction of a self through telling stories (or the fact that others are a factor in constructing your sense of self) *but that you desire to hear another person tell your life-story* (RN.32). Cavarero highlights that I *am* the relations to the particular “you’s” in my life through different cases of people becoming in touch with a specific identity by hearing their life-story told by another person. Her account of the self is thus radically relational, yet a fundamental motif of her theory is that every single human being is *unique*.

Both Butler and Cavarero are enquiring into the question of personal identity. Butler’s critique of the reified categorisation of “women” as a unitary subject or as having a unitary identity is simultaneously a critique of viewing identity, or the “self”, as a substantive core (although it achieves a substantive appearance “through a performative twist of language and/or discourse that conceals the fact that “being” a sex or a gender is fundamentally impossible” (GT. 26)). This results in the *belief* that we have a sort of “inner truth”, a kernel or innate set of characteristics that remain self-same, will not change, and consist of our “authentic” self (GT.30). For Butler, any sort of unity or core of identity is fictive; this is not necessarily a depressive or nihilistic claim, in fact, she views this

realisation as a source of emancipation. Identity as fictive[62] means that there are certainly formative experiences that can highly influence person's identity and the way she perceives situations, but they are not unchangeable and one's processing of these experiences can lead to having different dispositions. This notion of identity as a process rather than as static therefore opens up space for transformations (although there are indeed some social constraints to such transformation, and possibly punitive consequences).

The way we refer to a person (e.g. by pronouns) structures the scene of address and the way a conversation may or may not develop. Butler is highly aware of this difficulty, as can be seen in the following lines from the 1999 preface to *Gender Trouble*: "For this 'I' that you read is in part a consequence of the grammar that governs the availability of persons in language. I am not outside the language that structures me but neither am I determined by the language that makes this 'I' possible" (GT.xxv-xxvi). I cannot but "do" this "I", speak as this consciousness that refers to itself as an "I", if I am going to speak at all. But the way I speak and the way I am spoken to is conditioned by the form of address of my language and society. To what extent is my *being* conditioned by this address? Even though I speak as an "I", just by uttering this personal pronoun, my "I" becomes a part of thoughts and experiences of multiple "I's" that have used this language. My "I" becomes impersonal.

In *Giving an Account*, Butler analyses the use of personal pronouns in relation to the scene or structure of address. The focus is to a great extent on the "I" but always in relation to the "you", and the question *Who are you?* can be detected throughout the book. Butler agrees with Cavarero that the singular "you" comes before the "we", the plural "you", and the "they" (GAO. 32). And the "I" is nothing if not a "you", a set of particular "you's" in one's own life. In fact, the whole life of the "I" appears to exist because of the address by a "you": "I am not, as it were, an interior subject, closed upon myself, solipsistic, posing questions of myself alone. I exist in an

[62] The notion of fiction Butler adopts is not embedded in the opposition of fictive and real, it is rather the case that the duality is replaced by never-ending narrative processes.

important sense for you, and by virtue of you. If I have no ’you’ to address, then I have lost ‘myself’” (GAO.32). Or, to quote Thiem’s *Unbecoming Subjects*,

> we might say that in every communication the asymmetries are not as clear-cut as they might seem at first and that daring the “you” in addressing another person means in fact risking two “I”s. Even in responding to you, I will not only expose myself to you in the fragility of my “I”; I depend on your response, but at the same time my response is another address, namely, you finding yourself addressed by a demand, by my demand for your response (US.164).

It is not the case that one is solely in the power of addressing whilst the other awaits the address. Responding to an address is simultaneously an address. Both parties are vulnerable to the address and in being responsive; they both, in a sense, risk the “I” in the exposure of the address. The “I” and the “you” are not independent identities entering into a perfectly clear contractual relationship. We continuously lose our sense of “I”, and we remain fragile, exposed and undone by the “you”. Still we are only the “I” because of "you"!

Cavarero’s emphasis on the self at least partly aims to do away with the traditional conceptualisation of *the subject* in continental philosophy, a conceptualisation Cavarero relates with a sense of exhaustion. To counter the category of the subject Cavarero speaks of the *narrative self* who "*lives him- or herself* as his/her own story, without being able to distinguish the *I* who narrates from the *self* who gets narrated.” (RN. 34, italics original). Cavarero is fiercely opposed to universality, which she both detects in the idea of “Man” that runs through the history of philosophy (and through colloquial use), and in the more recent conception of the subject. She believes that the male-dominated Western tradition of philosophy has ruined “the particular” with its great emphasis on universality. As Cavarero puts it: "Man" is a universal that applies to everyone precisely because it is no one (RN.9).

This critique of the use of universality of personal identity is related to Cavarero's emphasis on the unique existence of every person. Her critique of the philosophical tradition is a critique of

mastery, and she claims that philosophical contemplation aims at abolishing the accidental (RN.53). By rescuing the particular from its finitude, philosophy produces an order, a mastery. According to Cavarero, one need not salvage the accidental, but care for it. Uniqueness is not at all opposed to the accidental, but the opposite; *the uniqueness of every being is utterly accidental* (RN. 53). But not only is it accidental, it is also embodied and always already exposed to other people. Therefore, one's uniqueness is beyond mastery, and beyond something one consciously forms.

Exposure is an important notion in Cavarero's analysis, and she characterises the human condition as vulnerable (RN.20). One is always, to a certain degree, exposed to others; there is always something of one's character that discloses itself without one either wanting it or being conscious of it. And that is not the end of it; something even appears that *only* the other perceives, that you yourself are blind to. Exposure is furthermore analysed in relation to the birth of a new life in Cavarero's account as she argues that from the moment of birth the infant is "exposed, brought into appearance as someone who is abandoned," and adds: (RN.19).

> The mother, who embodies the *ex-* of existent, despite having been there at the origin of the child's existence, is now no longer there. Existence as exposure becomes, in this case, the perceptible truth of every existence, made more acute by the immediate loss of one's own origin (RN. 19).

For Cavarero, identity is expositive and relational; it is not substantive (RN.20). Interestingly, Cavarero's account of both exposure and birth puts a special focus on the time before your first recollection of yourself; the first moments of your life-story. In a more recent book, *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence,* Cavarero points out that it is in the case of the newborn – when vulnerability and defencelessness are the same – that vulnerability express itself the most brazenly.[63] She notes that Butler's understanding of the "I" as open and exposed is a response to an individualistic modern ontology of the autonomous self that closes off and denies its

[63] Cavarero, Adriana, *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence* (New York: Columbia Press, 2009), 21.

vulnerabilities, dependency and injurability.[64] Cavarero disagrees with Butler's characterisation of the infant as a vulnerable being consigned to the other in terms of violence, questioning whether the radical dependency at the beginning of life necessarily includes violence towards the new being who is being handled.[65]

Although these particular works of Butler and Cavarero resemble each other when it comes to emphasising interpersonal relationality and the extent to which dependent and opaque infantile beginnings in this world call upon us as adult subjects, they also differ in fundamental ways. Whilst Butler is renowned as a critic of identity as a substantive core resulting in a unitary subject, Cavarero is not afraid of speaking about unity: "The unity of the self – which lies in the miracle of birth, like a promise of its naked uniqueness – is already irremediably lost in the very moment in which that same self begins to commemorate herself. This loss of unity gets turned into the lack that feeds desire" (RN.39). Each person has experienced the unity of the self, according to Cavarero, but it is an experience beyond memory. Yet the loss of this unity is experienced as something *one is lacking*; a lack which seems to kindle a quest for the original unity in stories of oneself as told by others. The aim here is not to critically engage with Cavarero's theory of the self.[66] What interests me in comparing Cavarero's account to Butler's is that the former gives this (lived) time one cannot possibly remember a special focus. While Cavarero states that we are desiring beings who always seek an original state of being, Butler argues that this opacity fundamentally produces who we are (without having a reference to original self or a lack).

[64] Ibid.

[65] Ibid, 22. I think this is a valid point, and I will engage with it in the fourth and fifth chapters.

[66] Grounding a theory of the unity of the self in these first moments of one's life is contestable, just as all articulations about these first moments are bound to be speculative (which does not mean that one should not engage with them), as Butler points out in *Giving an Account* (GAO. 78).

Vulnerability is at the heart of the notion of the relational self in both Butler's and Cavarero's accounts.[67] For Cavarero, vulnerability is important because others know dimensions of our unique life-story that we cannot account for; others fill up our own story, in a way: "it is necessary to go back to the narration told by others, in order for the story to begin from where it really began: and it is this first chapter of the story that the narratable self stubbornly seeks with all of her desire" (RN. 39). The particular other in some sense *completes* one's own story according to Cavarero, and this is where her path diverges from Butler's.

A key difference materialises in the way they approach the question: *Who are you?* In Cavarero's thought, this question is directed towards the unique existence of the "you" but as we will see, such a question becomes a little more complicated for Butler. One of Cavarero's aims by this question is an attempt to surpass the concept of the subject, which she sees as a practice of categorisation. She believes that enquiring into the singular "you" (rather than the plural "you" or the "we") serves the purpose of really perceiving the singular existence of "you" and the particularities that follow *just* that existence, instead of subsuming "you" under a categorical existence of the other pronouns (RN. 90).

> Symptomatically, the *you* [*tu*] is a term that is not at home in modern and contemporary developments of ethics and politics. The 'you' is ignored by the individualistic doctrines, which are too preoccupied with praising the rights of the *I*, and the 'you' is made by a Kantian form of ethics that is only capable of staging an *I* that addresses itself as a familiar 'you' (RN.90).

Cavarero sees this emphasis on the "you" as an ethical counter-movement, an alternative to the way traditional ethics phrases moral and ethical problems by focusing on the "I" and its capabilities to independently justify moral acts. By shifting the focus from individual intentions and dispositions, the moral act becomes one of enquiring: *Who are you?* What do you want? Where can we meet? You are not the same as me, and thus I cannot decide how to

[67] Guaraldo, "Thinkers that Matter", 106.

help you according to an ethical imperative concerning what I think is best for you. Or, as Butler puts it:

> Cavarero argues that we are beings who are, of necessity, *exposed* to one another in our vulnerability and singularity, and that our political situation consists in part in learning how best to handle - and to honor - this constant and necessary exposure (GAO.31-32).

Managing this exposure is what Cavarero calls the altruistic ethics of relations: “this ethic desires a *you* that is truly an other, in her uniqueness and distinction. No matter how much you are similar and consonant, says this ethic, your story is never my story” (RN. 92). Mills points out that the exposure is always mutual; it is not only *you* that expose yourself to the other “you” but that other “you” exposes itself to *you*.[68] Mills calls this “ontological altruism": the idea that your sense of self is unfulfilled without the narration of the others of your life-story is an ontological condition, which interconnects your life with multiple others.[69]

Butler asks the question *Who are you?* throughout her works, not only in *Giving an Account* but also in *Dispossession* (DPP.73), and in *Undoing Gender* (UG.35). In *Dispossession*, she sees this question as transcending the “distinction” between the most personal and the most political of circumstances. This question is both asked “when someone is in your face”, a stranger invading your personal space, and in a personal fight, when you angrily ask: who the fuck are you? I thought I knew you (DPP.73). This interestingly sheds light on Butler’s constant enquiry into the dialectics between familiarity and foreignness at the heart of the subject, which explains how Butler's account of relational ontology of vulnerability differs from Cavarero's. Thus, in contemplating the question *Who are you?* Butler emphasises to a greater extent than Cavarero how the "I" do not really know the answer to this question and needs to be *responsive* to the other "I" giving an account of oneself (even if this latter "I" will always to some extent fail in giving this account).

[68] Mills, “Undoing Ethics”, 58.

[69] Ibid.

1.3 The non-narratable and substitutability

Butler is more concerned than Cavarero with explaining how social structures – and the relations of power at work in them – are always inherent in the intersubjective context. While Butler concurs with the primacy of the "you", she does not share Cavarero's view of the way the opaque side of ourselves constructs relations. Butler focuses on how the "I" gives an account of herself, rather than on building the idea of a narrative self: not only does giving an account of oneself not necessarily consist in telling a story (such as in a biographical account), the unconscious also sets limits to any "narrative reconstruction of life" (GAO.12, 20).

Butler is wary of Cavarero's approach of subjecting the self so exclusively to narrative. Although such an approach sheds interesting light on the altruistic form of our existence by placing an emphasis on how others see us, it leaves out the fact that exposure cannot be narrated (GAO.35), the implicit dimensions of our lives, which cannot be put into words, or conveyed in any kind of communication. What is not and can never be discursive cannot be fully communicated in a narrative (US.149). Thiem points out that there are "unconscious histories of desires and relations to others" at play in being addressed (US.151). The psychic mechanisms of the self desperately evade the narrative form, because "the web of narratives that constitute our selves is traversed by nonnarratable aspects" (US.149). It is not only that we cannot translate all the images and affects that run through our heads into words, we also have an abundance of desires and feelings that dwell in us and "reach the surface" by certain signs. This applies both to one's sense of one's own life and to one's communications with others. According to Butler, a theory of a narrative self even in an altruistic form does not capture this dimension of living.

What Butler is trying to do by looking at the "I" giving an account of itself, is to illustrate that such an enterprise is always bound to fail. "The 'I' is the moment of failure in every narrative effort to give an account of oneself" (GAO, 79). Taking a third-person perspective upon oneself is impossible; our knowledge of ourselves is not "truth" but an ongoing interpretation that keeps failing. By giving an account

of oneself, the “I” is exposed as a contingent name given to a “being” that creates her own self-coherence according to given parameters.

Butler is not, however, proposing to do away with all narrative structures. “In any event, it does not follow that, if a life needs some narrative structure, then all of life must be rendered in narrative form” (GAO.52). Thus, Butler suggests that the structure of address is an interruption of narrative rather than what founds a narrative (GAO. 63).

> I speak as an "I," but do not make the mistake of thinking that I know precisely all that I am doing when I speak in that way. I find that my very formation implicated the other in me (GAO.84).

We do not really know what we want to express, words fail us all the time, fail to capture our ever-changing or mixed feelings that are too complicated and chaotic to be framed in a neat system like language (or at least, the basic definition of language). This failure (of coherence) provides us with a different kind of ontology; one that might, in the end, prove to accept more diverse ways of being vulnerable than the one that assumes a coherent subject capable of rationality.

What is really going on when I speak as an “I”, when I speak to you? As Butler points out, “whereas the other may be singular, if not radically personal, the norms are to some extent impersonal and indifferent” (GAO. 25). We are radical personal beings, yet impersonal and indifferent. We experience a unique encounter with another being, yet how we react, how we express ourselves may not be as personal as we think, not only because language is shared and impersonal but also because our ways of being and behaving are influenced by others throughout our lives. Butler emphasises the substitutability at the heart of our subject formation in *Giving an Account*:

> If I understand myself to be conferring recognition on you, for instance, then I take seriously that the recognition comes from me. But the moment I realize that the terms by which I confer recognition are not mine alone, that I did not single-handedly devise or craft them, I am, as it were, dispossessed by the language that I offer (GAO.26).

Norms of recognition have a *foreign* element to it, something I did not fully choose myself. These norms precede me and I act in an impersonal or multi-personal way when I act them out. Butler is wary of any sense of authenticity, of any idea that presents something *real* versus something *fake*. This aspect forms one of the defining threats of *Gender Trouble*, where Butler criticises ideas of genuine and authentic *femaleness* (GT. xxxi) and what she calls the "authentic-expressive paradigm" (GT.31). If "whole" means a sense of "me" or "mineness" – an agency completely founded on the "I" – we are never whole. What Butler is describing, however, is a certain formation of an "I" who believes something is "mine". It is the formation of a subject who believes she can seek out her own genuine self-being; she is produced in such a way that she desires authenticity.

Rather than proposing any sense of authenticity or sense of a "true" self, one is always already situated in a normative setting, whilst relating to others. "Though I thought I was having a relation to 'you', I find that I am caught up in a struggle with norms" (GAO. 26). The distinction between "you" and "me", the relationship that we have, is always already intertwined with histories of (other people's) meanings. Butler points out that singularity is a substitutable term; you and I may not be the same person but the very act of referring to the word *singularity* to describe both of us exposes the substitutability at the heart of singularity.

Via substitutability Butler also answers the question *Who are you?* She does so by connecting the answer directly to being recognisable. It is the fact of our substitutability which makes us recognisable. "The narrative authority of the 'I' must give way to the perspective and temporality of a set of norms that contest the singularity of my story" (GAO.37). Mills has this to say about the matter:

> The apparent paradox that we are all singular, and therefore substitutable, may appear as something of an aside within *Giving an Account*, but I think it actually has a greater significance. This is because, ultimately, substitutability becomes the mechanism by which we are morally bound to others. And part of this substitution is that as humans we have certain characteristics – most significantly vulnerability – in common. Thus, it is by virtue of this "collective condition" of being substitutable that we are morally beholden to others, not just to ourselves.[70]

According to this analysis, it is in fact substitutability which is at the heart of Butler's ethical turn. In order to get the other to recognise me, I refer to a common ground between us; the language that we use, the norms, the bodily expressions. "Paradoxically, it is this interruption, this disorientation of the perspective of my life, this instance of an indifference in sociality, that nevertheless sustains my living" (GAO.35). In other words, the "I" cannot have his/her own history although it designates a certain (impersonal) history as "mine" (US.34).

Butler thus places less emphasis on singularity and particular experiences than Cavarero. Although the starting point in her analysis is the way the "I" conceives of being addressed in this world, the form of address is always already formed by socio-political and – as we will further analyse in the next chapter – normative frameworks. Butler repeatedly exposes the violent "nature" of social universals, but they still found our communal living. We must learn to understand the functionality of social universals as well as the moral act of transforming the social universals that are felt as violent.

Furthermore, it is important to note that it is the *relationship* between the social universals and particular experience, what happens "in the middle", which is at stake in understanding the multiple dimensions of the relational ontology Butler is developing. Butler critiques Foucault for neglecting to theorise the *other*, and her critique arises precisely from the importance of acknowledging and

[70] Mills, "Undoing Ethics", 59.

theorising both social universals and particular experiences at the same time (GAO.23). The notion of the singular other, or of the "you", is the key to understanding this tension. One can surely engage with particularity without engaging with the "you" or with the "other" (that is, the relationship between particularity and universality), solely focusing on the self, for example. But as soon as one tries to express oneself – participate in a conversation, reflect on one's life – one is already engaged in this specific struggle between the particular and the universal, speaking to oneself in "particular" universal terms.

We have seen how the interpersonal relations of the "you" and the "I" compose one aspect of Butler's relational ontology of vulnerability. This aspect, however, is always tightly knit to the sociality formed by multiple anonymous others. Thus, we need to become social theorists in order to understand our own formation. There is, however, another aspect of the relational ontology of vulnerability of equal importance, namely our opaque beginnings in a primary dependency to our caring others. As I discussed earlier, Carero and Butler share an emphasis on the opacity and vulnerability of infancy, but disagree about its significance. I will now present a more in-depth reading of Butler's take on the importance of opacity and primary dependency for her relational ontology of vulnerability.

1.4 Psychoanalysis and the dependent beginning of human life

To ask about *knowledge* in general is to ask about living beings as epistemic subjects; as knowing subjects. In the context of the Foucauldian framework of knowledge and power that Butler adopts, her questioning of the epistemic subject means asking about relations of knowledge; relations of communicating, learning and surviving in a specific environment.

If one looks at the history of philosophy, the greatest surprise may be that the formation of the subject has not been given more space. Why has the wonder of the opacity of the first years not been manifested to a greater extent? How could philosophers ignore all

these dimensions of the self that we cannot possibly explore (unless they become conscious and thus not opaque anymore) and all this unknowingness concerning one’s “self”?

Psychoanalysis was without doubt the first school of thought that systematically investigated subject formation and the traces of infancy in adult life via the idea of *the unconscious*. In spite of the extensive debate about whether psychoanalysis is a scientific theory, as well as its dubious therapeutic success, its philosophical value is not only considerable but constantly evolving as it mixes with ever-new streams of thought such as feminism and queer theory. Thiem argues that Butler approaches psychoanalysis as a critical tool rather than as a clinical discourse, allowing her “to oppose Foucault’s rejection of psychoanalysis without disregarding his criticism of it” (US.42). Psychoanalytic theory is for Butler a toolbox to analyse how vulnerability comes to be through the dependency that is brought about by relationality.

Butler has engaged with different strains of psychoanalysis to a considerable extent, from Freud to Lacan to present-day accounts. There are three main themes that I aim to examine concerning Butler’s engagement with psychoanalysis: desire, other(ing), and the unconscious/opacity. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to fully engage with the relationship between psychoanalysis and Butler’s theory of the subject; my aim here is mostly to focus on relationality and opacity as put forward in *Giving an Account*.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler’s engagement with Freud’s account of mourning and melancholia marks a starting point for theorising subject formation.

> In the experience of losing another human being whom one has loved, Freud argues, the ego is said to incorporate that other into the very structure of the ego...The loss of the other whom one desires and loves is overcome through a specific act of identification that seeks to harbor that other within the very structure of the self: "So by taking flight into the ego, love escapes annihilation" (GT.78).

Melancholia is a response to a lost love-object via a different process than mourning as the perception of that very object is internalised into one's own ego through identification. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler, in fact, describes the forming of a subject as melancholic. The fact that the self is nothing but the multiple others – both in their concrete form as well as through normative structures – is melancholic as both the positive and negative emotions that one felt towards this other become one's "own" once they are internalised. As one would have turned against the other, one thus turns against oneself. This analysis of the melancholic formation of the subject is, however, not engaged with in *Giving an Account*, although she describes the consequence of the overwhelming primary address in Laplanche's theory as a state of "slaughtered being" (GAO.84). Although one might wonder to what extent the process of internalising others would be called "melancholic" in Butler's later works, the process itself is an important part of exposing how relational our ontology is.

To describe the functions and mechanisms of the unconscious as a whole is speculative at the level of theory, as one can never know the unconscious without that knowledge becoming conscious. This "nomenclature will always be giving the lie to itself" (GAO.53). What Butler draws from the different accounts of Freud, Lacan and Laplanche is an awareness of the way social norms form the unconscious through regulating our desires. (US.37). There is a reciprocal relationship between desires and normativity; one's "own" desire traverses through social norms (US.46), and norms exist because we are desiring beings. The following quote from Thiem's *Unbecoming Subjects* explains why it is important to think the unconscious, desires and relationality together:

> The ways in which we relate to others and how desires are at play in these relations might be exactly what escapes the explicitly narrated but that also conditions and animates the grammar of narrativity. Psychoanalysis can help us in this regard, as Butler argues, because it provides the theoretical tools to understand relationality and desires as traversing and at times even undermining what one aims to render explicitly in communicating an account or a story (US.150).

The formation of desire and the ways it traverses the psyche brings us back to the starting point: to ponder what is going on in the first opaque moments of everyone's life and how the infantile experience of primary dependency conditions relationality.

To state that we are beings of dependency seems to be the most obvious of statements given that no one survives the first years without help and care from others. However independent you later become, at the earliest stage someone nurtured you. Still, it seems vital to make this obvious statement at this current moment in history. We need to speak about this obvious fact in relation to the way our own sense of self is formed, as well as in relation to the way we perceive ethics and politics. Estelle Ferrarese asks in 2016: "Why at this time do we all seem to need the concept of vulnerability?"[71] As I will examine in the next chapter, the predominance of liberal ontology, revolving around the possessive individual as its subject-ideal, does not exactly encourage people to present or even acknowledge or accept themselves as dependent or vulnerable.

Dependency can be understood in different terms and feminist theorists have pointed towards political and ideological mechanisms that produce a negative notion of dependency.[72] Within feminist philosophy there has also been a rich re-evaluation of the term, not

[71] Ferrarese, Estelle, "Vulnerability: A Concept with Which to Undo the World As It Is?", 150.

[72] Fraser and Gordon trace the rise of the ideological uses of the term dependency back to social processes in the 15th and 16th century. The meaning of dependency changes from perceiving of it as a social relation towards an understanding of it as an individual trait. Some dependencies were deemed natural whilst others were considered to stem from a lack of will, individual weakness or laziness. Dependency became a gendered concept; a natural attribute for women but degrading for men. Fraser and Gordon, "A Genealogy of Dependency", 311.

necessarily in a positive light but as being a part of the human condition.[73] In Butler's account, dependency and opacity are both presented as forms of vulnerability, but reading these conceptions together intertwines the ontological and the epistemological still further. Opacity is a form of epistemic vulnerability, whilst dependency describes the way we are ontologically relational.

In the following quote, Butler describes the formation of the subject via relations to others systematically:

> There is (1) a non-narrativizable *exposure* that established my singularity, and there are (2) *primary relations*, irrecoverable, that form lasting and recurrent impressions in the history of my life, and so (3) a history that establishes my *partial opacity* to myself. Lastly, there are (4) *norms* that facilitate my telling about myself but that I do not author and that render me substitutable at the very moment that I seek to establish the history of my singularity. This last dispossession in language is intensified by the fact that I give an account of myself to someone, so that the narrative structure of my account is superseded by (5) the *structure of address* in which it takes place (GAO.39).

By looking at this primary dependency, Butler is not only underlining that no one escapes being dependent but that, in some sense, we *are* that dependency. Although we are singular – a sense that becomes actual when one is exposed to another human being – our ontological condition is not fully distinct from those others. Not only *are we* the concrete others that we share lives with (and that care for us) but, as we have seen, substitutability is at the heart of this account of singularity. Here, I argue, Butler is affirming her own account of ontology, which is essentially relational. This will be further explicated in third chapter. However, I think it is important to note that Butler's account of grief shows that this substitutability under no circumstances means that a life is worthless. Rather, what follows is that a sense of "me" derives from the sensing of others. "I"

[73] As an example of such reevaluation of the notion of dependency towards altering the prevalent ontology, Sigríður Þorgeirsdóttir has argued that "[t]he dimensions of interconnectedness in care ethics need to be extended to the financial realities that shape relatedness." Sigridur Thorgeirsdottir, "Dependency and Emancipation in the Debt-Economy: Care-Ethical Critique of Contractarian Conceptions of the Debtor-Creditor Relation", *Hypatia* vol.30, no. 3 (Summer 2015), 574.

am not only me; I am also those around me. This is felt when we discover that not only did the loved one we are grieving cease to exist but *we* did as well.[74] In order to continue living we need to transform, become *other* than we were when our loved one still existed:

> Perhaps, rather, one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly forever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say *submitting* to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance. There is losing, as we know, but there is also the transformative effect of loss, and this latter cannot be charted or planned (PL.21).

The stuff of our singularity is other's singularities, as becomes so painfully apparent in mourning. When Butler speaks of primary relations she is referring to the formation of a being who is helpless and utterly dependent on those relations. But she is also referring to "the becoming" of relational being, in which singular, concrete beings form the sense of "mineness".

1.5 Primary dependency

> From this primary experience of *having been given over from the start*, an "I" subsequently emerges. And the "I", regardless of its claims to mastery, will never get over having been given over from the start in this way (GAO.77).

It seems clear in light of the use of quotation marks around the "I" that we are to be suspicious of this pronoun (suspicious of whether the "I" is what it says it is). The reference to *mastery* in the quote above is also vital; Butler is addressing the way that mastery functions ethico-politically in the formation of a *sense* of an "I". Yet, when reading *Giving an Account*, it is not always obvious that she is discussing mastery; it is more obvious that "being given over from the start" is important. In her analysis, that condition is inspired by

[74] Lloyd, Moya, "Towards a cultural politics of vulnerability: precarious lives and ungrievable deaths", *Judith Butler's Precarious Politics: Critical Encounters*, ed. Terrell Carvell and Samuel A. Champers (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 94.

Laplanche's idea that the enigmatic message of others forms our psyche. This infantile experience that de-centres later adult experience has a lasting influence on who we are, and prevents us from being able to fully account for ourselves. To master every situation (according to plan) is not a possibility for us.

Butler's account of primary dependency is indebted to Laplanche's theories to the effect that the life of the infant is characterised by a certain opening to the world such that she is overwhelmed by the conscious and unconscious messages coming from the adult world.[75] This leads to a primary repression, which means, according to Mills, that "first, affects originate from the outside and it always maintains this external character, and second, this primary repression through which subjectivity emerges lies outside the articulable."[76] The enigmatic messages certainly come from a symbolic and discursive world but the way they establish a new consciousness is to some extent beyond the discursive. Although Butler had certainly started theorising about this primary condition in *The Psychic Life of Power,* Laplanche's theories as well as a focus on dependency first become predominant in *Giving an Account.*

There are two major points at issue in *Giving an Account*. Firstly, our primary condition does not yet involve a state of choice or will. Secondly, because of these primary conditions, we *are* from the start the particular others around us (and the norms they bring us). This happens as we learn to make emotional attachments to these same others. According to Laplanche's theory, you are never detached from others, "attachment is already overdetermined from the start" (GAO.74). Butler suggests:

> so one might say, reflectively, and with a certain sense of humility, that in the beginning *I am my relation to you*, ambiguously addressed and addressing, given over to a "you" without whom I cannot be and upon whom I depend to survive (GAO.81).

In a very concrete sense, a particular other comes before me (as I am born from a particular (m)other), but – as Butler describes in

[75] Mills, "Undoing Ethics", 50.

[76] Ibid.

this quote – there is another dimension to this subject formation: the subjective sense of an "I" is preceded by a sense which Butler claims is less of a self-sense than a sort of relation-sense. This establishes a *constitutive opacity* which is, as Thiem describes it, “bound up with passionate attachments and desires that we can neither fully control nor render fully transparent to ourselves” (US.110).

We never consciously decide to be addressed in a specific way by the other or to enter into a specific language-frame. We do not choose whether our first language will be Icelandic or Persian (or both). The address, the language is always first imposed on us, it is “only after it has produced a web of relations in which affectivity achieves articulation” (GAO. 63) that we can find our own way into language. Butler furthermore describes this as “a communicative enrichment” that the infant enters into and which leads to *default patterns of relationality.* These default patterns are in every account one gives of oneself; they are the opacity *of* the account (GAO.63). We do not simply “grow out of” the primary dependency that characterises infancy, but it conditions (and enables) our every waking moment.[77] This will be important to take into account when we return in greater detail to the ethical perspective of Butler’s philosophy. This otherness at the start is what enables openness towards others and our ability to relate to others (US.147).

The original infant experience “is prior to what constitutes the sphere of what might be owned or claimed by me” (GAO.78). So “my” first moments of life cannot really, according to this, be described as “mine”, they in fact mock the very fact that we phrase something as “mine”. There is indeed a sphere of “the mine” in Butler’s account but it is highly contaminated by otherness, if not radically relational and hardly mine at all. “It is a way of being constituted by an Other that precedes the formation of the sphere of the *mine* itself" (GAO.78). If we ever feel as if we are “complete” or that we have control over ourselves, we are undone by others the next moment. What they undo is exactly one’s sense of self

[77] Ibid, 44.

(US.148). Under influence from Laplanche the problem at the hand is to build a self, an ego from too much otherness.[78]

This shows how enmeshed in otherness any self-sense is, even at the time when our subjective experiences seem radically singular. Before you even try to act consciously, you have always already been *acted upon*. The sense of "me", accordingly, is a sense of the other (GAO. 89), the sense of me *is* that I have been acted upon.

> Self-consciousness is always driven, quite literally, 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 (GAO.98).

Butler takes up this idea of the enigma from Laplanche in order to describe this peculiar sense of *foreignness*, which *is* me through alterity and has become internal. As was discussed earlier, the messages the infant perceives from the adult world are enigmatic and, according to Laplanche, often in need of translation (US. 176). The adult and the infant stand in relation to each other, they are communicating, but the adult uses a complex set of symbols in addition to various learned norms and awaits some kind of reaction from the infant, in the form of a response to the action of the adult. What the infant perceives is not only the conscious acts of the adult but also every unconscious movement of the adult, whilst the infant herself, according to Laplanche, does not yet have an unconscious.

> The asymmetry between infant and adult, for Laplanche, results specifically from the fact that the world around us does not come upon us as neutral, meaningless facts but that gestures and interactions are always infused with conscious and unconscious meanings, desires, and fantasies (US.154).

As Thiem explicates, Laplanche reworks our understanding of communication and places emphasis on the unstable nature of communicating, not only in the case of the infant, but also in the case of the adult, who is not fully in control of the communications as what she expresses reveals a great deal more by nonverbal messages than she is aware of (US.155). The infant needs to act in

[78] Caruth, "Interview with Jean Laplance", 17.

response to these overwhelming expressions that he cannot fully understand. Laplanche calls this *seduction by communication*, placing asymmetrical communication as the basis of the formation of the "I". The infant tries to translate the messages but as the flow of diverse expressions and information becomes overwhelming, that which cannot be translated is repressed "and forms the unconscious, where the untranslatable continues to live on" (US. 156).

The unconscious, however, is not a restful place for the untranslatable, but a specific psychic mechanism, which, together with repression, is supposed to deal with "too much otherness" (US. 157). This point is well put in Thiem's analysis of Laplanche's influence on Butler: "As the unconscious is 'enacted' in relation to an other, the undoing of the repression brings to the fore the constitutive dispossession, disorientation, and incoherence of the 'I'" (US157). When a translation is possible, the infant produces an attachment to the other in the form of understanding via the translation. In *Giving an Account*, Butler describes the unconscious as something that *cannot* really belong to me, as "it defies the rhetoric of belonging" (GAO.54). Yet, even though it does not belong to me in any strong sense of that word, it certainly affects and conditions my life and thinking greatly.[79] Thiem points out that this idea of the unconscious adds a strange temporality to the subject; it has a past that has never been present as we do not remember it as a *past present*. (US.108) It is some sort of *non-presence* that is neither present nor absent. Therefore, we cannot dwell in that memory of the past, we cannot master it, it "is the *anarchical*, the non-original, past of the subject" (US.108). We have always already been addressed by others, pulled into a given symbolic world.

[79] Bell, Vikki, "New Scenes of Vulnerability, Agency and Plurality: An Interview with Judith Butler", *Theory, Culture and Society* (Los Angeles: Sage vol.27(1), 2010), 132.

> I find that my very formation implicated the other in me, that my own foreignness to myself is, paradoxically, the source of my ethical connection with others. I am not fully known to myself, because part of what I am is the enigmatic traces of others. In this sense, I cannot know myself perfectly or know my "difference" from others in an irreducible way. This unknowingness may seem, from a given perspective, a problem for ethics and politics (PL. 46).

Having a sense of foreignness can direct us towards a perspective of coming to terms with our unknowingness. We do not need to know all of our senses consciously, we can actually react ethically to others not only *despite* our unknown foreignness but through it; through its similarities to the rest of the world, which often feels foreign. This unknowability founds the ethical perspective that Butler is proposing in *Giving an Account*. Mills suggests that opacity can be viewed as an epistemic vulnerability at the heart of the subject *because of* the dependent state of our beginnings.[80] In line with Butler's overall approach to vulnerability, such an epistemic vulnerability is not necessarily negative or positive, but sketches out a way of being open to the world *and on that ontological basis* she establishes her ethical account.

1.6 Dependency and the limits of mastery

> The Foucauldian postulation of subjection as the simultaneous subordination and forming of the subject assumes a specific psychoanalytic valence when we consider that no subject emerges without a passionate attachment to those on whom he or she is fundamentally dependent (PLP.7).

At the heart of *Psychic Life of Power* is the idea that power is not external, it is the very "force" which "assumes a psychic form that constitutes the subject's self-identity" (PLP.3). In this case, Butler theorises power in relation to dependency, suggesting that the very fact of our dependent nature conditions the way we can, and will come to, participate in power relations. The formation of subjects can take on various forms, which either (or both) limits or enables them to play an active role in power relations. But what these

[80] Mills, "Undoing Ethics", 51.

different formations have in common is a primary unwilled state of dependency, as Butler points out:

> No matter how gently an infant is treated, the handling is always to some extent unwilled, since what we might call a "will" has not been formed.[81]

Butler's idea of “me” and “mineness” is closely connected with individual will or choice; when there is no sense of “me” there is neither a sense of choice nor will. To acquire the self-reflective sense of me is to acquire a sense of individual choice. As Butler repeatedly casts the focus on the opacity at the heart of “mineness”, it becomes apparent that not only is she questioning that sense, but also the general acceptance of the notion of an individual will. Yet she appears to retain some notion of individual will herself as the *unwilled* state of being in infancy in some way implies that it is prior to a later state that *does* involve some kind of personal will.

The question of will and choice is a question of *individual autonomy*, a notion which constitutes an essential feature of Kantian moral philosophy, John Stuart Mill’s utilitarianism and one of the main characteristics of liberalism. Autonomy, as a core feature of the ethical agent who is able to reflect independently and make independent choices, is greatly disputed within feminist thought. On the one hand, feminists often caution against the use of this notion because of the way it has historically operated ideologically, reducing autonomy to a set of property rights. On the other hand, women and minorities have throughout history claimed rights over their bodies and lives in the name of autonomy and individual freedom. I will engage further with autonomy in relation to the liberal subject as the possessive individual, but here, I want to emphasise that Butler is offering a critique of individual will or choice via the notion of primary dependency.

Butler comments on autonomy in relation to infancy in an interview with Vikki Bell. “You can’t imagine that all relationships are contractual and raise a child!”, she proclaims.[82] In other words, in thinking human relationality it cannot be the case that all interactions

[81] Bell, “New Scenes of Vulnerability, Agency and Plurality”, 136.

[82] Ibid,137.

are willed by all parties. We are impressionable towards other people in unpredictable ways (PL.46), starting from infancy. We neither control, nor do we have an overview over, our relations. This applies not only to infancy but to the entire span of a life. It does not mean that we do not welcome being impressed by others, but as Butler claims in both *Undoing Gender* and *Precarious Life*, we should face it, we keep being undone by others. Being impressed by others means that at least occasionally we are undone by others. (PL.23, UG.19).

In *Precarious Life* Butler claims that "there is a certain violence already in being addressed, given a name" (PL.139). As one cannot control the way one is addressed – as the address is not only *unchosen* but even *before* the possibility of choice – being subject to a system of intelligibility is always violent to a certain degree. Not only does Butler speak of violence but also of deprivation: "To be addressed is to be, from the start, deprived of will, and to have that deprivation exist as the basis of one's situation in discourse" (PL.139). This is inspired by Levinas, who believes that we are in a sense held hostage by discourse (PL.139). In *Frames of War*, Butler tones this thought down somewhat:

> We are at least partially formed through violence. We are given genders or social categories, against our will, and these categories confer intelligibility or recognizability, which means that they also communicate what the social risks of unintelligibility or partial intelligibility might be. (FW.167).

It would be worthwhile to critically pursue this notion of "being at least partially formed through violence" but it is beyond the scope of this dissertation. I think however that Butler is emphasising the unwilled dimension of subject formation by referring to violence. The way we are introduced to language and communication – starting out as the passive party in relations (although perhaps Butler should give more credit to crying, and to the way everything revolves around the needs of the infant) – we certainly do not choose. To be sure, we need to "master" linguistic, gestural, symbolic communication and discourse in order to be understood by others.

But although we might have an idea of "full mastery" either over relations with others or over our own lives and thoughts, that idea can never be actualised, according to Butler's analysis of opacity and primary dependency. Still, we may desire that sort of mastery, but the constant presence of the unconscious prevents us from acquiring it. Butler points out in *Giving an Account* that full mastery over the psychic should not be the goal of psychoanalysis, its strength lies in accepting our opaque, unconscious side.

It is not only the case that sometimes we are – as infants – totally bereft of the capacity to help ourselves, this primary dependency also produces a form of attachment, a "primary passion", which makes "the child vulnerable to subordination and exploitation" (PLP.7). Although *Giving an Account* also offers a more affirmative account of love and attachment, I do not think that Butler gives up this idea of psychic attachment, which makes us vulnerable in this primary way (PL.24). Primary vulnerability is thus social, not only because primary dependency makes us rely on others in order to survive, but because via this helpless form of being utterly dependent on the concrete others in our lives, an attachment and a desire for the company or recognition of others is formed.[83] In *Undoing Gender,* Butler states that survival is not enough, one also needs to be *affirmed* in a relational, social way (UG.195).

Being born dependent in overwhelming circumstances which you do not really understand makes you acutely dependent on these concrete others as well as open and vulnerable towards them. This form of dependency establishes a primary relationality, which along with constitutive opacity makes the "I" "dispossessed" (US. 110). The dispossession does not stem from any original *possession* or "uniqueness," to recall Cavarero's terms, but rather establishes a trans-relational ontology which is neither ethically positive nor negative, but is just an attempt to capture the complexity of selfhood as intersubjective and relational.

[83] Does it simply make us vulnerable to desire? Desire can be exploited.

1.7 Experiencing relationality

We have seen how – in order to fully comprehend the various aspects of Butler's relational ontology – we need to approach it from the perspective of the "I" and the "you", and the form the address between them takes. The reason for the importance of this aspect is to show firstly, that there always remains a dialectic between the particular experiences of the "I" and the way social universals and norms shape these experiences. Secondly, that the singularity of the "I" cannot be said to be *unique* in the same vein as in Cavarero's relational ontology because substitution is nevertheless at the heart of Butler's relational account. And finally, despite the importance of substitution, the starting point for Butler's theoretical investigation consists in the experiences of ever-new "I"'s as they reflect on themselves in the scene of an address.

Accordingly, it is apt that such great part of *Giving an Account* engages with the dependent beginnings of our lives. Dependency is of prime importance for the relational ontology in question and it furthermore indicates a way of responding with an alternative to the liberal ontology of an individual and invulnerable subject.

By analysing Laplanche's theory of primary dependency and opacity, the self-coherent "me" is debunked, indicating the critical awareness that grounds the ethical stand Butler is proposing; it is via our opacity that we can learn to morally relate to others, as we are more likely to develop an open and "forgiving attitude" to the unknowability of others if we face our own constitutional opacity. The "I" cannot recall her first experiences of being addressed in accordance with social norms through the concrete others in her lives. The "I" is in the middle of countless addresses when she starts to ponder her experiences. Yet, Butler locates this as the starting point of her philosophical perspective on the self as well as on the world, and from there, proceeds to her reflections concerning the fact that the "I" has always already been formed through social norms and multiple relations.

2 Normativity and the subject of (neo)liberalism

Being mindful of the concrete existence of the “you” and the “I” at the same time as one examines social norms and structures in the formation of the “I” is not an easy task, but one which Butler keeps working on.

I will begin this chapter by examining how Butler uses the notion of relationality to glue together particular experiences and social norms. This shows how Butler continues to address the complex dynamics and effects taking place in interpersonal relations, although the explanation may lie within analysis of social and ethical normativity. Hence, without losing sight of the lived experiences of the “you” and the “I” that are continuously formed through social structures, the chapter continues by looking at the extent to which normativity is essential to Butler’s relational ontology. Yet I will also pinpoint a theoretical tension in Butler’s account of norms, by first showing the extent to which she continuously presents norms in a general, abstract way (applicable to all societies as well as different historical times) whilst adhering to a Foucauldian genealogical account of norms as a historical phenomenon.

I will then show how this genealogical account corresponds to the ontology of the subject that Butler is responding to, namely, the predominant ontology of the subject of (neo)liberalism. This subject is arguably one of the main research objects of critical and feminist theories. It is called by many names, such as the sovereign subject, the liberal subject, the invulnerable subject, the autonomous being or the possessive individual.

This chapter will focus on the concepts of *the possessive individual* and *the invulnerable subject* in order to show that Butler responds by placing *dispossession* – in the meaning of being beside oneself– at the heart of her account of vulnerability. By looking at the feminist line of thought that critiques liberalism, I will show that the ontology of liberalism in fact produces two subject positions: the public one of the "strong individual" (presented as the only subject

position), and the hidden one of the *femina domestica* residing within the private sphere, which provides the possessive individual with the opportunity to hide away all his vulnerabilities.

Although Butler does not explicitly refer to the feminist tradition of executing this critique of liberalism, I argue that one can read her works in relation to it and, in fact, that her relational ontology of vulnerability does justice to the hidden figure of *femina domestica,* and rehabilitates it as an important feature of the ontological self that needs to be acknowledged rather than simultaneously hidden and assumed.

However, when exposing the possessive individual by placing emphasis on our primary dependency, our opaque site, our openness to the world, and our vulnerability, it is easy to succumb to the other extreme, and to fall into the pit of offering a new ideal of a fragile, opaque and relational subject that is reduced to passive exposure to social norms. Picturing agency, resistance and "autonomy" from this perspective is a challenging task, especially as the negative conception of vulnerability (according to which it is a negative attribute only *some* individuals have who may be victims of war or in an intensively dependent state due to illness) stemming from liberal discourse is prevalent. Thus, if the aim is to transform ontology towards an understanding of our relational and vulnerable state of being, it is always important to bear in mind that vulnerability is neither negative nor positive, neither solely a weakness nor a strength (in fact, it can be both), but marks a certain openness to the world.

2.1 Relationality and norms

As a concept, relationality is central to feminist thought, but the concept is often affiliated with relational psychoanalysis and the philosophical critique of the autonomous, unencumbered self, such as is common in feminist ethics.[84] The most frequent use of

[84] An example of relational psychoanalysis is Stephen A. Mitchell's *Relationality: From Attachment to Intersubjectivity* (New York and London: Psychology Press, 2000). Care ethicists who have engaged with relationality are e.g. Carol Gillingan in *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1993) and Nel Noddings in *Caring: A Relational*

relationality refers to interpersonal relationships; to what is happening between two or more people. Relationality does not necessarily refer to the relationships of human agents, but it can also refer to a perspective on the material world that puts primacy on the relationship between two entities, rather than their individual and separated existence, as can be seen in Barad's relational ontology.[85] Étienne Balibar has this to say about relationality's sister concepts, "relation" and "relationship":

> To begin with, in English a "relation" tends to indicate an objective situation, whereas a "relationship" specifically indicates a relation between persons that has a subjective dimension; but "relation" also has a logical and ontological meaning (whereby relations are opposed to forms or substances).[86]

The use of "relationality" in Butler's work appear to be based on the conjoining of the objective dimension of "relation" – especially as it refers to ontology – on the one hand, and the subjective dimension of "relationship" on the other hand. Butler's understanding of the term in *Giving an Account* places a special emphasis on the subjective dimension of "relationship", as can be seen in the concept of "ethical relationality," but by that idea Butler emphasises that we need to be involved in a relation with someone *before* we make an ethical judgment on that person (GAO.45).

In *Precarious Life*, Butler makes a distinction between two conceptions of relationality as a "historical fact of our formation" on one hand and an "ongoing normative dimension of our social and political lives" on the other hand, "one in which we are compelled to take stock of our interdependence" (PL.27). A few pages earlier Butler addresses her "affinity for the term relationality" when she contrasts a relational view with an *autonomous* one, but as I would

Approach to Ethics and Moral Education (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

[85] Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 333.

[86] Étienne Balibar, "From Philosophical Anthropology to Social Ontology and Back: What to Do with Marx's Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach" *Postmodern Culture* vol.22, nr. 3, may 2012), http://www.pomoculture.org/2015/06/10/from-philosophical-anthropology-to-social-ontology-and-back-what-to-do-with-marxs-sixth-thesis-on-feuerbach-2/, retrieved 24.09.2017.

argue, autonomy is the epitome of liberal ontology. Relationality is not a virtue or a quality that "makes us whole". Butler points out that we are not only constituted by our relations but also dispossessed by them (PL.24). Relational constitution hence consists in the double movement of constituting and dispossessing, over and over again. Furthermore, this process happens in accordance with the particular normative dimension of each life. Mills describes this as "the double edge of relationality":

> In the midst of arguing for the political valence of grief, she [Butler] posits that loss and vulnerability "follow from our being socially constituted bodies", whereby the attachment to another always threatens us with loss, and exposure to others threatens us with violence… This brings out the double edge of what one can call relationality – we are not only constituted by and through relations with others, but also dispossessed by those relations.[87]

In Butler's use dispossession is a concept used to describe a lack of self-continuation and a state of always-being-with. In *Precarious Life*, she describes gender as "a mode of being dispossessed, a way of being *for* another or *by virtue of* another" (PL.24). One cannot but be dispossessed; the fact that we are always already the relations that have shaped our lives means that we are always dispossessed. Thus, Butler's use of dispossession is ontological. This meaning of dispossession implies that we are not in control, and that we can never be in control of what we call our own lives.

A sense of "me" is made as well as unravelled by a "you": this relational account, which is a historical fact of our formation, means that we find ourselves yet again faced with the question of "you" and "I". Butler thinks it is important to make a distinction between these particular others that form the inaugural moments of the "I" on the one hand and the normative dimension on the other hand (GAO.59). "It will not do, then, to collapse the notion of the other into the sociality of norms and claim that the other is implicitly present in the norms by which recognition is conferred. Sometimes the very unrecognizability of the other brings about a crisis in the norms that

[87] Mills, "Undoing Ethics", 43, Butler, *Precarious Life*, 20.

govern recognition" (GAO.24). In *Unbecoming Subjects,* Thiem points out that in Butler's earlier works "the other had become very quickly assimilated into the agent of the law, to become the embodied demand of the social norms and personified social regulations" (US.96).

In my opinion this is one of the reasons why the relational ontology she develops in her more recent works better captures the tension between concrete, subjective experiences of facing another as well as how these relationships are always already shaped by the social structures of a given society. In *Giving an Account,* a qualitative difference emerges between the embodied other in the dyadic relations of the address and the multiple other in the normative framework. If we collapse the other into the idea of norms, we, in a way, lose the accidental and the hectic affects that comes across in relations with a concrete other.[88]

Furthermore, we lose sight of the way "playing with norms" is also a scene of possible resistance, which is a fundamental part of Butler's renowned theory of performativity. When I address an acquaintance that I desire to chat with and even get to know better, I may very well be playing with a specific set of norms in order to be likeable, but I can never be sure she will like me. I am performing the norms of being attractive as a companion in various ways, but I may be insecure and neurotic in my performance (because I have something to lose, my desire will not be fulfilled if she does not like me). But even if I could perfectly perform those specific normative gestures (which Butler believes is not possible), I could never be sure of her response. She might on the one hand recognise the specific social or cultural norm being performed or the normative references in my performance, but on the other hand she might not desire the company of those that perform so splendidly. In that case, she might have responded affirmatively if I had performed badly, and a (tiny) crisis in this particular normative framework might have

[88] After the abbrevations in *Giving an Account*, Butler comments on the notion of "the other", saying that generally it refers to the human other although in some cases, such as in Levinas' use, it has a somewhat different meaning. Levinas uses "the Other" to act "as a placeholder for an infinite ethical relation" in addition to indicating the human other. Butler, *Giving an Account*, x.

happened. In *Undoing Gender*, Butler states that normative performances can be of the utmost importance:

> The question of how to embody the norm is thus very often linked to the question of survival, of whether life itself will be possible. I think we should not underestimate what the thought of the possible does for those who experience survival itself as a burning issue (UG.217).

It can be a burning issue to get a sense of community or acquire intimate friendship, no matter what social context you live in. Embodying norms is a complex enterprise; not only does it happen through reiteration, but one has more often than not repeatedly practiced this embodiment in one's mind through imagination or fantasies.[89] Butler indeed states in *Undoing Gender*, that fantasy structures relationality and that it "comes into play in the stylization of embodiment itself" (UG.217). We are social, according to Butler, even at the most intimate levels (PL.45). Even though it is "you" that brings the "I" into being, both of us are dependent on a particular normative framework of recognition "that originated neither with the 'I' nor with the 'you' "(PL.45).

2.2 Normativity, recognition and failed norms

In order to understand Butler's relational ontology, a further examination of normativity is essential, bearing in mind that she adheres to an historical approach to the notion, which is quite connected to the history of liberal ontology. The way normativity intertwines with recognition is also vital for understanding the multiple sides of the relational ontology of vulnerability, but this intertwining does not necessarily take place in a perfect harmony – it can always end in failure.

The notion of normativity describes a structure in which norms are dominating, but this structure can materialise in multiple ways in

[89] An example of this could be the way people practise in front of the mirror, as can be seen in countless movie-scenes, where someone is practising how to communicate with a person they are about to meet. These movie-scenes also provide people with a validation for practising embodying norms, because if people do this in the movies it is perfectly legitimate for me to do it at home.

actual societies. In *Undoing Gender*, Butler claims that the norm does not have any independent ontological status but still, "it cannot be easily reduced to its instantiations" (UG.48), nor can it be fully extricated from its occurrences (UG.48). Butler adheres at least partly to a nominal view of the concept of norms similar to the one Foucault develops concerning power in *The Will to Knowledge*. We need to have a "name" for the norm, independent of its instantiation, but this does not mean that it is ontologically "real".[90] The norm needs to refer to something outside the particular instance: it cannot solely be a stable quality of a specific instance if it is supposed to remain a norm, one has to be able to *compare* this instance to another one. For each and every instance of the norm, there also needs to be a possibility of (intelligible) failure or a poorly performed norm. In *Frames of War*, Butler states that "every normative instance is shadowed by its own failure, and very often that failure assumes a figural form" (FW.7).

The "figural form" reminds us that a certain kind of narrative is being formed; the fiction of identity through the repetition of norms. As Carolyn Culbertson notes, "norms do not simply determine in a homogenous fashion the people that adopt them and their beliefs. Rather, these norms are revised through the negotiations of self-development, an ethical enterprise."[91] Whether you invest in certain frames of norms or not depends on your formation, values and sense of self. The body is not a neutral medium for the norm to work on, rather it is its *embodiment*. Thiem describes this as norms becoming activated by a particular body (US. 35).

The aim of actualising specific kinds of norms and building up a certain kind of self through it is to produce comprehension in communication. Butler calls this intelligibility, and it is acquired through signification. It is not a simple matter to analyse intelligibility,

[90] Butler critically engages with Foucault's nominalism of power in *Excitable Speech*, where she ponders what it is to *name*, to give names to acts. Although it appears as though she somewhat accepts this nominal view, she tries to go further and points out that when Foucault describes power as solely the name for a "complex strategic situation in a particular society," even that new substitute for a name can be reified and solidifed. Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 35-36.

[91] Carolyn Culbertson, "The ethics of relationality: Judith Butler and social critique", *Continental Philosophy Review* 46(3) (2013), 457.

as can be seen in the following paragraph from Thiem's *Unbecoming Subjects*:

> Signification works through establishing relations of difference; this differentiation is the horizon and condition of the possibility of intelligibility. Even as I am trying to think this relation, this differentiation and nondifferentiation, and the unintelligible, the unknowable, or that which might be prior to and irreducible to that which we can know, I am caught insofar as I am trying to understand and *know* and speak *intelligibility* about that which escapes knowing and intelligibility (US.27).

To develop a grid of intelligibility, a method of differentiation is needed as well as a system of reference. An "outside" is also needed; a negation of that particular system of reference; something which is ultimately different. But meaning and intelligibility do not exhaust all forms of living and being, not everything can be subsumed under a grid of intelligibility, although it is both politically and ethically important to detect the lives that are lived without social recognition, and change that situation accordingly.

Recognition as a concept or an idea has its own history and has originated a rich theoretical discourse. Although it is outside of the scope of this dissertation to engage with that discourse to a great extent, it is worth mentioning two strands of thought whose influence is apparent in Butler's conception of recognition.

Firstly, there is G.W.F. Hegel's conception of recognition as it appears in part B of *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which deals with the dialectic of lordship and bondage, better known as the master and slave dialectic.[92] Hegel is one of the philosophers that form the basis of Butler's thought, marking her as a "proper" continental philosopher – her first book *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France*, is based on her doctoral dissertation. One most often associates "the struggle for recognition" with Hegel: the path to becoming conscious of oneself by reflecting upon the actions of others, and noticing that one is structurally similar to them.

[92] G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

In the chapter "Post-Hegelian Queries" in *Giving an Account,* Butler states that recognition cannot be unilaterally given. "In the moment that I give it, I am potentially given it, and the form in which I offer it is potentially given to me" (GAO.26). It is however not the recognition of *sameness* in the master-slave dialectic that interests Butler, but the way norms of recognition essentially structure every dyadic relationship (GAO.29). What is at stake is the tension between the dyadic scene of recognition and the impersonal set of norms. Schippers notes that Butler identifies a difference between "recognition" and "recognisability" and that she is rather concerned with the latter, that is, how structures of recognition come into existence and how they are reproduced.[93] Whether we acknowledge vulnerability, our primal dependency and the way we are always already in relations with others thus depends on the structures of recognition.

> [R]ecognizability frames recognition: recognition presupposes awareness of the norms of intelligibility established by recognizability, so that recognition can only ever take place on the field of recognizability.[94]

Secondly, it is the *failure* of recognition, or *misrecognition*, that Butler seeks to examine rather than the means of acquiring it. We do not seek similar kinds of recognition from different actors in our lives; in a sense, we should speak of recognitions in the plural.[95] In *Giving an Account,* Butler implies that recognition can be given and taken on the basis of our shared opacity, which would form a new sense of giving and achieving recognition, bearing awareness of the ever-present possibility of failure both of recognition and of the achievement of self-identity (GAO.42). By recognising and being recognised, one transforms; one is always in the constant state of being transformed. A person or a relationship is different *before* and *after* a particular recognition, which means it is a process-oriented phenomenon, the outcome of which is never certain.

[93] Schippers, *The Political Philosophy of Judith Butler*, 26.

[94] Ibid.

[95] However, the problem of counting sub-categories of recognitions would then surface, as well as the problem of determining their distinctions.

Recognition is multiple, but it cannot encompass all aspects of our lives. Even aspects we think are the most straightforward and unchangeable can fail. An example of that could be one's nationality; even though I come from a little island in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean where people have been recognised as "Icelanders" for few-hundred centuries, that recognition might fail in the future. If I invest greatly in my national identity as an Icelander and become very attached to that idea, such a failure of recognition could prove traumatic for me. To prevent the trauma, I might hold tightly to this recognition as well as the boundaries I have marked for "Icelanders", trying to silence or disavow those whom I do not define as such but who still live in the geographical space called Iceland. The failure of recognition means that a norm ceases to be intelligible, in accord with Butler's emphasis on the way the impersonal norm determines recognition in personal relations. In a sense, what we receive by being recognised is a history of a certain kind of normativity.

2.3 The history of norms

Butler's most systematic account of norms is found in *Undoing Gender*, where she engages with thinkers who have analysed norms historically, such as François Ewald, Mary Poovey and Pierry Macheray.[96] Ewald is a French philosopher who, inspired by Foucault, has written considerably on norms and expanded the Foucauldian framework. The norm is clearly related to power in this analysis, yet it is not the same as power. Butler quotes Ewald in *Undoing Gender* in order to discern the difference between power and norm, where the latter is characterised by

[96] François Ewald, "Norms, Discipline and the Law" in *Law and the Order of Culture*, ed. Robert Post (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), Pierre Macherey, "Towards a Natural History of Norms" in *Michel Foucault, Philosopher,* ed. Timothy Armstrong (New York: Routledge, 1992), Mary Poovey, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830-1964* (Chicaco: Chicaco University press, 1995).

> an implicit logic that allows power to reflect upon its own strategies and clearly define its objects. This logic is at once the force that enables us to imagine life and the living as objects of power and the power that can take 'life' in hand, creating the sphere of the bio-political" (UG.49).[97]

According to Foucault, modern post-industrialised societies in the West are societies of norms. It is unclear to what extent, according to him, societies prior to the modern technique of disciplinary power were characterised by norms, however, he does not speak of norms in the abstract, without the historic context. Butler, on the other hand, does not always make this connection as clearly as Foucault, with the exception of an analysis found in *Undoing Gender*. In in the book mainly under discussion here, *Giving an Account*, she does not do so clearly. Interestingly, this tendency to discuss norms in an ahistorical manner is similar to Foucault's tendency to present the relational account of power ahistorically although his aim is to illuminate the historical traces of the function of power. Brown has commented on this tension in Foucault's analysis of power in her *Undoing Demos*, describing it in the following way:

> Appreciation of this vacillation is the only way to make sense of Foucault's critique of the sovereign model of power, which is simultaneously an argument about the nature of power generally and about political power in high-modern as opposed to premodern and early modern Europe.[98]

It is important to examine whether something quite specific to a given historical epoch is being applied generally as a universal principle. In the case of power and norms, the aim of the Foucauldian framework, which Butler repeatedly refers to in her works, is to offer an historical analysis, not universal principles.

I think Butler's tendency to present norms in a generic manner is the reason her critique of the liberal ontology is read as a side-story within her thought, rather than one of the main themes of her philosophy. By reading her work in the context of the present

[97] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 49 quoting Ewald, François "Norms", 138.

[98] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 126.

historical situation, the relational ontology of vulnerability emerges as a counter-narrative to the liberal ontology, which has shaped the genealogy of the norms we are engaging with. That is the line of thought I will follow in the coming chapters in analysing the historic norms of the human in Western societies and how Butler is responding to the normative order(s) of liberalism.

In Foucault's analysis, norms are tightly connected to the way juridical laws have developed in Western countries. Without the power over death prevalent in pre-modern societies, the power of juridical laws mainly resides in their normalising effects rather than in the negative might of *thou shall not*. That is, Foucault views norms as *productive*, producing the very subject needed for the specific kind of society that materialised. The main purpose of laws, according to this analysis, is to have normalising effects on the subject.

> We have entered a phase of juridical regression in comparison with the pre-seventeenth-century societies we are acquainted with; we should not be deceived by all the Constitutions framed throughout the world since the French Revolution, the Codes written and revised, a whole continual and clamorous legislative activity: these were the forms that made an essentially normalizing power acceptable.[99]

While norms are productive and thus "positive" in that they create something, the force of the laws, as we recognise it, is to limit, to prohibit and to prevent actions. But that is not the main function of the laws – although this is their official aim, which we more or less believe in. Their main function is to form people's lives. This misrecognition of the laws is the main reason we do not resist modern forms of power, according to Foucault; if we realised the extent to which a certain historically formed social system shapes the way we think, our resistance would very likely be greater.

Butler takes Foucault up on this point and develops it further by her willingness to peek into the psychic sphere of life. She places a greater emphasis than Foucault on how norms produce a way for us to relate to ourselves, to form a self-identity and a sense of who we

[99] Foucault, *Will to Knowledge,* 144.

believe we are.[100] We make norms our own, recognising ourselves and others through them, whilst rules and laws feel foreign to us. From the beginning of life, via our particular relationships, we internalise norms and they become to serve as “standards", even “rules”.

Norms give rules a certain local coherence, according to Butler, and valorise the use of rules (UG.49). The aim of the chapter "Gender Regulations" in *Undoing Gender* is to examine gender as norms and furthermore to argue that one function of a gender norm is more substantial than in the Foucauldian framework:

> Here I contravene Foucault in some respects. For if the Foucaultian wisdom seems to consist in the insight that regulatory power has certain broad historical characteristics, and that it operates on gender as well as on other kinds of social and cultural norms, then it seems that gender is but the instance of a larger regulatory operation of power. I would argue against this subsumption of gender to regulatory power that the regulatory apparatus that governs gender is one that is itself gender-specific (UG.41).

The emergence of a regulatory power, resulting in a new relationship between the rule and the norm appeared in the nineteenth century and the term “normalisation” appears in the 1920's (UG.49). This form of power appears with the rise of bureaucratic, regulatory and disciplinary powers, the very mechanisms of bio-power. What is of greatest interest concerning this historical account of normativity is that it is an account of *abstraction* becoming increasingly dominating:

> The norm is a measurement and a means of producing a common standard, to become an instance of the norm is not fully to exhaust the norm, but, rather, to become subjected to an abstraction of commonality (UG. 50).

In *Undoing Gender*, Butler also engages with Poovey’s book *Making a Social Body*, which traces the way abstraction increasingly affects the social sphere in England in the late eighteenth century. The main characteristics of the norm in this analysis is that of

[100] Judith Butler, "Bodies and Power revisited”, *Radical Philosophy* 114 (July/August, 2002), 190.

comparability (UG.51). We are subjected to a specific way of thinking, which is that of comparison: what am I and what are my qualities in the relation to the other? Are they similar or different, better or worse? This pattern of thinking simultaneously individualises through comparability (UG.50), it makes an individual possible by seeing that she has different qualities from the other; by comparing her to the other and seeing them as separate beings.

It is not necessarily *only* comparability that is involved in the normative function. The normative produces a specific field or frame, certain standards we are to accomplish. Thus, it also produces an *ideality* that we should aspire to (UG.28). This means that comparison makes some qualities better than others, and thus easily produces a hierarchy of qualities. Producing a field of better-to-worse furthermore exposes the ethical dimension of normativity; the ideal and the "ought" are important parts of the functioning of norms.

Norms refer to all sorts of thinking, behaviour, interactions and personal qualities. The qualities of a person or individual are of great concern to Butler, and in *Undoing Gender* she enquires into the relation between abstraction and norms in this context. Parameters of personhood are produced, according to which persons are produced with the help of abstract norms (UG.56). The very stuff of our lives and thinking is thus greatly conditioned by these *abstract* norms. Butler does not cast a moral judgment on the meaning of being produced by such abstractions, yet one can detect a critical tone when she adds that these abstract norms not only “condition and exceed the lives they make” (UG.56) but also break them.

2.4 The subject

The genealogical account of norms in the Foucauldian framework is closely related to the concept of the subject. This concept, of course, is of great importance in post-Kantian continental philosophy. The genealogy of the concept and its entwined philological history are not simple matters. Tracing the influence of the ancient Greek conception of *hupokeimenon* as well as the Latin *subjectum* via medieval thought, Balibar, Cassin and Libera argue that it was Immanuel Kant who invented the Cartesian subject:

> It is in fact only with the *Critique of Pure Reason* that *das Subjekt* (variously described as the logical subject, the empirical subject, the rational subject, the transcendental subject or the moral subject) becomes the key concept in a philosophy of subjectivity. Kant's philosophy therefore simultaneously 'invents' the problematic of a thought whose conditions of access to both the objectivity of the laws of nature and the universality of ethical and aesthetic values lie in its own constitution (the so-called 'Copernican revolution'), and gives the name 'subject' (i.e. the opposite of 'object') to the generic individuality inherent in the interplay between the faculties of knowledge; for all finite minds, that interplay constitutes 'the world' and gives a meaning to the fact of acting in the world.[101]

The tension that makes this such a fascinating, yet complicated, concept consists in the simultaneous implication of elements of "logical-grammatical and ontological-transcendental meanings" and "juridical, political and theological meanings".[102] It is in a sense "the Kantian" subject which is criticised for its illusion of "unity" and "coherence".

The concept of the subject has strong and important "roots" in the history of Western philosophy; at the same time, it is a product of a specific historical epoch, which we call modernity. The internalisation of the self in the subject as the point for departure for knowledge without doubt began with Descartes' philosophy of the *cogito*, but was radicalised in Kant´s philosophy. With Hegelian philosophy, the sociality and the historicity of the subject came to the fore, offering a basis for the Marxist, Foucauldian and now Butlerian approaches. Foucault adds to this story by showing that this concept of the modern subject came to the forefront in a certain political landscape. He systematically exposes the political dimension and

[101] Balibar *et al.*, "Subject" (Vocabulary of European Philosophers, Part I), 30.

[102] Ibid, 27. Balibar et al. trace this history mostly in relation to French and German, and to lesser extent in relation to other neo-Latin and Germanic languages. As the concept is so intertwined with its intellectual history, its multi-dimensional "nature" can be difficult to comprehend for native-speakers of other languages such as my own, Icelandic. There are furthermore three (not clearly distinct) perspectives to be indicated; subjectivity (the ontological), subjectness (the epistemelogical) and subjection (the political). The Icelandic translation of *sjálfsvera* (self-being) og *hugvera* (mind-being) more or less solely capture the meaning of the first two and not the political-juridical dimension of the concept.

the concrete actualisation of this (specific kind of) subject via the interrelation between liberal governmentality and biopolitical (normative) forms of productive power in modernity. According to this analysis, based in an important respect on a Nietzschean genealogy of power and values as norms, the embodied subject is formed through power and subordination, even when the subject resists this very same subordination. This point is fundamental to understand Butler's biopolitical ideas of the embodied subject influenced by the thought of Foucault, as discussed in the following paragraph from his article "Subject and Power":

> This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects. There are two meanings of the word *subject:* subject to someone else by control and dependence and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to.[103]

We are never "outside" of power when we form our own sense of self, not even when we decide to exercise our own will; we need to refer to the given framework of intelligibility. As can be seen in the passage just quoted, there is a difference made between the notion of the "individual" and the "subject". According to this line of thought, "individual" is presented as a sort of neutral concept to differentiate bodies, whilst the "subject" refers to how this same body is understood in the system of intelligibility he or she belongs to. This division is highly problematic, however, not only because the concept of the individual has a history of its own (tightly related to the concept of the subject, and different in various languages), but also – as Butler so clearly shows in *Psychic Life of Power* – one can never locate the time when the individual becomes the subject.

[103] Michel Foucault, "Subject and Power" in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982), 212.

> It makes little sense to treat "the individual" as an intelligible term if individuals are said to ac- quire their intelligibility by becoming subjects. Paradoxically, no intelligible reference to individuals or their becoming can take place without a prior reference to their status as subjects. The story by which subjection is told is, inevitably, circular, presupposing the very subject for which it seeks to give an account (PLP.11).

In line with this, when one refers to “the possessive individual” or “the strong individual” one is referring to a subject-position, not a neutral concept of an individual body.

When Foucault talks about a certain kind of subject formed by the modern form of productive bio-power, it is this subject who cannot but find her resistance and empowerment within the framework of her own subjection. This, of course, does not mean that we cannot imagine other forms of power or subjectivities. But as Hanna Meissner notes, when we ask ourselves about how to make changes, transform societies and resist oppressive social structures, we need to bear in mind our own political situations:

> For projects referring to the re-articulation of notions and practices of politics, this means that modern subjectivity is, paradoxically, both the object of critique as well as the means of resistance to power relations. This historical form of subjectivity configures contemporary frameworks for the intelligibility of the human; it is foundational for juridical notions of rights and also for political demands and it is constitutively implicated in the formation of civil society.[104]

Accordingly, I argue that we need to develop political strategies if the relational ontology of vulnerability described here is to have a chance of being actualised. We need to simultaneously imagine an alternative ontology of processes of becoming, another system of intelligibility, and to locate the social and political hindrances in the present. I think the example of the job interview illustrates the biggest hindrance for accepting a worldview of (neither positive or

[104] Meissner, Hanna, “Politics as encounter and response-ability. Learning to converse with enigmatic others” in“New Feminist Materialism: Engendering an Ethic-Onto-Epistemological Methodology”, coord,Revelles Benavente, Beatriz, González Ramos, Ana M., Nardini, Krizia, *Artnodes* No.14, (2014), 37.

negative) vulnerability because people *need* to get a job in order to maintain themselves. In order to further locate this hindrance, understand and transcend it, we need to look more closely at the predominant ontology of liberalism to which Butler is responding.

2.5 The many names of the subject of liberalism

> [T]his death, if it is a death, is only the death of a certain kind of subject, one that was never possible to begin with, the death of a fantasy of impossible mastery, and so a loss of what one never had. In other words, it is a necessary grief (GAO.65).

In *Giving an Account,* Butler discusses this peculiar death during a discussion concerning psychoanalysis' desire to render everything conscious: a full mastery of the self, leading to a fully narrative self. According to this stand, the "I" can be both fully knowing and known, and would be able to survive without an unconscious. This view cannot face the non-narrativisable beginning of life. Acknowledging that we cannot narrate our own emergence kills this certain kind of subject. This type of subject relies on a metaphysical substance of *knowing*; the idea that all can be captured and *mastered* with knowledge.

This kind of subject is far from dead; it haunts almost every consciousness, as well as institutional and political mechanisms in the West. But of course, this subject has in another sense never been alive, never been possible. It would be more accurate to say that this subject serves as an *ideal* in modern societies, in line with Charles Mills' analysis of ideal theory. What distinguishes ideal theory from non-ideal theory "is the reliance on idealization to the exclusion, or at least marginalization, of the actual".[105] It presents the way one is *supposed* to be, or supposed to present oneself to a (new) other (especially in a public venue). But even though it is an ideal, the function of this *ideality* feels very real to people. It is arguably a dominant tool both for *including* and *excluding* a particular individual.

[105] Mills, ""Ideal Theory" as Ideology", 168.

> We could wish ourselves to be wholly perspicacious beings. But that would be to disavow infancy, dependency, relationality, primary impressionability; it would be the wish to eradicate all the active and structuring traces of our psychological formations and to dwell in the pretense of being fully knowing, self-possessed adults. Indeed, we would be the kind of beings who, by definition, could not be in love, blind and blinded, vulnerable to devastation, subject to enthrallment (GAO.102).

Butler rejects a certain kind of ontology in this paragraph; one of "fully knowing, self-possessed adults" who can neither be vulnerable or in love. It is also clear that Butler's discussion of love here is tightly connected with her theory of vulnerability. Love is presented as opposite to rational judgment, knowledge and contractual relations; it is not a calculative enterprise but an acceptance of not being fully in control and of being both affected by and affecting the world and others around us. "Very often what we call "love" involves being compelled by our own opacity, our own places of unknowingness, and indeed, our own injury" (GAO.103). Love is an affective state of being aware of this primary opacity and dependency of our particular, physical lives. Accordingly, is it through our vulnerability or opacity that we are capable of loving because in love we not only come to (relationally) possess another living being but also become dispossessed by the way the other being takes hold of us.[106]

This certain kind of subject, which Butler discusses in the context of psychoanalysis in the quote above, is arguably one of the main research objects of critical and feminist theories. It has been called many names, such as the sovereign subject, the liberal subject, the invulnerable subject, the autonomous being, the possessive individual, the strong individual, the Man of reason, *homo economicus*, the masculine subject and the able-bodied person. Each of these concepts indicates important subtleties that need their own space in different theoretical frameworks and disciplines, such as when the aim is to examine the cost of masculinity in a given society, or the difficulty and desperation that

[106] Sigríður Þorgeirsdóttir, "Love of the Sexes in Nietzsche's Philosophy: From Opposition to Transformative Interaction", *Nietzsche Studien* 46 (2017), 105-113.

an ideal of able-bodiedness causes in another society. Here, however, the aim is to detect an ideology in the form of ontology that interpellates *all* subjects, and thus I choose to place emphasis on what these different concepts have in common, rather than what separates them.

Butler does not present this ontology as a part of a historical development as clearly as Foucault does. She does, however, make use of the concept of the sovereign subject and the problem of sovereignty in subject formation, as well as referring to liberal forms of ontology (UG. 192, GT. 159, GT, 41).[107] Her discussion of the metaphysics of substance in *Gender Trouble* establishes a critique of the dominant subjectivity, both via the philosophical tradition and in a broader ideological-hegemonic context. *Gender Trouble*, furthermore, is quite clearly a critique of the ontology of liberalism, as she states directly and demonstrates in subtler ways. Liberalism framed this way could be seen as straw man, as it may be more accurate to speak of many and diverse liberalisms. However, I follow Brown when she describes this difficulty in the following manner, in *States of Injury*:

> Liberalism is a nonsystematic and porous doctrine subject to historical change and local variation. However, insofar as liberalism takes its definitional shape from an ensemble of relatively abstract ontological and political claims, it is also possible to speak of liberalism in a generic fashion.[108]

The concept of the (neo)liberal subject I want to focus on in this dissertation is what C. B. Macpherson defined as the "possessive individual" in his book *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (1962). Butler discusses this concept in a conversation with Athanasiou in their book *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*. The reason I want to engage with this concept is that it is well suited to Butler's critique of substance ontology. Within that ontology, the concept of the self is thing-like or reified, seen as one's

[107] Foucault, Michel, "The Art of Telling the Truth", *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984,* ed. Lawrence Kritzman (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), 95.

[108] Brown, *States of Injury*, 141.

own property. In his book, Macpherson outlines how the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke is marked by their own historical time period, that of an emerging market society in seventeenth-century England. This especially applies to their foundational fables of a "state of nature," which bears a great resemblance to the rationality of their contemporary market society. Macpherson also interestingly claims that these theories produce the ontology they are supposedly describing:

> The assumptions of possessive individualism are peculiarly appropriate to a possessive market society, for they state certain essential facts that are peculiar to that society. The individual in a possessive market society *is* human in his capacity as proprietor of his own person; his humanity does depend on his freedom from any but self-interest contractual relations with others; his society does consist of a series of market relations.[109]

Although Macpherson does not lay out his analysis in a Marxist context, but rather in the context of a liberal-democratic theory, it is clear that Marx's thought is at the basis of his analysis. This is also apparent in the works of some of the feminist thinkers renowned for their critique of liberal theory, who are greatly influenced by Macpherson's conception of the possessive individualist, such as Carol Pateman and Wendy Brown. The focus of possessive individualism is on the ontology that presents the human as being able to alienate, and subsequently reify, personal qualities and capabilities and contract them out in order to acquire her means of subsistence and continue to live and breathe. According to Marx, objective relations are ultimately dominant in societies characterised by such an ontology. In the second chapter of his famous book *Capital*, Marx speaks of humans as guardians of objects turned into commodities:

[109] Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Political Individualism*, 271.

> In order that these objects may enter into relation with each other as commodities, their guardians must place themselves in relation to one another as persons whose will resides in those objects, and must behave in such a way that each does not appropriate the commodity of the other, and alienate his own, except through an act to which both parties consent. The guardians must therefore recognize each other as owners of private property. This juridical relation, whose form is the contract, whether as part of a developed legal system or not, is a relation between two wills which mirror the economic relation.[110]

The aim of this chapter in *Capital* is to show that the process of commodity exchange is always dependent on contractual relations. In her monumental book *The Sexual Contract*, Pateman exposes contract theories as systematically covering up "the missing half of the story," namely the story of the sexual contract, which the social contract cannot but rely on.[111] This means that the dominant ontology of liberalism always relies on a hidden, ontological figure that takes care of and accommodates all the "vulnerabilities," the urgent needs and dependencies required for human reproduction in society. Butler's relational ontology of vulnerability tells the story of these hidden figures in the social contract, which have been covered over by liberalism.[112]

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[110] Karl Marx, *Capital: Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books,1990), 178.

[111] Following *The Sexual Contract* two works have been published concerning other hidden stories of contract theories: the racial contract and the capability contract. *The Racial Contract* by Charles Mills exposes the fact that the social contract is in fact between white people and excludes people of color. The racial system and the colonial system thus helps to hide away all vulnerabilities and dependencies so the white male can appear in the public venue as the strong individual. In *The Capability Contract,* Stacy Clifford Simplican exposes the anxiety people with intellectual disabilities cause within democratic thought, which relies greatly on the idea of reason as necessary for the functioning of democracy. Thus the social contract appears universal although it hinges "on a distinction between the cognitively abled and the cognitively disabed". Stacy Clifford Simplican, *The Capability Contract: Intellectual Disability and the Question of Citizenship* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 5. Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999).

[112] It is important to note that the liberal subjectivation of the autonomous subject or the "strong individual" subsequently produces an ideal of masculinity, making vulnerability way more of an issue for men than women.

2.6 *Gender Trouble* and the liberal ontology of the subject

Starting with *Gender Trouble,* Butler reacts to a *unified conception of the subject*, by examining the political consequences of *social universals*. In the case of feminism, the unified conception is the category of "women", which subsumes particular experiences of multiple women in different situations under the same category or definition. *Gender Trouble* has been a monumental book in feminist and queer thought, giving rise to diverse critical responses which often contradict each other, as Butler's theory is interpreted as either providing a theory of a fully free will and independent agency in the form of voluntarism about gender identity, and as a theory that fits perfectly with neoliberal ideas about freedom, or as a theory of subject formation utterly void of individual agency, because it is determined by social forces and discourses.[113] According to this reading *Gender Trouble* is presenting an account of gender as a costume one can put on as one pleases. This critique not only fully overlooks the critique of liberal ontology in *Gender Trouble*, but it also ignores the fact that Butler takes pains to explain the punitive consequences of not doing your gender right. The other strand of interpretation, the deterministic one, fails to acknowledge how the subject is a process that is both determined and resistant and self-creating.

It is important to focus our attention *not* on what *Gender Trouble* is missing, but rather on what Butler is trying to accomplish by altering our conception of the subject and providing alternative forms of subjectivity. This new understanding of subjectivity centres on performativity, adding a dimension of *temporality* to the idea of identity. Temporality is an important element of the relational ontology that has hitherto been analysed. Although the liberal assumption about individual freedom is fundamental to Butler's critique of the category of women as well as the binary of sex and gender, the importance that *Gender Trouble* has for that discourse on gender appears to have obscured the fact that Butler is also

[113] Lloyd, Moya, Butler: From Norms to Politics, 50.

offering a philosophical critique of classical liberalism. To give an example:

> The prevailing assumption of the ontological integrity of the subject before the law might be understood as the contemporary trace of the state of nature hypothesis, that foundationalist fable constitutive of the juridical structures of classical liberalism. The performative invocation of a nonhistorical "before" becomes the foundational premise that guarantees a presocial ontology of persons who freely consent to be governed and, thereby, constitute the legitimacy of the social contract (GT.4).

Here, Butler simultaneously puts forward a critique of the way social universals come to be naturalised and of the way representational politics and juridical structures (of languages) come to be formed through these political foundational fables, which construct the ways of being in the historic present (GT.7). She also critiques “a humanist feminism” in the liberal tradition, which sees gender as an attribute whilst the core of self-identity is pre-gendered. According to humanist feminism, reason, moral deliberation and language are capabilities that precede gender formation, originating in the core of the gender-neutral person (GT.14).

Analysing and criticising the metaphysics of substance is an expansive theme of *Gender Trouble.* Butler notes that the phrase “metaphysics of substance” is associated with Nietzsche’s critique of the subject, but it is Luce Irigaray who has put forward one of the most fierce critiques of the “representational system of Western culture” that presents sex as a substantive attribute (GT.25).[114] Irigaray, in fact, states that women are excluded from the substance ontology and thus excluded from being *the subject*; they are the fetish of representation, and thus un-representable.

Butler opposes an atomised, ontological assumption both concerning physical entities and more psychic attributes, which produce the building-blocks of a static personal identity. Going against the metaphysics of substance does not mean that gender is a set of free-floating attributes, since “the substantive effect of

[114] Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 133.

gender is performatively produced" (GT.34). Butler's way of phrasing the effects of an atomised or naturalised ontology as performative, and hence neither really substantive nor utterly free but performing the appearance of substance, has been widely influential in feminist philosophy and theory. The dominant ontology of liberalism has constructed the way we bodily exist, what becomes intelligible to us, and our ways of desiring. Bodily parts such as the "penis" and the "vagina" *name* sexual parts that steer the way we can become sexual beings (GT.156). What is described here is an ontology of fragmentation and compartmentalisation (dividing the body into parts), which draws a distinct line between the body and the world, as if the skin were a wall.

> In effect, this is the mode by which Others become shit. For inner and outer worlds to remain utterly distinct, the entire surface of the body would have to achieve an impossible impermeability (GT.182).

The point is not to deny an inner reality of every human being, the lived experience of being alive, but rather to ask what purpose the discourse of a "trope of interiority" serves (GT.183). The emphasis on the indifference of the social norms that establish the "I", producing the substitutability of singular individuals, as we have seen in *Giving an Account*, is already at work, as can be seen in the following quote:

> Although there are individual bodies that enact these significations by becoming stylized into gendered modes, this "action" is a public action (GT.191).

As I discussed earlier, this account, to some extent, conflates the way norms function according to a specific historic ontology that is called liberalism, and how they possibly work ahistorically/transhistorically. This conflation occurs in *Gender Trouble* and in later works. Presenting an ahistorical analysis of norms and social structures and performing a critique of the liberal subject often happens simultaneously in Butler's work, without a clear distinction between a historical analysis and a conceptual, generalised one. Butler notes that "the epistemological paradigm that presumes the priority of the doer to the deed establishes a

global and globalizing subject which disavows its own locality as well as the condition for local intervention" (GT.202). Thus, it is apparent that her aim is not to offer us such a generalised or global account of norms and normalisation. Rather, the aim appears to be to offer a historical account, which however shows the function of generality in our lives, resulting in her emphasis on substitutability.

2.7 The possessive individual

In *Dispossession,* Butler and Athanasiou direct their attention towards the historical developments and intensifications of property-thinking, especially in terms of seeing persons as property and the increased role of abstractions in modern state apparatuses. These contemplations are directly related to contract-theories and the way they guarantee the premises of the liberal framework through the idea of the property-right. Slavery – being the most intense way of seeing a person as property – is, of course, not unique to modernity; in fact, the abolition of slavery is often characterised as the greatest transformation of modern societies marked by the individual's freedom to engage in contracts. Pateman, however, notes that the logic of classical contract theory does not exclude slavery:

> From the standpoint of contract, in social life there are contracts all the way down. Moreover, no limits can be placed on contract and contractual relations; even the ultimate form of civil subordination, the slave contract, is legitimate. A slave contract is not significantly different from any other contract.[115]

Logically, you can sign a contract with another person subjugating the property of your person to him for the rest of your life. Even though the contract is seen as the paradigm of free agreement, and (commodity) exchange or equivalence as the paradigm for equality in modernity, the contract of the current age, *the employment contract*, which is essential to many individuals' survival, neither consists of freedom nor of equality, and has even been marked with the notion of *wage slavery*.

[115] Pateman, *Sexual Contract*, 15.

Perhaps one could claim that a qualitative shift in understanding the human has not followed the abolition of slavery: the human is still seen as owning its individual traits as property in the same manner as before. Rather, a difference in *who* does the *owning* has taken place, namely not *others* but oneself, who has become the "landlord" of one's own property (which is then rented out).

In this context, Butler and Athanasiou discuss *possessive individualism*, which bases the idea of the individual on the idea of the possession of property (DPP.7). In *Dispossession*, Butler explicitly refers to possessive individualism as a political ontology forming the "human":

> the question is not whether possessive individualism is a good or a bad ontology; rather, the question is how it works, and in the service of what sorts of political aims. If we question the "desire to possess" as a natural property of individuals, then we can, as MacPherson does, begin to ask the historical question of how the desire to possess property on an individual basis was produced over time as a natural, if not essential, characteristic of human personhood (DPP.9. JB).

How does possessive individualism function and whom does it serve? In pointing out that this notion is assumed and seen as natural, while it actually developed little by little in history, Butler exposes the way that the formation of an ontology always happens in relation to power and ideology. In the case of possessive individualism, it was not only our *individual* right to private property that developed, but also our own sense of self: "property relations have come to structure and control our moral concepts of personhood, self-belonging, agency and self-identity" (DPP.13. JB). Interestingly, what is described here is not only an *objectification* of the self or of personhood, but also a commodification. Personhood as "property" means that one can participate in contractual exchange relations and therefore sell/rent out one's commodity if anyone wants to realise the property's exchange value.

Athanasiou highlights the fact that, according to the "founding moment of liberalism" (DPP.13. AA), it is always *you* that own your body – *you* are the sovereign over your own body and *no one* can take these rights away from you. No one else can own the *whole of*

you; no one else can own all your time. In the same way as the slave-owner in some sense owned you, it is now *you yourself* that does the owning. The slave-owner could have sold you to another slave owner, but thanks to the new liberal paradigm and its legal and institutional commitments, your property in yourself is not saleable *in this way* anymore.

What you *can* sell or rent out, according to this new system of thinking, is your *labour power*; you can sell *part* of your time to an employer/capitalist, who is not too concerned about *who* you are and what you do for the rest of *your time*[116] – as long as your work performance is apt. Accordingly, we have *private time* or private life...except that *you happen to be a life-form that needs to sustain itself.*

Marx described this great paradox of liberalism as being free in a double sense in chapter 26 of volume I of *Capital*, "The Secret of Primitive Accumulation".[117] "Double freedom" is what makes labour power available in the market as a commodity, meaning that the worker has the freedom to enter into a contract to rent out his "labour power" but also the freedom from other means of producing his means of subsistence. Carol Gould, in her book *Marx's Social Ontology,* believes that this critique is in fact Marx's main concern.[118]

> [T]he individual worker who has no other property to exchange than his or her laboring capacity is not free not to engage in this exchange. This dependency arises from the fact that the objective conditions of production that the worker requires for his or her activity and for his or her subsistence belong to capital.[119]

[116] Pierre Macherey has pinpointed the importance of making the distinction between labour power (and how it is rented out, not strictly speaking "sold") and the employment of it in "The Productive Subject" (p. 4). This analysis interestingly shows how Marx and Foucault can be read together, and how often it is overlooked that Foucault's ultimate explanation for the forming of modern disciplinary power was to produce docile bodies fit to work in industrialised production. Macherey, Pierre, "The Productive Subject", *Viewpoint Magazine: Issue 5 Social Reproduction*, https://www.viewpointmag.com/2015/11/02/issue-5-social-reproduction/, retrieved 21.09.2017.

[117] Marx, *Capital*, 874.

[118] Gould, Carol, *Marx's Social Ontology* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1980), 144.

[119] Ibid, 143.

The chapter on primitive accumulation in *Capital* shows how the work force was guaranteed by the process through which peasants lost the land they relied on to sustain themselves. Thus, the producer was divorced from his means of production.[120] An example of this development is to be found in Federici's *Caliban and the Witch,* where she describes how the feudal system had provided peasants with *the commons*; communal land which guaranteed means of subsistence if the harvest failed for someone. The so-called "enclosures" of common land led to an increasing debt accumulation, with the result that individual peasants lost their land.[121] By the time Hobbes and Locke developed their theories in the seventeenth century, wage labour was increasingly becoming the main form of subsistence. Locke, who is often seen as the father of (classical) liberalism, stated that the "produce of the earth" should be divided in common amongst mankind, and no one should cultivate more than he could consume.[122] Everybody had the right to preserve their life, as well as the right to their own labour. But already in the state of nature Locke introduces *money* in the form of "durable" goods, which do not go to waste in the same way as the organic products of the earth one cannot consume. If one transfers one's products into these durable goods – such as gold – through merchandise, the spoilage limit is superseded and unequal possessions of land justified.[123] When there is no longer plenty of land, the rights of subsistence are conveniently assured by the property of labour. The conclusion of this line of thought is the following, according to Macpherson:

> The initial equality of natural rights, which consisted in no man having jurisdiction over another, cannot last after the differentiation of property. To put it another way, the man without property in things loses that full proprietorship of his own person which was the basis of his equal natural rights.[124]

[120] Marx, *Capital*, 874-874.

[121] Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 25.

[122] McPherson, *The Political Philosophy of Possessive Individualism*, 201.

[123] Ibid, 209.

[124] Ibid, 231.

The need for the “equal” individuals in the state of nature to consent to the social contract and to choose a sovereign over them is to “hold everyone within the limits of peaceful competition”.[125] The possessive individual, who is supposed to aspire to look at his person as property and increase his property-value as much as possible as well as accumulate external property, needs clearly defined rules so “the number of variables in each man’s calculation” can be reduced to “manageable proportions”.[126] Locke, who was a merchant himself, provides a theory in which both merchandise and class-division is part of the state of nature in spite of the original claim of equal individuals. McPherson points out the way Locke took the class division of seventeenth-century England for granted by considering his servant’s labour as his own and the labouring class as something to be managed by the state.[127] Consequently, certain aspects, which characterised the particular society of seventeenth-century England, become to be thought of as a part of "human nature".

2.8 The hidden ontology of femina domestica

The social contract providing a political society of equals who consent to the sovereign power presents us with the contract as the dominant form of entering into public relations. The “propertyless” possessive individuals, the *proletariat*, need to enter into the employment contract in order to provide for themselves. But equally importantly, as Pateman points out:

> The story of the original contract tells of the genesis of a society that is structured into two spheres – although we are usually told only half the story and so we only hear about the origin of the public “universal” sphere.[128]

As already mentioned, the social contract cannot but assume the hidden sexual contract as Pateman argues. In her book *The*

[125] Ibid, 95.

[126] Ibid, 97. This is the reason the state is needed in order to guarantee competition on the free market and to prevent monopoly.

[127] Ibid, 215 and 228.

[128] Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, 112.

Sexual Contract, she exposes the contradictions of the notion of the individual that can enter into contract through the works of the classical contract theories. In order to enter into marriage, *both parties* are to freely agree upon the contract, yet women are presented as not having the legal right to represent themselves and thus enter into contract. The logic of the very idea of contract assumes women as free and equal partners, yet simultaneously excludes them from that position. The division between the public and the private spheres is essential to the construction of "contract societies" and, in order for possessive individualism to be felt as *common sense knowledge* to people, it is furthermore vital that the private sphere is seen as outside of the scope of political discussion and hence naturalised.[129]

Consequently, women do not acquire the status of individuals in classical contract theories. The worker is seen as a masculine figure, while the work women do is deemed natural and thus not work, even when they stand next to their husbands at the market selling produce, as Federici points out.[130] This does not mean that women should fight to be seen as possessive individualists; in fact, Pateman notes that Marx was quite aware of how misleading the category of *labour power* could be.[131] "The claim that *labour power* is contracted out, not labour, bodies or persons, enables proponents of contract to argue that the employment contract, like other contracts about property in the person, constitutes a free relation."[132] This is especially important when discussing sensitive labour issues such as sex work and surrogacy, which are essentially gendered, and rely heavily on the form of ontology or the understanding of the "human" chosen for the discourse.

One of the main arguments of Federici's *The Caliban and the Witch* is that Marx overlooks the systematic subordination of women that help to give birth to the capitalist economic system, an intensification of the unequal status women endured during the late middle ages. According to Federici, primitive accumulation was not

[129] Ibid, 3.

[130] Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 98.

[131] Pateman, *Sexual Contract*, 142-143.

[132] Ibid.

only accumulation of land. What is also being accumulated is the status and rights of women, which she presents in three parts: firstly, a new sexual division of labour emerged, "subjugating women's labour and women's reproductive function to the reproduction of the work-force".[133] Secondly, the exclusion of women from waged work, making them dependent on men and creating what Federici has named *the patriarchy of the wage*. Thirdly, the mechanisation of docile bodies was a gendered procedure, subjugating women as machines for the production and reproduction of new workers.[134] The historical emergence of capitalism essentially goes hand in hand with the devaluing of the ontological status of women, whether it is in the form of their reproductive bodies or their work. Federici's analysis shows us the political usefulness of presenting two different ontological subject-positions (as is really the case within liberal ontology), one of which is hidden underneath the surface whilst reproducing society.

Brown engages with Pateman's analysis and continues the work of analysing the gendered aspects of liberalism. In *States of Injury,* she notes that Pateman's critique is not specific to "contract relations" but is inherent in the *terms* of liberal discourses.[135] In that book she enquires into what it means to adhere to the "double" ontology of the possessive individualist and *femina domestica*, in which the former indicates a self-interested individual who is premised upon the latter, a selfless one who's main role is to care for others.[136] Brown furthermore highlights that this gender dynamic is not a side-issue of liberalism that could be reformed within the same system of thought, but reveals "liberalism *as* a discourse *of* male dominance".[137] This provides us with an ontology of masculine

[133] Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 12.

[134] Ibid, 12 and 98.

[135] Brown, *States of Injury*, 138.

[136] Ibid, 162. My use of the notion of *femina domestica* is derived from Brown's use but from *Undoing the Demos*, 99 and 104. She does not use this conception nor refer explicitly to "double" ontology in *States of Injury*, although in my opinion, both notions are implicitly within the text. In *States of Injury* Brown speaks of self-interested individual and a selfless one and how the self one of them have is sustained by the selflessness of the other.

[137] Ibid, 152.

sameness, presenting an abstract standard for the individual, which in fact is masculine.[138] The way the individual appears in liberalism makes freedom and equality impossible; liberalism "*requires* the existence of encumbered beings" and it cannot be universalised.[139]

> Finally, the putative autonomy of the liberal subject partakes of a myth of masculinity requiring the disavowal of dependency, the disavowal of the relations that nourish and sustain this subject.[140]

Pateman also notes that it appears impossible for women to be the self-interested individuals in Hobbes' state of nature; if they were, no one would care for children and the individuals of the state of nature would be the last generation of humans.[141]

The focus here has mostly been on tenets of classical *liberalism* as they pertain to ontology, but for the last decades we have been experiencing an intensified, and perhaps qualitatively different, version of it, namely *neoliberalism*. If classical liberalism was mainly concerned with economic relations and the public sphere, neoliberalism extends that particular economic rationality to every dimension of life, encouraging us to think of, not only our "public life", but also our most private and intimate one – such as our romantic life, e.g. finding a partner – within the parameters of enhancing our *human capital*.[142] Brown argues that human capital replaces labour power in neoliberalism, as one not only needs to rent out one's labour power but seeks to increase one's personal capital.[143]

Is it possible to detect ontological differences between liberalism and neoliberalism? Oksala, in her article "Feminism and Neoliberal Governmentality" follows Foucault's key insight that "the constitution of the subject is a thoroughly historical and highly

[138] Ibid, 153.

[139] Ibid, 156.

[140] Ibid, 157.

[141] Pateman, *Sexual Contract*, 49.

[142] Brown, Wendy, *Undoing the Demos*, 33.

[143] Ibid.

precarious process," which means that it is possible to detect differences in subjectivity during the last twenty or thirty years.[144] The transformation which has taken place over the last decades implies that presently women too need to perform as possessive individuals:

> I want to suggest that the spread and intensification of neoliberal governmentality has meant that women too have come to be seen, and to see themselves, increasingly as neoliberal subjects – egoistical subjects of interest making free choices based in rational economic calculation. Women do not only want a happy home any more, they too want money, power and success. They are atomic, autonomous subjects of interest competing for the economic opportunities available.[145]

The history of feminism as a political movement fighting for the rights of women is highly intertwined with the birth of liberalism.[146] It has, along with other political movements, exploited the contradictions to be found in liberalism; namely the fundamental premises of equality and freedom of *all* individuals whilst only propertied males are considered individuals. Athanasiou's and Butler's conversation reflects an ongoing dilemma in (radical) feminist thought and activism, namely that it is difficult to dismiss liberalism altogether. It is important to acknowledge the liberal roots of feminism, when (mostly bourgeois and chiefly white/colonial) women notice that they were being excluded from the supposedly universal equality of the bourgeois revolution. Furthermore, in order to develop effective political strategies for equality and women's empowerment, one cannot but speak in liberal terms in this historic present (of Western societies). Even in the case where one avoids referring to legal justice, it is still of the utmost importance to point out that nobody other than the women themselves *owns* their bodies; the *choice* is theirs as to which bodily actions they want to perform. In this context, Butler refers to G.C. Spivak, returning time and again to her statement that liberalism is what "we cannot not

[144] Oksala, Johanna, "Feminism and Neoliberal Governmentality", *Foucault Studies* (No. 16, September 2013), 37.

[145] Oksala, "Feminism and Neoliberal Governmentality", 37.

[146] Anne Phillips, "Introduction" in *Feminism and Equality*, ed. Anne Phillips (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 6.

want" (DPP.76). Therefore, it is not surprising that we see instances both in *Precarious Life* and in *Undoing Gender* where Butler returns to that which we cannot not want, as can be seen in the following paragraph:

> At the same time, essential to so many political movements is the claim of bodily integrity and self-determination. It is important to claim that our bodies are in a sense *our own* and that we are entitled to claim rights of autonomy over our bodies (PL.25).

In *Undoing Gender* Butler furthermore notes that in order to secure legal protections and entitlements in modern states, one needs to conform to a particular language that assumes bounded beings and a community defined by *sameness* (UG.20). The idea of autonomy is also of a great importance to different liberation movements. Venerating autonomy as a political goal, but simultaneously highlighting that we are essentially dependent beings and given over from the start, makes the claim for autonomy a lively paradox according to Butler (UG.21).

> Is there a way that we might struggle for autonomy in many spheres, yet also consider the demands that are imposed upon us by living in a world of beings who are, by definition, physically dependent on one another, physically vulnerable to one another? (PL.27)

Butler is not only speaking to the context of radical feminism, but also to the context of French feminist philosophy. As has been discussed in relation to *Gender Trouble,* Irigaray fiercely opposes the *masculine economy of the same*, proposing that women explore their own existence in order to produce sense and intelligibility, rather than seeking acknowledgment within the masculine economy. This thought, stemming from books such as *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974)*, This Sex Which is Not One* (1977) and later books such as *Je, tu, nous: Towards a Culture of Difference* (1990), are written at the same time as women increasingly demanded to be part of the workforce on equal terms with men.

The demand to enter the job-market turned out to be ambiguous, stated from the standpoint of (middle-class) housewives who could afford to live solely on their partners' income, at the same

time as most working-class women (who were also surely performing as housewives) could in reality not afford that role. Although the demand was important in order to acquire financial independence, it also led to women increasingly needing to adjust to the position of the possessive individual, and perhaps even reject the existence of "traditional feminine traits" such as experiencing vulnerability or a need/desire to care for others. Instead, as possessive individuals, they needed to show they could *compete* interchangeably with men as abled "human capital" for careers and success, to join the masculine economy of the same. This development increasingly led to the "equal" interpellation of everyone, men and women, as possessive individuals, neoliberal subjects making "free choices based in rational economic calculation resulting in an intensification of a denial of vulnerabilties," as Oksala points out.[147]

The problem is that it is simply impossible for everyone to be such a self-interested subject, as Pateman shows when she notes, as mentioned above, that self-interested women in Hobbes' state of nature would prove to be the last generation. If "mankind" is to live on, either the ontological role of *femina domestica* needs to be reproduced or we need something else. Brown comments on this impossibility of neoliberalism in *Undoing the Demos*:

> Either women align their own conduct with this truth, becoming *homo economicus*, in which case the world becomes uninhabitable, or women's activities and bearing as *femina domestica* remain the unavowed glue for a world whose governing principle cannot hold it together, in which case women occupy their old place as unacknowledged props and supplements to masculinist liberal subjects.[148]

The governing principle cannot apply to every human; in fact, the main functioning of its governing is that although it encourages subjects to aspire to its ideal of the possessive individualist, it

[147] Oksala, "Feminism and Neoliberal Governmentality" 37.

[148] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 104-105.

assumes that the functioning of *femina domestica* is at work everywhere; that she *runs the world*.[149] As Oksala argues in her article "Affective Labour and Feminist Politics", economic gender equality – where men and women compete on an equal level – is a structural impossibility in capitalist society.[150] The fact is that it is impossible to completely commodify childbirth and pregnancy, not to mention that most people would oppose such commodification, based on moral, political and economic premises. This means that equal possibility of possessive individuals is yet another contradiction.[151]

> For childbearing women to be able to participate in the economic game on equal terms would require that their reproductive labor be completely commodified, down to its most intimate aspects, and its price freely determined in the market in the same way as the price of other commodities.[152]

What this confirms is that the predominant ontology of liberalism in societies of the West – with its subject-ideal of the possessive individual – logically excludes some human bodies from its ontology, even now in times of "post-feminism" and neoliberalism. Butler does not present her ontology in relation to this hidden figure but – as has been argued – when she develops what I read as the relational ontology of vulnerability, she is clearly responding to the (neo)liberal ontology. Furthermore, her emphasis is in line with the

[149] *Run the world (Girls)* by Beyoncé was heavily criticised when it was released in 2011 as "girls do not run the world". As the blogger and philosopher Robin James notes, feminist bloggers accused Beyoncé of "profferring post-feminist falsehoods" and for presenting a music video which itself objectified women. But girls simultaneously do and do not run the world depending on the meaning of "run". If the verb is understood by direct exercise of power, then it is true that girls seldom negotiate trade agreements or start wars. However, if all of the work needed to reproduce the world is considered, the important role of girls and women for keeping things running becomes apparent. Robin Jones, "Girls do run the world, but patriarchy keeps that fact quietly bracketed: Listening to Beyonce's 'Run the world (Girls)'", *It's her Factory*, https://www.its-her-factory.com/2011/05/girls-do-run-the-world-but-patriarchy-keeps-that-fact-quietly-bracketed-listening-to-beyonces-run-the-world-girls/. Retrieved 20.01.2018.

[150] Oksala, Johanna, "Affective Labour and Feminist Politics", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, (41, no. 2, Winter, 2016), 299.

[151] Ibid.

[152] Ibid, 300.

ontological characterisation of *femina domestica*; as if Butler is diving into the dark water to help her to resurface. The primary dependency, opacity and the emphasis on *the openness* which is the consequence of our vulnerable being, indicates the relational and social "glue"; the emotional "labour" which is so often expected of women. Thus, it is apt to end this chapter by describing how the subject-ideal of the possessive individual is always already also "the invulnerable subject", a subject that disavows all emotions that are considered "weak".

2.9 The invulnerable subject

In "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology" Alison Jaggar discusses how the subject in the Western world ought not to show emotions or "be emotional".[153] She distinguishes between emotions and feelings, where the latter is defined as fully intentional, whilst emotions have an unconscious dimension. Jaggar is particularly interested in the way people have been encouraged to supress their emotions in Western culture. As a result, people are not necessarily conscious of their emotional states nor of how these states affect their lives. This echoes Gilson's notion of the ideal of *invulnerability* in Western cultures; emotions are seen as a vulnerability or weakness of the individual making him/her less desirable.[154] Jaggar also emphasises that emotions are not fully controllable. Even after you have come to realise that a particular emotion – such as feeling ashamed over your body – is unwarranted and socially constructed to "keep you in place" you continue experiencing this same emotion. Thus "we may still continue to experience emotions inconsistent with our conscious politics."[155] In this way, we may be aware of the contingency of our subject and emotional formation but simultaneously feel strongly attached to emotions which do not enhance our wellbeing. This may especially be the case when we are not encouraged to express our emotions but rather to suppress them.

[153] Jaggar, "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology", 154.

[154] Gilson, *Ethics of Vulnerability*, 7.

[155] Jaggar, "Love and Knowledge", 163.

Gilson furthermore analyses a *wilful ignorance of vulnerability* which is related to the pursuit of an ideal of invulnerability.[156] She points out that the conventional negative understanding of vulnerability sees it as a *property* some people have in particular circumstances, but others not. Vulnerability is seen as a weakness, something to be avoided at all costs, whilst invulnerability is the "desirable character trait and form of subjectivity."[157] According to Gilson, the way a certain kind of subjectivity, namely the "invulnerable master-subject," is privileged in capitalist socioeconomic systems is the reason why vulnerability is viewed in these negative terms:[158]

> [W]e repudiate vulnerability in both thought and practice such that we are committed not to the truth of invulnerability but to its social utility for us. We learn the habits of invulnerability in social contexts. I learn, for instance, that if I demonstrate that I am in control, self-possessed, then I get taken seriously.[159]

Actively ignoring the oppression of others and the way one's privilege is established in relation to that oppression is an ignorance of vulnerability.[160] Where invulnerability is a virtue, vulnerability is also seen as reducing the credibility of the vulnerable person in question; he or she is believed to be a poor epistemic agent.[161] Gilson notes, referring to Susan Bordo, that when this ideal of invulnerability applies to women, they reject "the maternal body" and may even feel empowered whilst experiencing "masculine" emotionally detached qualities such as self-containment, self-mastery and control.[162] Furthermore Susan Wendell notes that denial of vulnerability is a form of living that suppresses the fact that we are bodies that feel and ache. The fact of the pain of others reminds me of my own pain, and that I am a body that can experience a vast

[156] Gilson, "Vulnerability, Ignorance, Oppression", *Hypatia*, 308.

[157] Ibid, 312.

[158] Ibid.

[159] Ibid. 314.

[160] Ibid.

[161] Ibid. 318.

[162] Ibid.315, Bordo, Susan, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

amount of pain and difficult bodily states. Pain is *inevitable* and the body is both imperfect and fragile.[163] As Gilson describes Wendell's thought:

> Her pain, her bodily presence, epitomizes the opposite of the invulnerable self one seeks to be, and one's response of avoidance and disidentification is intended to shore up that sense of invulnerability. Thus, ignorance of relationality, of relations with others as being constitutive of the self, is at the core of ignorance of vulnerability.[164]

This relates to Butler's account of grief and the way that particular intensive emotion simultaneously dispossesses and makes us realise that we are always already relational; the sense I have of "me" is also a sense of "you" and of the multiple others who have formed my existence. "To deny vulnerability and its inherent relationality, is thus also to deny the power of one's own actions to affect others, to stand as an example to others".[165] To accept that we are not clearly demarcated beings but relational could, in effect, transform the way we relate to ourselves and others.

However, undergoing such a transformation might be difficult, especially since it means that we need to give up the idea that we can "master" every situation. As will be discussed in the remaining chapters, changing perspective in this manner means that we need to re-examine the premises of much of our ethical thought. Being aware of the limits to our understanding, our primary opacity and dependency does not mean, however, that we can do away with responsibility, but it can lead us to think through responsibility based exactly on those premises, rather than assuming a masterful subject.

I started this chapter by analysing Butler's use of the notion of relationality and how this use helps explain the multi-layered

[163] Gilson, "Vulnerability, Ignorance and Oppression", 322, Wendell, Susan, "Towards a feminst theory of disability" in *Feminist Philosophy Reader*, ed. Alison Bailey and Chris Cuorno (New York: McGraw Hill, 2008): 826-840.

[164] Ibid, 322.

[165] Ibid. 324.

ontological account she is affirming, as well as the way these different levels come together. There remains a primacy of the “you” and “I” experiencing the address, but the address is always in accordance with a specific social context, even though it may feel like a deeply personal encounter. Through the fact of relationality, the "you" and "I" are socially formed, which means we need to take a look at sociality and norms in order to understand the shape of the self.

As I have shown, Butler’s account of norms tends towards the generic, lacking somewhat the historic specificity of Foucault’s formulation of the norm. This is the case even though she adheres to analysing norms historically but her account is however logically consistent with the Foucauldian formulation. Subsequently Butler was presented as a critic of liberalism from *Gender Trouble* onwards, and by looking at feminist critique of the liberal subject, I argued that Butler’s relational ontology of vulnerability helps uncover the hidden ontological figure of *femina domestica*, a figure that represent all the hidden workers that reproduce capitalism.

Officially, there is only one subject position within the predominant liberal ontology, the one of the possessive individual, who sees his individual traits as properties, which value he should try to enhance as much as possible. Thus, he is also the invulnerable subject, because appearing as vulnerable does nothing but decrease one's personal property-value. The liberal ontology conceals the fact that it cannot reproduce itself without another subject position, that of *femina domestica*, who takes care of all the frailty of being, and denies that we are dispossessed by relations, dependent on others and other elements, essentially open to the world and vulnerable in multiple ways.

However, in exposing the invulnerable subject or the possessive individual as based on our primary dependency, our opaque site, openness to the world, and vulnerability, it is easy to fall into the pit of offering a new ideal of a fragile, opaque and relational subject. The aim of this dissertation is to avoid that trap, and instead to explore that which might be thought and perceived via an openness to the world, via sitting comfortably in one's vulnerability.

The aim of Butler's work is not to offer any kind of "good" subject as a settled ground for reflection (US.198).

A critical examination of the meaning and function of social ontology might offer us awareness of how we have always already been conditioned by certain subject positions. In order to grasp how Butler provides us with a relational ontology of vulnerability – both as a political project of this historical present, and as a basis for new ethics – it is important to ponder the complex interrelations between ontology, ethics and critique. This will be the focus of the next two chapters, before the discourse on vulnerability and its limits can be treated in depth in in the fifth chapter.

3 From critique to relational ontology

Throughout Butler's work there is a great emphasis on critique, and *Gender Trouble* is a monumental work of feminist critique. It is a work of social criticism questioning a certain framework of gender identity. In the book, Butler performs a feminist critique as well as a *critique of feminism* as the basis for feminist politics: "Feminist critique ought to explore the totalizing claims of a masculinist signifying economy, but also remain self-critical with respect to the totalizing gestures of feminism" (GT.7). Time and again Butler warns against establishing a new global or universalising subject, as can clearly be seen in her engagement with Monique Wittig's lesbian subject as a new sovereign. She also warns against any attempt to "establish a point of view outside of constructed identities," believing that such an enterprise deploys the very imperialist strategies she aims to dethrone and criticise (GT.210). In enquiring into the purpose of the feminist project, Butler lays the course towards ontology:

> Within feminist political practice, a radical rethinking of the ontological constructions of identity appears to be necessary in order to formulate a representational politics that might revive feminism on other grounds (GT.7).

Although her subsequent works do not have as clear-cut feminist agendas, they certainly follow the path of radically rethinking ontological constructions in this feminist spirit, as I discussed in the last chapter in relation to the way Butler's ontological account corresponds with the hidden figure of *femina domestica*. Butler repeatedly shows a commitment to feminist politics and theory, but at the same time she seemingly self-identifies as a critical theorist.

I begin this chapter by showing the extent to which *critique* is an essential part of the relational ontology of vulnerability Butler is developing. To further clarify this perspective, I examine how Butler

engages and identifies with the philosophical tradition of critical theory, especially in terms of the way Foucault pondered critique. This also relates to the next step I take within the chapter, when I examine how Butler's earlier works criticise and politicise ontology in order to expose the fact that the "natural" has been social and political all along. After this discussion, with the help of White's analysis in *Sustaining Affirmation*, I examine the way Butler ceases to limit herself to ontological critique and begins to develop and *affirm* her own ontological theory.

In the second chapter, I showed that this ontological account is *responding* to the prevalent ontology of liberalism, which means that this is an historical ontology. In this chapter, the aim is to evaluate the extent to which Butler has been developing her own ontological account, and especially the extent to which it is *relational*. That means that this ontology cannot but contain the question of the human, given that the subjective perspective is a human perspective. Therefore, the next step is to analyse the way Butler theorises the human, but I endorse Schippers in interpreting the "human" in Butler's thought as an open-ended, futural conception; a dynamic becoming.[166]

Before examining the relational dimension of this type of ontology and the way it includes social and bodily aspects, the next step of the analysis is to show firstly, how *potentiality* further characterises this ontology (and in fact Butler's whole approach to vulnerability): one is vulnerable due to a potential encounter in the world. Secondly, I will examine the way she interprets the Spinozan idea of *conatus essendi* – the desire to be and to prolong one's existence – as a social desire, a desire to be with others, and prolong the existence of that shared being. Then I will explain why I choose to characterise this ontology as relational, which means that it is also social and bodily ontology. Next I will further underline the relational aspect of this ontology by looking at Butler's emphasis on *ec-static relationality*, which means that one is always beside

[166] Schippers, *The Political Philosophy of Judith Butler*, 50.

oneself, both in intensive dispossessed ways and the more affirmative ways of sharing lives with others.[167]

Finally, I will show how this ontology gives rise to an ethical stance: through an awareness of our own opacity we may learn to be responsive to the other and to our surroundings, and thus acquire a new sense of responsibility. An awareness of these different dimensions, of being both ontologically relational and vulnerable, can give rise to a *responsiveness,* which I will examine further in the next chapter.

3.1 The critical theorist

Although a specific work may contain a fierce critique of a particular subject matter, this does not necessarily imply that its author has consciously asked herself: what is critique? But Butler does just that, if not throughout her work, then in a paper from 2000 called "What is critique? An essay on Foucault's virtue".[168] In this paper, Butler specifically engages with Foucault's paper by the same name, "What is Critique?" (1978).[169] She makes it explicit that critique is an essential part of *moral* and *ethical thinking*, both in relation to breaking away from oppressive norms and in reminding oneself that one's own moral beliefs can turn out to be oppressive or excluding for others.

In one of the defining moments of *Giving an Account,* Butler suggests that the "I" needs, in some sense, to become a social theorist in order to begin the project of giving an account of oneself. The "I" needs to critically examine the social conditions of its own

[167] The notion of the "ecstatic" is (originally) derived from the Greek words ekstatikos and ekstasis, which indicate a unstable condition, to be out of place, entranched and even insane. Butler sometimes refers to ec-static (GAO. 32, UG. 151) and sometimes to ec-static with an hyphen (GAO.115, UG. 33), with the effect of somewhat distancing the notion from the more common English word. Lloyd and Schippers refer to ek-static, which is nearer to the Greek words. Schippers, *The Politcal Philosophy of Judith Butler*, 20, Lloyd, *Judith Butler: From Norms to Politics*, 15.

[168] Butler, Judith, "What is critique? An essay on Foucault's Virtue" in *The Political*, ed. David Ingram (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 212-228.

[169] Foucault, Michel, "What is Critique?", *Politics of Truth* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), 41-82. However, when "What is Critique?" is referred to in the rest of this chapter, it denotes Butler's paper, not Foucault's.

emergence, which means she needs to realise that she does not "stand apart from the prevailing matrix of ethical norms and conflicting moral frameworks" (GAO.8). Gilson points out that critique importantly exposes the difference between ethical and social norms. Rather than solely relying on convention, presumption and given interpretive frames in line with social norms, ethical norms should succeed a practice of critical reflection.[170] This places critique as a necessary precursor for ethical norms but not for social norms. Thus, "ethical deliberation is bound up with the operation of critique" (GAO.8). Thiem describes Butler's notion of critique as both "politically oriented social criticism" and "an epistemological assessment of the limits of knowledge" (US.190). Critique needs to trace the formation of concrete subjects, but in order to remain critical, it needs to position itself at the intersection of politics and ethics (US.89).

It is difficult to describe the relationship between ethics and critique as it means that one is attempting to think outside one's own frame of reference, to think something incomprehensible. As we are situated beings, discerning and criticising one's own moral assumptions is not an easy task. But some experiences help us to spot these assumptions more than others: "[t]he universal not only diverges from the particular, but this very divergence is what the individual comes to experience, what becomes for the individual the inaugural experience of morality" (GAO. 8-9). When the particular settings of your own life cannot be subsumed under a universal, when this experience cannot be identified by thought or language, you feel it on your own skin, and that experience stimulates a critical attitude. If a certain understanding of the "human" is prevalent in society, such as the idea that the human is athletic, you may feel like – and be made to feel like – a monster if you lack stamina and physical strength. This experience of divergence forms you as a moral subject, if you learn to see the functioning of social universals and the way they can be changed, rather than rebuking yourself for your "own" monstrosity.

[170] Gilson, *Ethics of Vulnerability*, 52.

An account of oneself is given to another "and this other establishes the scene of address *as a more primary ethical relation* than a reflexive effort to give an account of oneself" (GAO. 21, italics mine). Butler shows explicitly here that she considers ethics to be a form of relation rather than a standpoint of the "I". These relations to the other are more *primary* than the "I" ethically deliberating by itself. In order to realise that these ethical relations are subject to a specific time and place, we need the practice of critique; it not only "exposes the limits of the historical scheme of things" but also the epistemic and ontological horizon of the particular subject itself (GAO.17).

In spite of the importance of historicity, critique's relationship with history is nothing if not complicated. The fact that critique always takes place in a particular historic time itself, without being able to fully understand its own time, makes fully reflexive critique nearly impossible. As Thiem notes, critique needs to be critical of "historical constellations of powers" whilst being itself conditioned by them (US.191). Thiem furthermore warns against seeing history as the ultimate judge of critique:

> The task … is to refuse to allow power and history exclusively to determine what is right, while taking into account that power and history condition any such judgment that is made in the name of love, justice, or freedom. To understand that convictions, criteria, and norms are conditioned by relations of power and their historical situatedness is different from claiming that relations of power and historical circumstances fully determine normative stance (US.211).

Therefore, we need to simultaneously be aware of how our critique is always historically situated at the same time as we need to recall that they are not fully determined by history. In "What is critique?", Butler opposes theoretical practices that start with a framework of ethical norms in order to perform a critique. On the contrary, Butler believes (in a rather peculiar *general* sense) that "critique" always comes before any suggestion of a normative ideal. Somehow – and this sounds like a difficult practice of thought – when your ethico-political desire captures your mind, taking you halfway to your social utopia, Butler challenges you to think: how is this utopian thought conditioned by *that* of which you are not conscious, i.e. your opacity, and how might it turn out to be a total

disaster for the planet, or for other people? By the primacy of this "'general' sense of critique" (general, in that the particular and contextual critique comes after the specific normative circumstances), Butler challenges you to think consciously about what you are not conscious of, think the *unthinkable.*

The question of critique's relations to norms and normative criteria is of great importance to both Foucault's and Butler's accounts. By choosing what one wants to put under scrutiny, there are multiple other dimensions that one cannot but leave uncriticised. Normative aspirations emerge at the back of concrete criticism, as Thiem notes (US.250); by accepting our historical and social situatedness we also need to accept that our "critical sense" is itself limited. Even though one tries to remain constantly critical of norms whilst evaluating the normative, one cannot but be conditioned by uncritical dimensions of one's one (opaque) way of thinking. If we bear this in mind, at least we may accept that a constant revaluation of our ways of being critical is needed, that critique is as an open-ended project without a final point.

The problem with this approach is that decision-making becomes difficult if you must constantly be aware of your own uncritical opacity. This problem is not addressed to any length in Butler's work. Mills notes that normativity cannot at all be a straightforward matter for Butler, as can be seen in Butler's reluctance to map out ethical rules with a normative power in the historical present within her own philosophy. One can always dig deeper into one's critique and find a dimension of the rule which is oppressive in some way, and, therefore, it is not Butler's role to form rules for subjects who find themselves in a completely different situation from her own. Accordingly, Butler follows "Foucault's refusal to tell others 'what to do'" as Mills puts it.[171] Given that one can never be fully aware of one's circumstances, and therefore cannot master them, it is impossible to tell with certainty whether the general rule will be oppressive or not.[172]

If one adheres to a critical attitude in this manner, the question becomes: how is one to participate in politics, since there must be

[171] Mills, "Undoing Ethics", 57.

[172] Ibid.

some general rules in politics? To what extent does this approach to critique prevent you from acting out the politics and ethical practice you deem as the right ones? A rigid adherence to critique may turn out to be too much in line with the desire for mastery; to some extent we need to accept that we are *undone by others* in politics and that we will unwillingly undo others. It is important to honour critique as an open-ended project and be conscious that it will always, to some extent, *fail*.

In light of this, critique is a mode of agency that undoes, performs and responds to given circumstances. As we have seen, it is not as if the ethical side of critique begins only when we have laid out normative aspirations to guide our way forward. We are always already situated in ethical relations and the method we use to criticise is always already ethical. We could be quite competent in "critique", tearing down flawed arguments or world-views, only to find out that this has produced a desire for mastery within us, which turns out to be more important for us than our consideration for others.

When it is the case that one's concrete reality is at odds with the "oughts" of society and with the social universals that condition one's life, asking the question "who I can become?" can be a matter of desperation. Something needs to be changed in order to go on. This shows the existential dimension of Butler's approach to critique: you can feel your own resistance to oppressive situations boiling in your skin; it is unsettling, possibly painful, *yet* it is what keeps political life alive. Critique is thus entangled with the multi-dimensional account of the relational ontology I read in Butler's work: it is always the concrete "I" that comes to experience his normative formation, and he is the one who has agency to alter it via critique, even though this may pose a life-threating risk for his very same "I".

3.2 Critiquing given ontological frameworks

In asking existential questions about the possible *becoming* of every human life, Butler sets out her analysis of ontology as *political* in a distinct manner. Conventionally, in order to draw clear borders that produce a specific political meaning as well as recognisability within the borders, the outside needs to be clearly drawn up as

depoliticised (or not up for political scrutiny). An example of this is when a clear distinction is made between the cultural and the natural. If we see ontology as political, the contingency of the political borders is exposed.

Although I am conditioned by the specific political order of *being* in a given society, that does not necessarily mean that I can only become what that order "wants" one to become. There are multiple dimensions of *who* and *what* I can become, but simultaneously there are strong opposing forces I encounter whilst exploring that path:

> One does not drive to the limits for a thrill experience, or because limits are dangerous and sexy, or because it brings us into a titillating proximity with evil. One asks about the limits of ways of knowing because one has already run up against a crisis within the epistemological field in which one lives. The categories by which social life are ordered produce a certain incoherence or entire realms of unspeakability.[173]

It is when one finds oneself in this alien realm of unspeakability that one cannot but make an attempt to transform the ontological order that conditions one's life – if that is possible in the first place. In order to do just that, one needs to find "moments of discontinuities, sites of failure of intelligibility or the breaking points of the ontological field."[174] These sites exist because the subject will never be fully totalised, that is, never fully subjugated by governmentalisation; *being* is never fully complete or exhausted.[175]

Here, Butler states that it is as a response to governmentalisation that critique begins, which interestingly begs the question whether her analysis of critique is particular to a given epoch (the one in which the art of governing became a central political question), or whether it supplies us with a general theory of critique.

[173] Butler, "What is Critique?", 215.

[174] Ibid. 222. A similar description can be found in *Undoing Gender*, 216.

[175] Ibid.

> Criticality is thus not a position per se, not a site or a place that might be located within an already delimitable field, although one must, in an obligatory catachresis, speak of sites, of fields, of domains. One critical function is to scrutinize the action of delimitation itself … The questioning of taken-for-granted conditions becomes possible on occasion; but one cannot get there through a thought experiment, an *epoché*, an act of will. One gets there, as it were, through suffering the dehiscence, the breakup, of the ground itself (UG.107).

This paragraph from *Undoing Gender* is simultaneously a critique of a given epoch, namely our own, and its over-emphasis on the individual will, and an explication of the lack of a stable "position" when it comes to critique. The topological metaphors referring to positions and fields are the nearest we can come to describing this unspeakable phenomenon. But these metaphors also indicate that Butler thinks that it is of the utmost importance to try to *name* the unspeakable—give an account of it—yet acknowledge that there is always some part of our being, of our existence, which escapes language, communication and comprehension.

In the realm of each consciousness the act of being critical (of an authority that poses as an absolute) is a transformative act that changes the self or the psyche.[176] This goes together with the peculiar, classical philosophical concept in the title of Butler's paper: *virtue*. Foucault, so to speak, fully redefines the notion in line with his conception of resistance (as opposed to power). According to him, one is virtuous if one is willing to risk the established order and play havoc.[177] You are virtuous if you risk your place as a subject in a society, if you risk becoming incomprehensible.

But who can risk their place as a subject in the first place? In the more existential approach that shines through in Butler's "What is Critique?" the starting point often appears to be a person who is born to a political recognition in line with the one Western people take for granted. In order to "desubjugate yourself" you need to have been subjected to a certain political framework of subjugation in the first place. How does this correspond to the lives without recognition

[176] Ibid, 218.

[177] Ibid, 215.

described in Butler's work, to her emphasis on "seeing" those who are not considered "human", e.g. stateless people? The act of being critical and virtuous does not seem to be on offer for them.

I think this example shows that here, as elsewhere in Butler's work, there is a tension between the historical approach, which connects critique to the art of governing in a Foucauldian manner, and a more general approach, which, at least in principle, allows every reader to place herself in the position of the one willing to risk her subjecthood for another ontological horizon. Accordingly, it is important to acknowledge that this particular relation between critique and ontology is conceptualised within the history, and even the borders, of the West. Thus, this account takes the subjects, who already enjoy minimum political recognition, for granted.

In order to think the relationship between critique and ontology beyond Western borders (or in fact within them in the case of illegal immigrants), a minimal political recognition often can not be assumed. Although it is not fully my place to describe the situation of the one who finds herself outside of the borders of the West, some of these subjects greatly desire what I am locating here as the *hindrance* for actualising the relational ontology of vulnerability: namely, the ability to perform as the invulnerable subject in a job interview, even though they are vulnerable in diverse kinds of ways.[178] This desire furthermore exposes how we *need* to situate ourselves within the prevalent ontology of liberalism and also acknowledge its part in the minimal political recognition we enjoy.

[178] In this instance the asylum interview appears as an interview that mirrors the job interview, as you need to appear as the extremely vulnerable subject in the asylum interview in Western states. Whilst one needs to appear invulnerable and as an attractive worker in the job interview, the asylum seeker needs to communicate his extreme and traumatic vulnerabilities in a clear manner in the asylum interview. Even though it is not possible to get asylum without performing as the intensively vulnerable subject, once the same person finally acquires asylum, he needs to appear invulnerable in a job interview as soon as possible in order to get a job. Generally, he does not get any time or space to deal with the trauma that got him the asylum in the first place if he wants to acquire full rights as a citizen in the state that gave him asylum. This is at least the case in Iceland, which provides those that have asylum with citizenship *if and only if* they have no criminal records, can show that they can provide for themselves and that they have not gotten support from their municipality for means of subsistence for the last three years. The Directorate of Immigration, "Grunnskilyrði", https://www.utl.is/index.php/grunnskilyrdhi#framfaersla, retrieved 09.04.2018.

Given that we enjoy minimal political recognition, critique is a self-transformative act shaking the place of the subject, so that each and every particular “I” can obtain space to live and breathe. The "you" and the "I", deny being subsumed under a (particular) subject position. This is an apt description given Butler’s differentiation of judgment and critique in describing what Adorno and Raymond Williams have in common:

> Judgments operate for both thinkers as ways to subsume a particular under an already constituted category, whereas critique asks after the occlusive constitution of the field of categories themselves.[179]

“What is critique?” shows us not only how Butler approaches critique from the standpoint of the “I” but also how critique is always performed in relation to ethics in view of addressing the given ontological framework. Before engaging further with the relationship between ethics and ontology, I want to look at a few different aspects of Butler’s ontology that show why I choose to read that ontology in terms of “relationality” and “vulnerability”. But I will begin by showing how Butler steps away from being mainly a critic of given ontological assumptions towards developing her own onto-ethical stance.

3.3 From critiquing to affirming ontology

We have seen that Butler’s critical project is concerned throughout with the question of ontology; or, better, with questioning ontology. From *Gender Trouble* to her most recent works Butler has, in her extensive philosophical quest, dug into various discourses to expose the hidden assumptions of apolitical understandings of the human and pointed out how they turn out to play a specific political function.

Butler is aware that she is speaking to a specific conceptual history of ontology, as can be seen in the following paragraph from *Gender Trouble*:

[179] Butler, "What is Critique?", 215.

> In the philosophical tradition that begins with Plato and continues through Descartes, Husserl, and Sartre, the ontological distinction between soul (consciousness, mind) and body invariably supports relations of political and psychic subordination and hierarchy (GT.17).

As Butler notes here, this conceptual history of ontology has produced a hierarchical relation between what is considered matters of the mind and matters of the body.

What she does not dwell upon, however, is the fact that ontology used to be a much more restricted category in the history of Western philosophy, one that had little to do with ethical or political concern. Stephen K. White notes in *Sustaining Affirmation*, that it is mostly in the twentieth century that the conceptual use of ontology is widened to such a degree.[180] The shift of the meaning of ontology emerges in analytical philosophy and philosophy of science.

> For most English-speaking philosophers, ontology came to refer increasingly to the question of what entities are presupposed by our scientific theories. In affirming a theory, one also takes on a commitment to the existence of certain entities. Ontology in this general sense seems to have been increasingly appropriated in recent years in the social sciences. Thus, one frequently hears reference made to the ontology implicit in some social scientific theory or research tradition.[181]

This shift has commonly been referred to as the "ontological turn" and emerges, according to White, with the realisation that we live in "late modern" times. This realisation corresponds with an awareness of what has been taken for granted in the Western world.

According to White, much of liberal thought goes hand in hand with what he calls "strong ontology". It sets out a strict world-view of determined ontological entities which more or less do not change. Against this, White develops "weak ontology", which would allow those opposing the strong one – instead of being solely in the position of opposition and deconstruction – to articulate and affirm their own ontological gestures.[182] Self, other and the world are surely

[180] White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 3.

[181] Ibid.

[182] Ibid, 8.

contestable notions, but both political life and reflective, ethical life need such concepts.

I would furthermore argue that there are unconscious ontological assumptions at work in any attempt to move and act in this world. Schippers convincingly argues – through the example of a debate concerning the right to marriage – that there are "competing conceptions of the human" at work between those that adhere to marriage equality and the right to marriage for people of the same sex and those that oppose it.[183] Schippers suggests that – whilst there are plenty of enquiries concerning the question of what human rights consist of – the underlying (and assumptive) notion of the human involved is often under-theorised. This shows that if one chooses to remain in the critical gear rather than participate in building the worldview one wants to actualise, one allows others (who may have given self-critique less thought) to solely define the sphere of ontology as well as the notion of the human; conceptions which then determine the construction of our social lives. White offers "the critics" a way out via the notion of "weak ontology":

> Weak ontologies offer figurations of these universals, whose persuasiveness can never be fully disentangled from an interpretation of present historical circumstances. Fundamental conceptualization here thus means acknowledging that gaining access to something universal about human being and world is always also a construction that cannot rid itself of a historical dimension.[184]

The context of our lives is thus structured by underlying ontological assumptions. Our lives are conditioned by the given worldview, as well as by the prevalent notion of the human at this historical moment in time. Ontology is mediated through the social, but does that mean that we are speaking about social ontology? As I aim to show in the following section, that is not necessarily the case, and although Butler presents us with a social, bodily ontology, I rather choose to characterise this ontological framework as a relational ontology of vulnerability. The relational aspect offers us a

[183] Schippers, *The Political Philosophy of Judith Butler*, 46.

[184] White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 9.

broader and yet more precise conception than the social one, and vulnerability better describes what it is about (physical) existence that serves attention. The existential aspect of Butler's idea of the "I", as well as her critical analysis of the human, has triggered a discussion as to whether Butler's more recent works are turning towards humanism or not. This discussion is important for shedding light on her relational ontology of vulnerability because it shows that Butler takes issue with basic tenets of humanism, most importantly the liberal idea of the subject, in her efforts to elaborate a richer idea of the subject.

3.4 What is the human?

It is important to examine the extent to which Butler is speaking about and responding to the tradition of humanism and the Enlightenment. The birth of modern science spurred a wave of optimism for an ever-better world driven by the "rational attributes" of the human. This development corresponded historically with the bourgeois revolution and an increasing dominance of liberal thought. It was the birth of a secular epoch in which the human was to be free from the superstition of any religious belief. Conventionally, the notion of "humanism" is related to this historical and political development, i.e. to the rejection of any kind of God and of any institution that gains power by preaching his might. Humanism rejects a system where some humans have a privileged relation to the almighty – and thus a truer claim to existence –than other humans, advocating instead that all humans possess the same capability for rationality. As important as it was to think the human in terms of equality, it soon became apparent that not all humans were to be a part of this newly established humanity. The feminist movement is a good example of a political force that demanded gender equality based on the liberal idea of a freedom and equality for *every* human, while also exposing the way liberalism excluded some humans –namely women –from this equal position.

The contradictions of humanism have led to diverse strands of critique, such as the *anti-humanism* of Louis Althusser, opposing

what he believed to be (a conservative) Marxist humanism.[185] Butler supersedes this tradition and redefines it by deploying the critical force of feminism. As has been discussed here, the focus of her earlier work lies in pointing at the social and political consequences of different definitions of the "human" rather than defining the human herself. In her post-2000 works she frequently contemplates the notion of the human, albeit most often asking about those who are excluded from the category of "human". This intertwines with the way she develops her own ontological and ethical stance. As a result, concerns about the degree to which her thought has developed into "humanism" have been raised, as can be seen in Murphy's and Honig's reading of her works.[186] Schippers notes that these questions revolve around whether "Butler's endorsement of 'the human' leads her to subscribe to a form of philosophical humanism that rejects notions of the decentred subject."[187] Schippers also points out different traditions such as post-humanism and critical humanism, which indicate that when Butler is "accused" of humanism, this does not necessarily mean that her concern is with the rational capabilities of all humans and "humankind" at the cost of other species. Honig furthermore points at two different conceptions of humanism in Western history, opposing "the rationalist, universalist variety discredited by poststructuralism" to "a newer variant, one that reprises an earlier humanism in which what is common to humans is not rationality but the ontological fact of mortality, not the capacity to reason but vulnerability to suffering."[188] This earlier version she calls "mortalist humanism," and she believes that Butler's more recent works show signs of this view. Murphy's idea of a "new humanism" of corporeal vulnerability "gesture[s] toward the possibility of a humanistic ethic that finds its provocation

[185] Gutting, Gary, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). 236.

[186] Here I am refering to Honig's "Antigone's Two Laws: Greek Tragedy and the Politics of Humansim" and Murphy's "Corporeal Vulnerability and the New Humanism".

[187] Schippers, *Political Philosophy of Judith Butler*, 39.

[188] Honig, Bonnie, "Antigone's Two Laws", 1.

in an 'anonymous' state of corporeal vulnerability that is evinced by each unique human body."[189]

Lloyd notes that Butler's critics stress suffering and morality and that they furthermore overlook an "admittedly less prominent aspect of Butler's argument",[190] namely that vulnerability is not the same as injurability of the body, and that ontologically Butler adheres to ecstatic relationality.[191] Vulnerability does not solely indicate the ways we can suffer, be injured and die, but also how we can be touched by others, how we can love and be loved. Butler's account of grievability does not revolve around our finitude but around our inter-relational "nature" as well as the political distribution of who can be grieved.

Butler does, however, contemplate the notion of the human. In her engagement with Adorno's thought in *Giving an Account*, she provides us with the following, so to speak "minimal" definition of the human:

> If the human is anything, it seems to be a double movement, one in which we assert moral norms at the same time as we question the authority by which we make that assertion (GAO.103).

Butler is engaging with Adorno's works *Minima Moralia* and *Problem of Moral Philosophy* in this paragraph, but she is also developing her own ontological line of argument; namely that ontology cannot be taken out of the context of critique and ethics.[192] Adorno was highly sceptical of humanism and, as Butler recounts, struggles with the difficulty of speaking about the human at all (GAO 104).[193] It is essential for morality to be on the side of restraint, neither allowing you to eagerly "join in" the newest "ought" or to consider yourself being on the "right team" whilst others are on the wrong one; that it is *you* who have acquired the right notion of the human (GAO.104). But just as Butler is recounting the difficulty of

[189] Murphy, "Corporeal Vulnerability and the New Humanism", 578.

[190] Lloyd, "The Ethics and Politics of Vulnerable Bodies", 172.

[191] Ibid.

[192] Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 2005) and *Problems of Moral Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

[193] Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 169.

speaking about the human for Adorno she defines that very same term:

> So there is something unyielding that sets itself up in us, that takes up residence within us, that constitutes what we do not know, and that renders us fallible. On the one hand, we could say as a matter of fact that every human must contend with his or her fallibility. But Adorno seems to be suggesting that something about this fallibility makes it difficult to speak about the human, to claim the human, and that it might rather be understood as ‘‘the inhuman’’ (GAO.104).

It is our fallibility, our opacity which characterises this definition of the human. Calling it “the inhuman” emphasises the conventional understanding of the human both Adorno and Butler are opposing. Schippers notes that Butler’s engagement with the notion of the human is concerned with liveability rather than a strict definition of the concept.[194] Butler looks at the idea of the human as an open question – as can clearly be seen in her engagement with Adorno – and one needs to approach it, as a “futural conception”.[195] Accordingly, the adequate form of humanism Butler could be said to adhere to would be “pre-humanism,” or tending towards humanism; there is a dimension of *possibility* to her line of thought as well as a quasi-utopian element, given that we are beings of change, we, the humans, can always become something else.

However, it is important to underline that *the perspective* of Butler’s ontology is a human one. Accordingly, she could be accused of that very *subjectivism* that the anti-humanism of Althusser opposes, because, as Diana Coole argues, experience is so central to Butler’s account.[196] The “I” comes into being by being *addressed,* and although the address forms the “I” via normative social structures built up by multiple, anonymous others, Butler places emphasis on the fact that *this* is still the first perspective from which we begin to make sense of the world. And it must be the case

[194] Schippers, *The Political Philosophy of Judith Butler,* 49.

[195] Ibid, 50.

[196] Coole, Diana, “Butler’s phenomenological existentialism”, in *Judith Butler’s Precarious Politics: Critical Encounters*, ed. Carver, Terrell, Chambers, Samuel L., (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), 13.

that as long as we have (some kind of) humans that ponder these questions, we will need to give an account from the human perspective. As Meissner notes: "Butler is thinking from the standpoint of a human subject, but she is trying to conceptualize the way in which this subject is solicited and animated by an "other"".[197] Meissner adds that this opens up the possibility of taking Butler's works "beyond the confines of human relations".[198] In line with this, I think that relationality better characterises Butler's ontology than sociality. The openness characterised by relational ontology of vulnerability does not *only* indicate an openness towards other humans or the society of humans, it indicates an openness to all the diverse encounters of the world. Therefore, I will now present two dimensions of openness, *being as possibility* and the Spinozian *conatus essendi* both in terms of the social world of humans and of more diverse kinds of relationalities.

3.5 Being as possibility and conatus essendi

As White points out, there is a degree of flexibility in Butler's ontological framework, in fact, it could fit diverse sets of other ontologies.[199] Accordingly, ontology is not fixed, and it is not even singular. It is plural and political and has the ability to provide us with *potentiality*. In *Psychic Life of Power,* Butler dwells upon being as *potentiality* in the context of ontology. She quotes the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben when he simply states in his book *The Coming Community*:[200] "There is in effect something that humans are and have to be, but this is not an essence nor properly a thing: It is the simple fact of one's own existence as possibility or potentiality" (PLP.131).201 Whilst engaging with Agamben's thought, Butler interestingly defines being in the following manner:

[197] Meissner, "Politics as encounter and response-ability", 38.

[198] Ibid.

[199] White, "Sustaining Affirmation",105.

[200] Agamben, Giorgio, *The Coming Community,* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

[201] Agamben, "Ethics", *The Coming Community*, xxi, italics are from Agamben's original text.

> we might reread "being" as precisely the potentiality that remains unexhausted by any particular interpellation. Such a failure of interpellation may well undermine the capacity of the subject to "be" in a self-identical sense, but it may also mark the path toward a more open, even more ethical, kind of being, one of or for the future (PLP. 131).

Possibility is marked by that which is not exhausted; there is always a possibility of something else, something that is not tightly constructed by the system that interpellates you. Although it appears that Butler opposes "being" with the subject in this quote, I think the point is rather to emphasise that the social ontology of the predominant subjectivity will never give an account of the totality of your being. Given the temporality and relationality of being we can never have a stable and complete frame, which exhausts all of being.

This being of possibility follows another ontological discussion, namely *the desire to exist* inspired by Spinoza's conception of *conatus essendi*, the desire to persist in one's own being (PLP. 130). This desire is also connected to Butler's emphasis on *survivability* and liveability. On the one hand, survivability concerns "discerning the conditions necessary for humans to secure their own liveability" as Moya Lloyd notes,[202] but on the other hand it concerns what it means to speak about survival politically. The latter concerns *the desire to exist*. According to Spinoza, in order to desire in the first place, you need to have some sort of basic desire to exist and keep existing:

> No one can desire to be blessed, to act rightly and to live rightly, without at the same time wishing to be, to act, and to live – in other words, to actually exist … Desire is the essence of a man, that is, the endeavor whereby a man endeavors to persist in his own being. [203]

Butler notes that this constitutive desire is exploited by dominating forces. What they exploit is our willingness *to sacrifice a*

[202] Lloyd, *From Norms to Politics,* 134.

[203] Spinoza, Benedict, *Ethics* (London: Wordsworth Classics, 2001), Prop. XX9, 179. Butler quotes this passage in *Undoing* G*ender*, 236.

part of our potential in order to acquire *some* sense of social being (both identity and belonging to a community). Thus, some of us are offered limited, subordinated but guaranteed ways of social being. By the strategies of offering people such limited but guaranteed lives, the "law" thoroughly monopolises existence. But Butler also notes that people are really willing to risk being, it is not necessarily the case that they think it is better to be "enslaved" than to be at all (PLP.130).

> Is there a possibility of being elsewhere or otherwise, without denying our complicity in the law that we oppose? Such possibility would require a different kind of turn, one that, enabled by the law, turns away from the law, resisting its lure of identity, an agency that outruns and counters the conditions of its emergence. Such a turn demands a willingness *not* to be—a critical desubjectivation—in order to expose the law as less powerful than it seems (PLP.130).

White refers to this as a being-in-trouble.[204] This being derives her life from discursive frameworks, patterns of signification she never chose. But there always lingers a sense of potentiality; a different kind of turning as *being* is never exhausted.

Being as possibility and Spinoza's *conatus essendi* are further developed by Butler in "The desire to live: Spinoza's *Ethics* under pressure" (2006).[205] She notes that Spinoza's *conatus* is often interpreted as only concerning self-preservation in line with "individual self-interest associated with later contractarian political philosophers," but she believes this interpretation overlooks important aspects of Spinoza's thought.[206] The very "practice of perseverance" consists in "referential movement toward the world".[207]

Again, Butler defines life as *potential* through this reading of Spinoza. "Life stands the chance of becoming enhanced through that process by which the *potential* of life is expressed."[208] As I will

[204] White, *Sustaining* Affirmation, 86.

[205] Butler, Judith, "The desire to live: Spinoza's *Ethics* under pressure", in *Senses of the Subject* (New York, Fordham University Press, 2015), 63-89.

[206] Butler, "The desire to live", 63.

[207] Ibid, 64.

[208] Ibid.

discuss in the next sections, Butler frequently thinks the *conatus* in relation to ec-static relationality. This she does to further emphasise how the desire to live, to exist, to persevere in one's "own" being is essentially relational, as the following clearly shows:

> It will turn out … that to live means to participate in life, and life itself will be a term that equivocates between the "me" and the "you," taking up both of us in its sweep and dispersion. Desiring life produces an *ek-stasis* in the midst of desire, a dependence on an externalization, something that is palpably not me, without which no perseverance is possible.[209]

3.6 Social, bodily and relational ontology

Both in *Frames of War* and "On this Occasion…" Butler suggests that we need a new bodily ontology: "one that implies the rethinking of precariousness, vulnerability, injurability, interdependency, exposure, bodily persistence and desire, work and the claims of language and social belonging."[210] This bodily ontology is, however, always already a social ontology according to the same logic, as a person's sense of her own body can never been fully independent of the discursive. Expression of any bodily sense is necessarily mediated through signs, words, symbols and gestures. Butler's emphasis on primary dependency is furthermore an indicator of the way her social ontology takes embodiment increasingly into account. By emphasising the time of our lives when we are utterly dependent, she subtly criticises ontologies that abstract away from the different periods of a human life. Such ontologies present the human at her *fittest* rather than looking at the multiple forms humans take, such as the human infant or the old human. Bodily ontology constructed on the basis of the shared condition of dependent beginnings can be seen as representative of the multiple forms that the "human" takes. Furthermore, opacity marks this ontology; none of us remembers our first breaths of life and neither do we remember the whole of our waking minutes (not to mention our sleeping hours). Our bodily social ontology is that of opacity and thus of ever-limited knowledge.

[209] Ibid.67.

[210] Butler, "On this Occassion...", 12.

> The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well. Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own. The body has its invariably public dimension. Constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others, it bears their imprint, is formed within the crucible of social life; only later, and with some uncertainty, do I lay claim on my body as my own, if, in fact, I ever do (PL.26).

This paragraph in *Precarious Life* shows the interconnection between the bodily as our own condition and the social in Butler's thought. In *Frames of War,* Butler examines this interconnection in relation to a critique of the ontological givens of liberalism, which the state-system sustains. She engages with contemporary debates of ethical and political issues and points out their (political, argumentative) use of the ontological. One example is the *pro-life* discussion. Butler exposes the ontological assumptions of those that seek a moral conception of "personhood" of the foetus that makes abortions amoral and accordingly "settle the ethical and political questions by recourse to an ontology of personhood that relies on an account of biological individuation" (FW. 19). This critique underlines how Butler's bodily ontology does not necessary mean a *bounded* bodily ontology, determining the borders of the individual.[211] Rather, in line with the social emphasis, it is an inter-relational and contextual ontology (FW. 19). Butler's account of grief aims to

[211] Käll notes in her introduction "Vulnerable bodies and Embodied Boundaries" to the edited volume *Bodies, Boundaries and Vulnerabilities* that the Greek word for boundaries, *horos*, can be understood in terms of the horizon. After describing how the articles in the volume follow Butler's approach to vulnerability as a fundamental openness to the world, Käll describes their approach to the ambivalence of boundaries in the following manner: "The horizon is the line in the perceptual field where the earth meets the sky, the most distance point available to perception, where the earth curves out from view. It is both a point of separation and of joining together". Not only does the metaphor of horizon thus aptly describe the peculiarity of boundaries but also, in a sense, show us that what we need in order to chance the ontological horizon is to change our perspective and even accept the blurry view of cloudy days when we want to view and observe the landscape. Käll, Lisa Folkmarson, "Vulnerable Bodies and Embodies Boundaries", *Bodies, Boundaries and Vulnerabilities: Interrogating Social, Cultural and Political Aspects of Embodiment*, ed. Lisa Folkmarson Käll (Heidelberg: Springer, 2016), 2.

expose the inter-corporeal nature of existence, as Lloyd phrases it.[212] Furthermore, the distinction between the social and the ecological is not absolute; what we are (we who think this thought, or understand it) is never fully distinguishable from our social environment.

Although one can certainly describe an ontology both as relational and social –the notions often being used interchangeably – I think that characterising this ontology with *relationality* is not only more accurate, but also offers more possibilities. Relationality is a broader concept that can refer to diverse kinds of sociality, for example interpersonal relations or structures of social relations such as relations of commodity exchange. Relationality can also refer to what is not conventionally defined as the social, such as "objective relations," the interactions within environmental forces and how these forces encounter multiple forms of lives.

Balibar raises issues concerning "social ontology" in his engagement with the influential statement of Marx's sixth thesis on Feuerbach, "widely considered one of the emblematic formularies of Western philosophy":[213] "But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of social relations."[214] In this aphorism (never intended for publication), Marx uses both "social" and "relations" in order to describe "the human essence". Balibar suggests interpreting Marx's thought here as a *philosophical anthropology* or an "ontology of relation" rather than as a social ontology. In making that case he points at certain problems with describing ontology as social:

[212] Lloyd, *From Norms to Politics*, 141. Perhaps it would be more apt to call it *trans-corporeal nature*.

[213] Balibar, "From Philosohical Anthropology to Social Ontology and Back", *Postmodern Culture*.

[214] Marx, Karl, "Theses on Feuerbach", Marx/Engels Internet Archive (2002) https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses.htm, retrieved 10.10.2017.

> It could mean that we are "ontologizing the social," which in turn means either that "society" as a whole (as a system, organism, network, development etc.) is installed in the place of "being," or that the emergence of the social (as opposed to the biological, the psychological, etc.) is "essentially" attributed to some quasi-transcendental instance that has a "socializing" quality (such as language, labor, sexuality, or even "the common" or "the political").[215]

Butler does not contemplate which attributes might distinguish "the human" from the non-human, and whilst she certainly theorises the "social", her aim is to avoid a totalising gesture akin to what Balibar is critically describing here. In that context, it is import to recall her emphasis on failure; how the interpellation that brings the subject into being always, to some extent, fails. She is at pains to give an account of different forms of relations and, although she certainly concentrates her attention on human relations, it is not against the logic of her ontological framework to analyse non-human relations within it.

There is another issue that is important to consider in order to realise the depth of Butler's conception of relationality. Not only are "beings" in relations, according to this ontology, but *they are the relations.* Gilson notes that in order to describe ontology that surpasses the idea of bounded beings, the notion of *interdependence* or *interrelations* is not enough. An ontology of interdependence assumes separate, bounded beings that *depend* on each other. The ontology Butler is developing, where "I am only in the address to you", does not describe separated entities but "goes all the way down and is prior to the establishment of individuals who can be said to depend on one another."[216] In order to further examine the extent to which Butler's ontology is relational to the core, we must look further into ec-static relationality.

[215] Balibar, "From Philosophical Anthropology to Social Ontology and Back", *Postmodern Culture.*

[216] Gilson, *Ethics of Vulnerability*, 55.

3.7 Ec-static relationality

In order to describe this relational ontology of non-demarcated beings, Butler speaks of *ec-static* subjectivity. She borrows this notion from Hegel and dwells upon it in *Subjects of Desire,* but also returns to it in *Undoing Gender*.[217] Related to the social dimension of the conatus, *ec-stasis* describes how we are always to a certain extent *outside* or *beyond* ourselves; we are beings who lose their identity or sense of self over and over again. This stems from our existence always already being social, in the sense of one's way of interacting with the world always being conditioned by social terms that are never fully one's *own*. Schippers notes that ec-static subjectivity shows that the language of *autonomy* is misleading, as we are always dependent on the other.[218] This perspective also acknowledges that we are always vulnerable to each other, and possibly undone by one another.

Butler discusses this in the chapter "Beside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy" in *Undoing Gender*. She pinpoints the way we are beside ourselves through sexuality, as we are dependent on the outside world as sexual beings. In this context, she furthermore describes how our desire for recognition, which founds our sense of personhood "*means that the ec-static character of our existence is essential to the possibility of persisting as human.* (UG.33). A world of fully autonomous individuals would not be possible according to this analysis. Since our existence depends on others, we need to manage the way we cohabit, which is not a simple matter:

[217] Schippers, Birgit, *The Political Philosophy of Judith Butler*, 20.
[218] Ibid, 21.

> What we call aggression and rage can move in the direction of nullifying the other; but if who we "are" is precisely a shared precariousness, then we risk our own nullification. This happens not because we are discrete subjects calculating in relation to one another, but because, prior to any calculation, we are already constituted through ties that bind and unbind in specific and consequential ways. Ontologically, the forming and un-forming of such bonds is prior to any question of the subject and is, in fact, the social and affective condition of subjectivity (FW.182-183).

This paragraph from *Frames of War* clearly shows a critique of the rational, calculative subject which I have mainly analysed in this dissertation under the heading of the possessive individual. What we also see here is that *trans-personal relationality is ontologically prior* to any question of the subject. Precariousness is shared, which means that your own existence is the existence of the other, your survival is the survival of the other. In the following answer to Murray, Butler adds a dimension to her analysis of "ontological boundedness" which might provide us with some answers:

> The question of who I am, that ontological question, only follows from being addressed by this Other: I am that being who is already riven by the address of the Other. This shows how rhetoric establishes the ontological conditions of the subject. I only acquire a certain "being" in relation to another who impinges upon me and interpellates me, and I do not live or survive as a being without the primary care of others.[219]

The reason our particular life continues, that we persevere in our bodily existence, is that we have been both cared for and interpellated; somebody else has established an (at least minimal) ethical bond to us. It often seems as though the root of ethics lies in these original bonds in Butler's framework, but this is not a necessity; although you have been cared for and hailed as a certain kind of subject, it does not mean that you will act "ethically", whether it is in the form of an ethical obligation towards those who have cared for you, or by acting in accordance with the given moral

[219] Murray, "Ethics at the Scene of Address", 420.

parameters of your society. Thus, by virtue of ec-static relationality we are not autonomous beings and we would not be alive if it would not be for the (caring) other. This does not mean that our lives are devoid of choices or that we cannot change our ontological horizon but that we necessarily make such change in relation to the other and that our actions will change the ontological framework of other lives we share space and time with.

3.8 Ethics and ontology

Is it possible to make the universal claim that *the human* is always outside herself, that her borders are not clearly distinguishable from others? What would ethics based on this perspective look like?

As we have seen, it is when one reaches the edge of normative and moral intelligibility that one starts to question that very same framework and its legitimacy. To be "virtuous" means risking the intelligibility that constructs our lives in order to gain something more *liveable*. We don't know what this future liveability will look like. Ethics is the sphere of the future unknowing, of an *uncertain ontology*.

But ethics does not happen in the future; it concerns a way of thinking *the past* and *the future* together in *the present*. What we have here is a (dialectical) relationship between four different dimensions of philosophy, the ethical, the critical, the epistemological and the ontological.

In *Precarious Life* Butler speaks of "insurrection at the level of ontology" when describing her own ontological thinking (PL. 33). This interestingly succeeds her claim that it is not enough to reform the given ontology by adding the excluded. The insurrection compels us to think about the ways the given ontological horizon has caused and can continue to cause violence by derealisation. This exposes how entangled ontology is with ethics, and shows that affirming a radically alternative ontology, rather than reforming the given one, is a critical and ethical project. An ontology that has already decided who counts as a viable speaking subject would be, according to

Butler, an ontology that posits a single and uniform ideal for life.[220] Butler is very aware of how difficult it is to speak about the human without unconsciously establishing such an ideal. But that is exactly what makes it such an important yet challenging task to think about liveable life in a political context, while remaining wary of the ideal.

Such an ideal needs to be examined and questioned at the same time as we acknowledge that various universal categories (which can always congeal into normative ideals) shape our social lives. To believe that we could live without them would be a far-fetched, unrealisable fantasy because of the very fact that social universals not only produce us, but have always already formed "the concrete particulars" that we are. The point is to provide a system of social universals that is multiple in terms of what it is to be human, what it is to be "a life" and what it is to be a part of this world that is continuously open to change.

What is at the heart of Butler's "ethical turn" is a beautiful yet melancholic wonder concerning all the lives that dwell in what she calls "suspended ontology".[221] When lives are invisible, when they do not count and have no political significance, then we have a suspended ontology. What one can sense in Butler's work when she asks *who counts as human?* is a certain disbelief regarding the magnitude of this ontological problem. To belong to an ontological field that remains oppressive to you but yet provides you with *some* political recognition is certainly a serious problem. But if you are already *seen*, then at least you can do *something*. It is when the political system and those belonging to it are completely unaware and unconscious of your existence that the question of ontology becomes an urgent political problem and not solely a philosophical exercise.

What does this mean for Butler's analysis of the relationship between critique and ethics? As can been seen in this paragraph from *Giving an Account,* Butler follows both Adorno and Foucault in

[220] Judith Butler, "Can one lead a good life in a bad life", *Radical Philosophy,*176 (Nov/Dec 2012), 15.

[221] Butler, "What is Critique", 221.

making a connection between critique and ethics. But that is not the end of it:

> Foucault, like Adorno, maintains that ethics can only be understood in terms of a process of critique, where critique attends, among other things, to the regimes of intelligibility that order ontology and, specifically, the ontology of the subject. When Foucault asks the question "What, given the contemporary regime of being, can I be?" he locates the possibility of subject formation in a historically instituted order of ontology maintained through coercive effects. There is no possibility of a pure and unmediated relation of myself to my will, conceived as free or not, apart from the constitution of my self, and its modes of self-observation, within a given historical ontology (GAO109).

We have seen in the preceding chapters that Butler makes the case that there is no unmediated relation of myself to my will. I started this chapter by emphasising the role of critique as a means of becoming aware of one's own situatedness in the world, of one's "own" ontological horizon and of the ways in which one might want or need to transform that very same horizon. I analysed the way Butler began her philosophical path by criticising ontology but also how, in line with White's analysis, we find that she is increasingly *affirming* her own (weak) ontological stance. In a response to this stance, her critics claim that her more recent philosophy forms a sort of "humanism" in determining a mortalist or corporeal definition of the human, but in line with Schippers, I argue that Butler rather presents the "human" as an open-ended question. I furthermore argued that Butler's ontology is best characterised as *relational*, based on the primacy of ec-static relationality, being as possibility and the emphasis that *the conatus essendi* is a social desire.

What still needs investigation is the "historically instituted order of ontology" which would locate the ontological discussion in our historical present, responding to a particular political problem. Gilson makes an interesting point concerning this, a point I think is vital both for surpassing the predominance of the given ontology of liberalism and for affirming new sorts of ontologies:

> Ethical practice will require a transformation in our ontology, but such a transformation will have to be undertaken both at the level of thought and at the level of occasionally mundane practice. Indeed, as much as we theorize a relational ontology – an ontology of vulnerability, precariousness, and interdependence – we still, for the most part, operate in accord with dominant liberal norms of personhood and individuality, norms that urge us to disregard the bonds that shared vulnerability forges among us. [222]

Although we want to act in accordance with an ontology of vulnerability, the pre-established mechanisms of the dominant liberal norms of personhood and individuality force us to act as bounded beings who calculate the costs and benefits of every action. How do we indeed transform ontologically in accordance with the ethical practice that this account of relational ontology of vulnerability provides? Before I explicitly engage with that question, an examination of the ethical perspective is needed. The aim of the next chapter is therefore an examination of Butler's main ethical emphasis, culminating in her redefinition of responsibility:

> If I cannot be responsible without being responsive, and I cannot be responsive unless I am appealed to or addressed in some way, that means that who I am is bound up with the question of ethics.[223]

[222] Gilson, *Ethics of Vulnerability,* 63.

[223] Murray, “Ethics at the Scene of Address”, 20-21.

4 Vulnerability for new and different ethics

> If it is really true that we are, as it were, divided, ungrounded, or incoherent from the start, will it be impossible to ground a notion of personal or social responsibility? I will argue otherwise by showing how a theory of subject formation that acknowledges the limits of self-knowledge can serve a conception of ethics and, indeed, responsibility (GAO.19).

Conventionally, it appears as if (self-)knowledge or at least self-coherence, grounds ethical responsibility in the Western tradition. The Ancient Greek aphorism "know thyself" (*γνῶθι σεαυτόν*) arguably grounds the Western philosophical tradition, and the rational subject of Post-Kantian philosophy relies heavily on self-coherence in order to be ethically responsible.

Butler, however, follows a tradition of breaking away from this ethical starting-point that stems from the critical philosophy of Nietzsche, pointing towards the way other factors such as power relations and unconscious mechanisms condition ethical responsibility. In accordance with this line of thought, Butler argues that our opaque being opens up a new dimension of ethics and of the way we can conceive of responsibility. Thus, it is our epistemic vulnerability, indicating an open state of being, which grounds this ethical account. Vulnerability in this sense is a concept of relational, social ontology that places emphasis on an openness between subjects. Simone de Beauvoir discusses such openness between ethical subjects in her ethics of ambiguity,[224] but Butler goes further than Beauvoir in extending the interpersonal dimension of relational ontology towards the political. We have seen that politicising ontology is a critical project with an ethical undertone in Butler's works. When we turn to ethics, critical social theory is always present, resulting in ethics that ought never to be taken out of a political context, as Adorno argued.

[224] Simone de Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Open Road, 2015).

In locating milestones within Butler's thought, scholars have, as already noted, pinpointed an "ethical turn" happening in and around 2000, corresponding to a wider turn taking place within continental thought.[225] Other scholars have argued that ethics has always been a part of Butler's thought, and that it could be misleading to speak of an ethical turn.[226] In "Ethical Ambivalence" in *The Turn to Ethics*, Butler speaks about her own relation to the idea of ethics.[227] She notes that any talk about a turn to *the ethical* made her feel like shouting "bad air bad air" —in a similar way to Nietzsche's response to Hegel's thought—as she worried that ethics meant an escape from politics.[228] Lloyd notes, in her introduction to *Butler and Ethics,* that her readers were surprised when *Giving an Account* appeared in 2005, in which Butler consciously engages with ethics and moral philosophy, the very stuff that made breathing difficult for her earlier.[229]

The traditional approach to ethics more or less revolves around the question "what ought I to do?" In Butler's account the "I" is debunked, and the focus is rather on the relationship between the "I" and the "you", as well as on the social norms that always already constitute the "I". Butler's ethical perspective is, however, still about the "I", as it is always the "I" who asks *Who are you?* But ethics is not a private enterprise, and it should not be privatised, nor is it solely a concern of a single, individual mind. Ethics is an enquiry that has the question *Who are you?* at its heart. When one asks, in a self-reflective manner, "who am I?" one practises ethics, but such a question needs to give an account of the social origin of the "I", exposing the fact that ethics is always already political.

Because of the predominance of the sovereign subject in traditional ethics, consciously asking ethical questions was more or less abandoned in continental philosophy, especially in the

[225] Lloyd, Moya, "Introduction", *Butler and Ethics*, 2.

[226] Ibid, 4.

[227] Butler, "Ethical Ambivalence", *The Turn to Ethics,* (New York: Routledge 2000), 15.

[228] Ibid.

[229] Lloyd, "Introduction", *Butler and Ethics*, 3.

philosophical thought that engaged with Marxism.[230] The turn to ethics could be said to characterise poststructuralist thought, and has more generally been inspired by the thought of Emmanuel Levinas. As Thiem puts it, ethics was "recovered" within continental philosophy by Levinas' work on alterity (US.7).[231] Poststructuralist ethics shares the questioning of the "epistemological comfort" of the subject "as a stable structure prior to contingent realities" (US.10). Mills pinpoints Butler's relations to continental moral philosophy in the following manner:

> Butler follows the Continental tradition of moral philosophy in emphasizing the necessity of relationality or the interdependency of the subject and the other in the emergence of ethical responsibility. But the novelty of her approach is to thoroughly circumscribe this encounter within the horizon of social normativity.[232]

In other words, it does not suffice to speak only about the ethical in the dyadic encounter, or only about how the subject is formed via social structures. These theoretical accounts need to be intertwined. I think Butler successfully provides an account which conjoins ethics and politics by placing what I read as a relational ontology of vulnerability at the forefront.

In this chapter, I aim to examine the conceptual framework at work in Butler's ethical turn in light of the relational ontology of vulnerability. Furthermore, the analysis is carried out in the context of our own historical present in the West, enquiring into the political

[230] Paul Blackledge, *Marxism and Ethics: Freedom, Desire, and Revolution* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen, Rebecca L. Walkowitz, "Introduction: The turn to Ethics", *Turn to Ethics*, ed. Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen, Rebecca L. Walkowitz (New York: Routledge, 2000), viii.

[231] It is noteworthy to mention other more subtle influence to be found within Butler's ethical turn, such as Irigaray's *Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Even though Butler does not subscribe to an ethics of sexual difference herself, the idea of opening the ethical subject up to difference shows similarities to Irigaray's ethics. If the given moral framework demands sameness and self-coherence of the soveregin subject, the vulnerable subject is always in conditions where difference emerges. Irigaray,Luce, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* trans. Carolyn Burke (London and New York: Continuum, 2005).

[232] Mills, "Undoing Ethics", 56.

and ethical framework Butler is responding to. I begin the chapter by analysing the importance of the notion of *failure* and fallibility for Butler's ethics. I argue against characterising Butler's ethics through this notion, however; although there is a dimension of inherent fallibility and imperfection that undeniably characterises an ontology of vulnerability, instead, I argue that the discourse of "failure" cannot in this historical present fully rid itself of its connection to the production of a "desire for mastery" of the invulnerable subject.[233] What we presently conceive of as a failure might turn out to be just a mundane state of being, if the given grid of intelligibility was transformed towards relationality and vulnerability.

Subsequently, I examine how failure is essentially related to the primacy of "the address" in *Giving an Account*. As I have discussed in previous chapters, Butler's theoretical starting point is the form of the address of a particular "I". Rhetoric and performativity in this sense precede both ontology and ethics. By being addressed by others, the "you" and "I" come into being. Every "I" is a new self-reflective consciousness who comes to experience this world, even though she is always already formed via the norms and social structures that condition the address.

To flesh out the ethical implications of this analysis, the next step is to examine how Butler conceives of responsibility, and argue that her relational ontology grounds her account of responsibility as *responsiveness*. This means that the analysis needs to be situated in the interpersonal relations themselves in order to ask: *Who are you? What do you want?* Responsiveness is a practice of realising that the other is different from you, and that she may not need the same help as you would in her situation. This shows the importance of the other for this ethical account. Therefore, I will next examine the Levinasian influence on Butler's ethics, especially in relation to the notion of the other. Butler also draws upon Levinas work in order to reflect upon violence as well as how to handle difficult, intensive emotions. Thus, I examine Butler's proposition of decreasing

[233] With her idea of vulnerability, Butler does in fact challenge and problematise a strict opposition of mastery and failure that we have inherited from dualistic, oppositional models such as the Hegelian master-slave dialectic.

violence as much as possible whilst acknowledging that difficult and intensive emotions are a part of the human condition.

Subsequently, I will take a closer look at the way Butler theorises violence increasingly in relation to difficult emotional states. This furthermore situates Butler's ethical account historically as Butler describes the subjectivation of the invulnerable subject as violent by the fact of the foreclosure of tackling difficult emotions.[234] Although this is only one of several different ways Butler conceptualises violence, I think it importantly shows the extent to which this is a historical ontology: this form of relating to one's emotional life is not necessarily a feature of all societies but is enhanced by the denial of vulnerability in (neo)liberalism. But how can we alter this subjectivation and make space to tackle difficult emotions? In order to achieve this goal, we need to further examine why the invulnerable subject keeps being reproduced and politically presumed. In order to survive in the current system, subjects form a sense of themselves *appearing* as invulnerable worker-subjects, and they *become* that performance. This hinders the actualisation of a relational ontology of vulnerability. Accordingly, reconfiguring ethical responsibility in the form of responsiveness and making space for difficult emotions will not be actualised unless people manage to surpass the individualisation of the job interview. The question at hand is: how to collectively transform the system towards one in which showing vulnerabilities does not mean risking one's livelihood?

4.1 Failure and fallibility

One dimension of the relational ontology of vulnerability is fallibility and failure, yet failure is also the biggest "sin" of the subject of liberal ontology. In critiquing the prevalent ontological landscape, which conditions and limits our ethical relationality, and in subsequently

[234] Although it is important to note that opressive and unequal social structures produce and enhance the experience of difficult emotions, I think that according to this line of thought, these emotions are essentially a part of the pshycic life and would not disappear in an "ideal" society. Thus, they are a part of this ontology of vulnerability, and there needs to be space for people to process these difficult emotions.

transforming that very same landscape, Butler suggests the resignifying strategy of failing to repeat, causing trouble or performing a parody. This can be done individually or collectively, as evidenced in battles for all kinds of (minority) rights. The emphasis on *failure*, which has such a strong presence throughout *Giving an Account*, is thus not a new feature, but can be found throughout Butler's work.

> For Butler, it is not the achievement of autonomy – whether against or with others – that matters in ethics; rather, it is precisely the *failure* to achieve a condition approximating autonomy that is of primary significance. And notably, this failure is not occasional or circumstantial – it is a necessary feature of ethical subjectivity.[235]

This is the reason *responsiveness* is the key word here; in the context of the "you" and "I", Butler's focus is on what happens in the "in between" of the "you" and "I", rather than on how the "I" can justify her actions independently of the thoughts and experiences of the other. We are ontologically relational, which means we need to think responsibility in a new light. Responsiveness is the conceptual tool at hand for becoming aware of the relational existence we are already living.

Time and again Butler refers to Adorno in thinking the relation between ethics and politics. Asking if one can lead a good life in a bad life is representative of her veneration of Adorno's call for situating ethics within politics (in the broad sense of the latter term). Butler was awarded the Theodor W. Adorno Prize in 2012 for her contribution to philosophy. In a speech given on that occasion, Butler described Adorno's moral thought in the following manner: "[W]hat begins as a moral question about how to pursue the good life in a bad life culminates in the claim that there must be resistance to the bad life in order to pursue the good life."[236] The ethically good life cannot be pursued solely for yourself; pursuing a good life means changing bad social conditions. The ethical quest Butler is proposing does not consist in pursuing the good life only for yourself, it also has to be pursued in a collective manner. It is not solely about

[235] Mills, "Undoing Ethics", 52.

[236] Butler, "Can one lead a good life in a bad life", 17.

being able to justify your personal choices. This clearly shows the degree to which ethics is intertwined with politics. In a way ethics is "the quest for the right form of politics."[237]

In *Giving an Account,* Butler notes that Adorno and Foucault "concur on the necessity of conceiving the human in its fallibility" (GAO.111). Error is constitutive of who we are (ontologically).

> This does not mean that we are only error, or that all we say is errant and wrong. But it does mean that what conditions our doing is a constitutive limit, for which we cannot give a full account, and this condition is, paradoxically, the basis of our accountability (GAO.111).

To be conscious of this constitutive limit is to realise the possible fallibility of one's judgments and opinions, and to defer judgment. Not only because one might not have all the information at hand to make the judgment, or because one's "logic" might be fallible, but also because one's understanding of the "shared human condition," of what it means to be human, might differ from others' understanding of this shared condition.

One of the ethical values of the relational ontology of vulnerability is that one may become more understanding towards the fallibility of the other after having faced one's own opacity and fallibility. In articulating the good life as well as justice, you certainly need to understand *your own* sense of justice, why you react emotionally to some things when others do not. What is described here is the emergence of a self-conscious subject who has the ability to reflect on her own life. But the way one reflects upon one's own life differs from one person to the next, especially when it comes to critique. In order to begin a critical self-reflection, according to this analytical framework, one needs to examine how one has already been formed as a "human" by socially produced ontologies, but also how each and every one responds somewhat differently to this formation.

It is of vital importance to acknowledge the diverse levels of failures and fallibilities that condition one's life, rather than seek out masterful performances and give an account of oneself as a

[237] Ibid, 9.

"success story". Not only because we are beings that essentially fail constantly in our given mission, but also because the account we give of ourselves always already implicitly exposes something we did not aim to deliver, and hence the account is not under our control. Last, but not least – and this is central for understanding Butler's affirmative and ethical account of ontology responding to the (neo)liberal subject – we will always already "fail" at knowing what the other needs and wants if we determine their needs solely with the help of our individual will, rather than being *responsive* to what the other shows as her needs and desire.

4.2 The failure of the address

Via the notion of the scene of address, Butler presents her philosophy as onto-ethical. The "I" comes into being by being addressed, but this address always fails in some way or other. If the address did not fail, perhaps we could have an "ethics of mastering autonomy and reason," but it does fail, because we are opaque beings and cannot be otherwise. Of course, the category of address is a theoretical expression, a means for building an alternative ethics whilst critically examining subject formation. But as a theoretical tool, it usefully exposes the fact that we are always in the act of responding and being responsive, because we are in relations with others who ask multiple things of us, such as: *Who are you?*

In line with Laplanche's psychoanalytical account, the address does not necessarily happen at a fully conscious level, nor do we recall the different ways of being addressed and of addressing others. Thiem notes that the perception of an address and a response in communication does not solely happen in full awareness, but also through rhetorical and affective dimensions (US. 146). It is conditioned by the multiple temporalities at work in the present: past memories and affects, and future anticipations and fantasies.

The following paragraph from Giving an Account shows the primacy Butler gives to the scene of address: "if there is an ethics to the address, and if judgment, including legal judgment, is one form of address, then the ethical value of judgment will be conditioned by the form of address it takes" (GAO.46, italics are original). Murray

raises the point that this is unconventional for a philosophical approach as this claims priority to rhetoric which then enables ethics and philosophy.[238] In responding to Murray, Butler points out that problems of responsibility emerge in intersubjective scenarios. Responsibility is not a pre-given entity applied to human societies, but emerges in acts of addressing and being addressed. Responsibility emerges in interactions between two bodies that feel and think in accordance with their own lived experience and the social history that is passed down to them via the handling and the addressing of particular others (as well as impersonal institutional and normative frameworks).

With the "I" always already being addressed, as well as shaped by constitutive limits, with schemes of intelligibility being (many and) limited, Butler suggest that *the limits may be a* "site where we ask ourselves what it might mean to continue in a dialogue where no common ground can be assumed" (GAO.21). These very same limits appear in another context in *Undoing Gender*. After locating the oppressive or violent "limits" of prevailing norms, it is possible, according to this analysis, not only to continue in a dialogue without common ground, but to make space for e.g. non-normative genders and new gender practices. The limit is the site of transformation according to Butler, it is the edge where a change becomes possible by transgressing or extending the limit. Through critique, the possibility of the transformation of the ontological landscape appears.

> What moves me politically, and that for which I want to make room, is the moment in which a subject – a person, a collective – asserts a right or entitlement to a liveable life when no such prior authorization exists, when no clearly enabling convention is in place (UG.224).

Asserting a right to a liveable life means a possible transformation at the level of ontology, one that certainly may fail. Hence, Butler acknowledges the experimental character of such a transformative process. In new spaces, we may participate in dialogues without being able to assume any common element,

[238] Murray, "Ethics at the Scene of Address", 419.

hardly having any norms to rely on. The dialogue, the space, the new meaning between us may not work out in the end; we simply cannot know, because we are experimenting with relations and norms, trying to alter them and creating something new, something *we have not already reiterated.*

By repeatedly placing emphasis on the performative dimension of our thinking and acting, Butler not only provides us with a new and different way of understanding what is happening in human relations, but also with the possibility of a break with any action that does not sit well with us. With the theory of performativity, she offers a way to expose how social acts and ideas begin to appear as natural via reiteration. The politics of performativity offers us the strategy of subversive performances aimed at breaking the norm. Resignification is the practice of creating new and different meanings between us; its political and ethical aim is to diminish normative violence.

A person facing the acute vulnerability of a medically unacknowledged chronic illness is a subject to a normative violence both in terms of the fact that her pain is not considered "real", and in terms of the way this lack of acknowledgement subjects her to heightened precarity. Without a recognition stemming from the medical system, she is stuck between two systems of livelihood: the system of labour and the welfare-support system of modern societies. For many in this position (and for their carers, who sacrifice being the possessive individual for the patients), a social movement which re-signifies our medical comprehension (such as by acknowledging new diseases, recognising multiple and formerly deviant capabilities as well as diversified career paths) is the way forward.[239] Such an enterprise is, however, not straightforward, and

[239] An example close to home is the global campaign *#Millionsmissing* for ME - Myalgic Encephalomyelitis– health equality but the first action took place in 2016. Even though millions of ME-patients suffer severely and remain bed-bound, it is still the case in 2018 in most Western countries that a patient cannot claim disability benefits on the grounds of this disease as the medical recognition is still disputed. People I know in Iceland who have been able to claim benefits "lie" in order to get it; although they fight for ME rights publicly, according to the "disability interview" they have fibromyalgia and depression. Furthermore they do not dare to openly criticise

contains a certain risk of failure, which could turn out to be a serious matter for precarious groups or populations. Yet, it also harbours a tremendous potential for revaluing what counts as contribution, and hence undermines narrow ideas about the value of work which currently deem taking care of money in banks much more valuable than taking care of toddlers in a nursery.

Resignification alone as a political strategy is, according to Butler, not sufficient in “progressive politics,” as becomes apparent in the following paragraph:

> So it seems clear that resignification alone is not a politics, is not sufficient for a politics, is not enough. One can argue that the Nazis appropriated power by taking the language and concerns of democracy against itself, or that Haitian revolutionaries appropriated power by using the terms of democracy against those who would deny it. And so appropriation can be used by the Right and the Left, and there are no necessarily salutary ethical consequences for "appropriation" (UG. 223).

Resignification can thus lead to something much less desirable, such as more violent norms. My point in making this argument is that it will not suffice to refer to Butler's earlier emphasis on resignification as a political strategy that could bring about a paradigm shift towards vulnerability. Something else is also needed, such as the political and ethical view that equality consists in a collective means of (hopefully) sustaining livelihood for everyone, rather than the view that a competition on the job-market should determine people’s right to a livelihood.

the disability-system for fear of losing their only possible means of substistence: disability benefits. https://millionsmissing.meaction.net/, retrieved 05.03.2018.

4.3 Responsibility as responsiveness

> Of course, we see within forms of neoliberalism the idea that individual "responsibility" increases as social services and infrastructures fail, which means that the domain of morality absorbs and deflects the economic and political crisis. And even though that is a pernicious use of morality, I think, as you think, that ethics is a different matter, and that it can provide one point of departure for the critique of neoliberal "responsibilization." It seems to me that morality issues maxims and prescriptions, but the ethical relation is a way of rethinking and remaking sociality itself (DPP.103. JB).

In the historical present characterised by responsibilisation, which Butler describes here in a conversation with Athanasiou, one of Butler's main philosophical projects is to redefine responsibility as responsiveness. Additionally, accountability is not presented as something to be measured or calculated, but as a concept that needs to be rethought as well. According to Thiem, the neoliberal account relies on a traditional ethical account of responsibility which has been predominant in Western thought over the last centuries and evolves around the subject's moral status as well as justifying and evaluating what counts as moral actions (US.4).

This traditional account relies on a particular sense of *time*, which the subject ought to develop. The future, as well as future actions, are to be anticipated in a calculative manner based on past experiences (and the "oughts" that materialise through them). Accordingly, responsibilities are reified, and you are held accountable for them. If you, as a PhD student of philosophy in your thirties, draw attention to the difficulty of making ends meet, the neoliberal account of "responsibility as responsibilisation" would point out that you should have created an Excel-file as a young adult and calculated your future prospects, reaching the conclusion that you should study something implying fewer risk factors and more possibilities than philosophy. Accountability becomes a temporal fusion in which the individual is supposed to acquire knowledge of future prospects even though, as we know, no one knows the future (although we certainly can make some plans). This kind of accountability and responsibility may feel deeply "right" to us,

modern subjects in the West. Disconnecting the past from future actions feels like an extremely irresponsible action. If the subject is not held accountable for her actions on the ground that "she should have known", it seems as if responsibility is out of the question.

However, there is another way to think and conceive of responsibility without getting rid of it, which bears awareness of the uncertainty of future prospects as well as of the fact that not everything can be calculated. Thiem describes this alternative account clearly:

> to argue that I cannot fully know and stand in for what I have done does not mean that the consequences of my actions are no longer relevant. While we can never fully know the effects and especially the hurtful effects that we may have inflicted, we nevertheless remain responsible for our actions (US.137).

As Thiem is pinpointing here, you are not unburdened by responsibility as "you did not know," although this ethical perspective advocates another form of accountability. We are beings of opacity, and based on that condition we try to imagine ethical relations of responsibility. If you have hurt another being you need to be responsive to that fact, at least in the minimal act of acknowledging it.

The primacy of opacity furthermore opens up a wider scale of being responsible; just by living a good life in a bad life, by living in a wealthy country that benefits from an unequal system on a global scale, you are taking part in "hurtful relations". These paradoxes of just conduct in an unjust system lead to an account of responsibility that concerns listening, acknowledging, being humble and responsive about having affected another person, rather than denying it based on a strict sense of calculative premises. This does not mean we should not act, or that we are always already sinful in a Christian manner, but that living ethically is neither pure or categorical but paradoxical, fluid and muddy. We should not punish ourselves or others, but let it be known if we are hurt, and listen to the suffering of others.

This new ethical approach emerges by identifying what traditional liberal notions of responsibility consider a failure. When you are interpellated as the autonomous, sovereign subject who is supposed to be able to anticipate future events in a calculative manner and be responsible accordingly, failure enters the scene as a kind of a deadly sin. This subject is "fully self-transparent and self-aware regarding [its] actions and obligations", as Thiem puts it (US. 137). This is a *failure according to the prevalent ontological framework* that structures our lives through the institutional, administrative and labour system. The understanding of failure is thus at least historically contingent, applicable to our very historical present, and not universal. Although fallibility appears as an essential factor of the emerging ontological account of vulnerability, this account would also place less emphasis on mastering, losing, failing and achieving.

Mills points out that although this new approach to responsibility emerges in relations to others, what one is responsible *for* does not change from the traditional account.[240] This is not a kind of altruistic responsibility in which you become responsible for the other; the responsibility still concerns yourself. But the focus importantly shifts from estimating one's own action, towards responding to the other and understanding him. Relationality is where responsibility takes place, but "it does not cause it as such".[241] As Thiem puts it, responsibility is about responding *well*. Such responsiveness not only concerns the immediate communication we may be participating in right now, but also functions at a more systematic level, to provide a sustainable environment and liveability. However, this issue remains a bit vague in Butler's thought: how are we to leave the framework of calculative anticipation while still anticipating how to sustain the environment in a liveable way? Mills points out that Butler needs to explain the "normative force of precariousness and the political import of precarity".[242] Mills furthermore notes:

[240] Mills, "Undoing Ethics", 52-53.

[241] Ibid, 52.

[242] Ibid, 48.

> [I]t is conceivable that precariousness does give rise to obligation – that the existential condition of our "predestination" to loss, grief and death, as well as our primary entanglement in the lives of others, means that we are always bound to others in a way that can be understood as entailing obligation. But while precariousness may thus give rise to an obligation, it does not determine the shape of that obligation, or tell us what it is.[243]

4.4 How do we become responsive?

The ethics that Butler develops is certainly social and political, however – in line with Mills' suggestion that the form of obligation needs to be outlined – I think more can be done in terms of suggesting ways for this ethics to actualise in concrete politics. This is vital if the assumptive, predominant ontology of liberalism is to be seriously challenged. As Gilson points out, we need to realise in what way we are embedded in relations constructed by liberal ontology in order to find ways to transform the way we *are* conditioned by it. A "Butlerian manner" of responding to this critique would emphasise the possible "oppressive nature" of constructing only one way of realising this ethics on an institutional scale; multiple movements built in the context of every concrete situation would rather be needed. Yet I aver that one can view neoliberalism and capitalism on an increasingly global, structural scale, working within the same universal logic, which has been outlined here in terms of ontology. Thus, one can analyse where within existing social structures (similar) political strategies are needed in order to actualise ethics in this manner, and transition towards an ontology of vulnerabilities.

These strategies would involve collective action; the act of resisting the vertical interpellation and the unequal power relations of the job interview, in favour of horizontal interpellation amongst equals and more collective approaches to livelihood. Yet how this could be executed in a system that individualises the means of attaining livelihood, in which you compete with those around you for job opportunities, is the issue at hand. What is needed is the simultaneous action of risking one's livelihood (and sense of

[243] Ibid.

security, coming to terms with living with certain precarity) and of already acknowledging the relational ontology of vulnerability, in the midst of the subjectivation of liberal ontology. It would also be helpful to build structures of guaranteed livelihood in which being without a job, losing a job, seeking assistance and being sick (in fact, acknowledging vulnerability) is not considered shameful. These support structures would assume that subjects are vulnerable rather than asking them to prove their vulnerability whilst time and again making them responsible and accountable for the ways they are vulnerable, e.g. because they do not take vitamin D daily or because they are overweight.

In line with this analysis, there is ample reason to think that responsibility greatly affects the way we relate to each other and to ourselves. It affects the way we listen to others, and our own feelings and bodily responses (e.g. (unconscious) fat-shaming hinders us from listening to the pains of fat people because we are preconditioned to think they are responsible for their pain). It affects the way we discuss, debate and argue, the extent to which we listen to others, and the extent to which we do everything in our power to *defend* our own positions.

Additionally, and importantly, there are different ways to deal with aching and feeling as a body, or as an "I". You can be socially formed in such a way that you are encouraged to close off into a privatised bodily state. And that is what the idea of the sovereign, autonomous body arguably does; it encourages *closing off*, rather than *opening towards*. If you share a desire for company, or if you share a personal fact, this might be held against you. Therefore, you keep these feelings to yourself even though you may feel the need to express them. This reconfiguring of responsibility essentially encourages and depends on openness to another.

However, there is another, and perhaps more serious, dimension to the problem: whether you *see* the other to begin with. Thiem points out that such openness can always be foreclosed from the start, so that the other does not appear to us at all (US.141). Part of being ethical in this manner is thus to make an attempt to see, perceive and understand socially and politically what you are not seeing at the moment, yet be aware that you will never see

everything (and most importantly, that others need to direct you where you remain blind). A critique that exposes the onto-epistemological framework is essential in order to perceive lives and to see who has been excluded from the normative perception of the "human". In responding well to another, you need to see the other and you need to ask *Who are you?* You need to make sure that "responding well" is based on the other's idea of it, although you always translate it towards your frame of thought in the response.

In *Giving an Account,* Butler speaks of an "ontological difference" that is produced between *the judge* and *the judged* with the help of condemnation, denunciation and excoriation (GAO.46). Relationality is at the heart of when and whether we ought to judge. If we want to apprehend the other we may need to suspend judgement (GAO.44). Condemnation makes the other non-recognisable, as if we shared no commonalities with that person (GAO.46).

Practicing ethics whilst deferring judgment is not an easy practice. We cannot but speak in a "given" context in order to be comprehended, and this adds another level of difficulty. We cannot speak as if we are reflecting upon *the now* from a future-position, in which we have taken all the possibilities in the present into consideration.

> The mode of address conditions and structures the way in which moral questions emerge. The one who makes a claim on me, who asks me, as it were, who I am, what I have done, may well have a singularity and irreplaceability, but he also speaks in a language that is impersonal and that belongs to historically changing horizons of intelligibility (GAO.134).

We always, to some extent, rely on a given morality at the same time as we want to change it. We need to refer to the "logic", "common sense" or "historical rationality" of the given morality, but simultaneously expose the unfairness of this given logic. In the article "Can one lead a good life in a bad life?", this tension between a given morality and an ethical quest is historically situated through Butler's choice to conceptualise *biopolitics* in a Foucauldian way: the

individual question of how to live my life is already bound up with the biopolitical question concerning whose lives matter.[244] "By biopolitics, I mean those powers that organize life, even the powers that differentially dispose lives to precarity",[245] Butler writes. A first-person account of oneself is a way of exposing given "oughts" of society as they have accrued at a certain time and place, not (only) the particularities of that person. Within ethical practice one should, according to Butler, accept the limits of knowability in giving an account of oneself, and thus hold off judgment of that very same account:

> To hold a person accountable for his or her life in narrative form may even be to require a falsification of that life in order to satisfy the criterion of a certain kind of ethics, one that tends to break with relationality (GAO. 63).

Rather than to hold a person accountable based on a coherent narrative, Butler aims at seeking out the ruptures in a narrative; to go against an idea of *accountability* as self-same or identical (with earlier versions of oneself). She is not proposing any kind of "ethics of the self", in which self-preservation is the basis (GAO.103). The aim is to change the fundamental viewpoint; away from the pure "I" towards a sort of a *critical relationality*. Accordingly, we would not straightforwardly accept the relations in which we find ourselves (e.g. that relationality of *not* enquiring into what the other wants) but we would participate in building the relations we desire with others. Responsibility ought to be thought of in relation to our own formation within social life (GAO.136); we are to understand that our thinking is both limited and conditioned by social factors.

At this historical present, responsibility as *responsiveness* thus consists not only in enquiring into who the other is, but also in realising how we have been socially formed to compartmentalise responsibility. Too much credit has been given to the subject's capability to make individual plans whilst having little control over social and environmental forces. For more possibilities to respond well, it is pertinent to examine better the idea of the *other* who the "I"

[244] Butler, "Can one lead a good life in a bad life", 10.

[245] Ibid.

is always already in relations with. There I will next consider Levinas' influences on Butler's work and his emphasis on *the other* in ethical thinking.

4.5 Levinas and the othering of ethics

Butler time and again comments on the difficulty of engaging with Levinas' work given his views on Israel and Palestine. His presentation of the Jewish people as eternally persecuted, his failure to open his eyes to Israel's treatment of the Palestinians and the way he essentially ties his ethics to religion (and the voice of God) may provide enough reasons for many to dismiss his philosophy altogether. Nathan Gies notes that some of Butler's readers felt she was taking a wrong turn by engaging with Levinas' work.[246] Not surprisingly, Butler appears to be somewhat troubled in her engagement with Levinas, fiercely opposing and lamenting some of his philosophical statements concerning the "elective" status of Jews in relation to ethical responsiveness (GAO. 94). Yet I would argue that fundamental parts of her approach to ethics, such as her enquiry into the other and how we are substituted by this relationship, draws upon his works at the same time as she departs from other dimensions, especially the theological side. Levinas has been influential in recent ethical developments; not only the ethical turn in poststructuralist thought, but also as Lloyd points out, Levinas' "non-violent ethics has been particularly influential in feminist ethics".[247] The way *the other* and her ethical demand makes claims upon us via her fragile and vulnerable being highly influences Butler's ethical and ontological account. Furthermore, the way Levinas radically changes our perspective on responsibility is at the basis of Butler's theorisation of the same subject. As Levinas claims in *Otherwise than Being*:

[246] Nathan Gies, "Signifying Otherwise: Liveability and Language", *Butler and Ethics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2015, 15.

[247] Lloyd, *Butler: From Norms to Politics*,137.

> But the relationship with a past that is on the hither side of every present and evey re-presentable, for not belonging to the order of presence, is included in the extraordinary and everyday event of my responsibility for the faults or the misfortunes of others...The responsibility for the other can not have begun in my commitment, in my decision. The unlimited responsibility in which I find myself comes from the hither side of my freedom, from a "prior to every memory," an "ulterior to every accomplishment," from the non-present par excellence, the non-original, the anarchical, prior to or beyond essence.[248]

What is apparent here is that temporality is of great concern to Levinas when it comes to everyday situations of responsibility. Because we are always already born into a system that precedes us (in ways we cannot give account of), we are always already in an ethical situation of responsibility. When we begin the journey of making sense of ourselves, to give an account of ourselves, we have always already been impinged by others. Butler's notion of the subject as an entity who is unwillingly addressed is clearly influenced by the work of Levinas (although Levinas did not engage with primary dependency).

But in what way do we conceive of the other? According to his analysis, one is *persecuted* or *accused* by the other. The meaning of persecution in Levinas' thought differs from the conventional meaning as Butler notes:

> [P]ersecution is precisely what happens *without the warrant of any deed of my own.* And it returns us not to our acts and choices but to the region of existence that is radically unwilled, the primary, inaugurating impingement on me by the Other (GAO. 85).

It is this unwilled address of the other that makes the ethical demand upon me: in a sense "I" am responsible for those that persecute me. This is a difficult thought to comprehehend. One might make the assumption that responsibilitisation of a neoliberal kind is taking place, i.e. that the fact that I am persecuted means that it is, for some reason, *my fault*. But as Butler notes, this is not at all what is at issue here, because Levinas separates the claim of

[248] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being: Or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonson Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2016), 10.

responsibility from the possibility of agency (GAO.85). Accordingly, persecution precedes any notion of a will or a choice.

> This formation takes place, in his words, "outside of being [*essence*]." Indeed, the sphere in which the subject is said to emerge is "preontological" in the sense that the phenomenal world of persons and things becomes available only after a self has been formed as an effect of a primary impingement. We cannot ask after the "where" or "when" of this primary scene, since it precedes and even conditions the spatio-temporal coordinates that circumscribe the ontological domain (GAO.85-86).

Before there is a being, there is the impingement of the other; an ethical demand which will shape how I am and will be formed as a subject. But in line with Butler's argument, which has been traced in this dissertation, it is not a simple matter to distinguish between the preontological and the ontological. The others who address me are always already ontologised; what they bring upon me in relations is a socially formed ontology. Butler exposes this confusion with the example of the Jewish people as the eternally persecuted.

> [T]he Jew becomes the model and instance for preontological persecution. The problem, of course, is that "the Jew" is a category that belongs to a culturally constituted ontology ...and so if the Jew maintains an "elective" status in relation to ethical responsiveness, then Levinas fully confuses the preontological and the ontological. The Jew is not part of ontology or history, and yet this exemption becomes the way in which Levinas makes claims about the role of Israel, historically considered, as forever and exclusively persecuted (GAO.94).

Butler condemns the way Israel is presented as the land of the eternally persecuted people, which by definition cannot itself be persecutory, at the same time as the systematic displacement of Palestinians by Israel is taking place. This example exposes the faultiness of such a preontological categorisation; people are always culturally situated.

Although one is always already situated in ethical encounters before the forming of the subject takes place, that does not mean that this ethical encounter precedes the normative framework of a given society. Interestingly, childhood is not a factor in Levinas'

ethical perspective, and, as Butler points out, “is given no diachronic exposition; the condition is, rather, understood as synchronic and infinitely recurring” (GAO.90). Thus, the preontological is always “there”; it is as if the moment of the ethical relation of being acted upon by the other brings me into being at the very moment of the relation, and this happens repeatedly.

Levinas speaks of this way of being as a sort of primal *passivity*; the condition of being addressed and acted upon unwillingly forms a passivity that precedes passivity in the everyday use of the word (as opposed to activity). “What cross-cuts this field of ontology synchronically is the preontological condition of a passivity for which no conversion into its opposite is possible” (GAO. 87). This is related to another “unwilled” issue; namely the unwilled susceptibility to others, the fact that you cannot really close off and not sense the other (if the other is seen as a face to begin with). This is the basis of responsibility for Levinas: “this susceptibility designates a nonfreedom and, paradoxically, it is on the basis of this susceptibility over which we have no choice that we become responsible for others” (GAO. 88). We cannot will away the demand the other makes upon us; we are not “free” to choose our own actions that we are then responsible for. We become responsible as the other makes a claim upon us by acting upon us and persecuting us. I am, in fact, *substituted* by the other, I am “beset by an Other, an alterity, from the start” (GAO. 88). I am driven by something which is not "me" (GAO.89) as if, by the fact of my relations with the other, *something* beyond my choice or control is pulled out of me. This primary impingement is, according to Butler reading Levinas, always already an ethical interpellation (GAO.89).

The relational ontology of vulnerability comes across clearly here, as I *am* the other by being substituted by her. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that this dyadic encounter is a concrete and singular experience and the face of the other is irreplaceable (GAO. 91). This other, who addresses me, acts upon me and persecutes me, simultaneously fills me with outrage, and I am tempted to hurt her and even to murder her. Yet, as her fragility and vulnerability is always already exposed by simply being in

relations, her f*ace* is subsequently humanised and an ethical responsibility arises on my behalf. Even as she injures me, this responsibility calls upon me and demands that I do not answer that violence with violence. This perspective on responsibility is hence one of asymmetrical relation and an ethics of non-violence. As Butler furthermore notes, in her 2012 book *Parting Ways*,[249] the ontology at the basis of this ethics is essentially relational. Rather than offering an "intersubjective" ontology in which a clearly demarcated "autonomous" self and an "autonomous" other are in relation, the other is always already (part of) me. Butler writes:

> I want to suggest that the Levinasian "interruption" by the other, the way in which the ontology of the self is constituted on the basis of the prior eruption of the other at the heart of myself, implies a critique of the autonomous subject and the version of multiculturalism that assumes cultures as constituted autonomous domains whose task it is to establish dialogue with other cultures.[250]

This paragraph clearly shows how Butler draws on Levinas' works in order to affirm her own ontological stance that has relationality and vulnerability at its heart. Furthermore, we see how she considers this a critique and a response to the autonomous subject of liberalism which compartmentalises "distinct cultures". Just as we cannot speak of clearly demarcated selves according to Butler's relational ontology, we cannot speak of clearly demarcated cultures.

We respond to a face, to a meaning that we read into the body of another being. What it is that we are responding to – and this is an important point that Butler takes up from Levinas and makes explicit in *Precarious* Life– is the extreme precariousness of the other (PL.134).[251] Through this experience, we understand the

[249] Butler, Judith, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

[250] Butler, *Parting Ways*, 38.

[251] Levinas, Emmanuel, "Peace and Proximity," *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Bernasconi, Robert, Critchley, Simon, Peperzak, Adriaan T. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996),167.

precariousness of life itself (PL.134), which is, according to Butler, an ethical understanding that makes "the face belong to the sphere of ethics" (PL.134). It is the precariousness of the other that triggers such a response, rather than realising one's one precariousness. In terms of thinking about the relationship between precariousness and violence, Levinas does not deny difficult feelings and emotions. "He gives us a way of understanding how aggression is *not* eradicated in an ethics of non-violence; aggression forms the incessant matter for ethical struggles" (PL. xviii).

In terms of violence and suffering, Butler is not only concerned with how we are to respond to the suffering we notice around us, but also with the violence and suffering that we do not see, which are not recognised by any kind of system and remain opaque. If this suffering is to be seen, it is important to open up to the other, to ask *Who are you?* In her analysis of the notion of the face in Levinas, Butler time and again wonders about all the faces we do not perceive as a face; the ones that simply do not appear as human others to us. Not all images of the human make an ethical demand on us, because the way we perceive of the expressions of others differs according to context and culture.

Butler analysis of Levinas' work thus underlines how *relationality* is at the heart of Butler's ethics: through my relations with *you* I perceive the ways I am always already in ethical relations. The way I act and the way I respond matters. This brings the analysis to the context of the social and the political; perceiving an other assumes a dyadic encounter but there are, of course, more others in the world. There is always a third party in the world and, as Thiem notes, there is never only one other that makes a call upon me (US.131). According to Levinas, this is how justice emerges. One is always amongst many others, encountering plural others. In order to articulate the relations between ethics and politics, we must now examine one of the major issues of both fields, namely violence and how to prevent it. As I read Butler's relational ontology of vulnerability, understanding the vulnerability of our emotional life is fundamental to both decreasing and preventing violence. Yet, as will be examined in the next chapter, the social formation of modern, Western societies does not encourage the acceptance of vulnerable

states; everything that is considered a "weakness" is not proper to the invulnerable subject we need to be in order to acquire livelihood.

4.6 Vulnerable emotions and violence

The other appears to us as a fragile, vulnerable being even whilst he violates us, according to the Levinasian ethical framework. We have an obligation not to return violence; responding with violence would mean not responding well. But what does that really mean? How do we define violence? Butler proposes a non-violent ethics at the same time as she insists on seeing our subject formation as, to some extent, *violent*, since we are always unwillingly acted upon by another.

Defining violence is instrumental to Butler's thought, but the first premises for such a definition would always place an emphasis on the relational, would always enquire into our relations with the other, relations that are necessarily always asymmetrical in some way.

Furthermore, according to this framework, violence must be viewed in the social and historical context in which it takes place. When responsibility is redefined as responsiveness, the "I" needs to enter into a conversation with the "you" in each and every context in order to formulate the meaning of violence. If one wonders about who the other is, one is not deciding beforehand what would be a universally ideal action in given circumstances, for each member of a particular society. One is not determining the meaning of violence once and for all, but rather focusing on being responsive to what others consider to be violent. One would be enquiring into the particular needs of the other at this particular moment. Instead of *controlling* or prescribing what the other needs, one would simply try to respond to the needs of the other. As Butler writes:

> Violence is neither a just punishment we suffer nor a just revenge for what we suffer. It delineates a physical vulnerability from which we cannot slip away, which we cannot finally resolve in the name of the subject, but which can provide a way to understand that none of us is fully bounded, utterly separate, but, rather, we are in our skins, given over, in each other's hands, at each other's mercy. This is a situation we do not choose. It forms the horizon of choice, and it grounds our responsibility (GAO. 101).

We cannot choose to be invulnerable; there will always be *a possibility* of violence or being hurt. This possibility conditions what we can choose and in what way we relate to each other. "Violence and non-violence are not only strategies or tactics, but form the subject and become its constitutive possibilities and so, an ongoing struggle" (FW.165).

It is also possible that we ourselves will violate others. This is perhaps where Butler would reject an idealistic ethics aimed at terminating all violence. Rather, she would ask: if it is the case that violence is inflicted in the world, how are we to manage it? The main way of managing violence in different societies is *punishment*. Nietzsche famously wondered, as Thiem recalls, "how the notion of justice was instituted as the justification and rationale that endow pain and the pleasure of vengeance with moral worth" (US.64). Butler believes that Nietzsche restricts his notion of accountability to the juridical notion, being unable to imagine other scenes of accountability (GAO.15). According to this account, the way the subject develops a self-reflective attitude is by turning her own aggression inwards in the name of morality (by the enforcement of the institution of law), and therefore developing a guilty conscience. Butler self-critically remarks in *Giving an Account* that she too quickly accepted this "punitive scene of the inauguration of the subject" in *Psychic Life of Power* (GAO. 15). This sets the tone of the book as Butler, so to speak, turns away from Nietzsche's emphasis on moral systems as based on violence, towards that of the later work of Foucault and his project of rethinking the sphere of ethics, which started in the early 1980's. To quote Butler:

> For Foucault, morality is inventive, requires inventiveness, and even, as we shall consider later, comes at a certain price. However, the "I" engendered by morality is not conceived as a self-berating psychic agency. From the outset, what relation the self will take to itself, how it will craft itself in response to an injunction, how it will form itself, and what labor it will perform upon itself is a challenge, if not an open question (GAO.18).

In accordance with this, Butler examines how desires, feelings and affects are formed through society and culture, which encourage some emotional tendencies whilst discouraging others. However, in

line with Nietzsche's reflections on memories of difficult emotions,[252] as well as with Levinas' acknowledgement of the intensiveness of emotional life, Butler does not propose that we do away with or repress difficult emotions that are a part of the psychic life. In this context, she makes a clear distinction between violence on the one hand and *aggression* on the other hand. At the core of articulating violence is accepting that the psychic life of emotions and feelings is not always pleasant nor in a state of equilibrium, but capable of actualising itself as violence. In *Frames of War,* Butler discusses how both Hegel and Freud show that the repression of difficult feelings, such as destructiveness does not necessarily lead to their obliteration but rather finds another direction or venue for these feelings (FW.48-49). Thiem points out that the way we approach emotional life is fundamental for the ethics we build. This raises questions about the extent to which we are accountable for our attachments and desires. If we are not in control of them, if we cannot easily change them, can we really answer for them? This does not mean that Butler or Thiem are proposing that people should give in to difficult and harmful emotions. The aim is rather to acknowledge that difficult feelings are a part of psychic life.

> It would further follow that the only other alternative is to find ways of crafting and checking destructiveness, giving it a liveable form, which would be a way of affirming its continuing existence and assuming responsibility for the social and political forms in which it emerges. (FW.48-49).

The subject required by the job interview is not one that is encouraged to face the vulnerability of having sets of difficult emotions within one's psyche. Rather, this subject is encouraged to repress or deny experiencing these emotional states. By giving vulnerable, intensive emotions space in her ontology, Butler accepts them rather than trying to erase them or reason them away. Aggression is part of life; it is not necessarily the same as violence, but it can become violence. Not only should we accept aggression, we should realise how it could prove to be affirmative and useful in

[252] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Geneology of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007).

politics in its antagonistic form, such as in civil disobedience, revolts or just heated debates (FW.48). We should acknowledge it, but Butler cautions against changing aggression into a virtue:

> It is crucial to distinguish between (a) that injured and rageful subject who gives moral legitimacy to rageful and injurious conduct, thus transmuting aggression into virtue, and (b) that injured and rageful subject who nevertheless seeks to limit the injury that she or he causes, and can do so only through an active struggle with and against aggression (FW.172).

We may very well be "justified" in being injured and rageful subjects after having experienced violence and suffering. Whether or not we will sustain the aggression so that it results in violence is another matter. The injured subject himself can also inflict violence on others whilst he sustains his aggression and rage. Non-violent ethics emerges "from an understanding of the possibilities of one's own violent actions in relation to those lives to which one is bound, including those whom one never chose and never knew, and so those whose relation to me precedes the stipulations of contract" (FW.179). Thus, non-violence does not necessarily mean a "peaceful English countryside" kind of life, but an acknowledgement of one's own psychic life and a willingness to deal with it. This entails being able to gain some distance from one's own difficult emotions instead of being totally under their sway, and deferring emotional judgment, so to speak, until one has reflected upon the situation at hand.

> If violence is the act by which a subject seeks to reinstall its mastery and unity, then nonviolence may well follow from living the persistent challenge to egoic mastery that our obligations to others induce and require. This failure to narrate fully may well indicate the way in which we are, from the start, ethically implicated in the lives of others (GAO 64).

According to this passage, violence is directly connected to acting on a *desire* for mastery and unity. It would be easy to interpret this as claiming that violence is solely the result of fully conscious acts of re-establishing mastery. Upon closer investigation, however, such an interpretation can be questioned. The subject might not be

fully conscious of seeking such mastery. Perhaps it represents exactly the opposite: an unconscious desire for a wholeness (via mastery) or a sense of purpose through identity. And this desire can very well be the result of a very specific subject formation, particular to our own historical epoch; the one I argue Butler is responding to by developing a relational ontology of vulnerability via her turn to ethics.

In any case, if, at any moment, we get a sense of wholeness, a sort of "me"-perfection, that moment soon passes, as other people enter the scene and accidentally dethrone "the perfect me-being" by just being, interacting, asking, tearing down my perfect little world where I am the centre. Non-violence does not offer a sense of “perfect-me” nor some balanced, meditative version of ourselves “yogi-style”, but rather encourages us to challenge our actions, our sense of self, and our immediate emotional responses. As Thiem notes, Butler argues that neither nonviolence nor social justice “need to be considered as a norm in order to oppose violence." (US.250). Indeed, establishing general principles regarding how to deal with violence is questionable, and in fact exposes the difficulty of establishing general principles to begin with, as can be seen in the following words from Thiem:

> For example, a rigorous pacifism and denunciation of all use of violence pose the problems of nonintervention, considering how refusing to intervene might aid the exacerbation of violence. At the same time, settling firm principles by which to determine what counts as justified violence and what is a “just war” is equally problematic, because such an endeavor presupposes that different kinds of violence can be compared and that some can be justified, so that certain violent effects can be considered morally acceptable (US. 229).

Accordingly, the way we deal with and decrease violent acts depends on the concrete situation we find ourselves in rather than a set of general principles. We need to be responsive, enquire into what the other wants and what he considers to be violent. At the same time, through grieving the violent deaths of others we feel that violence to another is violence to ourselves. Butler points out that “without the capacity to mourn, we lose that keener sense of life we

need in order to oppose violence" (PL. xviii-xix). In this context, one of her main questions revolves around whose lives are grievable. Gilson points out that if one refrains from getting over grief too quickly (as one probably desires), if one tarries with grief, one can realise the extent to which we not only share lives with each other but how our being is relational.[253]

The public dimension of grieving is of particular importance, because asking whose lives are grievable could also translate into the question: who is being violated without our seeing it? The ones that are most vulnerable in present-day societies are the ones who do not belong to any frame or any discourse, those lives that are not fully seen as lives. Acknowledgement of their existence and hence of their vulnerabilities is vital in order to oppose violence.

4.7 Vulnerability as an ethical possibility

Vulnerability stands in direct contrast to a desire for mastery (of ourselves and others) and an idea of the self-coherent self. If we are not fully self-coherent, we are not the kind of beings that can or should remain the same at all time. The *failure* lies in being ever-changing and multi-dimensional, and thus not able to cohere to a logical or linear narrative. This failure "gives rise to another ethical disposition" (GAO. 40). In this context, Butler problematises the Hegelian "mirroring" that entails that the other is like me and that the other recognises that I am like him/her. If one affirms what is incoherent and contingent in oneself, one may also mirror the other in difference, not only in similarities (GAO.41). If one acknowledges that one is incoherent and that one's (un)conscious views of the world are subject to change, and that what one *wills* and *longs for* may be different in the future, one also sees that what the other desires can be different from one's own desire.

This idea of vulnerability, in fact, opposes the ethical code of the Golden Rule, (which is also called the law of reciprocity), which can be found in some form in most major religions; that you should treat others as you want others to treat you. Although this imperative or code certainly shares a particular *relational ethics* with Butler's

[253] Gilson, *Ethics of Vulnerability*, 55.

ethics, and feminist ethics more generally, it can be argued that it involves a certain attitude of epistemic paternalism, of *knowing better* what is best for the other: namely what is best for you. This attitude can reign despite overwhelming evidence that the other requires something completely different, as you would find out if you were responsive towards the other, and asked the question *Who are you?*

It is important to dwell further on the connection between the opaque side of ourselves and the way we are always bound to each other, the way we are ontologically interrelated, in order to better capture the simultaneous relational and vulnerable aspect of the ontology at hand.

What first conditions the process of our particular subjectivation is the primary dependency of our first moments, resulting in the opacity that comes to shape us, and stay with us, ever produced anew. The life that we are starts inside the womb of a mother, wholly surrounded by that life, to the extent that it is difficult to speak of a separation in that context.[254] In some sense, there are no boundaries. During this time of our lives, which none of us remembers, we are born into the world and this certainly introduces *some* boundaries between us and the mother's body. But we continue to be taken care of in the hands of parents and care-givers, the needs of our bodies becoming the most important needs of their lives, and we learn to live tightly connected to them. On this basis of these ties as well as the notions of opacity and fallibility, Butler establishes her *relational* ethics that gives rise to wonder concerning the experiences of the other and even frustration when we do not understand the actions of the other. It is ethics because it asks about the *possibilities* of another ontological horizon, the possibilities of different ways of being, and interactions with each other. According to Butler possibilities are as crucial as bread to our bodies and they should not be seen as a luxury (UG.29).

[254] Butler, interestingly, hardly ever uses the word “mother”.

> Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home. (UG.29)

Ethics as such always embodies a fantasy in the form of a powerful force that "moves us beyond what is merely actual and present into a realm of possibility, the not yet actualized or the not actualizable" (UG.28). As Lloyd suggests, we need to be open to possibilities in order to see the ways the other is vulnerable, and it is through such circumstances that ethical responsibility can arise.[255] Ethics is the practice of opening up other dimensions and other worlds. Ontological vulnerability is "more open" to ethical practices than the forms of (social) ontologies that answer once and for all what both being and the human is. But how are we to proceed from the present to the future that we want to actualise?

> The point is not to institute new forms of intelligibility that become the basis of self-recognition. But neither is the point to celebrate unintelligibility as its own goal. The point, rather, is to move forward awkwardly, with others, in a movement that demands both courage and critical practices, a form of relating to norms and to others that does not "settle" into new regime (DPP.68. JB).

Self-knowledge, like any other quest for knowledge, is an explorative journey full of experiments that may fail, slow us down or fill us up with fatigue. But through an acknowledgement of our own opacity as well as the opacity of the other, the possibility of greater understanding is enhanced. What interests me here is the emphasis on constant movement – that the point is not to produce ethics which should remain universally right or *true* for every possible situation. Critique should remind us that we live in an ever-changing time continuum, and our present has a *specific* historical basis influencing and conditioning our thinking and our possibilities for the future. When a particular future has arrived, these conditions have also changed. Thus, we are not *waiting* for that particular future to settle in, for a particular form of intelligibility; rather, we are using our

[255] Lloyd, *Butler: From Norms to Politics*,144.

fantasies concerning the future to direct us to another set of conditions (hoping for the best).

I began this chapter by looking at the relationship between *failure* and *fallibility*. Although the latter is certainly part of being vulnerable, I argued against characterising Butler's ethics in this manner, as the "resignification of failure" is also importantly a response to the prevalent form of liberal ontology of the subject. The *scene of address* is vital in comprehending Butler's ethics as it places emphasis on ontological relationality, and furthermore, shows the influence of Levinas on Butler's philosophy, especially in terms of the notion of unwilled susceptibility towards the other.

When we are addressed whilst simultaneously addressing others, the way we *respond* is of the utmost importance for ethical practice. It is indeed in relation to the manner of *response* that Butler locates responsibility and redefines (or dismisses) traditional ethical concepts such as the notion of judgment and moral calculation. It is via our relation to the personal *other* that ethical encounters take place but yet, one cannot fully separate ethics from politics; in a sense, we are responsible to multiple others that cohabit with us. Accordingly, defining *violence* is a complex enterprise, but one of the utmost importance, both in terms of finding ways to decrease and prevent violence but also in acknowledging that via difficult emotions such as aggression, we ourselves can cause violence. Throughout the chapter, I have furthermore shed light on how Butler's ethical account responds to the subject-ideal of *the invulnerable subject* or *possessive individual,* and how traditional accounts of ethics reify the concept of responsibility, viewing it as an attribute one can (in a calculative manner) give or take, rather than seeing responsibility as part of being responsive in relations.

Accordingly, I think it is important to note the *historical aspect* of emphasising vulnerability and to see it as a *responsive* process responding to the liberal ontology of the possessive individual. I think that the growing emphasis on vulnerability in theoretical discourses implies a great desire for a reconfiguration of our ontological landscape and subsequently of our ethical practice. However, we need to understand why we continue to appear as the invulnerable

subject to maintain our livelihood, as can be seen in the example of the job interview. Butler's account of vulnerability and precariousness has multiple dimensions and has developed over time; the different accounts, therefore, are sometimes at odds with each other. But a common theme is seeing vulnerability as an ontological condition of our existence, one that is always already political, exposing the unequal distribution of vulnerability in the world.[256] This account is intricately intertwined with ideas of equality and with ways of "producing and naturalizing forms of social inequality".[257] This relational ontological account of vulnerability has great potential with regard to transforming society but, as I will argue in the next chapter, it needs to be more thoroughly situated in concrete social contexts in order to locate political strategies that will realise this philosophy.

[256] Butler, "Can one lead a good life in a bad life",15.

[257] Ibid.

5 Vulnerability and the job interview

> Common presumptions about vulnerability are reductively negative in two ways: first, they constitute an implicit understanding of vulnerability that equates it with liability to injury, weakness, dependency, powerlessness, incapacity, deficiency, and passivity; second, these assumptions also often devalue vulnerability, deeming it a condition or quality that is bad. Vulnerability is understood in a reductively negative way both by definition and in terms of its value.[258]

As can be gathered from this opening quotation, Gilson argues that a negative definition of vulnerability is prevalent in most public discourses.[259] This understanding of vulnerability tends to function as an un-interrogated background assumption, not only in theoretical discourses, but more generally in public debates. In this way, vulnerability is overdetermined to the extent that it is construed as a generalisable weakness. At the same time, new forms of discourses can be detected which respond to this "background assumption" of vulnerability as negative. The 2013 TED talk by Brené Brown, "The power of vulnerability", is a good example of these new forms of discourses inasmuch as it offers a positive re-evaluation of vulnerability.[260]

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[258] Gilson, *Ethics of Vulnerability*, 5.

[259] Ibid.

[260] Brown encourages people to come to terms with feeling exposed and vulnerable rather than seeking to be and appear perfect. This shines through both in her TED talk and in her book *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent and Lead*. She recommends viewing vulnerability as a strength rather than a weakness. Brown's talk is one of the most popular TED talks, and her book has appeared on various best-seller lists. The popularity of her work indicates that people somehow relate to what Brown is proposing; that it is difficult to openly appear to be vulnerable. Brown, however, does not enquire into the reason why people seek to appear perfect and invulnerable whilst covering up all possible vulnerabilities that they might have. Brené Brown, "The Power of Vulnerability", *TED: Ideas Worth Spreading*, https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability, retrieved 09.08.2017, Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent and Lead*, UK/USA: Penguin 2012.

As I have argued throughout this dissertation, I do not think that redefining vulnerability as a strength would help us surpass the liberal paradigm. Rather, serving as an ideal, vulnerability would become a new attractive property or trait an individual can perform in order to "win the competition" of the most suitable worker. However, the positive re-evaluation of vulnerability in popular discourse as indicated by the Brown lecture is a sign that times are changing. This re-evaluation might contribute to the death of the invulnerable subject in the sense of the possessive, sovereign individual.

This is the concluding chapter of the dissertation, in which I will dig deeper into Butler's conception of vulnerability and show how it can be read as a part of a bigger wave of response to the hyper-individuality of neoliberalist conceptions of the subject. I argue that the reason for this recent concentration on vulnerability (which I read here from the perspective of ontology) is political in a historical way, and is linked to the “inhuman” consequences of the idea of the invulnerable, sovereign subject, both in terms of how it affects people's psyches and the way it was built into the political structure.[261]

The seeds of a relational ontology of vulnerability have certainly been planted in countless different places (and discourses).[262] As such, the very idea of a relational ontology of vulnerability serves as a refusal and resistance to being subjected to the liberal ontology, even if it is the case that this idea is merely limited to theoretical discourses. Yet, more organised actions as well as political strategies are needed for this form of ontology to become prevalent. It is still the case that people need to appear invulnerable in the job interview. This is the reality people face –perhaps now more than ever, since increased precarisation resulting from the recent austerity politics of many Western countries after the 2008 recession

[261] By "inhuman" I am not implying a "once and for all" definition of the human. Rather, my aim is to emphasise the impossibility people experience in relation to their own lives, e.g. the impossibility of a viable future.

[262] In this context, it is also important to bear in mind that a prevalent social ontology is never totalising, there are always many ideas and even ontologies at play as well as endless implicit perceptions we have of this world.

has dismantled the systems of supports which were developed in the (latter part of the) 20th century.[263]

I begin this chapter by introducing the interdisciplinary discourse of vulnerability that is emerging both in the Anglophone world and on the continent of Europe. Secondly, I analyse Butler's approach to vulnerability and show that she is developing a relational ontology of vulnerability (this section, of course, echoes some of the aspects that were thoroughly discussed in the third chapter in relation to ontology). Thirdly, I will examine the distinction Butler makes between precariousness and precarity, which are the concepts she uses to denote shared and situated vulnerability. Subsequently, I will look at how this analysis relates to the emerging political movement of the "precarious" and to ideas about precarisation, especially in relation to Lorey's *State of Injury*. Next, I will contemplate why the discourse of vulnerability is currently

[263] In a 2016 study for the European Parliament (the Employment and Social Affairs Committee) the increased risk of precariousness in Europe, due to the financial cirsis and its aftermath, is explained: "As employers and employees find themselves operating in a more competitive and uncertain context post-crisis, new hirings have increasingly taken place on the basis of temporary and marginal part-time contracts. Jobseekers have accepted these contracts, as the alternative would be continued unemployment." Full-time permanent contracts are still the main type of employment relationship in the EU with 59% of the share of employment, but this number is on the decline, as it was 62% in 2003. Arguably full-time contracts are becoming the minority form, as is the case with the contract-types on offer for younger people. If this trend of non-standard forms of work continues, the study concludes that the risk of precariousness will increase. Another factor that increases this risk is that "the majority of workers' rights and protection in the EU have been built around standard contracts. Andrea Broughton, Martha Green, Catherine Rickard, Sam Swift, Werner Eichhorst, et. al., "Precarious Employment in Europe: Patterns, Trends and Policy Strategies", *Directorate General for Internal Policies – Policy Department A: Economic and Scientific Policy*, (May, 2016), 10-13. It is furthermore important to consider Breitt Neilson's and Ned Rossiter's idea that precarity has in fact been the norm within the capitalist mode of production and the welfare-period of the twentieth century, and the period of welfare which goes by the name Fordism was an exeption from this norm within capitalism. The period of stable welfare regime was only from the 1940's until the end of the 1960's according to Neilson and Rossiter, when Fordism goes into an irreversible crisis and the stability of welfare is on the decline. Published in 2008, Neilson and Rossiter doubt that precarity will remain a critical tool in order to present a systematic social analysis as it appears to them at the time that this momentum is already over. However in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis the discourse of precarity is far from being dead and seems to serve to analyse and critique diverse kinds of twenty-first century capitalism and even changing work-and employment conditions. Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter, "Precarity as a Political Concept, or, Fordism ans Exception", *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol.25(7-8) (2008), 51-72.

gaining momentum, and I will emphasise the importance of viewing such discourses historically. In this context, I will examine the importance of historicising Butler's own philosophy, and how she has been criticised for an abstract presentation of her conceptual framework whilst adhering to historicity. Following that analysis, I ask why it seems to be so difficult to appear vulnerable in this historical present, both generally in interpersonal relations, and in the paradigmatic example of the job interview.

In order to answer this question, I analyse a discrepancy between “true” or “authentic” emotions, which are constructed within us, according to the ontological landscape of liberalism, and, on the other hand, the way we need to perform emotions other than those that feel authentic to us in order to appear as attractive and able workers. We need to appear invulnerable, or manage our vulnerabilities so that our emotional performance is deemed attractive and “human” in the right way.

Based on this analysis, I argue that the transition away from the liberal ontology of the possessive individual, who stores all his vulnerabilities in the hidden figure of *femina domestica*, will not take place unless we build our struggles around collectively assuring our means of subsistence, and hence rejecting the interpellation of the job interview. You cannot “come out” with the particular vulnerability of being chronically ill in the job interview if you desperately need to support yourself and others. By taking the example of the very particular vulnerability of being chronically ill yet needing to acquire a job, I am not saying that chronically ill people should essentially be part of the work-force, nor that they cannot work. The aim should be to build a system where each could work and produce according to her abilities and each would acquire the means according to his needs.[264] The question is, will we continue to perform as the “invulnerable subject”, trying to survive in this system of increased

[264] Workplaces with highly-skilled people as employees (especially "white-collar" jobs) often offer the flexibility that people with different kinds of chronic illnesses need in order to go on with her work. This flexibility is far from the norm for work-places, especially for unskilled workers. Thus, as of now in 2018, flexibility does not solve the structural problem, which is exemplified in the fact that people do not take the chance to appear vulnerable.

precarisation or will we demand otherwise to assure our liveability collectively?

5.1 The emerging discourse on vulnerability

Analysing vulnerability has been gaining momentum within various theoretical discourses, such as international relations and philosophy. A common Anglophone starting point is Goodin's book *Protecting the Vulnerable: A Reanalysis of our Social Responsibilities* (1985). Goodin claims that we have an ethical responsibility to those around us who are vulnerable. Gilson notes that Goodin's ideas remain within the negative conception of vulnerability as he places himself and the reader in the position of a "normal" person devoid of vulnerability, and places emphasis on "normal" people having an ethical obligation towards those less fortunate to help the latter out of their precarious circumstances.[265] Care ethicists such as Eva Feder Kittay have critically engaged with Goodin's account in order to provide a more nuanced analysis of vulnerability, disability and dependency.[266]

In continental Europe –more precisely, in the French-speaking world –a discourse of vulnerability is greatly influenced by the thought of Robert Castel, who analyses vulnerability in relation to the historical transformation of social structures in the West during the last few centuries.[267] The aim of his analysis is to reflect on the development of "mass vulnerability," consisting not only in the insecurity of being a wage labourer without other means of subsistence, but also in the development of unstable relations of integration and support, which has been established as the norm in Western societies. Castel is at pains to produce a language of "processes" rather than "states" and believes that conceptualising vulnerability and insecurity rather than poverty and marginality

[265] Gilson, *Ethics of Vulnerability*, 30.

[266] Kittay, *Love's Labor*, 55.

[267] Robert Castel, *From Manual Workers to Wage Labourers: Transformation of the Social Question* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2014), Ferrarese, Estelle, "Introduction – Vulnerability: A Concept iwth Which to Undo the World as It IS?", *Critical Horizons*, Vol 17 No.2, May, 2016, 149.

serves that aim.[268] Lorey believes that the extent of the process of precarisation is far greater than Castel anticipated, as it has become the norm in Western societies of the twenty-first century.[269]

Perhaps one can say that Goodin and Castel, although belonging to different contexts, mark the birth of a certain discourse, although the influence of Levinas and the ethical approach of Alasdair McIntyre cannot be overlooked.[270] The legal scholar Martha Albertson Fineman has furthermore been very influential in establishing the discourse on vulnerability, proposing that the vulnerable subject replaces the liberal subject assumed in the juridical systems of modern states.[271] Another legal scholar, Jonathan Herring, has made a similar argument to Fineman's concerning the Western approach to health. Background assumptions that frame healthy people as autonomous, self-sufficient and contained are inherent in academic debates concerning health, according to Herring, against which he proposes a definition of the human as vulnerable, interdependent and caring.[272] These works are highly interesting and cast a critical light on different academic disciplines, but in my opinion Butler's account of vulnerability read as an relational ontology offers a transdisciplinary approach, with an historic resonance, which better captures the complexity of being.

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[268] Ibid, 150.

[269] Lorey, *State of Insecurity*, 60: “Castel is not wholly wrong in his view of precarity and precarization as eating their way into the entire society like a highly contagious virus that can lead to tumult. The reasons for the inflammatory viral infection, however, are no longer to be found (only) in the unreasonable political and economic impositions to which the marginalized are subject, but consist rather in the normalization of precarization throughout the whole of society, and which therefore require responses other than an increase in integration. There is no longer a centre or a middle that could be imagined as a society stable enough to take in those pushed to the margins”.

[270] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicaco: Open Court Press, 1999).

[271] Martha Albertson Fineman, "The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring Equality in the Human Condition", *Yale Journal of Law & Feminism* vol. 20,iss. 1, article 2 (2008). http://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1277&context=yjlf, retrieved 30.03.2018.

[272] Jonathan Herring, "Health as Vulnerability; Interdependency and Relationality", *The New Bioethics* vol. 22, No. 1, (2016), 18-32.

5.2 Butler and vulnerability

What distinguishes Butler's account from the dominant negative understanding of vulnerability consists in the ontological approach: vulnerability is a state of being open towards the world, and hence it is neither understood negatively nor positively (but sometimes both). Vulnerability describes a certain way of being affected and affecting others in multiple ways, some negative, some positive, some both or neither.[273] The prevalent understanding of vulnerability sees it as a condition that limits us, but it can also be a condition that enables us.

Butler does not systematically analyse vulnerability and precariousness before the publication of *Precarious Life* and *Giving an Account of Oneself*. She does not approach vulnerability as a distinctive feature that can easily be separated from the transdisciplinary approach of her philosophy. Vulnerability cannot be thought of without its relation to the psychic, political, social and the ethical. The emphasis on opacity furthermore characterises her approach, not only through the awareness that we can never be invulnerable in terms of knowledge or rationality, but also by revealing how this form of epistemic vulnerability opens up an alternative way of relating ethically to each other. It is through our "failure" to master our own narrative that the possibility of being responsive to others opens up, of asking *who are you?* leading to a redefinition of responsibility and accountability. But there are other dimensions to consider in order to trace the interrelationship between vulnerability and ontology.

As was discussed in chapter three, Butler concludes the chapter "Conscience doth make subjects of us all" in *Psychic Life of Power* by suggesting that the Spinozian *conatus essendi*, the desire *to be*, is a condition of *possibility*. To *not be* is obviously devoid of any possibilities (at least on this level of existence). But a pre-given, determined existence, a coded existence lacks possibility as well. If life solely proceeds according to given parameters, there are no possibilities and thus no agency (except in the code).[274] Coded

[273] Gilson, "Vulnerability, Ignorance and Oppression", *Hypatia*, 310.

[274] A good, albeit fictional example of such a coded, very shielded existence is the "post-human", post-organic" cybernetic organism of *The Borg* in the science fiction franchise *Star Trek*. The Borg, interestingly, is a collective, which aims to assimilate

existence such as in computational or robotic life-forms is of course not wholly invulnerable, but very shielded, as it functions according to given parameters. Gilson suggests that "vulnerability is a condition of potential that makes possible other conditions."[275] Thus, it is by the "fact" of our vulnerability that possibility marks our being.

The openness that characterises vulnerability yet again sheds light on the importance of enquiring into the relationship between vulnerability and relationality. As has been discussed earlier in this dissertation, bodily vulnerability is the basis of the ec-static, it is because our existence *is* this physical vulnerability that we are open to the other.[276] The infant is acutely vulnerable, dependent on others around him. Whilst he explores the movements of his body, his environment and how he can interact with it, he is directed and helped by his parents or caregivers, *becoming* in interaction with them. This vulnerable body is the way we interact with each other and thus, in line with Cavarero's thought, it exposes us to each other. It is a vulnerability "to a sudden address from elsewhere that we cannot preempt" (PL.29).

Throughout her work, it is apparent that Butler is fully conscious of the political "dangers" of idealised versions of the human, such as in the epitome of humanism discussed in third chapter. Butler addresses this question in *Precarious Life* without directly stating that she is positing a new basis for humanism. It may be that we always already *are* these vulnerable beings, but if it is not acknowledged, little is accomplished. An ontology of (social) bodily vulnerability needs to be acknowledged in an ethical encounter in order for it to count for anything. Simply stating that we are vulnerable is a certain kind of acknowledgment that forces us to think about the ethical and political consequences of that utterance (PL.42-43).

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every individual being it encounters and accumulates all the biological and technological distinctiveness of those they assimilate.

[275] Gilson, "Vulnerability, Ignorance and Oppression", *Hypatia*, 310.

[276] Lloyd, *Butler: From Norms to Politics*, 139.

> So when we say that every infant is surely vulnerable, that is clearly true; but it is true, in part, precisely because our utterance enacts the very recognition of vulnerability and so shows the importance of recognition itself for sustaining vulnerability (PL.43).

The shared human condition of vulnerability essentially needs to be recognised in order to sustain life *in its vulnerability*. Otherwise, that which is described as vulnerable may cease to be, and thus not be vulnerable anymore. Although it is important to have an idea of human vulnerability in general, it is the ways of seeing and recognising vulnerabilities *here and now* in an ethical encounter, of opening up to others, that allows us to act ethically and politically. The human is based on ever-changing cultural understandings of the human, a particular way of making the other human:

> In this sense, if vulnerability is one precondition for humanization, and humanization takes place differently through variable norms of recognition, then it follows that vulnerability is fundamentally dependent on existing norms of recognition if it is to be attributed to any human subject (PL.43).

The political power of vulnerability lies in this particular recognition. It presents a circular paradox akin to that of becoming a subject in *Psychic Life of Power* (what, then, are you, before you become the subject?) Vulnerability exists prior to recognition but you never have direct access to vulnerability before the recognition and realisation of it. Recognising vulnerability is a precondition of perceiving the human. Mills notes, however, that it is never clear in Butler's work "whether the attribution of vulnerability allows for recognition of the human as human, or whether humanization allows for the recognition of vulnerability."[277]

Yet vulnerability is not produced by recognition; if we misrecognise or deny vulnerability it is not as if it just goes away; we cannot *will* it away (Pl.29). But it *is* denied "through a fantasy of mastery" that can "fuel the instruments of war" (PL.29). Populations

[277] Mills, "Undoing Ethics", 44.

of people and abundances of lives lack humanisation and thus acknowledgement of their vulnerabilities.[278]

Furthermore, there appear to be two kinds of openness at play in Butler's ontological account of vulnerability. Firstly, due to the ecstatic nature of our vulnerable bodies, we cannot be but open; "the outside" will affect us and change us without our having any say in it. Secondly, there remains a more existential dimension; affirming a relational ontology of vulnerability enables us to explore this openness, rather than "close up" in a private state concerning whatever we feel vulnerable about. The question, however, remains: to what extent is the latter a historical condition of the present, and to what extent does it indeed belong to the ontological condition of vulnerability we cannot will away, although we try to deny it? Before engaging with that question, it is important to examine another axis of the discourse on vulnerability, namely situated and shared vulnerability, which Butler respectively names precarity and precariousness. This axis sheds light on how the capitalist structure of livelihood heightens the precarity of some people and, in fact, makes rather few feel fully confident concerning their future prospects of providing for themselves and their dependents.

5.3 Precariousness and precarity

In *Frames of War,* Butler states that it is precariousness, not vulnerability, that is the central concept of the bodily ontology she is developing. Precariousness often functions in a manner similar to vulnerability. In the different works by Butler under consideration in this dissertation, the definitions of these concepts vary somewhat, but overall it may be said that vulnerability is a broader notion than precariousness. The most systematic distinction between precariousness and precarity can be found in *Frames of War* where Butler speaks of how precariousness has historically been maximised for some and minimised for others (FW.2). "It implies exposure both to those we know and to those we do not know; a

[278] "Humanisation" could here arguably also apply to other lives than "human", such as the various animals living on factory farms, who urgently need the recognition humanisation brings about.

dependency on people we know, or barely know, or know not at all" (FW.14). In *Frames of War* Butler presents precariousness as a generalised condition without relating it to a particular humanisation. It is "the condition of being conditioned" but as such, it is generalised (FW.23). This generalised precariousness marks an important step in making one of the rare, clearly stated, normative claims Butler makes concerning equality:

> Normatively construed, I am arguing that there ought to be a more inclusive and egalitarian way of recognizing precariousness, and that this should take form as concrete social policy regarding such issues as shelter, work, food, medical care, and legal status. And yet, I am also insisting, in a way that might seem initially paradoxical, that precariousness itself cannot be properly *recognized* (FW.13).

It appears as if recognition plays a rather different role for precariousness in *Frames of War* than it does for vulnerability; at least, Butler places emphasis on precariousness not being an effect of recognition (FW.13). Somehow precariousness is a part of what we can never fully translate into language and into a conventional system of intelligibility, although we can intellectually perceive the intensive precariousness of what it is to live and breathe. It cannot be properly recognised and perhaps it cannot be properly uttered either. Precariousness always, to some extent, escapes being recognised and thus spoken about. But in more serious circumstances, when lives are at risk, the apprehension of precariousness multiplies. When death is near to us we apprehend the value of life; when someone dies, our grievability not only allows us to apprehend, understand and grieve for this particular life, but also for the generalised condition of precariousness itself. But not all lives are grieved and the value placed on human lives can be quite different:

> Precariousness and precarity are intersecting concepts. Lives are by definition precarious: they can be expunged at will or by accident; their persistence is in no sense guaranteed. In some sense, this is a feature of all life, and there is no thinking of life that is not precarious – except, of course, in fantasy, and in military fantasies in particular. Political orders, including economic and social institutions, are designed to address those very needs without which the risk of mortality is heightened (FW.25).

To theorise the different positions of human lives, Butler introduces the concept of precarity, a narrower concept than that of precariousness. As can be seen in *Frames of War,* precarity is the "politically induced condition" in which precariousness is maximised for some populations and minimised for others (FW.26). Precariousness is thus the generalised condition, a feature of *all* life[279] whilst precarity is the political apprehension of this "fact". Gilson points out that substitutability is at the heart of precariousness in Butler's thought, which makes it relational rather than individualising:

> Precariousness is akin to an existential sense of finitude in that it emphasizes the fragility of existence, but it serves a different purpose. Precariousness calls our attention not to the tenuousness of our own individual lives – our own mortality, the inevitability of our death, our isolated and unique beings – but rather to the way this tenuousness is shared, the way any of us might be substituted for another and so are interchangeable when it comes to the precariousness of life. [280]

To contemplate one's precariousness is to contemplate the precariousness of the other, of all life, and this can, according to Butler, evoke ethical obligations. In fact, what is at stake here, is not only the ability to contemplate one's own precariousness as well as that of the other—rather, it is a matter of *feeling* or *sensing* that this shared precariousness at the heart of being is such that we are bound to others.

Mills suggests that Butler's ethics shares more similarities with the tradition of Western moral philosophy than she herself proclaims.

[279] Gilson, *Ethics of Vulnerability*, 45.

[280] Ibid.

Mills describes this prevalent Western approach to morality as "despite our differences, we are all human, that is, vulnerable."[281] Moral agents are thus "bound to others by virtue of shared characteristics" and community is understood as commonality.[282] Mills seems to think that "shared" means "same", as she opposes "shared" with "different". Accordingly, Butler's work appears to fall into the great pit of "abstract (masculine) sameness", that characterises the Western tradition, rather than participating in the feminist response that emphasises differences.

However, there remains another way of approaching the issue, one that Lorey presents as part of her engagement with Butler's thought on precariousness: "precariousness relates not to life itself, but rather to the conditions of its existence, what is problematized here is not what makes everyone the same, but rather what is *shared* by all."[283] Lorey admittedly proposes that precariousness can be viewed in terms of what all of us have in common, but at the same time she claims it can be understood as a separation factor.[284] Rather than indicating an "existential sameness" or "immutable mode of being", separateness highlights "a multiply insecure constituting of bodies".[285] What is shared is also what is separated, and Lorey suggests that we should consider this axis of shared/separated in its ambivalence; she refers to it either as relational difference or shared differentness.[286]

In line with Lorey's analysis, it is important to emphasise that, although we are referring to the same concepts, precariousness or universal vulnerability, we are trying to describe a "situation of difference", which is an attempt to conceptualise "the scene" in which difference happens. An ontology of vulnerability does indicate commonality, but in the midst of differences. Ontological relationality means that we cannot ever demarcate exactly *what* is different in a clear manner, yet we are describing a field of multiplicity and

[281] Mills, "Undoing Ethics", 59.

[282] Ibid.

[283] Lorey, *States of Insecurity,* 19.

[284] Ibid.

[285] Ibid.

[286] Ibid.

difference. Furthermore, approaching vulnerability ontologically means that we are neither viewing it positively as an ideal, nor negatively, as a trait of someone who is "weak" and in need of protection. Hence, this commonality does not serve as an ideal, and the difference indicated in this ontological landscape does not serve to indicate hierarchies of those who need protection and those who *do* the protecting. The concept of precarity should not create such hierarchical differences, but serve to show us how the social and political system heightens the precarity of some whilst decreasing the precarity of others.

Social institutions designed to lower the risk of death for individual subjects are tacitly based on a general awareness of precariousness. Again, here we have a reference both to a general condition of precariousness and the management of it in the form of precarity, introducing multiple layers of measuring, predicting and preventing too much precariousness. For Butler, ethical responsibility entails pointing out and acknowledging the general condition of precariousness with the hope that all life will benefit from the accumulated knowledge stemming from collective organisation, materialising in particular ways of decreasing the risk of precariousness.

The people who are radically exposed to precariousness have been put in that position by a social system that produces them as subjects “outside” of the system (FW.29), and that even heightens their precarity by invading their lands and lives. But it is also a case of being unrecognised, as can been seen in this paragraph from *Dispossession,* in which Butler places emphasis on precarity rather than precariousness:

> In other words, if prevailing norms decide who will count as a human or as a subject of rights, then we can see that those who remain unrecognised are subject to precarity. Hence, the differential distribution of norms of recognition directly implies the differential allocation of precarity (DPP.89. JB).

The unrecognised are subjected to heightened precarity, in which they intensively feel their precariousness whilst others are hardly subject to precarity at all, because their lives are valued and protected to such a great extent. In the case of the chronically ill

person in a job interview, that person is certainly a good example of someone living under heightened precarity. Furthermore, a part of her being remains unrecognised by the social and medical system with the result that she is "stuck" between "boxes" of recognised ways of being human; she remains a systematic "misfit".[287] Yet, more generally, her case indicates a problem of subjectivation in societies of the West: due to the possibility of livelihood being conditioned by individual competition, you cannot be open about your particular state of being.

Precariousness is a narrower concept than vulnerability according to Butler's conception, as it is essentially connected to the *potential of loss*; in the heightened sense of precarity, the risk of losing lives is higher.[288] Vulnerability, on the other hand, is not necessarily about loss, although it can be. Nor does it necessarily describe lives; the ecosystem is vulnerable, as Gilson points out, and that is one of the multiple ways of being affected in the world.[289] In terms of human lives, we are not only vulnerable towards other human beings, we are vulnerable in regard to natural forces that can affect us and hurt us.

We are also vulnerable in regard to norms in the Butlerian framework; being subject to norms can affect us and hurt us.[290] In fact, the very function of norms assumes that they make us vulnerable, as Gilson notes:

[287] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson offers the critical concept of the misfit in order to capture the diverse kinds of experiences disabled people encounter. "When the shape and substance of these two things correspond in their union, they fit. A *misfit*, conversely, describes an incongruent relationship between two things: a square peg in a round hole. The problem with a misfit then, inheres not in either of the two things but rather in their juxtaposition, the awkward attempt to fit them together." Garland-Thomson analyses misfits in relation to an ontological understanding of vulnerability, indicating the way bodies are always situated within environments and open towards them. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept", *Hypatia*, vol. 26, no.3 (Summer 2011). 592-593.

[288] Gilson, *Ethics of Vulnerability*, 46.

[289] Ibid.

[290] Ibid, 47.

> Yet, it is only because we are vulnerable that norms can operate as they do. That is, the vulnerability of the self – its susceptibility to impression, its malleability and openness, its formation and mutation through relation – is the context in which norms are produced and reproduced both critically and conventionally. Thus, the relation between vulnerability and normativity is constitutive. Vulnerability enables the functioning of norms and norms can render us vulnerable.[291]

The self is formed through relations and the process of time via the "play" of vulnerability and normativity (at least, in societies of normativity). Norms are malleable to the emergence of every new subject, who is simultaneously subjected to the norms, but yet playing with them, and even resisting them. Because normativity is so highly intertwined with certain ways of being vulnerable, a theory that acknowledges the ways vulnerability is at play in normativity might go a long way in forming ethical aspirations (built on deferring judgment and practicing critique), although this ontology does not necessitate an ethical demand.[292]

5.4 Towards precarisation

The transformation of the political landscape in the aftermath of the 2008 global economic crisis appears to be influencing Butler's most recent account of vulnerability, which is increasingly articulated in relation to the various forms of public protest happening in different parts of the world. In her most recent works, such as *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* and *Vulnerability in Resistance*[293] (the latter of which Butler edits), one can detect the same underlying characteristics as have been outlined here, but also a greater emphasis on the *affirmative* elements of the notion, by showing that vulnerability and resistance are not opposing notions. At the same time –as can be seen in the paper "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance" –she fiercely criticises any ethics and

[291] Ibid.

[292] Ibid, 55.

[293] Butler, Judith, Gambetti, Zeynep, Sabsay, Leticia, *Vulnerability in Resistance* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016.)

politics based on an *ideal* of vulnerability, especially when privileged groups of people execute such politics.

Butler furthermore clearly states her scepticism concerning the emotional politics of "getting in touch with our feelings" and an "sudden outbreak of 'care'".[294] Ethics of care or emotional politics ought not to be used as political strategies producing an ideal of shared vulnerability in the form of a superficial solidarity along the lines of "we are all in this together". Butler recognises the ways in which privileged people can and do use vulnerability as such a power strategy, as an asset of one's personality that appears at the right moment, presented with virtue signalling in social media, as the right "mask" of an authentic self. This she believes, is still in line with agency understood as sovereign modes of *defensiveness*.[295] Thus, it should neither be the case that appearing as vulnerable becomes a virtue one can strategically use in the public venue, nor that it is a virtue to sympathise with a vulnerable group, as if yourself could appear as utterly invulnerable. Against this Butler offers the following conception of vulnerability:

> To summarize: vulnerability is not a subjective disposition, but a relation to a field of objects, forces, and passions that impinge upon or affect us in some way. As a way of being related to what is not me and not fully masterable, vulnerability is a kind of relationship that belongs to that ambiguous region in which receptivity and responsiveness are not clearly separable from one another, and not distinguished as separate moments in a sequence.[296]

Although this is more or less in line with the account of vulnerability to be found in her works from the first decade of the twenty-first century, she appears to dismiss the primacy of the perspective of the "I" being addressed, which is vital in *Giving an Account.* Yet other dimensions of the account of vulnerability are

[294] Butler, Judith, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance", (a paper given at) *Building Interdisciplinary Bridges Acroos Cultures & Creativities (BIBACC)* (Madrid, 2014), 16, http://bibacc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Rethinking-Vulnerability-and-Resistance-Judith-Butler.pdf, retrieved 01.10.2017.

[295] Ibid.

[296] Ibid.

clearly present, especially the ways of being related to what is not me and not fully masterable. There is no clearly distinguishable "I" that fully knows her individual will and how to master its execution according to predefined strategies. My desire is partly yours; the desire of the multiple others forming the system, and living *in spite of* the system. This account strongly opposes the prevalent ontology of liberalism by emphasising that which can never be mastered in a calculated and controlled manner. We are bound to one another in precariousness, and this bond precedes contract. This echoes Butler's articulations in *Frames of War,* where she states that an ontology of volitional and contractual individuals can efface this bounded ontology by producing an understanding of us, individuals, coming together in a completely negotiating, and contractual way (FW.xxv).

What must be discussed to a greater extent is how this dynamic of responding with vulnerability to the master-subject of the possessive individual might be a specific historical development characterising our present-day lives in Western societies. Thus, it is important to emphasise that our (and Butler's own) ethical response is also historical. Adhering to historicity means that we want to propose ethically an ontology of vulnerability without proposing that it is the "true" ethics in all possible times and societies. In light of this, it is relevant to mention a recent historical development that deals with the same notions as are in question here, namely the *Precarious movement*, which began developing at the start of the twenty-first century in Europe.[297] It is in relation to this movement – which has been prominent in pointing out the process of precarisation under neoliberal governmentality –that Butler explicitly places her conceptual framework in an economic context in *Dispossession*:

[297] Lorey traces the birth of the precarity movement to the Mayday parade in Milan on 1 May 2001, and Neilson & Rossiter pinpoint the EuroMayDay movement from 2001 until 2006, but the protests spread to eighteen European cities. Emphasising that the precarious is not a collective subject easily unified, this movement has highlighted the invisible structures of corporatist organizations taking precarious working and living conditions as their starting point in an attempt to "organize the unorganizable". Lorey, *States of Insecurity*, 8, Neilson and Rossiter, "Precarity as a Political Concept", 53.

> One reason I am interested in precarity, which would include a consideration of "precarization," is that it describes that process of acclimatizing a population to insecurity. It operates to expose a targeted demographic to unemployment or to radically unpredictable swings between employment and unemployment, producing poverty and insecurity about an economic future, but also interpellating that population as expendable, if not fully abandoned. These affective registers of precarization include the lived feeling of precariousness, which can be articulated with a damaged sense of future and a heightened sense of anxiety about issues like illness and mortality (DPP.JB.43).

Although Butler is describing a very particular transformation happening in this historical present, she presents the transformation in a rather general manner. In the next sections I aim to explore the benefits of acknowledging the particular historicity we are living through. I will argue that Butler's ontological account, which gives rise to ethics, needs more clarification concerning the extent to which it posits presents universal features of subject formation, and the extent to which presents the historical subject formation of Western societies. This is important as I read Butler's response to liberal ontology as participating in a bigger wave of feminists responding to the individualisation of the neoliberal period.

Furthermore, situating these ideas historically helps us to detect the points of resistance from which we can develop political strategies to alter the ontological landscapes (and hence structures of subjectivation). Lorey shows in her *State of Insecurity*, that precarisation is a process specific to the secularised modernity of the West. Butler describes Lorey's analysis in the following manner, in her foreword to Lorey's book:

> Lorey's work asks us to pay close attention to "precarization' as a process that produces not only subjects, but also 'insecurity' as the central preoccupation of the subject. This particular form of power lays the groundwork for establishing the need for security as the ultimate political ideal.[298]

[298] Judith, Butler "Foreword" in *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious* (London and New York: Verso, 2015), viii.

Lorey's main argument consists in showing how precarisation is increasingly normalised in Western societies. Despite of the wave of protests and revolts during the last few years, citizens in some of the richest parts of Europe are coming to terms with social insecurity out of fear of being replaceable.[299] They are handling "the privatization of risks" and contributing to "the normalization of precarization through subjugation and conformity".[300] Neoliberal governmentality is perfectly fine with inequalities and relative poverty, as long as its subjects can and will participate in competition in the job market.[301] "Against this background, precarization is a steering technique of the minimum threshold of a social vulnerability that is still just tolerable".[302]

A relational and social ontology of vulnerability needs to be simultaneously analysed as a historical ontology, in order to situate the different ways people are conditioned by liberal subject formations, and subsequently in order to decide how to formulate political actions that can shift these ontological frameworks. The job interview exposes the hindrance to actualising this form of ontology; the question remains, how we can come together despite the ways we are separated by this particular interpellation?

5.5 Why is the discourse of vulnerability gaining momentum?

The social and relational ontology of vulnerability that I have argued Butler is affirming as a response to the predominant (neo)liberal ontology is, in many ways, a rather general application of ontology. From the perspective of every-day experience, it appears self-evident to state that human beings are born into dependency and opacity, that they need to be taken care of (psychologically, socially and politically), and that thus we are bounded beings. After tracing the rising discourses on vulnerability in the English-speaking, French-speaking and the German-speaking worlds, Estelle

[299] Lorey, *State of Insecurity*, 63.

[300] Ibid.

[301] Ibid, 66.

[302] Ibid.

Ferrarese asks: "Why at this time do we all seem to need the concept of vulnerability?"[303] Butler's contribution is vital in these recent discussions on vulnerability, a reference point no one seems to be able to do without.

I argue that the reason for this recent concentration on vulnerability is political in a historical way, responding to the "inhuman" consequences of the idea of the invulnerable, sovereign subject, both in terms of psychic matters and in the political sense. It has repeatedly been pointed out that Butler's work contains a high level of generality and abstraction, presenting an ahistorical account of relations that may be very specific to our historical times. Lloyd concludes in her book *Butler: From Norms to Politics* that the latter's weakest point may lie in her concentration on general conditions instead of showing a willingness to analyse the specific historical circumstances of today:

> Butler, in my view, still pays insufficient attention to the exact power relations and to the specific social and political institutions or practices that underpin and shape actual acts of iteration and resignification. She concentrates too much, that is, on the *general* conditions of possibility for resignification and not enough on the specific *historical* circumstances within which *particular* resignifications emerge.[304]

Lloyd points out that Butler adheres to Foucault's idea of historical specificity, but perhaps not always successfully.[305] As I have argued earlier in this dissertation, although I think Butler's account needs to be further historicised, the political value of presenting her ideas in a general manner must also be emphasised. Butler's theories are applicable to a broader diversity of different and complex situations, as they do not solely target one particular society or nation-state. People from different contexts (e.g. not only those related to the North American context) can apply her theory to their situations (to some extent) as it is not bounded to a specific ideological, intellectual or political history. Yet it also remains the

[303] Ferrarese, "Vulnerability: A Concept with Which to Undo the World As It Is?", *Critical Horizons*, 150.

[304] Lloyd, *Butler: From Norms to Politics*, 125.

[305] Ibid, 20.

case that by presenting her philosophy in such a generic way whilst adhering to the idea of historicity, this onto-ethical account does not locate the "battleground" for political strategies of social transformation on the path to such ethics; it does not clearly show us where within the social mechanisms we need to demand to be vulnerable.

In order to locate such "battleground" I have drawn out how Butler's affirmative approach to ontology can be framed as a critical response to liberal ontology. However, Butler's rather general style of writing covers over the fact that such a critical response must always be historical. The performativity of her text, the language that she chooses does not immediately direct the reader towards the genealogy of the present, to ponder how we came to think this way. Although she refers to debates and problems in the present, such as *gender identity disorder*, or the difficulty of being allowed to have a critical debate about the war on terrorism, she does not offer an explicit genealogy of these issues, but rather analyses the present debate on the subject without a historical reference (UG.78, PL.79).[306] It is as if she takes Foucault's framework of forms of power for granted without underlining what he time and again claims to be the fundamental reason for the development of the productive forms of power: they were politically useful to the dominant group of people and perpetuated their hegemony.

[306] It is especially the case when Butler discusses *Gender Identity Disorder* that she seems to take the Foucauldian genealogical framework for granted. She mentions considering the history of the disorder, but then only refers once to "the American Psychiatric Association's (APA) decision in 1973 to get rid of the diagnosis of homosexuality as a disorder and its 1987 decision to delete "ego dystonic homosexuality,". A genealogical analysis and critique of the reasons a classification such as *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders'* (*DSM-IV*) was developed in the first place seems to be assumed. *Undoing Gender*, 78.

> What in fact happened instead was that the mechanisms of the exclusion of madness, and of the surveillance of infantile sexuality, began from a particular point in time, and for reasons which need to be studied, to *reveal* their political usefulness and to lend themselves to economic profit, and that as a natural consequence, all of a sudden, they came to be colonised and maintained by global mechanisms and the entire State system.[307]

Arruzza points out that the genealogical dimension of norms is downplayed in Butler's earlier works on gender, although Butler claims to celebrate historicity.[308] Arruzza contends that the linguistic emphasis in understanding social practices (in the sense of discourses) "shifts her attention away from the historical (non-teleological) dimension of Foucault's genealogical project."[309] Emphasis on the linguistic *de facto* abstracts her account and yields rather insufficient tools to understand historical transformations.[310] Floyd also notes that Butler fails to make a distinction between *temporality* and *history* in her thought concerning the material.[311]

Another example of a lack of historicity is Butler's engagement with Althusser's theory of interpellation, but Althusser's work is written in the context of the reproduction of labour power. The first half of Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" describes the ways in which such labour power is continuously reproduced via ideological and repressive state apparatuses, as Floyd points out.[312] Althusser describes how these apparatuses determine and reproduce a certain division of labour in society via the distribution of the teaching, practice and reiteration of different

[307] Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures", *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 101, italics are mine.

[308] Cinzia Arruzza, "Gender as Social Temporality: Butler (and Marx)", *Historical Materialism* 23.1 (2015): 41. As Arruzza mainly engages with Butler's earlier works it is important to note that the genealogical dimension of norms becomes more apparent in *Undoing Gender*.

[309] Ibid, 45.

[310] Ibid, 46.

[311] Floyd, *Reification of Desire*, Arruzza, "Gender as Social Temporality: Butler (and Marx)", *Historical Materialism*, 41.

[312] Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" and Floyd, *Reification of Desire*, 95.

"know-hows". Performativity is skilled in this sense according to Butler, but her analysis of the dynamics of subjection distances itself "from the reproduction of labour power; the routinely forgotten starting point of Althusser's analysis".[313] Floyd points out that separating the *interpellative subject* from capital is frequent amongst structuralist and poststructuralist readings, but adds that Butler goes a step further by presenting *labour* out of the context of the concrete social relations that constitute it, namely that of capital.[314] The subject repeatedly performing her identity is a skilled subject who has materialised the epistemological labour of a skill (even though she may fail or trouble her performance). Floyd is not dismissing Butler's theory but rather asking to what extent it may be specific to a certain time, and whether it would complement the theory to enquire into the distribution of norms of gendered performances.[315]

Guaraldo notes that even though the invulnerable subject – or fictional entity of the immune individual, as she calls it – has long since ceased to convince even within the boundaries of its own fictional narrative, the political tools remain within that narrative.[316] She points out that both Butler and Cavarero share a need to pose the question of relational ethics in order to rethink politics and the political project of modernity "especially its individualistic corollaries: unrelatedness, self-sufficiency and sovereignty—both thinkers embark on the effort of radically re-thinking the human moving from its essential condition of dependency, precariousness, vulnerability."[317] But it is difficult to discern the political worth of these

[313] Floyd, *Reification of Desire,* 95.

[314] Ibid, 96.

[315] Floyd puts forward these contemplations concerning the relationship between theory and historical context within Butler's work: "[W]hen one employs Butler's theory of performative gender while also underscoring the historical specificity of one's own analysis, what happens to that theory itself? Do historically specific questions leave the theory itself unaffected? In what ways does the historical moment under scrutiny also "read" the theory in turn? How are we to understand the ways in which a dialectic of concrete history and conceptual abstraction operates, or should operate, within such a scenario? In Edwards Said's formulation, to what extent can Butler's theory of gender "travel" between different historical contexts?" Floyd, *Reification of Desire*, 82.

[316] Guaraldo, "Thinkers that Matter: on the Thought of Judith Butler and Adriana Cavarero", 108.

[317] Ibid.

ethical premises, as Guaraldo also argues.[318] One can propose, and even celebrate, the ethics of vulnerability without it leading to social transformation. Vulnerability needs to be socially acknowledged, but for that to happen we need to pinpoint the reason it is so important for us (individually) to perform as the invulnerable subject under the conditions of the present-day labour systems of capitalism.

5.6 Why is it so difficult to be vulnerable?

It is an ongoing theme in *Giving an Account* to debunk the desire for mastery encouraged by the subjectivation of the sovereign subject, as has been traced in this dissertation. If constructing an ontology with opacity at its heart has a political goal, it is to expose that mastery as impossible. A desire for mastery is a desire to appear invulnerable. I want to cast light on why we cannot but desire in this mastery in order to survive.

In order to measure up to the expectations we feel we must live up to, in order to perform well as the invulnerable subject, we are required to be in control of every little aspect of our lives. This requirement, which Butler perceives of as a form of violence, is a product of a particular historical epoch. Lorey has analysed this desire for mastery as a result of biopolitical techniques of power in modernity, according to which one is encouraged to develop ways of self-governing in which "one's own body is imagined as the property of the self; it is 'one's' own body that has to be sold as labour-power."[319] Lorey not only notes that this kind of self-governance "strengthens fantasies of mastering one's 'own' precariousness," but she also directly connects "one's own" to Macpherson's possessive individualism.[320] This form of control does not only apply to the way we manage our own lives, whether we choose to eat sourdough bread or to jog in order to control our individual bodies, but also to how we interact with others. This can be seen in *Undoing Gender,* where Butler writes a few words on how best to participate in

[318] Ibid.

[319] Lorey, *States of Insecurity*, 27.

[320] Ibid, 26-27.

disputes and debates. Again, she seems to be speaking in her (and our own) present in an interesting way without directly saying so:

> My purpose here is not to win a debate, but to try to understand why the terms are considered so important to those who use them, and how we might reconcile this set of felt necessities as they come into conflict with one another (UG.176).

What is described here is a certain attachment to one's *own* opinions; an attachment to the "I" and a validation of the epistemological landscape of the "I" that produces a certain form of a debate; one in which mastering a discourse and winning a debate is important.[321] The relational element of such a debate is not solely normative comparison, but also (neo)liberal competition. In this context, Butler asks why it is the case that "we can only use terms that we *already know how to master"* (UG.181. Italics mine). In accordance with this we are encouraged to perfect our framework (in a specific way) *before* we enter into a debate.

Questions concerning how to converse or debate in a fruitful way are beyond of the scope of this dissertation. But what is clear here is that, in order to converse differently, we need to examine our own social formation and the way we relate to ourselves and others. We need a vulnerable notion of the human to be *practiced*, to be acknowledged in the social mechanisms and institutions that form the subject. We need to overcome our desire for mastery in the calculative manner of controlling every minute of our lives and even those of others. But is that possible, if this desire is fundamental to our means of subsistence? The desire for mastery may be the very element that allows us to *believe enough* in our performance as the invulnerable subject to appear convincingly as such in the job interview, acquire a job and, hopefully, to keep it.

5.7 Vulnerability and emotional discrepancy

In *Gender Trouble* Butler argues against the idea of an *authentic self* in an essential sense; there is no inner kernel as an immutable essence, that can be found merely by peeling off the multiple layers of inauthenticity. You are always in the process of becoming, without

[321] In my opinion this is one of the reasons it is important to discuss the methods we use to debate with each other in the philosophy classroom.

being able to seek out any origin that is lost. Yet, as we have seen, the possibilities of your own *becomings* can be many and varied, and some of them become possible by seeking out the ruptures and implicit failures of the dominant ontological landscape. But why do we desire to break out and follow another path?

Within the present capitalistic labour system, people are subjectivated to see themselves and their emotional lives as authentic and "their own," whilst their emotional lives are simultaneously managed by capitalism in the West through affects and profiling of emotional responses. Accordingly, emotions become "a set of skills produced and regulated in such a way as to be sold as a commodity *sui generis*, that strange commodity that is labor power" as Arruzza notes in her public seminar "The Capitalism of Affects".[322] She refers to Arlie Hochschild's ground-breaking book *The Managed Heart* and discusses the way Hochschild shows how the commodification of emotions alters people's self-perception.[323] Arruzza describes this emotional discrepancy, which is formative of subjects under capitalism, in the following way:

> To clarify, what I am suggesting is that the transformation of our social relations and form of life under capitalism has produced both sets of phenomena at the same time: on the one hand we are interpellated to recognize and accept our "true" emotions as in them our inner and most authentic self finds expression; on the other hand, our emotions are detached from us and constructed as interchangeable and measurable things that can be exchanged on the market or as skills that add to our labor power... This contradiction, however, should not be conceptualized as a contradiction between naturalness and artificiality, authenticity and inauthenticity, but rather between two different forms of experience that are both socially mediated and that are both part of what it means to live in a capitalist society. [324]

[322] Arruzza, Cinzia, "The Capitalism of Affects", *Public Seminar*. http://www.publicseminar.org/2014/08/the-capitalism-of-affects/#.WYM39dPyiT8. Retrieved 04.08.2017.

[323] Hochschild, Arlie Russell, *The Managed Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

[324] Arruzza, Cinzia, "The Capitalism of Affects", *Public Seminar*.

Rather than stating that there is some sort of original, authentic self, Arruzza shows *how we are formed to believe in such a self* at the same time as we are compelled to perform emotions that do not feel "true" or "authentic" to us in order to sustain ourselves through work.[325] When we experience a discrepancy between what we consider our "true" emotions and those we need to perform, we feel alienated.[326] The chronically ill person in a job interview may feel a great discrepancy in giving an account of the most important aspect of her life—the fact that she needs to listen to the different feelings and aches in her body all the time, in order to decide how much she can actually do. Furthermore, she may be experiencing tremendous shame over being fragile and vulnerable, as well as shame about being untruthful by not communicating this important aspect of her life.

[325] This does not mean that the care we may take within our waged work is more "fake" than the care we take within our "own" time. Rather, the point is to investigate the feeling of discrepancy the self may be experiencing. An example of this is that when one is at home, one feels one has the choice to be a bit grumpy towards one's children, spouse, or parents, but if one shows that attitude within working hours, one may feel that one could lose one's job.

[326] One is not strictly speaking alienated from the product of one's labour, as is the case in the alienation of labour in Marx's analysis of capitalism, but from what one consider's one's "true" emotions. Hence, given that we are subjects that need to participate in waged work in order to sustain ourselves, and this work increasingly requires performatively "emotional labour", this form of alienation is part of the formation of the subject in capitalistic countries. At the same time, I do endorse Rahel Jaeggi's notion that what makes the concept of alienation so interesting is that one cannot fully discern self-alienation from alienation from the world (and thus the product of one's labour). A modern-day example of the way "true emotions" play a part in alienation could be the encouragement to be an *entepreneur* –to be full of enthusiasm, ambition-driven and thinking in terms of solutions. Although these characteristics are not inherently "bad" and under human, or good, conditions they can fill us with us with vigour and joy, I would certainly deem the form of precarity they presuppose as well as the stress that follows this encouragement as unfavourable. This also relates to Carl Cederström's analysis of how authenticity has become a synonym for good health in present-day work structures. Accordingly, workers are encouraged to "be who they are" in contemporary work politics, at the same time as this ideology encourages them to strive for intensively high standards of health, such as running a marathon. According to Carlerström, this is is a new form of control or domination over the self. Carl Cederström, "Fit for everything: Health and the ideology of authenticity", *ephemera: theory & politics in organization*, vol 11(1) (2011), 27-45. Rahel Jaeggi, *Alienation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), xxi.

People experience alienation[327] resulting from the discrepancy between being subjectivated as having unique, “true”, private emotions and emotions that are “detached from us and constructed as interchangeable and measurable things that can be commodified –exchanged in the market and sold as skills”, as Johanna Oksala notes in her engagement with Arruzza’s analysis.[328] The vulnerabilities one perceives in oneself—although one may even experience them as shameful —are nevertheless perceived as "true" to one's own being at the same time as they are foreclosed. In accordance with this analysis, Brené Brown’s message about daring greatly and seeing vulnerability as strength speaks directly to people’s hearts. However, if the reasons this emotional discrepancy is so characteristic of people's lives are not addressed, this very same discrepancy will be reproduced, however greatly we dare.

Although Butler does argue that authenticity (such as in “true” gender experience) takes on the appearance of naturalness via the reiteration of the belief of having an authentic self, the historical production and formation of a “desire for authenticity” needs to be better acknowledged in her work. People value their lives in accordance with that desire. In line with Arruzza and Oksala, the extent to which it is politically useful for capitalism to maintain the production of authenticity needs to be put into connection with Butler's work through a critique of “authentic” identity or self.

But more importantly, this form of alienation comes into existence because people *need to perform against what feels right to them in order to sustain themselves*. The "freedom" from any means to sustain oneself means one cannot appear vulnerable without a huge risk to one’s own existence. Thus, one cannot be ontologically vulnerable unless the present-day labour system is altered away from the neoliberal individualisation (and responsibilisation) inherent in the competitive form of providing for

[327] Gavin Rae argues that the notion of alienation is inherently conceptualised with a notion of a preferable or authentic self. Gavin Rae, "Alienation, athenticity, and the self", *History of the Human Sciences*, 23(4) (2010), 21-36.

[328] Oksala, “Affective Labor and Feminist Politics”, *Signs*, 295. Lorey describes this as virtuoso labour, which consists in “the form of labour that is currently becoming hegemonic, one that demands the whole person, is primarily based on communication, knowledge and affects”. Lorey, *State of Insecurity*, 5.

one's livelihood. But in order to find ways to alter this present-day work system of capitalism, it is important to consider how this very same social system addresses the individual-subject, asks *Who are you?* without being responsive, and without offering a scene where the other can express himself in a hectic manner, trying to make sense of himself. Rather, the subject is compelled to give an account of himself that increases the likelihood of getting a job.

5.8 The job interview

Why is the job interview an illustrative example of the difficulty of being and appearing vulnerable? The answer lies in the necessity of acquiring the interview in the first place and of managing to convince the employer that you are the employee he is looking for. Whatever "true self" you feel you have is not shared in these situations. Furthermore, the job interview exposes the individualisation of neoliberalism; the fact that the individual subject needs to separate herself from others in the same economic class as her, compete with them, and win that competition by acquiring the job.[329]

The job interview is a fairly recent structural enterprise in labour-relations in Western societies; it began to develop in the early the twentieth century with the onset of careerism, which developed over the course of the twentieth century. Today, there are countless websites, consultant firms, booklets and governmental agencies that either support people in the generally desperate situation of looking for work, or exploit them.

In terms of academic theory, however, the discourse that engages most considerably with the subject under present conditions is *Human Resource Management* (HRM).[330] This

[329] This process continues when the worker has acquired the job, given that she could always lose it again. Therefore she needs continuously to be the one that "wins", competes with others in order not to lose the job.

[330] "From an epistemological perspective then, the argument that HRM –at least in terms of its normative model –is essentially modernist, rests on its adherence to a positivistic epistemelogy and to the values of rationality and performativity. If HRM is about designing organisation structures and personnel policies to achieve competitive advantage in the world of increasingly competitive and uncertain global markets, it is difficult to see how it can be anything other than, epistemologically speaking, a modernist project in a world of late modernity". Kareen Legge, *Human*

discourse, which is generally studied within business and administration faculties, debates the best ways of organising business and recruiting fit workers.[331] However, it is clear that the main standpoint propounded by the discourse is that of the business executive; it is not that of the person with the heightened vulnerability of needing a job.[332] The discourse of HRM has mainly been on the rise since the 1980's, but within its early history one can find the scientific management of Taylorism (named after its founder Frederick Winslow Taylor) which consists of theories of maximising the productivity of the workers, and has been greatly critiqued by Marxist literature.[333]

According to the HRM discourse, the systematic use of the job interview began in the early twentieth century. An analysis of the phenomenon starts to appear in journals of psychology during the same period.[334] The popular story of the birth of the job interview states that the inventor Thomas Edison was a pioneer concerning the job interview, because he created a written test to find the best candidates in 1921.[335] During this period, more people were graduating from college than ever before and the division of labour was becoming more advanced. The need to evaluate who was fit for highly-skilled jobs was born.

Today in Western societies, it is hardly possible to get a job without a job interview, whether the job in question requires a

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Resource Management: Rhetorics and Realities, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 340.

[331] Michael Armstrong, *Human Resource Management Practice* (London and Philadelphia: Kogan Page, 2007).

[332] Paul S. Duckett, "Disabling Employment Interviews: Warfare to work", *Disability &Society* vol. 15, issue 7 (2000): 1019-1039.

[333] Weeks, *Problem with Work* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 56.

[334] Robert W. Eder, K Michele Kacmar, Gerald R. Ferris, "Employment Interview Research: History and Synthesis", *The Employment Interview: Theory, Reearch, and Practice*, ed. Robert W. Eder, Gerald R. Ferris (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1989), 19. An example of journals are *Journal of Applied Psychology, Personnel* and *Personnel Journal*.

[335] Jacquelyn Smith, "Thomas Edison conducted the first job interview in 1921– here is how they've evolved since", *Business Insiders UK*, 21.05.2015, http://uk.businessinsider.com/evolution-of-the-job-interview-2015-5?r=US&IR=T. Retrieved 25.03.2018.

specific education or not. The vast literature concerning how to successfully find the right applicant through interviewing favours structured interviews over unstructured.[336] The most important types of interviews are behavioural or situational interviews, the former enquiring into how the applicant has performed certain tasks in earlier jobs, whilst the latter asks you to place yourself in hypothetical situations to solve a task related to the job in question. Job applicants are asked *Who are you?* through standardised questionnaires, which is supposed to guarantee that each applicant is approached in the same manner and that the best candidate is chosen for the job.

It is, however, generally acknowledged within this literature that there are discriminatory factors within the interview process and that "faking" or impersonating is common among applicants.[337] Attractiveness matters, and people of colour as well as women are at a disadvantage in the job interview. Disclosing a disability in the job interview is a risky business, as can be seen in a 2017 survey of two thousand disabled people in the UK, which shows that disabled people need to look for 60% more jobs than non-disabled people.[338] Furthermore, the type of disability matters, as employers are more likely to hire people with physical disability than a psychiatric one.[339] Rebecca Spirito Dalgin and James Bellini note that the decision concerning the disclosure of a disability in the job interview is

[336] Robert L. Dipboye, "The Selection/Recruitment Interview: Core Processes and Contexts", *Handbook of Personnel Selection*, ed. Arne Evers, Neil Anderson, Olga Voskuijl (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 121.

[337] Robert L. Dipboye, Adrienne Colella, *Discrimination at Work: The Psychological and Organizational Bases* (New York and London: Psychology Press, 2005), J. Levashina, "Measuring faking in the employment interview: developement and validation of an interview faking behavior scale", *Journal of Applied Psychology* 92(6) (Nov 2007), 1638-1656.

[338] May Bulman, "Disabled people need to apply for 60% more jobs than non-disabled people before finding one", *Independent*, 27.09.2017. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/disabled-people-jobs-applications-more-able-bodied-stats-before-employment-a7970701.html, retrieved 25.03.2018.

[339] Rebecca Spirito Dalgin, James Bellini, "Invisible Disability Disclosure in an Employment Interview: Impact on Employer's Hiring Decisions and View of Employability", *Rehabilitation Councelling Bulletin* vol. 52, nr. 1 (October 2008), 6-15.

extremely complex, especially when the disability carries a social stigma.[340]

Thus, although most of the literature concerning the job interview proposes a better work environment by employing the greatest diversity of people possible, there is a great acknowledgement that this is not the reality the job applicant faces. In the present-day climate of increased risk of precarious work, the disclosure of vulnerabilities such as a medical disease that carries a social stigma is out of the picture if one desperately needs a job.

The job interview as a paradigmatic example thus exposes the inherent logic of the ideological functions in question, namely the ontology of (neo)liberalism.[341] When Butler analyses the narrative structure of *giving an account of oneself*, what is at the forefront is the exposure of the fact that such an enterprise always fails; how neither an identity nor a narrative can be masterfully formed. But if you are without any means of subsistence and desperately need a job, it is of the utmost importance that the address of the job interview *will not fail*. In whatever way you feel vulnerable, you cannot show it whilst seeking a job; you need to master the right performance for the job interview.

The anxiety of getting a job heightens along with your precarity when you are in the particularly vulnerable position of being chronically ill, without proper recognition from the medical system – when you have a "disease" that carries a social stigma that prevents you from being able to claim disability benefits. Finding and diagnosing the cause of chronic illness and pain is, of course, not a simple matter, but living without a diagnosis can be a matter of mere survival. Many people living in those conditions never receive a full diagnosis, or they are diagnosed with unrecognised and under-

[340] Ibid, 7.

[341] A use of such a paradigmatic or illustrative example is in line with the form of philosophising Butler herself carries out. Thiem notes that the example as such shows the complex interrelations of a structure and its instantiations. “The exemplary is an example only insofar as it is not absolutely unique but instead demonstrates and illustrates an instance of a generality, implying not only interchangeability but also repeatability” At the same time, it is important to note that each particular scene, each particular job interview has its own concreteness, which cannot be mastered. Thiem, *Unbecoming* Subjects, 129.

researched diseases such as fibromyalgia or ME/CFS, which carry social stigma.

The precarity of disabled people has furthermore heightened under the current approach of work capability assessments, which, rather than granting sick people unconditional benefits due to their illness, has resulted in devastating cases of poverty and death, such as the death of Elaine Morrall in the UK in 2017. Her employment and support allowance (ESA) was cut, as she failed to attend three assessments at the same time as she was "in and out of intensive care in hospital".[342] Unable to pay for heating and other bills, Morall did not turn on the heating until her four children came home from school, and she died in a freezing home. In countries such as the UK where the work capability assessment is predominant, the precarity of a good number of people living with particular, situated vulnerabilities of diverse kinds of illness and disabilities is heightened to the degree that surviving the day, week or month is an utter struggle.[343] The desperation of needing to provide for yourself whilst chronically ill illustrates quite clearly that you need to perform as the invulnerable subject, an able worker in the job interview, and that you cannot give an account of yourself that you perceive as honest or "true" as you wilfully cover over your vulnerabilities.

[342] Frances Ryan, "Elaine Morall died in a freezing home – the state is tossing away people's lives", *Guardian*, (16.11.2017), https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/nov/16/neglect-benefit-cuts-deaths-elaine-morrall?CMP=fb_gu, retrieved 18.11.2017).

[343] Although there is already dire evidence from the UK that ESA is directly causing deaths, powerful advocacy groups and agents in Iceland such as SA (Business Iceland) and Virk (Vocational Rehabilitation Fund) are lobbying for the work capability assessment in order to determine social benefits. They (strategically) argue for a more positive approach to the human via (work) capabilities rather focusing on the invalidity of people, the things they are not capable of. However, their arguments repeatedly fail to give an account of the lack of employment for people that experience periodic illness, who can e.g. work 80% for the period of four months before relapsing and being unable to work for the next two months. The organisation of Disabled in Iceland strongly oppose the work capability approach. Due to their opposition, proposed revision of the structure of National Insurance that would have included a work capability approach starting in 2017 was suspended. Arnar Páll Hauksson, "Full örorka eða ekki neitt", *RÚV*, 01.09.2016), http://www.ruv.is/frett/full-ororka-eda-ekki-neitt, Guðmundur Björn Þorbjörnsson, "Segir vinnufæra einstaklinga afskrifaða", *RÚV*, (28.08.2016), http://www.ruv.is/frett/segir-vinnufaera-einstaklinga-afskrifada, retrieved 18.11.2017.

Therefore, you cannot "come out" as a chronically ill person in the job interview. Even if your chances of being hired are great, you could not take such a risk if you desperately need to financially maintain yourself and others. People with chronic illnesses often appear as able-bodied and can perform as such if needed. They are thus tempted to answer the question *Who are you?* by leaving out the most fundamental aspect of their life by faking able-bodiedness. The first thought when you wake up with a "broken body" is to ask yourself: how do I feel today?[344] But this is not something you tell your employer. Gilson places the "body in pain" as the opposite of the subject that seeks to be invulnerable; pain reminds us of the existence of pain for all of us as well as the fragility of the body. If a subject of the liberal ontology is formed with the desire for authenticity, with the belief that every individual has an authentic self capable of expressing her true emotions, being placed in the position of performing as a desirable and invulnerable worker results in a sense of emotional discrepancy and alienation.

The ethical act of acknowledging vulnerability as our fundamental ontological condition is thus obstructed by the present-day labour system of capitalism, as seen in the example of the job interview. By maintining the prevalent ontology of liberalism, this system thus also hinders us from viewing our being as relational. The responsibility of maintaining oneself rests mostly on the individual subject's ability to acquire a job. Only one person will, in the end, acquire the particular job at hand. Often you are competing against your friends, peers and neighbours for a particular job. In order to be supportive or to help these people with whom you share a life, *you need to work against your own interest as the possessive individual.*

It is important to bear in mind that people *can* and *do* work against their own interest in this way; they reject and resist being the possessive individual. This again shows us that the prevalent ontology of liberalism does not exhaust all of life –there are, in the end, multiple ontologies at play. People *do* support each other even when it is not in their individual favour, because they *are* relational

[344] Price, Janet, Shildrick, Margrit, "Breaking the Boundaries of the Broken Body", *Body & Society* (London: Sage Publications vol. 2(4) 1996)): 93-113.

and the pain and problems of the other *is also their own* pain and problems. The relational ontology of vulnerability *is* a part of the liberal ontology via the hidden figure of *femina domestica*, as I argued in the second chapter, and thus at work in multiple, diverse situations. Yet, there is another distinction one needs to be mindful of in this context: these situations of being able to perform or express oneself freely as the relational being rather than as the possessive individual mostly happen in what we conceive of as "the private sphere" of society, or in informal chats amongst people one trusts, rather than being publicly declared.

However, one can also detect instances in which this form of ontology is addressed in the public venue, when people e.g. individually admit they are dealing with difficulties or when people come together and form a social movement around an issue perceived as vulnerable, such as living with a particular kind of mental illness. Examples of cases where individual demands to be able to live openly in their vulnerable state have been prominent for the last several years in Iceland, such as in the way Gunnar Hrafn Jónsson, a former parliamentarian for the Pirate Party, openly discussed his mental illness and took a leave of absence due to his depression. The former Norwegian prime minister Kjell-Magne Bondevik was the first prime minister to openly discuss his mental illness and took a leave of absence to battle depression in 1998. Another example which indicates that people actually believe that diverse and differently vulnerable people contribute to society is when the disability activist Freyja Haralds was elected to the Constitutional Council in Iceland in 2010. An example of collective social movements around an issue perceived as vulnerable is the *#MillionsMissing* global campaign for the recognition of ME/CFS.

However, what the job interview shows us is that people are helping each other *despite* the present-day system of labour, not with the help of these structures. In concluding her analysis of the neoliberal dynamics of governmental precarisation, Lorey claims the following: “In the permanent race for the hoped-for securing of one’s own life and that of one’s immediate social milieu against competing others, the fact that a lastingly better life cannot be an individual

matter is obscured".[345] Whilst the job interview is the fundamental social address of Western societies, it will continue to individualise "the good life" as well as obscuring the fact that the good life cannot be an individual matter. Within this system of maintaining one's livelihood, of keep staying alive, responsibility is put on the shoulders of the individual subject in an overwhelming way, as Wendy Brown notes:

> [W]hen the act of being responsible is linguistically converted into the administered condition of being *responsibilized*, it departs from the domain of agency and instead governs the subject through an external moral injunction – through demands emanating from an invisible elsewhere.[346]

The subject is thus to blame for how she fares in life, not only concerning whether she is able to acquire a job or keep it, but also for being vulnerable, weak and even sick, heightening the sense of performing as the invulnerable subject whilst feeling otherwise. The job interview as a paradigmatic example thus exposes the structural limits of ethics and ontology of vulnerability in the historical present. Yet it also pinpoints the battleground in which we need to come together and demand a space and time for being vulnerable in various ways and learn to live together in such manner.

5.9 Collective strategies for a relational ontology of vulnerability

I have argued via the paradigmatic example of the job interview that the modern form of individualisation in Western societies hinders a relational ontology of vulnerability from influencing or modifying the form of ontology, as well as hindering the understanding of the human, which is always already assumed in social institutions and mechanisms.

I began this chapter by taking a closer look at the emerging discourse on vulnerability in order to locate Butler's contribution to this discourse. A rich re-evaluation of vulnerability is taken place and

[345] Lorey, *State of Insecurity*, 90.

[346] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*,133.

even affecting people's sense of themselves via popular outlets such as Brené Brown's TED-talk "The Power of Vulnerability". Yet this re-evaluation could easily be appropriated by the neoliberal paradigm if vulnerability is understood as a new ideal to aspire to or a new personal asset.

What first and foremost characterises Butler's account of vulnerability is her assertion that it is a social, relational ontology, and hence neither a negative attribute or a positive ideal. But a relational ontology of vulnerability needs to be recognised in order to have any political significance. Furthermore, the different allocation of vulnerability and different value given to vulnerability needs to be recognised. Butler has made use of the different notions of precarity and precariousness in order to analyse situated and universal vulnerability, in which precarity is the “politically induced condition” through which precariousness is maximised for some populations and minimised for others (FW.26). Precarity thus consists in the political apprehension of the fact that precariousness is a feature of *all* life. In relation to this, I furthermore examined Butler's analysis together with the recent discourse on the "precarious". In this context, I drew from Lorey's work on how these states of insecurity affect people's sense of selves, both in terms of the fact that they cannot but perform as the masterful, invulnerable subject in order to have a chance of livelihood, but also to explain why the notion of vulnerability has been gaining momentum both in theoretical discourses and in wider public discussions. This also shows the importance of firmly situating Butler's philosophy in the historical present: her relational ontology of vulnerability is responding to the prevalent ontology of the (neo)liberal subject, who is socially formed to view her own emotional states as authentic and truly her own whilst being compelled to perform other emotional states in order to acquire a job and to keep it.

Being chronically ill in a job interview, but performing as an attractive and able worker illustrates why it is so difficult to *be* or reside in one's vulnerability in the present-day societies of the West. Philosophy of vulnerability needs to take the hindrance illustrated by the job interview into account. We need to build political strategies to surpass the liberal ontology that compels us to perform as the

possessive individuals and invulnerable subjects, performing other emotions than those that feel right to us. These political strategies will be directed at transforming the ontological landscape towards vulnerability, in which the relationality and dependency covered over in the liberal ontology will be acknowledged, along with the hidden figure of *femina domestica*, revealing that the liberal ontology has always already been gendered. These political strategies will be directed at acknowledging the epistemic vulnerability of opacity in order to change the ethical perspective away from that of the sovereign subject, who thinks he knows what is the best for the other, towards the position of being responsible by being responsive, and asking *Who are you?* in order to participate in ethical relationality.

Last but not least, the job interview suggests that we need *collective* political strategies and that we need to come together with shared goals in an ontological climate that expects us to work individually and separately. This is not an easy task and implies sequences of multiple different operations and organisations in different places. Furthermore, this does not solely imply going back to "old-school" trade-unionism, especially not in the forms that place emphasis on a strong Protestant work-ethic, which makes work a virtue even in the cases when it makes people sick. The emphasis on vulnerability means that we need to redefine social value as well as each and everyone's contribution to society. Rather than emphasising ability and capability of the workers, we need to demand (in an eco-friendly way) to collectively live well in an acknowledgment of our vulnerabilities.

I would not say that the relational ontology of vulnerability *itself* could serve as a political strategy in order to transform social structures towards an ontological landscape of relationality and vulnerability –such would imply a peculiar paradox in which the ontological shift I am proposing would need to have already happened, in terms of our perception of ontology, in order for it to function politically. Yet, the seeds of such an ontology need to be planted in order to transform the social structures and, as I have pointed out, they have already been disseminated and planted, such as in the cases of *#MillionsMissing* and in cases where public figures

speak openly about their illnesses. Many of the issues and struggles that could be characterised by the feminist slogan "the personal is political" serve to plant these seeds. By coming together around "private issues," and by speaking openly about our vulnerabilities, which we might not have talked about before due to a sense of shame, a fertile acre for the co-operative means of subsistence and the relational ontology of vulnerability is prepared. In the conclusion of this dissertation I will suggest that the feminist revolutions of recent years, such as #freethenipple in Iceland and #metoo internationally, have already begun to prepare such a fertile acre for a more widespread relational ontology of vulnerability.

If we are to create an ontological landscape in which each person can ponder what it is to be human him/her/themselves, in which space can be provided to each and every one to be vulnerable in whatever way they perceive for themselves; if we are to open up and be responsive to the other, and if we are to acknowledge that some populations are more precarious than others, we need to resist the individualising subjectivation of the liberal ontology, which culminates in the interpellation of the job interview.

Means of subsistence –as well as lastingly good life –need to be a collective project, a part of cohabiting the planet with others. It cannot be determined by work-structures shaped by the liberal ontology, by the few who own the means of subsistence. Jan Rechmann, in his *Theories of Ideology*, suggests that interpellations do not need to be vertical and hierarchical, coming from a policeman or an employer asking *who are you?* – interpellation can also be horizontal and among equals, a horizontal socialisation.[347] This is in line with Butler's own argument concerning Althusser's theory of interpellation; it does not exhaust all of one's existence, and it is not always answered. But as long as we are formed as separated individuals who need to compete with each other concerning who is the most able and attractive worker, we will not acknowledge our situated vulnerability as a condition of being in the world. Neither will we so easily learn more open-ended ways of asking one another

[347] Rehmann, Jan, *Theories of Ideology: The Powers of Alienation and Subjection*, (Chicaco: Haymakret Books, 2013), 178.

Who are you? or learn how to *elicit* more vulnerable accounts from others.

The scene of address needs to be transformed away from vertical interpellations towards horizontal addresses. There needs to be a space for the hesitations, the forgetfulness of what one wanted to say, the brain-fog of the sick person and the hectic pauses in giving an account of oneself. The politics of vulnerability need to happen at the level of the job interview, resist it, and transform that level into a shared collaboration of maintaining ourselves and living together.

Conclusion

The capitalist system of production and division of labour does not provide a livelihood for all. In fact, as Marx famously argued in *Capital*, it relies on a disposable "industrial reserve army" and "it creates a mass of human material always ready for exploitation by capital," consisting in desperate people who can hardly sustain their lives.[348] Marx knew all too well the multitude of people needed to cooperate in order to alter these *stressful* social structures, yet how exactly such alteration can successfully take place has mostly eluded social thinkers, activists and movements.

According to my interpretation, the works of Butler's "ethical turn" argue that people are essentially vulnerable, social and relational, and that the recognition of this ontological reality is vital for constructing societies that provide space for these very same elements. The neoliberal period has been successful in disrupting systems of support, in decreasing the value of every relationality that does not involve individual competition, and in encouraging people to develop a sense of self (ideally, as an invulnerable subject) that experiences shame by the exposure of any perceived vulnerability. This subject aims at mastering and controlling his emotional life rather than acknowledging the uncontrollable sociality of who he is, and how his life will work out.

As long as the need to appear invulnerable (or if not, to be forced into a position of desperation)[349], as long as we need to compete with our peers in appearing to be able workers, the reproduction of these stressful social structures will not come as a surprise. We need revolutions at the level of ontology, to learn to connect through our vulnerabilities and acknowledge our various forms of interdependency as a fundamental part of life. This has not

[348] Marx, *Capital,* 784.

[349] It is furthermore curious how desperation becomes a sign of vulnerability, conceived as a weakness if it is shown in the job interview.

been the agenda of the socialist revolutions of recent centuries, but it has been the agenda of feminist revolutions with the motto "the personal is political". These revolutions have not been “bloody”, transforming the meaning of the term “revolution” towards a broader understanding than the conventional understanding of one (or a few) militant event(s). Feminist revolutions are "militant" in a more subtle, nuanced and even joyful way, nevertheless with the potential of long term effects transforming the hegemony of social ontology towards vulnerability.

These feminist revolutions are something more than the individual seeds (some of which never grow into plants) planted by people acknowledging their own situated vulnerability rather than denying it. These revolutions indicate nothing less than an earthquake, shaking the landscape of liberal ontology. I see in them a transition towards a new ontological landscape, away from the horizon of liberalism towards the one of a relational ontology of vulnerability.

2015 was a year of feminist revolutions in Iceland that locally went by the name “emotional revolutions” (*tilfinningabyltingar*). What characterised these revolutions was a sharing of difficult experiences or enhancing one’s bodily comfort in (virtual, female) spaces of alliance and solidarity. “Free the nipple” and “Konur tala” (Women speak) changed the “common sense” or the political rationality of sexual relations as well as the general approach to emotional life. A (mostly virtual) space was constructed in which one achieved support for being "raw" and vulnerable. These revolutions took place during the same year in which 100 years of women's suffrage was celebrated in Iceland, enhancing the experience of female solidarity.

The feminist revolution revolving around the hashtag #metoo, which is taking the globe by storm while I write these words in 2017-2018, bears a great resemblance to the revolutions in Iceland 2015, changing what is normatively accepted in sexual relations. These social transformations are happening at the level of social ontology: instead of advocating the being of the *strong individual* of liberalism, who appears invulnerable, these revolutions

are making space for simply being vulnerable without such vulnerability being judged as either positive or negative.

"Free the nipple" was an international campaign designed to attack the social stigma against women breastfeeding in public, whilst pointing out that newspapers such as *The Sun* published sexualised photos of topless women every day. Freeing the nipple took on new implications in Iceland and, as well as standing for a freedom for breastfeeding, had the aim of rendering *revenge porn* powerless: Iceland's high schools filled up with topless students proud of their diverse bodies and breasts. An ex-lover could not take revenge on a girl by distributing a topless photo of her because she had already drunk her cup of coffee casually topless in school! A new generation was gaining a political consciousness via the many feminist organisations that had been popping up in high schools and youth organisations in the years leading up to these revolutions.

The Icelandic *Beauty Tips* Facebook group started as a site for beauty tips and talk, but became a place where women could share difficult and traumatic experiences in a supportive environment closed to typical online trolling. Soon, 25,000 women had joined the group and multiple stories of sexual violence appeared. The revolution flooded out of the gates of the group as hashtags such as #konurtala (women speak) and #þöggun (silencing) become popular on Twitter and Facebook. A common theme throughout these stories was the tremendous shame felt by women, which prevented them from speaking out about these experiences that greatly affected their lives. Now, though, the silence was broken. Not only were stories being shared openly, but a more symbolic act followed: people changed their Facebook profile photos to either a yellow or orange smileyface with a speech bubble. These were orange if a person had experienced sexual violence, and yellow if a person knew someone with that experience. This was a way of showing the frequency of sexual violence, and equally a way for victims of sexual violence to "come out" through a shared effort, without having to stand alone. Another hashtag, #daginneftir (the day after), appeared to oppose the juridical system's normative assumptions concerning the behaviour of victims of sexual violence the day after the violence. The hashtag was used to point out how

"normal" (as opposed to traumatised) victims actually acted the next day, and accordingly verdicts based on victim's behaviour were strongly opposed. In the aftermath of these revolutions a committee was established to re-examine the juridical structure of cases of sexual violence.

In 2017, the political party Björt framtíð, which formed a governmental coalition with Sjálfstæðisflokkurinn and Viðreisn, backed out of the coalition after a series of controversial cases in which criminals convicted of sexual abuse got their honour restored according to Icelandic laws. What, in the end, triggered the collapse of the government, was the revelation that the prime minister's father had written a letter of recommendation for a sexual abuser, and that the prime minister and his party, Sjálfstæðisflokkurinn, had not revealed this information. The family and friends of the victims of these sexual abusers, who had fought against these restorations of honour, claimed in interviews after this event that the recent feminist movements had both given them support and power to fight for these important issues and eventually caused the fall of a government.[350]

I think that these events and movements show that feminist, emotional revolutions are making change, not only in that people are not tolerating violence and sexual abuse anymore, but also in that these issues are not solely matters of the private sphere anymore, where the individual "hides" all his vulnerabilities. Governments fall, and the "background assumption" of what it is to be "human" subsequently alters. Rather than presupposing an assumption of the human, who "should have known better," bearing the sole responsibility of her misfortunes (e.g. who should have estimated the chances of sexual abuse in deciding how to dress), these revolutions are pregnant with an ontology of vulnerable and relational humans.

Every individual act of coming out with an invisible illness, or expressing a sense of shame concerning a perceived vulnerability is

[350] Kristjana Björg Guðbrandsdóttir, "Fólkið sem felldi ríkisstjórnina: Málinu er ekki lokið", *Vísir*, http://www.visir.is/g/2017170919175, retrieved 02.01.2018.

a seed planted in acre preparing a new ontological horizon. In this landscape we can be vulnerable, in whichever way we are so. Rather than claiming possession of whatever value we believe ourselves to have in the manner of a personal asset, we acknowledge the way in which our own situation is conditioned by the relationality and sociality preceding us. Butler's more recent philosophy greatly supports such acknowledgement.

The current feminist movements, in Iceland and around the globe, are something more than those individual seeds. They inherit their force from powerful waves of feminism during the twentieth century. Federici points out that every new revolutionary movement aiming for an alternative to capitalist society has returned to the "transition to capitalism," bringing to it the perspective of new social subjects and uncovering new grounds of exploitation and resistance.[351] This is true, but I also think we need to pinpoint where we see a possible transition taking place in the given historical moment. The emotional revolutions are an example of such a possible contemporary transition, but it is still the case that we need to appear invulnerable in the job interview and compete against our peers.

Although these revolutions surely show that a transformation is taking place, there can always be a backlash. *Femina domestica* cannot (as easily) be sexually violated anymore, but that does not mean that all of the qualities traditionally deemed as feminine and vulnerable will now be accepted.

The spirit of acceptance and of affective solidarity to be found in the emotional revolutions needs to seep into struggles concerning work, benefits and means of subsistence. Interestingly, the #metoo movement does confront how sexual abuse has been used as a power strategy to subordinate women in work-structures with strict hierarchies, starting with one of the most prominent and glamorous work-structure of the world: Hollywood. However, as of December 2017-April 2018, this movement generally accepts the competitive and hierarchical structures found in the work-structures each #metoo group is targeting.

[351] Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 11.

"In a post-feminist world, feminism is seen to have already achieved its goal and, therefore, to have made itself redundant."[352] As Annadís G. Rúdólfsdóttir and Ásta Jóhannesdóttir show, the young women participating in the #freethenipple revolution were generally raised during the neoliberal period, with the belief that gender equality had already been achieved, only to begin to discover the subtle forms of gender subordination.[353] Although these revolutions certainly bear a mark of critical enlightenment directing these same women towards radical feminism, one needs to acknowledge the neoliberal undercurrents that certainly characterise the revolutions. As Annadís and Ásta furthermore show, there is frequent reference to a liberal conception of choice and autonomy.[354] Although women are coming together in solidarity, the neoliberal idea that how the individual fares in life is down to her own choices remains a strong undercurrent in this movement. The current feminist wave challenges the individualistic "common sense" of previous generations' neoliberal paradigm but has not yet replaced it. In fact, as long as the neoliberal rationality is prevalent, the possibility of playing the "feminist card" will not disappear. Being a feminist thus becomes another asset for the individual, maximising her assets as labour power/human capital in an increasingly competitive labour market. Accordingly, a woman could use the feminist identity to climb her own career ladder, celebrating vulnerability as a strength without using her increased power to fight for issues that would actually change the unequal power dynamics

[352] Annadís G. Rúdólfsdóttir and Ásta Jóhannesdóttir, "Fokk patriarchy: An analysis of online social and mainstream media discussion of the #FreetheNipple activites in Iceland in March, 2015", *Feminism and Psychology*, vol. 28, iss 1 (2018), 135. http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0959353517715876#.WnxBjqY-KNY.facebook, retrieved 11.04.2018.

[353] Ibid.

[354] Ibid, 141.According to Icelandic naming tradition, one should refer to one's given names, such as Annadís and Ásta, since "Rúdólfsdóttir" and "Jóhannesdóttir" are strictly speaking not their names, but refer to their paternity. Although this confuses systems of reference within the English language, I do think it is more important to honor different naming traditions as English has become the language of international discourses and debates, both theoretically and more generally. Therefore international discourses in English should aim at including and honoring different naming-traditions around the globe rather than to subsume most of them under English/American traditions.

and better the concrete situation of other women and marginalised groups.

Yet I think it is important to emphasise the radical potential of these revolutions rather that criticise them as yet another aspect of neoliberal individuation. By coming together, accepting and being open to each other's vulnerabilities rather than deeming them negative or positive, we are more likely to remember that all of us have been *femina domestica* all along; all of us *are* vulnerable and interdependent. The aim of this dissertation is accordingly to cast a light on an account of the relational ontology of vulnerability in Butler's work, which I think can be helpful to direct the power of feminist scholarship and activism towards this radical potential.

The following four issues have been the matter of engagement of this dissertation:

i) To show the extent to which Butler's ethico-ontological thought is multi-dimensional. I have done this by placing emphasis on relationality and vulnerability when it comes to ontology. The focus on ontology more than ethics also casts light on the philosophical depth of her theory, which is often overlooked when the ethics of non-violence prevalent in *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War* is at the forefront of theoretical discussions on her ethical turn. By analysing opacity as an epistemic vulnerability, the interconnections between the multiple dimensions of relationality and vulnerability are explicated, as can be seen in the interconnection between Butler's theory of the self and her analysis of social normativity. This analysis furthermore shows the ingenuity of Butler's ethical account: because we are opaque beings, we cannot know the whole of our lives. Understanding how we share this state of opacity with others allows us to accept their unknowingness and opacity as well as our own, in determining what constitutes a "good action" or a "good life". The relational account of Butler's ethics hence becomes more explicit. Responsibility cannot be calculated or measured in accordance with general ethical principles but consists in *being responsive*. Responsibility (always already) happens in relations, at the scene of the address, in which the "I" asks *Who are you?* By an ontological shift towards relational

ontology of vulnerability, people can learn more open-ended ways of asking one another *Who are you?* or learn how to *elicit* more vulnerable accounts from others bearing in mind that giving an account of oneself can be hectic, confusing and can indeed fail.

ii) The issue of sociality marks another dimension of Butler's ontological account. Given that we are relational beings born into primary dependency, we are subjected to normative frameworks according to our own social location through the caring and intimate others of our lives. The focus on social normativity furthermore casts light on the (alleged) historicity of the account. Butler adheres to the genealogical account of norms given by Foucauldian scholarship. Accordingly, this is a historically-situated ontology. In light of this, I examine what is frequently a target of Butler's critique: namely liberal ontology. By expanding this analysis with other scholarship critiquing (neo)liberalism, I argue that the relational ontology of vulnerability Butler proposes has indeed always been a hidden part of the liberal ontology. The relational ontology of vulnerability has been hidden in the figure of *femina domestica*, and limited to the private sphere of society, whilst the possessive individual can appear invulnerable in the public sphere. This shows an ethico-political aspect of Butler's ontology: as a response to the individuation of (neo)liberal ontology, Butler affirms a social, bodily ontology with relationality at its heart. The political aim of such affirmation is to suggest an ontological landscape for more collective and supportive ways of living.

iii) The third issue consists in critiquing Butler's account of vulnerability and more generally the theoretical discourse of vulnerability, both within philosophy and as an interdisciplinary discourse within the social sciences and humanities. What is it that hinders so many of us from comfortably appearing vulnerable if we feel like it? Throughout the dissertation, I have used the example of the chronically ill person with an unrecognised medical condition as an example of a state of heightened vulnerability that cannot be disclosed. Being chronically ill in a job interview, but performing as

an attractive and able worker, thus illustrates why it is so difficult to *be* or reside in one's vulnerability in the present-day societies of the West. Any philosophy of vulnerability that does not take the hindrance illustrated by the job interview into account does not have a good chance of changing the world (of work and livelihood).[355] The paradigmatic example of a chronically ill person in the job interview shows us that ontology of vulnerability (and politics and ethics of vulnerability) is essentially related to the (economic) structures of livelihood or means of subsistence. Without traditional, liberal welfare or new and innovative support systems, earning one's bread becomes an issue of desperate and dire need.

Although the hegemony of neoliberalism appears to have lost consensus, it still is the case that separated individuals are interpellated by the present-day labour system of capitalism as can be seen in the job interview, that compels one to compete with one's peers.[356] This means both that it is difficult for you to appear vulnerable, and that you are ontologically conditioned by invulnerability. To truly lay the ground for being vulnerable, to collectively acknowledge vulnerability and the interdependencies that have resided within the liberal ontology all along, hidden in the figure of *femina domestica*, the unequal power relations of capitalism need to be altered.

iv) I conclude by pointing at the possibilities in the present. I claim that the possibilities of an ontological landscape of relationality and vulnerability do reside within feminist scholarship and activism. Socialist revolutions can easily reproduce liberal subjectivities if they do not contain feminist critique pointing towards the ontological

[355] As Marx claimed as being the purpose of philosophy in his eleven thesis in "Theses on Feuerbach".

[356] Rehmann refers to "Gramsci's interregnum" when describing the situation where there appear to be no social and political alternatives, but the general public has lost all faith in the ruling system. Thus, neoliberal capitalism can still rely on passive consensus from the general public. Gramsci believed that "the crisis precisely consists in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear." Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2003), 275-276, Rehmann, *Theories of Ideology*, 296.

reality of *femina domestica*. Feminist revolutions can also reproduce such subjectivities by being too focused on upper- or middle-class feminism as well as white feminism; the main outcome being that privileged women manage to climb the hierarchical career-ladder of capitalist work-structures.

However, these feminist revolutions show an awareness of the subjective experiences of the concrete people in question, of the possibility of someone being excluded, that we may not understand the experiences of other people, that it might take time to alter your "common sense" given how deeply it reaches your psyche and that society consists of many different and intersecting hierarchies. These points are essential for building solidarities as well as alliances and for sharing the world. This is the reason Butler's multi-dimensional ontology is important: via analysing different aspects such as the psychic, the political and the ethical, it soon becomes clear that "overthrowing" capitalism means that we need to change our hearts and souls, not solely the macro-structure. As Audre Lorde put it so aptly: "The true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations that we seek to escape but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us."[357] If we aim for wellness (with decreased stress and anxiety), collective responsibility and equality; if we aim for a society from each according to her ability, to each according to her needs, then we really need these emotional, feminist revolutions disclosing and acknowledging vulnerability.[358] But these very same revolutions need to confront, attack and transform the unrealistic individuation of invulnerability stemming from the liberal paradigm and capitalist means of production.

The relational aspect of vulnerability acknowledges the way we *are* always already the others around us and essentially dependent on relationality. Accordingly, I am making the claim that social relationality is a part of the human condition. The emphasis on

[357] Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women redefining Difference", *Sister Outsider*, (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 123.

[358] Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Marx/Engels Internet Archive, (1999), https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/ch01.htm, retrieved 16.04.2018.

(primary) dependency and all the hidden labour of traditionally female roles –more often than not executed in a supportive and collective way –cannot but indicate collectivism (in an equal and democratic sense) as a political form of living. But furthermore, I am proposing an ontology that favours cooperation rather than competition, in an attempt to construct a supportive collectivity where individuals can flourish.

The theoretical originality of this dissertation mainly lies in interpreting Butler's more recent philosophy as a relational ontology of vulnerability as well as showing the current limits of this philosophy, as it does not adequately address the requirement to appear invulnerable in capitalist work-structures. I rely on emerging literature about vulnerability in Butler's work such as that of Mills, Thiem, Schippers, Gilson and Lloyd, all of whom have directed my thought towards emphasising relationality (as a broader concept than sociality) as well as seeing vulnerability ontologically, and hence not as a new ideal to celebrate. Gilson has pinpointed the problem of the discourse of vulnerability by pointing at the denial of vulnerability and the ideal of invulnerability. However, I have pointed towards a need to connect Butler's and Gilson's analysis more tightly to the way work-structures effect this denial, as well as how they reproduce they need to appear invulnerable. Capitalism offers us freedom to starve, as Marx noted, and this freedom subjugates us to accept terms that force us to appear invulnerable.

Debates concerning to what extent Butler is a Marxist have mainly revolved around the concept of the "material" and its relations to the "economic" and "cultural" as can be seen in the Butler-Fraser debate.[359] My aim has been to view Butler's work differently, but from a Marxist standpoint, by looking at the notion of vulnerability from the perspective of feminist critique of both classical liberalism and neoliberalism. I think that the originality of this interpretation of the relational ontology of vulnerability additionally lies in coming up with

[359] Fraser, "Heterosexism, Misrecognition, and Capitalism", 280, Butler, "Merely Cultural", 266.

such a different standpoint, rather than analysing existing debates within Marxism and feminism, although that project is worthwhile.

My original aim was to provide some sort of Marxist critique of Butler's work –which is very much in spirit of our current times, as Butler has been widely critiqued for her silence on matters of capitalism and class –but I was surprised to see, through my reading and examination of the critique of liberalism in her work, that she is more of a Marxist thinker in the sense of her critique of the human than I anticipated. Like Marx, she is highly critical of the abstract character of the human within liberalist thought, and her analysis in *Gender Trouble* exposes how the heterosexual matrix favours the reproduction of capitalism and her approach to vulnerability and precariousness shows an awareness of precarious labour relations. However, Butler does not connect her ideas of liveability and survivability to the prevalent system of gaining livelihood, namely acquiring a job and (hopefully) keeping it. Nor does she address how fundamental it is for the function of capitalism that people find themselves without means of subsistence.

Through my own path of being socially constructed during a post-feminist and neoliberal period, I think I sometimes superficially dismissed feminism as a mere theory of "women's issues" (e.g. when I started studying philosophy) only to find out how the most fierce and interesting debates concerning philosophical matters such as the world, society and of course women's issues, are happening within feminist movements and scholarship. The relationship between Marxism and feminism is described (within feminist scholarship) through marriages and divorces between critiques of capitalism and patriarchy. I choose a different, albeit related, path: to examine subject formation within (neo)liberalism via the analytical tools of social and historical ontology and to analyse the work of one of the most prominent and interesting feminist philosophers of today: Judith Butler.

My aim was to use conceptual tools that felt fitting to the struggles of the beginning of the twenty-first century, to a generation struggling with hyper-individuality, a need to "be themselves" and even struggling with loneliness in a digital world. At the same time, it

is a generation that – perhaps more than earlier generations – is willing to open up and face their emotional lives, accept them and learn to live together as (universally) vulnerable beings with different particular vulnerabilities. It is a generation that might reconceptualise ethical responsibility and be able to ask *Who are you?* as well as being content with the constant implicit failure of giving an account of oneself. It is my hope that these conceptual tools echo the rich scholarship that considers the marriages and divorces (or relationships) of Marxism and feminism, such as the work of Iris Marion Young, Maria Dalla Costa, Selma Jones and Lisa Vogel, whilst showing that the relational ontology of vulnerability found within Butler's more recent philosophy can serve as a glue for scholarship and movements aiming to conjoin micro- and macro-struggles.[360]

The relational ontology of vulnerability touches upon different matters that need to be thought together. My earlier perception of feminism as a mere theory of women's issues, (politically often unjustly termed as “soft” issues compared to “hard” issues of economics and political systems of governance) indicates that we are socially formed to compartmentalise our thinking, to reduce women's issues into a neatly fit category that certainly needs to be reformed, but does not otherwise touch upon other aspects of the social structure.

But women's issues and *femina domestica* seep into every nook and cranny of the social fibre. The future of employment, in the wake of ever-advanced technology and job computation, appears

[360] These thinkers all have different approaches to both capitalism and patriarchy, but share a commitment to thinking feminism and Marxism together. The so-called dual system-theory emerged as a response to Heidi Hartmann's article, "The unhappy marriage of Marxism and Feminism" but there have been other versions of such a dual system, such as Nancy Fraser's analysis of recognition and redistribution. Heidi Hartmann, "The unhappy marriage of Marxism and Feminism" in *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*, ed. Lydia Sargent (Cambridge: South End Press, 1981), 1-41, Iris Marion Young, "Beyond the unhappy marriage: A critique of the dual system theory" in *Women and Revolution*, 43-70, Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), Maria Dalla Costa and Selma James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of Community*, (London: Wages for Housework Publisher, 1975), Lisa Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women. Towards a Unitary Theory* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

rather bleak, "technological unemployment" is already widely felt.[361] In light of this, it is of the utmost importance to challenge the relationship between subjectivity and capitalist employment that the liberal ontology depends on, and to find ways to begin something new. We need to prevent this state of technological unemployment – which increasingly goes under the name of the "fourth industrial revolution"[362] –from leading to a general mass poverty and horrific conditions of life. Furthermore, we need to prevent this development from leading to an epidemic of anxiety and desperation amongst the majority of the population fighting for fewer and fewer steady, long-term jobs. As long as we are formed as separated individuals who need to compete with each other concerning who is the most able and attractive worker, we will not acknowledge our situated vulnerability as a condition of being in the world. Neither will we so easily learn more open-ended ways of asking one another *Who are you?* or learn how to *elicit* more vulnerable accounts from others.

Issues of livelihood as well as issues surrounding "the personal is political" are conjoined in the multi-dimensional account of the relational ontology of vulnerability I have read into Butler's more recent philosophy. At this historical present, feminist revolutions are pregnant with possibilities but an analysis of relational ontology of vulnerability as well as what it is that hinders the actualisation of this ontology would greatly benefit these revolutions. If we would be able to ask and answer *Who are you?* and give accounts of ourselves that are not exhausted by our relations under capitalism, a different understanding of vulnerability and what it means to see one another as vulnerable can appear.[363] But in order to change our own

[361] Carl Benedikt Frey and Michael A. Osborne, *The Future of Employment: How Susceptible are Jobs to Computerisation?* (Oxford: Oxford Martin School: 2013), retrieved 02.01.2018: https://www.oxfordmartin.ox.ac.uk/downloads/academic/The_Future_of_Employment.pdf.

[362] Klaus Schwab seems to have popularised referring to the fourth industrial revolutions but the *World Economic Forum* organisation has also established *The Center for the Fourth Industrial Revolution*. https://www.weforum.org/center-for-the-fourth-industrial-revolution/about, retrieved 02.01.2018.

[363] Allowing people of all genders to recalibrate and shift their perspectives on vulnerability.

perceptions and "internal logic" we need to fundamentally restructure society.

Addressing sexual abuse in the #metoo revolutions means that unequal hierarchical gendered relations in work structures are beginning to be addressed and (hopefully) restructured. Furthermore, these revolutions show people's (women's) exhaustion and outrage with the need to appear as the invulnerable subject and to conform with abusive and violent behaviour in order to be deem as a fit and attractive worker in present-day labour systems of capitalism. These revolutions show why the concept of vulnerability has been gaining a momentum and why this concept has become so important for a transdisciplinary, feminist philosopher such as Butler. The next step to be taken if an ontological transition towards relational ontology of vulnerability is to happen, is to truly address and revolutionise work-structures that rely on unequal hierarchies, and a permanent surplus population that desperately seeks the scene of address of the job interview, in which an employer asks *Who are you?*

Útdráttur

Síðustu ár hefur *berskjöldun* (e. vulnerability) átt miklu brautargengi að fagna bæði í fræðalandslagi femínískrar heimspeki og sem þverfaglegt hugtak. Heimspekingurinn Judith Butler hefur vakið eftirtekt fyrir gagnrýni sína á hve víða í samfélaginu sé gengið út frá ákveðnum mannskilningi og verufræði, t.d. hvað varðar kyn, og hvernig þessi verufræði viðhaldi ráðandi samfélagsgerð. Í þessari doktorsritgerð greini ég hvernig Butler kemur fram með annan verufræðilegan valkost í bókinni *Giving an Account of Oneself* frá 2005 og tengdum verkum sem ég nefni *tengsla-verufræði berskjöldunar* (*e*. relational ontology of vulnerability). Ég held því enn fremur fram að þessi verufræði sé ómissandi til að skilja og betrumbæta samspil siðfræði og stjórnmála í samtímanum. Berskjöldun er hvorki skilin sem neikvæður eiginleiki né sem ný gerð af hugsjón sem maður ætti að sækjast eftir.

Butler er þekkt sem gagnrýnin og pólitískur heimspekingur, meðal annars sem ein af upphafsfólki hinsegin fræða. Hún hefur hins vegar verið gagnrýnd fyrir skort á Marxísku sjónarhorni en í þessu samhengi er almennt vitnað til ritdeilu hennar við Nancy Fraser frá árinu 1997 þar sem Butler var beint og óbeint sökuð um að vera „aðeins menningarleg“. Ef Butler er einungis skoðuð út frá verkum Karl Marx þá notast hún vissulega lítið við þau verk – en ef verkin eru skoðuð út frá femínískri gagnrýni á frjálshyggju, sem er einn meginþáttur femíniskrar heimspeki þá sést að Butler er í megindráttum að gagnrýna þann mannskilning sem liggur til grundvallar kapítalisma. Þannig sést glöggt bæði í fyrri verkum hennar sem og þeim nýrri, að Butler gagnrýnir hvernig að hin ráðandi sjálfsverumótun beinir manneskjum í ákveðið far sem stuðlar að endurframleiðslu ráðandi afla í samfélaginu. Þetta far takmarkar möguleika manneskjunnar á því að *vera* á þann hátt sem kemur heim og saman við hennar eigin upplifanir af heiminum.

Meginstef ritgerðarinnar felst þó fyrst og fremst í því að sýna fram á að Butler kemur fram með verufræði sem er ekki aðeins

fræðilega áhugaverð heldur er einnig mun mannúðlegri (og visthverfari) en sú ráðandi verufræði sem skilyrðir líf fólks í vestrænum samfélögum í dag. Þessi verufræði dregur í dagsljósið þá margbreytilegu berskjöldun sem einkennir persónulegt líf okkar sem og þau ótal félagslegu tengsl sem við erum ávallt þegar partur af þegar við hefjum bæði sjálfskoðun og að skilgreina hver við erum fyrir öðrum. Það sem gerir þessa nálgun áhugaverðari en margar þær kenningar um berskjöldun sem hafa komið fram síðustu ár, er að Butler einskorðar sig ekki við eitt fræðasvið (eða svið mannlífsins), heldur kemur fram með hugmynd um berskjöldun sem nær að fletta saman innra líf manneskjunnar, hið pólitíska og samfélagslega kerfi sem og þá siðferðislegur þræði sem liggja til grundvallar hinum ólíku sviðum.

Í fyrri verkum Butler leggur hún til pólitískar strategíur til þess að skjöna (*e.* queer) hefðbundin kynjanorm. Ég held því fram í þessari ritgerð að slíkar strategíur vanti til þess að tengslaverufræði berskjöldunar megi ná að umbylta þeirri ráðandi verufræði frjálshyggju sem finna megi í samfélaginu. Ég legg til að til þess að byggja upp slíkar strategíur þurfum við að huga betur að sögulegu ástæðum þess að berskjöldun sé svo mikilvæg í dag og hví svo erfitt sé að koma fram í berskjöldun sinni. Með því að lýsa því hvernig að langveik og þar af leiðandi mjög berskjölduð manneskja þarf að koma fram sem sé hún ósærandi í atvinnuviðtalinu, staðset ég hvað það sé sem komi í veg fyrir að tengslaverufræði berskjöldunar nái samfélagslegu forræði.

Fyrsti kafli ritgerðarinnar fjallar um þá hlið verufræðinnar sem snýr að sjálfinu. Ég útlista þá hugmynd Butler að „ég-ið“ verði til í tengslum við „þú-ið“. Þetta gerist í gegnum *ávarpið* og formgerð ávarpsins skiptir sköpum um hvernig sjálf verður til. Til þess að sýna fram á sérstöðu hugmyndar Butler skoða ég einnig tengsla-kenningu Adriönu Cavarero um sjálfið. Á meðan að Butler og Cavarero eiga það sameiginlegt að huga að tengslum sjálfs og *hins* sem og hvernig að sjálfið verði til í gegnum *frásögn*, þá telur Cavarero hvert sjálf vera einstakt á meðan Butler telur að tengsl og félagsveruleiki grundvalli sjálfið. Það sem við *erum*, er fólgið í öllum sjálfunum í kringum okkur, bæði okkar nánustu sem og þeim ótal óþekktu sjálfum sem hafa mótað það kerfi norma sem skilyrðir líf okkar. Ég

fjalla einnig um hina þekkingafræðilegu berskjöldun sem felst í hugmyndinni um *óminni* (e. opacity) í fyrsta kafla. Samkvæmt Butler einkennir óminnið allar okkar stundir, bæði hið upprunalega óminni sem birtist í því að við munum ekki fyrstu augnablik lífsins, en einnig óminnið sem felst í því hve margt fer framhjá okkur í líðandi stund. Butler leitar meðal annars í hugmyndir sálgreinanandans Jean Laplanche hvað varðar óminnið sem og til þess að leggja áherslu á að við fæðumst inn í algert *hæði* (*e.* dependency) sem kemur ávallt til með að einkenna lífsgöngu okkar að einhverju leyti.

Í öðrum kafla skoða ég þá hlið verufræðinnar sem lýtur að kerfi norma og hvernig það tengist sögu sjálfsveruháttar í vestrænum samfélögum. Í gegnum norm öðlumst við skiljanleika (*e.* intelligibility) og viðurkenningu frá hvort öðru. Óskiljanleiki er þó alltaf inni í myndinni þegar við tjáum okkur og hinn normatívi gjörningur getur alltaf brugðist. En að hversu miklu leyti einkennir slík normalísering öll möguleg samfélög og að hversu miklu leyti er um söguleg þróun að ræða? Þetta er ekki alltaf skýrt í verkum Butler en hún aðhyllist þó sögulega greiningu í anda Michael Foucault og að mínu mati þarf að undirstrika þessa sögulegu nálgun á norm. Sé það gert kemur í ljós að *sjálfsveran* er til grundvallar þessari greiningu. Þessi hugmynd er nátengt hugmyndafræði frjálshyggjunnar í nútímanum. Á þessum sögulega tíma þarf manneskjan að birtast sem hin *ósærandi sjálfsvera* (e. invulnerable subject) eða sem hinn *eignarvæddi einstaklingur* (e. the possessive individual) til þess að geta selt vinnuafl sitt í skiptum fyrir laun í hinni kapítalísku formgerð framleiðslu sem er oft eina leiðin til þess að afla sér lífsviðurværis. Þessi sjálfsveruháttur gerir ekki grein fyrir þeim eiginleikum manneskjunnar sem lúta að berskjöldun og hæði. Þegar að tengslaverufræði berskjöldunar er dregin saman þá kemur í ljós að hugmyndir Butler varpa ljósi á það sem femínískir gagnrýnendur á frjálshyggju eins og Carol Pateman og Wendy Brown hafa afhjúpað: að mannskilningur frjálshyggju er í raun tvöfaldur, hinn sterki, eignarvæddi einstaklingur og *femina domestica* – huldukonan sem hlúir að öllum viðkvæmum þáttum mannlífsins á borð við umönnun og umhyggju svo hinn sterki einstaklingur geti birst út á við sem óháður og ósæranlegur (*invulnerable*). Þannig er þessi verufræði berskjöldunar í raun til staðar innan frjálshyggjunar og er í

grundvallaratriðum kynjuð en hulin sjónum þó að ekki sé hægt að viðhalda samfélögum án hennar. Á síðustu áratugum hefur frjálshyggjan gengið í endurnýjun lífdaga sem nýfrjálshyggja. Nýfrjálshyggjunni fylgir mjög greinileg einstaklingsvæðing allra vandamála; í stað þess að sníða kerfi sem að tryggir samábyrgð og nýtir í raun sérhæfinguna sem er til staðar, þá er ábyrgðinni varpað yfir á einstaklinginn á grundvelli þess mannskilnings sem byggir á sjálfsveru frjálshyggunnar.

Í þriðja kafla greini ég Butler sem verufræðing. Ég legg áherslu á að *gagnrýni* er alltaf til grundvallar verufræði Butler og skoða hvernig að hún sjálf samsamar sig hinum gagnrýnu fræðum meginlandsheimspeki. Upp úr aldamótum fer Butler hins vegar að mynda sinn eigin mannskilning eða eigin félagslegu verufræði gegn hinni ráðandi verufræði frjálshyggjunnar. Í stað þess að vera ávallt í sporum gagnrýnanda þá byrjar hún að benda á þætti sem einkenna mannlífið að mun meira leyti heldur en hinn sterki og skynsami einstaklingur frjálshyggjunnar nær að endurspegla. Í þessum kafla útskýri ég af hverju ég álít þetta vera *tengslaverufræði*. Butler leggur áherslu á *möguleika* þegar kemur að verufræði, á hugmynd Spinoza um *contatus essendi* (en Butler túlkar hana sem þránna að vera *með öðrum*) og síðast en ekki síst telur Butler að á grundvelli tengsla séum við alltaf þegar *fyrir utan okkur* (ecstatic). Á þennan hátt erum við berskjölduð og í raun opin gagnvart umheiminum, bæði gagnvart því erfiða og því ástúðlega, ef svo má segja, auk þess sem óminnið gerir okkur þekkingalega berskjölduð

Í fjórða kafla fjalla ég um siðfræði Butler, bæði hvað varðar órjúfanleg tengsl siðfræði og (félags)verufræði sem og þá siðferðislegu undirtóna sem finna má þeirri tengslaverufræði berskjöldunar sem ég dreg fram úr verkum hennar. Óminnið sem einkennir líf okkar gerir það að verkum að við getum aldrei vitað neitt af fullvissu. Þessi hugmynd skekur grundvöll hinnar skynsömu sjálfsveru hefðbundinnar siðfræði, sem setur fram almenn siðalögmál. Þetta þýðir að við þurfum að hugsa um ábyrgð upp á nýtt og Butler skilgreinir ábyrgð í þessu samhengi sem svörunarhæfni (e. *responsiveness*). Þetta þýðir að tengsl manns við *hinn* liggur þessari siðfræði til grundvallar og leitar Butler hér fanga í heimspeki Emmanuel Levinas. Eitt af meginstefum þessarar siðfræði

er að skilja flókið tilfinningalíf manneskjunnar og af hverju fólk beitir ofbeldi. Butler telur að til þess að minnka líkur á ofbeldi þurfi fólk að fá rými til þess að skoða sitt eigin tilfinningalíf, en sjálfsveruháttur ósæranleika í frjálshyggju hindrar slíka skoðun og er í raun ofbeldi í sjálfu sér.

Í fimmta kafla skoða ég hugmynd Butler um berskjöldun og hvernig hugmynd hennar tengjast öðrum samtímahugmyndum um hugtakið. Butler greinir á milli almennrar berskjöldunnar (*e.* precariosuness) sem einkennir líf allra manneskja og staðbundinnar berskjöldunar (*e.* precarity) sem er mismikil eftir því pólitíska fyrirkomulagi sem finna má í ólíkum samfélögum. Þessi orðræða tengist einnig hugmyndum um berskjöldunarvæðingu (*e.* precarisation) og hvernig að aukið atvinnuóöryggi einkennir líf fólks á Vesturlöndum. Ég skoða af hverju hugmyndir um berskjöldun eigi svo miklu brautargengi að fagna um þessar mundir sem og af hverju fólki finnst svo erfitt að birtast í berskjöldun sinni. Ég tel svarið liggja í því hvernig ósæranleiki liggi til grundvallar því að geta aflað sér lífsviðurværis í kapítalísku efnahagskerfi; til grundvallar því að hreinlega eiga í sig og á. Þannig er atvinnuviðtalið birtingamynd þess sem gerir berskjöldun að vandamáli fyrir fólk. Það er ekki hægt að birtast sem langveik manneskja í atvinnuviðtali. Jafnvel í þeim tilfellum þar sem að atvinnurekandi væri líklegur til þess að ráða þá manneskju myndi hún ekki taka áhættuna að afhjúpa slíka berskjöldum ef hún þarf virkilega á lífsviðurværi að halda. Hin langveika manneskja í atvinnuviðtali er þannig sett fram sem birtingamynd þeirrar þverstæðu samtímans að fólk er berskjaldað á margvíslegan hátt en samfélagsformgerðin gerir þeim vart kleift að birtast samtímis í berskjöldun sinni og sem æskilegur starfskraftur. Vegna þess að það *ávarp* sem hefur hvað mest að segja um lífsskilyrði fólks – það er, ávarp atvinnuviðtalsins – býður fólki ekki upp á að birtast berskjaldað, mun hvorki verufræði né siðfræði berskjöldunar fela í sér umbreytingarkraft nema að þróaðar séu pólitískar strategíur sem taka mið af þýðingu atvinnuviðtalsins.

Í niðurlagi ritgerðarinnar bendi ég á hvar möguleikarnir gætu legið svo tengslaverufræði berskjöldunar ná samfélagslegu forræði. Þessir möguleikar eru að mínu að mati að finna í hinum nýlegu femínísku byltingum, bæði í tilfinninga-byltingunum sem áttu sér á

Íslandi 2015 og í hinni alþjóðlegu #metoo-byltingu. Í þessum byltingum hefur fólk (konur) komið saman og birst í berskjöldun sinni og skapað rými fyrir fólk að gera slíkt hið sama. Einnig hafa ójöfn valdatengsl kynjanna í vinnukerfum samtímans verið gagnrýnd, sem er forsenda þess að gagnrýna það ójafna kapítalíska vinnukerfi sem heldur fólki í sífelldu óöryggi um lífsafkomu sína. Nýung ritgerðarinnar felst í að tengja orðræðu berskjöldunar svo gagngert við þetta vinnukerfi samtímans á sögulegan hátt. Ennfremur felst nýung ritgerðarinnar í því að ramma inn fræðilegar samræður um marxisma og femínisma á nýjan hátt: Í stað þess að greina kerfi feðraveldis og kapítalisma er skoðað hvernig að ráðandi verufræði frjálshyggju viðheldur ójafnri kynjaskipan og hvernig að félagsleg verufræði á borð við Butler geti umbylt samfélaginu í krafti þess að skoða upp á nýtt eiginleika á borð við berskjöldun og hæði sem hafa verið álitnir bæði kvenleigir og neikvæðir.

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