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Questioning the “We” in Times of Global Threats with Butler and Levinas

Lucia Angelino

Abstract

Today, the “we” has not lost its place in contemporary debates. On the contrary, it has become a crucial question in the political and philosophical debates relating to global-scale disasters and traumatic events, which expose all of humanity to the same risks and same threats. In a dramatic and paradigmatic way, these events invite us to “mourn” the fantasy of self-sufficiency of the *I* and remind us to which extent our lives are immediately linked to those of others. At the same time, however, these events, which yields the potential to reveal a relationality constitutive of “who we are,” also suggest the need to reframe our understanding of the “we,” and to overcome the us/them divide upon which it has been construed until now. In this essay, I take up this challenge by first engaging in a critical discussion of Judith Butler’s ethics of vulnerability, and then turning to the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas.

Keywords

We – ethics of vulnerability – ethical responsiveness – global threats – Judith Butler – Emmanuel Levinas

1 Introduction

Today, the “we” has not lost its place in contemporary debates. On the contrary, it has become a crucial question in the public, political and philosophical debates relating to global-scale disasters and traumatic events – be they wars, terrorist attacks, environmental crises, pandemics, or illegitimate state

of violence – which expose all of humanity to the same risks and same threats. In a dramatic and paradigmatic way, these events challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control and display the bonds of interdependence by which we exist outside of ourselves and through others than ourselves. In this respect, they invite us to “mourn” the fantasy of self-sufficiency of the *I* i.e. the *ego*, and remind us to which extent our lives are immediately linked to those of others. At the same time, however, these dramatic and global events, which yields the potential to reveal a relationality constitutive of “who we are” also suggest the need to reframe or revise our understanding of the “we” in ways that depart from the identitarian paradigm (e.g., from the idea that what binds one community to another, or one population to another depends on those two communities bearing similar marks of national, cultural, religious, racial belonging), and challenge the us/them divide upon which it has been construed until now.

It is worth recalling at this point that in all its known, and previous forms, the “we” always stands up against a “them,” it arises in opposition to a foreign, outside community. In other words, its affirmation seems to be inseparable from an exclusion, and, correlatively, from the identification of an enemy, or an outside group. However, we are entering an era in which “we find ourselves invariably joined to those we never chose,”¹ and we must respond to solicitations that are “global in character and that emerge both at a distance and within relations of proximity,”² to recall Judith Butler’s recent diagnosis of our times. In other words, no clear lines can be traced between “us” and “them,” neighbors and foreigners, friends and foes, chosen and unchosen, known and unknown, proximate and far away, because “what is happening ‘there’ also happens in some sense ‘here,’”³ and that “here” is always connected to several “elsewhere(s),”⁴ and necessarily so, owing to the shifting global connections and challenges, which connect each of us with the destiny and the life of other human beings.

This ambivalent redrawing of boundaries and this “reversibility of proximity and distance”⁵ requires us to move beyond the us/them dichotomy, and to give shape to a “we” which would extend beyond our immediate sphere of

1 Judith Butler, “Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation”, *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 26(2), 2012, 134.

2 Ibid.

3 Butler, “Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation,” 138.

4 Ibid.

5 According to an expression borrowed to Judith Butler and which occurs in the paper entitled “Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation,” 134–151.

belonging, in the name of a shared condition of vulnerability which is coextensive to human life in any and all of its forms.

In this respect, there is a challenge before us. If we assume that the emergence of a “we” on a global scale (humanity-wide “we-feeling”) is heralded and made desirable by the appearance of global-scale disasters and catastrophic events, which threaten all human societies alike, the obvious and crucial question, which will be the topic of this paper, can be formulated as follows: in what sense can we understand a humanity wide “we-feeling” to emerge from a shared condition of vulnerability? To what extent might vulnerability, understood as our bodily exposure to new and radical threats, give rise to a we-feeling that extend to those “we never chose and with whom we may feel no immediate sense of social belonging”?⁶

In order to address these questions, I shall proceed in three steps. First, by dealing with Butler’s *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning*, I will suggest that the experience of grief, vulnerability and loss, can *restore, reawaken* the perception of our common fragility (denied until now by a subject long thought of as sovereign and self-sufficient) and therefore offers a “chance” for a humanity-wide “we-feeling” to emerge in the pathic and dative form of *to us*. This opportunity, however, is only a “chance” that we can take up, but one which we can also not know how to (or not want to) seize. From then on, the problem is to understand under what conditions the *to whom of pathos*, can be transformed into an ethically *responsive we*. To address this question, I will then move on to Levinas’s intersubjective ethics and argue that vulnerability can become an ethical resource and a resource for politics, only insofar as it is conceived of as a certain affective disposition towards alterity *within* the subject – what Levinas calls the “for the other” of subjectivity or “the other within the same” of ethical subjectivity as described in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. In a third and last step I will outline the outcome of this cross-reading, arguing that if a humanity-wide we-feeling has the opportunity to emerge, it would take its departure not in an anonymous, shared condition of bodily vulnerability nor in the ecstatic and unbounded relationality of the body, but rather in a primary susceptibility/vulnerability to the other which constitutes me as an ethical subject, as a subject disposed to attend to and to respond ethically to the suffering of others (both at a distance and within relations of proximity), because originally defined by the approval of the other’s claim at its heart. In conclusion, the social implications of this view can be formulated as follows. What binds us together is not an elective and exclusive “complicity” that includes many, while establishing that it excludes others, nor

6 Butler, “Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation,” 144.

it is an identity to be separated and defended against those who do not belong to or do not identify with our group. Rather, it is a responsibility *before* and *for* all men – *before* and *for* the world that binds us together – founded on the ethical structure of the one-for-the-other and rooted in a kind of primary vulnerability to others.

2 The “We” in Times of Global Threats

Before getting to the point, let me start by setting forth a diagnosis of our times (*Zeitdiagnose*), by painting a picture of the present age, while drawing the general frame that motivates my philosophical inquiry. It seems increasingly evident that “if we are to solve our largest challenges as a species, which threatens all human societies alike, we had best be prepared to think of all of humanity as a ‘we.’”⁷ But, as Norbert Elias reminds us, “our ties to this all-embracing we-unit are so loose that very few people – it seems – are aware of them as social bonds.”⁸ A contradiction therefore appears between the situation of global interdependence nowadays achieved, and the “persistent fixation of individual’s we-identity on units of an earlier stages”⁹: on the one hand, as Norbert Elias insightfully pointed out, we are entering an era in which “human-kind – split-up-into-states – is increasingly becoming the framework of reference, as social unit, of many processes and structural changes.”¹⁰ On the other hand, “the we-image, the we-identity of most people,” – their identification with limited sub-groups and local communities, in particular nation states – “lags behind the reality”¹¹ of global interdependence actually achieved.

Put differently, although the emergence of a humanity-wide “we-feeling” (i.e., a “we-group feeling” relating to all of humanity) is made desirable by the appearance of global-scale disasters and catastrophic events, which threatens all human societies alike, it remains very difficult to achieve, precisely because it cannot rely on the “us/them” divide that has structured the cohesion of communities at all the previous levels. While all previous forms of social

7 Michael Tomasello, “The Origins of Human Morality: How We Learned to Put our Fate in Another’s Hands,” *Scientific American* 319: 75. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1038/scientificamerican0918-70>.

8 Norbert Elias, *The Society of Individuals, The Collected Works of Norbert Elias*, vol. 10 (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, [1987] 2010), 202.

9 *Ibid.*, 204.

10 *Ibid.*, 203.

11 *Ibid.*

integration – from tribal “communities” to state and national societies – have structured themselves through this opposition to a foreign, an outside community, this is indeed impossible on the scale of ultimate integration that is humanity, which “is not threatened by other non-human groups, but only by sub-groups within itself”.¹²

In keeping with this, no question has been more central to contemporary philosophical debates than the question of whether global threats unite *or* divide communities. Do they increase solidarity and community feeling among groups? Or do they instead stir up the tensions running through societies, dangerously emphasizing divisions and communitarian closedness? Within the literature there are theories to support either thesis. On the one hand, extending in particular the work of Günter Anders,¹³ many philosophers and sociologists – including Jürgen Habermas,¹⁴ and Ulrich Beck¹⁵ – claim that exposure to global-scale disasters has a *unifying* effect on communities and might engender a humanity-wide we-feeling. On the other hand, community studies – following in particular the work of Roberto Esposito¹⁶ – claim that catastrophic events *divide* communities, and provoke self-defensive reactions, resulting in increased violence and external hostility. As with all debate, each position contains a grain of truth. But from my point of view the question of whether global threats unite *or* divide communities is irrelevant for we all know that the answer to such questions will always be “yes and no.” The real question that concerns me in this paper, is *in which way* global threats that “emerge both at a distance and within relations of proximity”¹⁷ affect and reshape the sense of “us,” both in its relationship to the “I,” and to “they.”

My general hypothesis on this point is that exposure to global-scale threats, lays down the objective premises for a “we” on a global scale to be experienced, at least in the pathic form of a “to us.” These real possibilities, however, are only a chance, and a chance that most often comes up against the opposite pressure of self-defensive mechanisms, resulting in increased external hostility and

12 Ibid., 204.

13 Günter Anders, *L'obsolescence de l'homme*, Vol. 1, (Editions de l'Encyclopédie des Nuisances, 2002); Vol. 2 (Editions Fario, 2012).

14 Jürgen Habermas, *La paix perpétuelle. Bicentenaire d'une idée kantienne*, (Paris: Cerf, 1996).

15 Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a new modernity*, (London: London State, 1992); *What is globalization?* (Malden Polity Press, 2000); *World Risk Society* (Cambridge Polity Press, 1998).

16 Roberto Esposito, *Communauté, Immunité, Biopolitique*, (Milan: Mimesis, 2019); *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life* (Wiley, 2011).

17 Butler, “Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation,” 134.

communitarian closedness. From then on, the real problem is understanding if the subjective resources exist to grasp this chance.

The relevant questions then become: to what extent might vulnerability, understood as our bodily exposure to new and radical threats, give rise to a humanity-wide we-feeling? And what are the subjective resources of this kind of community-feeling? In other terms, what connects us to each other and makes us sensitive to the fate of others in our societies, as well as beyond its borders?

3 Judith Butler and the Transformative Effect of Loss and Mourning

To begin answering the above questions, I consider stimulating the reflections made by Judith Butler, in connection with the “conditions of heightened vulnerability and aggression”¹⁸ that followed the terroristic attack of September 11 in the United States. In *Precarious Life*, Butler suggests a possible answer to the above questions bringing into play the topic of grief and the “transformative effect of loss”¹⁹ and mourning. The essential point to be retained is that for Butler “there is something to be gained from grieving.”²⁰ Indeed, “if we stay with the sense of loss [...] we are returned to a sense of human vulnerability, [and] to our collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another.”²¹ “Violence is surely a touch of the worst order, a way a primary human vulnerability to other humans is exposed in its most terrifying way.”²² But, “in a way, we all live with this particular vulnerability, a vulnerability to the other that is part of bodily life, a vulnerability to a sudden address from elsewhere that we cannot preempt.”²³

At times, this physical dependency of one upon another is described by Butler through the radical dependency of the infant,²⁴ who is fundamentally and radically exposed to the care and touch of others insofar as he could not survive without that care and touch. But this does not mean that the dependency that Butler is working with is limited to that figuration. Infancy is not a

18 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York, London: Verso, 2004), xi.

19 Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York, London: Routledge, 2004), 18.

20 Butler, *Precarious Life*, 30.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., 28 and Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

23 Butler, *Precarious Life*, 29.

24 See, in particular, Butler, *Precarious Life*, 43.

particular condition of dependency that we “grow out” but entails a primary vulnerability to others, that we cannot escape or “will away.”²⁵ And indeed, “what grief displays” is precisely “the thrall in which our relations with others holds us, in ways that we cannot always recount or explain, [...], in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control.”²⁶

That’s why, according to Butler: “To foreclose that vulnerability [...] is to eradicate one of the most important resources from which we must take our bearings and find our way.”²⁷ In other terms, grief has an ethical salience in that it can reawaken the awareness of a condition of primary vulnerability, of “being given over to the other [...] to some set of primary others,”²⁸ from the outset that we tend to forget. In the act of “undergoing” grief and mourning, Butler surmises, “something about who we are is revealed,” something that delineates the ties we have to others, moreover, showing us that “these ties constitute who we are.”²⁹

At the same time as it can refer us back to a fundamental feature of our existence – our being linked to each other – grief can also be the starting point for an ethical engagement. By inhabiting the space of grief, one might identify not only with one’s own private suffering but begin to apprehend suffering as a common ground. The suffering with which we may identify is, importantly, not just our own. Rather, it is “suffering itself”³⁰ with which one must identify and by extension, the suffering of others. That’s why a new sense of responsibility and community-feeling can be gained from grief, if we refrain from getting over too quickly, and “if the narcissistic preoccupation of melancholia can be moved into a consideration of the vulnerability of others.”³¹ In this sense, Butler contends that by “tarrying with grief,”³² it is possible to create the basis for an expanded ethical and political community. Indeed, grief equalizes us to such a point that we could suggest that historical experiences of injury and loss have the potential to make a “tenuous ‘we’ of us all,”³³ “despite our differences in location and history,” insofar as “all of us have some notion of what it is to have lost somebody.”³⁴ In conclusion, although “many people think that

25 Ibid., 29.

26 Ibid., 23.

27 Ibid., 30.

28 Ibid., 31.

29 Ibid., 22.

30 Ibid., 30.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., 20.

34 Ibid.

grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation and is, in that sense depoliticizing,”³⁵ Butler thinks, on the contrary, that it “furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order” – first of all by bringing to the fore “the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility.”³⁶

To summarize, what makes Judith Butler’s reflections particularly interesting is that she “explores the ethical implications of the inherent vulnerability of the human body, which exposes us to the actions of others and may elicit a wide range of responses from them – from violence, abuse and contempt though to care, generosity, and love. This ambiguity is an ineradicable feature of the self-other relation and renders human life precarious.”³⁷ In *Precarious Life* and, more recent works, such as *Frames of War* (2009) and *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015), Butler present a case for the ethical and political importance of recognizing the vulnerability that attends human beings at both the individual and collective level. One of the points that Butler makes more insistently is that the experiences of vulnerability and loss might open up “another kind of normative aspiration within the field of politics,”³⁸ specifically, “another way of imagining community,” that “affirms relationality [...] as an ongoing normative dimension of our social and political lives.”³⁹ In particular, a central point Butler makes in *Frames of War* is that if we assume that precariousness “is not simply an existential condition of individuals, but rather, a social condition from which certain clear political demands and principles emerge,”⁴⁰ then our political task consists in learning how to handle this constant and necessary exposure.

Ultimately, for Butler a new sense of “global political community,”⁴¹ coextensive with human life in any and all of its cultural forms, should emerge out of the recognition that vulnerability is a mode of existence not only for oneself but for all the others as well, one that implicates us in what is beyond us and yet part of us. One way to begin to describe the political community that Butler gestures towards is in terms of an expanded, cosmopolitan (collective) sense

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid., 22.

37 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*, ed. C. Mackenzie, W. Rogers, and S. Dodds (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 2–3.

38 Butler, *Precarious Life*, 26.

39 Ibid., 27.

40 Judith Butler, *Frames of War. When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2010), xxv.

41 Butler, *Precarious Life*, xiii.

of “responsibility for the physical lives of one another.”⁴² It is in *Frames of War*, and in a later article entitled “Precarious Life and the Ethics of Cohabitation”⁴³ that Butler delineates more sharply what shape this ethical and political community might take. Her reflections take departure from the insight that “precariousness implies [...] the fact that one’s life is always in some sense in the hands of the other.”⁴⁴ Consequently, if we assume, that “precariousness implies exposure both to those we know and to those we do not know; a dependency on people we know, or barely know, or know at all,”⁴⁵ it becomes clear that the political community that Butler gestures towards is one in which “we find invariably joined to those we never chose,” and “who may or may not bear traits of familiarity to an established sense of who ‘we’ are”⁴⁶; one in which “it is” paradoxically “to the stranger that we are bound, the one, or the ones, we never knew, and never chose.”⁴⁷ Correlatively, “it implies being impinged upon by the exposure and dependency of others, most of whom remain anonymous.”⁴⁸

Although “this way of being bound to one another in precariousness is not precisely a social bond that is entered through volition and deliberation,”⁴⁹ nor necessarily a relation of love and care, Butler claims that it nevertheless implies strong ethical obligations that are “global in character and that emerge both at a distance and within relations of proximity”⁵⁰; obligations to preserve the lives of those we may not love, and we may never love; obligations to sustain precarious lives across the globe. For Butler these ethical obligations find their provocation in a generalized and anonymous condition of vulnerability that every human body evinces. They emerge from bodily life understood as injurable, and more precisely “from the fact that we are, as it were, social beings from the start, dependent on what is outside ourselves, on others, on institutions, and on sustained and sustainable environments, and so [...] in this sense, precarious.”⁵¹ Echoing Arendt’s claims that political norms and policies emerge from the “unchosen character of earthly cohabitation”⁵² Butler contends here that the “precarity of life imposes an obligation upon us”⁵³ the

42 Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 23.

43 Judith Butler, “Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation,” 134–162.

44 Butler, *Frames of War*, 14.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid., xxvi.

48 Ibid., 14.

49 Ibid., xxv.

50 Butler, “Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation,” 134.

51 Butler, *Frames of War*, 23.

52 Butler, “Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation”, 143.

53 Butler, *Frames of War*, 2.

obligation “to protect [...] life or secure the conditions for its persistence and flourishing.”⁵⁴

But how can ethical obligations towards others – indeed any other wherever and whoever they are – be deduced from an ontological condition of physical vulnerability?

For Butler, the point of departure for such a rethinking of ethics and ethical obligations is a relational account of the body – what she terms “a new bodily ontology”⁵⁵ – that recognizes and honors the dependence of self on others, the “fact that one’s life is always in some sense in the hands of the other.”⁵⁶ In her own terms: “If the ontology of the body serves as a point of departure for such a rethinking of responsibility, it is precisely because, in its surface and its depth, the body is a social phenomenon: it is exposed to others, vulnerable by definition. Its very persistence depends upon social conditions and institutions, which means that in order to ‘be,’ in the sense of ‘persist,’ it must rely on what is outside itself.”⁵⁷

Questioning whether it is possible to talk of the “being” of the body, Butler speculates that the “being” of the body to which such an ontology refers is – above all else – “socially ectstatic”, which means “outside” itself, always in some sense, transported beyond itself through senses in the world of others, but also in a space and time beyond its control, dependent upon what is “outside itself,” in order to survive and thrive. In her own words, “the ‘being’ of the body to which this ontology refers is one that is always given over to others”⁵⁸ but also, to our natural environment and “to social and political organizations.”⁵⁹ In this sense, Butler brings together two connected ways of being outside of ourselves, and therefore vulnerable: as sexual, social and affective beings we are “given over from the start to the world of others, bearing their imprint, formed within the crucible of social life,”⁶⁰ and therefore exposed to “socially and politically articulated forces as well as to claims of sociality.”⁶¹ But as bodily beings with particular material needs, we are also constantly transported beyond oneself in the outside world, exploring or navigating our environment, extended and sometimes dispossessed through the senses, and above all, “coming up against”

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid., 14.

57 Ibid., 33.

58 Ibid., 2.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid., 21.

61 Ibid., 3.

unchosen circumstances that are beyond our control, and could imperil our lives and survivability. In this sense, the body is vulnerable by definition, inevitably, “dependent on, and conditioned by, a sustained and sustainable world,”⁶² dependent on the protection of public and private spaces, on social norms of recognition, on social and political organizations as safeguards against various kinds of injury and violence.

Overall, not only we are vulnerable to one another in multiple ways – to loss and grief, to neglect, abuse, and lack of care; to rejection, ostracism, and humiliation – but, in addition, this very vulnerability indicates a broader condition of dependency and interdependency that binds us to anonymous others (we may well not know, and whom we have never chosen), and to living-sustaining-impinging environments, to social networks of support, to institutions, to states, to social and political organizations. Put yet, in other words, we are, as bodies, vulnerable to others and to the natural, social and institutional environments, and this last vulnerability “constitutes one aspect of the social modality through which bodies persists.”⁶³

In this respect, Butler’s reconceptualization of the body is not only indebted to the idea of ecstasy, which she construes as “to be transported beyond oneself by passion, or to be beside oneself,”⁶⁴ but also rests on the idea that “the body is, in certain ways and even inevitably, unbound – in its acting, its receptivity, its speech, desire and mobility.”⁶⁵ As indicated in her own terms, the body “is outside itself, in the world of others, in a space and time it does not control, and it exists not only in the vector of these relations, but as this very vector.”⁶⁶ In other words, not only the body “is open to what is outside it, and must be, in order to survive.”⁶⁷ Through its tactile, motile, haptic, visual, olfactory or auditory capacities, the body relates me – against my will and from the start – to another or a set of others, and “not only exists in the vector of these relations, but as this very vector.”⁶⁸ As the expression “body-as-vector” suggests, Butler’s claim is not just that “this or that body is bound up in a network of relations, but that the body, despite its clear boundaries, or perhaps precisely by virtue

62 Ibid., 34.

63 Judith Butler, “Can one lead a good life in a bad life? Adorno Prize Lecture”, *Radical Philosophy*, 176, 2012, 15.

64 Butler, *Undoing gender*, 20.

65 Judith Butler, “Remarks on ‘Queer Bonds’”, *A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Attitudes*, vol. 17(2–3): 2011, 385.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid.

of those very boundaries, is defined by the relations that make its own life and action possible.”⁶⁹

In other words, the body is always and “invariably in community, impressed upon by others, impinging upon them as well”,⁷⁰ and in ways that are beyond its control, in forms that are not “clearly predictable”.⁷¹ In conclusion, the body is never simply one’s own, it is always impinged upon from outside, both affecting and affected in some ways: by others, known and unknown, distant and proximate; by social norms; by historically specific conditions; by social and political organizations; by environmental factors. In this sense, “the body does not belong to itself and never can. It is bound and unbound.”⁷²

Rather than read this condition of vulnerability as an unwilling passivity, and this “dependency on other bodies and networks of support”,⁷³ as an unwilling coercion or constraint, Butler emphasizes the transformative effect of being dispossessed (or undone) by those very links that constitute us. Indeed, if the body “is to exercise autonomy at all, it would precisely as a consequence of this ecstatic and bounded relationality.”⁷⁴ Further, and more substantially, Butler argues that vulnerability, conceived as a “way of being related to what is outside of ourselves and out of control”,⁷⁵ has in itself a kind of ethical, normative force. In fact, as “a relation to a field of objects, forces and passions that impinge on or affect us in some way”,⁷⁶ vulnerability can be, and often is, what animates a primary affective responsiveness. Put, yet, in other words, the outside, unchosen world against which the body comes up, is “one that impinges us, exacting responsiveness in complex, sometimes ambivalent, forms.”⁷⁷ Correlatively, the body whose tactile, motile, haptic, visual, olfactory or auditory capacities comport us beyond ourselves, is not “a mere surface upon which social meanings are inscribed,” but also “that which responds to the exteriority of the world, an exteriority that defines its disposition, its passivity and activity.”⁷⁸

To summarize: “All responsiveness to what happens is a function and effect of vulnerability, whether it is an *openness* to registering a history that has not yet been told, or a receptivity to what another body undergoes or has

69 Butler, “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance”, in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, ed. J. Butler, Z. Gambetti, L. Sabsay (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2016), 16.

70 Butler, *Precarious Life*, 27.

71 Ibid.

72 Butler, “Remarks on ‘Queer Bonds’”, 385.

73 Butler, “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance”, 16.

74 Butler, “Remarks on ‘Queer Bonds’”, 385.

75 Butler, “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance”, 25.

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid.

78 Butler, *Frames of War*, 34.

undergone, even when that body is gone.”⁷⁹ Consequently, also ethical responsiveness is a function and effect of vulnerability, conceived as an openness or, as “a way of being related”⁸⁰ to a world that is not fully known or predictable, as “a relation to a field of objects, forces and passions that impinge on or affect us in some way,”⁸¹ and thus, ultimately “as a kind of relationship that belongs to that ambiguous region in which receptivity and responsiveness are not clearly separable from one another.”⁸² Further, and more substantially, Butler argues that the “ecstatic and bounded relationality”⁸³ of the body is a condition of possibility not only for ethical responsiveness, but also, for a sense of responsibility for the physical lives of others. Put in her own terms, “responsiveness – and thus, ultimately, responsibility – is located in the affective responses” of the body⁸⁴ “to a sustaining and impinging world.”⁸⁵

But to what extent is such an argument plausible? “How can responsibility be thought on the basis of this socially ecstatic structure of the body?”⁸⁶ What is it in the experience of bodily vulnerability, that might lead us to treat the other – indeed any other wherever and whoever they are – as deserving an ethical response from us, rather than criminal abuse? In other words, what is that disposes subjects – especially those whose bodies are not at risk (are protected) – to ethical responsiveness? Does a story build around a body “impinged upon,” both affected and affecting others, suffice to explain why vulnerability has in itself an ethical force and how does it support our capacity to respond ethically to the suffering of others, especially when we find ourselves inevitably joined to those we never chose and may not love?

In this paper, I suggest that it does not. With this summary in place, I can now briefly formulate my critical concerns. My first criticism is that Butler’s account does not suffice to explain the transition from a kind of universal vulnerability characteristic of human life (an ontological condition) to a sense of collective responsibility for the lives of one another.⁸⁷ And indeed, as a closer

79 Butler, “Can one lead a good life in a bad life? Adorno Prize Lecture,” 16.

80 Butler, “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance,” 25.

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid.

83 Butler, “Remarks on ‘Queer Bonds’,” 385.

84 On this point, it is important to remember – or to underline – that responsibility requires responsiveness, and that responsiveness is not merely a subjective state, but a way of responding to what is before us.

85 Butler, *Frames of War*, 34.

86 Ibid., 33.

87 I am surely not alone in arguing for this criticism. We find several ways of pointing towards this weakness/problem in Butler’s ethics of vulnerability. For instance, Catherine Mills notes that “the recognition of vulnerability and relationality does not itself guarantee

reading of her work reveals, the unbounded and ecstatic “relationality” of the body “allows responsibility to take place, but [...] it neither grounds nor generates it, though it does make it possible in some sense.”⁸⁸ My second criticism is that there is an impasse in Butler’s attempt to articulate the normative implications of vulnerability in terms of an expanded sense of community. More precisely, the move that Butler’s reflection is unable to make – what I call its impasse – concerns the passage from the unwilling community of those who share in vulnerability to the ethical and political community of those responsible for one another,⁸⁹ that is, more precisely, from a “we” experienced in the pathic and dative form of a to “us” which is unwilling or unchosen, to an ethically responsive “we”, in relation to whom we feel all together responsible for one another (both known and unknown, chosen and unchosen, proximate or far off).

To overcome this impasse, I argue for an alternative framing of vulnerability, by turning to Levinas’s work. I argue that an account of vulnerability that lens on Levinas’s work⁹⁰ cashes in on the ethical-political promises immanent, yet un realized in Butler’s recent work. At this point, it is worth recalling that, although Butler takes up several insights from Levinas, her reading can be certainly said to be unfaithful in some respect. A closer and more careful reading of Levinas’s later work reveals some fundamental differences that leads to a different conception of vulnerability. Furthermore, I would like to emphasize, Butler takes distance from Levinas’s characterization of the ethical relation as “traumatic” and a-symmetrical in various ways, such that the approach to the ethical self that she outlines ultimately bears little resemblance to his.

ethical responsibility. [Although it] might be a necessary condition for responsibility, it is not sufficient in itself”, Catherine Mills, “Normative Violence, Vulnerability, and Responsibility”, *differences* 18 (2): (2007), 153.

88 According to a formulation borrowed from Catherine Mills, “Undoing Ethics: Butler on Precarity, Opacity and Responsibility”, in *Butler and Ethics*, ed. M. Lloyd (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2022), 52.

89 As E. Gilson notes, “an expansion of the former – the community of those responsible to one another – in light of the latter – the community of all who share in vulnerability – is one of the key aspirations of Butler’s ethics of vulnerability”, Erinn C. Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 55.

90 It is worth recalling on this point that Butler has been repeatedly characterized as offering “idiosyncratic” readings of other authors. This is particularly true in regard to psychoanalysis, but also, as I would argue, in relation to Levinas’s ethical philosophy. Her readings can be certainly said to be off-center or unfaithful. Sometimes, it seems, this eccentricity is manifested in the way she by-passes major concerns of a thinker in order to make her own point.

To be clear: I do not want to contest that Butler is here onto something important. The reminder that we are, by necessity exposed to one another and that our political task consists in a sense in learning to handle this constant and necessary exposure is valuable, but I think that the ontological, rather than ethical, notion of vulnerability which she brings into play is insufficient to ground the broad social and political claims she reaches concerning its normative and political implications.

4 Emmanuel Levinas: An Alternative Account of Vulnerability

Let me without further ado propose an alternative: the condition of possibility for ethical responsiveness, and beyond that, responsibility and community-feeling, is not a conception of the body as impinged upon, both affecting and affected by others; it is, rather a conception of the subject (self)⁹¹ as constituted in a primary relation to the other.⁹²

Put differently, “it is only because there is a *certain affective disposition towards alterity within the subject, as the structure or pattern of subjectivity*”⁹³ – what Levinas calls the “*for the other of subjectivity*”⁹⁴ involved in sensibility,⁹⁵ or “*the other in the same*”⁹⁶ of the ethical subjectivity as described in *Otherwise than Being, or beyond essence* – that there can be ethical responsiveness for the

91 As is well known, subjectivity is a central and constant theme in Levinas's work. For an exhaustive account of the subject in Levinas, see Gérard Bailhache, *Le sujet chez Emmanuel Levinas*, (Paris: PUF, 1994).

92 As Levinas writes in the 1968 version of “Substitution”: “It is from subjectivity understood as a self, from the exsistence and dispossession of contraction, whereby the Ego does not appear but immolates itself, that the relationship with the other is possible as communication and transcendence”, Levinas, “Substitution”, in *Emmanuel Levinas. Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. A.T. Peperzak, S. Critchley and R. Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 92.

93 According to an expression borrowed to Simon Critchley, *Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity*, (London – New York: Verso, 1999), 182, whose reading of Levinas's work is particularly insightful and interesting from the point of view of our inquiry. In my reading of Levinas here, I am particularly and frequently indebted to Simon Critchley, *Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity* (London – New York: Verso, 1999) and to Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, (London & New York: Verso, 2007).

94 Levinas, “Peace and Proximity”, in *Emmanuel Levinas. Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. A.T. Peperzak, S. Critchley and R. Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 168.

95 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or beyond Essence*, (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 74, for instance.

96 *Ibid.*, 111, for instance.

suffering of others, and responsibility for their fate, in our societies as well as beyond its borders.⁹⁷

To make my claim clear: it is only because there is a kind of “internal alterity” within the subject – what Levinas calls the “other in me”⁹⁸ – at the level of pre-conscious or pre-reflective sensibility⁹⁹ – a term by which Levinas refers to that region of responsiveness that precedes and constitutes the ego – that the subject can be claimed by the other; this susceptibility or vulnerability to others constitutes me at the most fundamental level and sustain my capacity to respond ethically to the suffering of others; it is only because the Other is impressed upon me from the start that “relatedness is possible.”¹⁰⁰ Put, yet in another way, it is by virtue of a disposition towards alterity at the heart of the subject that responsiveness to the other is possible.¹⁰¹

97 Let me emphasize that in my reading I tend to focus on Levinas' later work – *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence* (1974) – over his earlier work, *Totality and Infinity* (1961) – as well as in a number of articles from the late 1960s and 1970s [cf., for instance, the article “Substitution” (1968), “Peace and Proximity” (1984) and “De la conscience à la veille, A partir de Husserl” (1974)] for it is here that a “disposition towards alterity” at the heart of the subject, can be founded, as the very structure or pattern of the ethical subject, and ethics is worked out as a theory of the subject, what Levinas calls “the other within the same.” Cf. for instance the following passage: “Il serait absurde d’isoler cet Autre de cette relation infinie et de le geler comme ultime – c’est-à-dire comme le Même à son tour – dans un attachement impénitent au rationalisme du Même. Dans le réveil, entre le Même et l’Autre se montre une relation irréductible à l’adversité et à la conciliation, à l’aliénation et à l’assimilation. Ici l’Autre, au lieu d’aliéner l’unicité du Même qu’il inquiète et tient, l’appelle seulement au plus profond de lui-même, au plus profond que lui-même, là où rien ni personne ne peut le remplacer. Serait-ce déjà à la responsabilité pour autrui ? L’Autre appelant le Même au plus profond de lui-même!” Levinas, “De la conscience à la veille, A partir de Husserl,” *Bijdragen. Tijdschrift voor Filosofie en Theologie*, 35, 1974, 242.

98 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, 125, for instance.

99 See in particular the paragraph entitled “Vulnerability and contact” in Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, 75–81.

100 Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding* (London – New York: Verso, 2007), 62.

101 This is of course a controversial claim. However, I found confirmation of my reading in the following statement by Simon Critchley: “The key concept in Levinas’s work is ethical subjectivity. The precondition for the ethical relation to the other is found in Levinas’s picture of the ethical subject. [...] That is why I tend to privilege Levinas’s later work, *Otherwise than Being*, over his earlier work, *Totality and Infinity*, for it is here that ethics is worked out as a theory of the subject, what he calls ‘the other within the same’” (Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 62). On this point, it would be interesting to compare Critchley’s position/view with the opposite one defended by Dan Zahavi in “Alterity in self” in *Ipsity and Alterity*, ed. S. Gallagher et al., (Rouen: Publications de l’Université de Rouen, 2004), 138–152.

As it is well known, Levinas tries to capture the origins of this “disposition towards alterity within the subject” or “internal alterity”¹⁰² at play in the very heart of selfhood by recurring to the experience of an original traumatism, terms by which he refers to an originally passive impingement by the other, or rather better to a “non-intentional affectivity,”¹⁰³ which tears into my subjectivity and leaves its original imprint within. This original traumatism, towards which I am utterly passive, is often described as a persecutory original scene¹⁰⁴ where I am “absolutely responsible for the persecution I undergo,”¹⁰⁵ and radically subject to another’s action upon me.

The essential point made by Levinas in *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, and in a number of articles from the seventies, is that at the origin of the self (or the ethical subject)¹⁰⁶ lies a primary affection by the Other¹⁰⁷ – an unwilling address, an ethical demand or a command that carries with it

102 According to a very telling expression borrowed to Dan Zahavi, “Alterity in self”, in *Ipseity and Alterity*, ed. S. Gallagher et al., (Rouen: Publications de l’Université de Rouen, 2004), 138–152. In this paper, Dan Zahavi argues for an “internal alterity” at play in the self at various levels of self-experience, against a specific criticism of Levinas’s position in *Totality and Infinity*. But, despite this criticism he also admits (in footnote 1, page 138) that Levinas’ view in *Otherwise than Being* and in a number of articles from the seventies, is much more complex and acknowledges the existence of what he calls the “internal alterity” at work in the very structure of selfhood which prepares the self for, and makes possible, the encounter with the Other. That is why I tend to on Levinas’s later work – *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence* – over his earlier work, *Totality and Infinity* – for it is here that a disposition towards alterity can be founded at the heart of the subject, as the very structure or pattern of the ethical subject, what Levinas calls “the other within the same”. In this respect my reading of Levinas’s work is much more in line with the one exposed by Simon Critchley, according to which the precondition for the ethical relation to the Other is to be found in Levinas’ picture of the ethical subject.

103 For the characterization of trauma as a non-intentional affectivity, see Andrew Talon, “Nonintentional affectivity, affective intentionality and the Ethical in Levinas’s philosophy”, in *Ethics as First Philosophy*, ed. A. Peperzak (New York: Routledge, 1995), 107–21.

104 As Simon Critchley acutely notes, “given the experience of Levinas’s family and people during the Second World War”, such a claim “is nothing less than extraordinary. Trauma was not a theoretical issue for Levinas, but a way of dealing with the memory of horror”, Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 61.

105 Levinas, “Substitution” in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 90.

106 It is worth recalling that the ethical subject is, for Levinas, a sentient subject (*un soi sentant*) not a conscious or a thinking ego (*un moi pensant*). It is because the self is sensible, that is to say, vulnerable, passive, open to wounding, outrage and pain, but also open to the movement of the erotic that he is capable or worthy of ethics.

107 As expressed in Levinas’s terms: “the condition [...] of the Self [*Soi*] is not originally an auto-affection presupposing the Ego [*Moi*] – but precisely an affection by the Other – an anarchic traumatism”, Emmanuel Levinas, “Substitution,” 90.

a trauma, since, “in its extreme straightforwardness – its right over me.”¹⁰⁸ In other words, for Levinas, the other’s demand is a “traumatic demand”,¹⁰⁹ it is something that comes from outside the subject – “from the absolutely other”¹¹⁰ – “but which leaves its imprint” within him and implies ceding a certain ego-logical perspective for one that is structured by a mode of address. A subject, in the accusative (*here I am, me voici*) emerges when he responds to this traumatic demand leaving an imprint at his heart. Importantly, the subject is also internally divided by this demand, lacerated by contact with an original traumatism that produces a scattered interiority, “like a gaping wound that will not heal.” And so, the image emerges of a wounded, “traumatized self, a subject that is constituted through a self-relation [...] experienced as a lack.”¹¹¹

But this is *a good thing*. It is only insofar as the subject is originally affected, undone, and wounded, or dispossessed by the Other, that he is capable of ethical responsivity and responsibility for his suffering. It is only by virtue of this original, opening to the Other, whose significance is ethical, that a sense of responsibility for the other, indeed all the Others, occurs and is sustained.

In this connection, one may generalize this structure and go so far as to say (although in a provisional manner) that without a relation to an original traumatism, or at least without a relation to that which summons, claims, interrupts or troubles the subject, there would be neither ethics, conceived as relation to the Other (the unique and incomparable) – nor politics, understood as a relation the third party that is, to all the others that make up society. In other words, without a relation to that which summons and challenges the subject, there would be neither responsibility for one another nor ethical obligations for those “we never chose and with whom we may feel no immediate sense of belonging.”¹¹²

In keeping with this, it is worth recalling that for Levinas “the others, [all the others] concern me from the first.”¹¹³ From the first, my ethical relation with the Other in proximity “gives meaning to my relations with all the others”¹¹⁴ and is doubled into a political relation to the plurality of beings that make

108 Levinas, “Peace and Proximity,” 167.

109 In this regard see Simon Critchley, “The Original Traumatism: Levinas and Psychoanalysis”, *Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity*, (London – New York: Verso, 1999), 56–63; Elisabeth Weber, *Verfolgung und Trauma*, (Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 1990); and Michel Haar, “L’obsession de l’autre. L’éthique comme traumatisme,” in *Emmanuel Levinas*, (Paris: L’Hermé, 1991), 444–53.

110 Levinas, “Peace and Proximity,” 166.

111 Critchley, “The Original Traumatism: Levinas and Psychoanalysis,” 195.

112 Butler, “Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation,” 144.

113 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, 159.

114 *Ibid.*

up community, and to humanity as a whole.¹¹⁵ As Levinas puts it: “The other is from the first the brother of all the other men. The neighbor that obsesses me is already a face, both comparable and incomparable, a unique face and in relationship with faces, which are visible in the concern of justice.”¹¹⁶ In other terms, my ethical obligations to the Other open onto wider obligations for all the others and for humanity as a whole, obligations that, to recall Butler’s claims, “would extend to those who are not proximate in any physical sense and who do not have to be part of a recognizable community to which we both belong.”¹¹⁷ Moreover, Levinas’s claim here is that my ethical relation to the Other is, at the same time the setting forth of a “we,” the constitution of a relation among equals. That is to say, my relation to all the others takes place only insofar as it binds me to the absolutely and irreducible Other, as the *fraternal* mode of a proximity to the other. Thus, the “we” or the political community, has a double structure, as a relation to the Other, the “you,” the unique, and, at the same time, to all the Others, including even those we do not know, we did not choose, could never have chosen, and may not love. It is a community among equals (or a community of brothers), which is at the same time based on the inegalitarian moment of the ethical relation (which is as it asymmetrical and unequal). In other words, as Simon Critchley clearly expressed, “the convergence of human beings in a “we” is, for Levinas, based on the non-coincidence of the same and the Other in the ethical relation.”¹¹⁸ It is precisely the transcendence of the relation with the Other, that which prevents the community from becoming wholly immanent. The social implications of this view, however, is that the “we” is riven from the start, interrupted by a constitutive and internal alterity. Without such an internal alterity, alterity in the “self” or in the “we,” one cannot imagine a political community that would be as inclusive, open, cosmopolitan, and respectful of human plurality, as the community which Butler has recently set as her political goal.

Thus, the passage to community and politics passes through or across the theoretical and historical experience of trauma and loss. In a way that joins Butler’s claim, we can say: no community-feeling and no sensible democracy

115 In Butler’s terms, we could say that “the apprehension of the plurality of others – their exposure to violence and their socially induced transience and dispensability – is, by implication, an apprehension of the precarity of any and all living beings, implying a principle of equal vulnerability that governs all living beings,” Butler, *Frames of War*, xvi.

116 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, 158.

117 Butler, “Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation,” 139.

118 Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction. Derrida and Levinas*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 227.

without the traumatic experience of loss and “the task of mourning that follows.”¹¹⁹

5 Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I would like to return to my opening question: to what extent might vulnerability, understood as our bodily exposure to new and radical threats, give rise to a humanity wide we-feeling in our times? My question is very simple, but the answer, is far from being self-evident.

Following first Butler’s reflections, we have seen that to place new trust in vulnerability as an ethical resource as well as the ground for a “we” – extending beyond our immediate sphere of belonging – requires to depart from conventional definitions of vulnerability as injurability, and to understand vulnerability anew in a positive sense as “an openness” or as a “receptivity to what another body undergoes or has undergone”¹²⁰ by acknowledging the socially ek-static nature of the body, its being impinged upon, both affecting and affected by others.

Such a *move* produces a *slide* towards a relational conception of vulnerability which does not only allude to the subject’s fragility, but to its dependency on other bodies, pointing towards a shared condition of dependence and interdependence in which “we are, however distinct, also bound to one another and to living processes that exceed human form,”¹²¹ to an intertwinement of lives that are mutually implicated in one another. In this sense, vulnerability, is, importantly, a feature of human life, the way in which my life is bound up with that other life and all those other lives, the way in which my life is not my own, always in “a relation to a field of forces and passions that impinge upon and affect”¹²² me in some way. Understood in this way, that is as a “way of being related” to what is outside us, implicated in what is beyond us, yet part of us, vulnerability is supposed to ground “ethical responsiveness – and thus, ultimately, responsibility”.¹²³

As interesting as this position might be, one obvious limitation is that the “relationality” on which Butler relies seems insufficient to capture the kind of relation to others that is relevant for the emergence of a sense of responsibility

119 Butler, *Precarious Life*, 19.

120 Butler, “Can one lead a good life in a bad life? Adorno Prize Lecture,” 16.

121 Butler, “Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation,” 141.

122 Butler, “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance,” 25.

123 Butler, *Frames of War*, 34.

for the physical lives of one another, as well as the complex character of the social ties that bind us in a community in the ethical and political sense. Indeed, the kind of relationality on which Butler draws “goes all the way down and is prior to the establishment of individuals who can be said to depend on one another”¹²⁴ or to be linked to one another. Accordingly, my claim in this talk is that Butler’s vulnerability model does not account for the transition from a “we” experienced in the pathic and dative form of a to “us” which is unwilling or unchosen, to an ethically responsive we, in relation to whom we feel all together responsible for one another (both known and unknown, chosen and unchosen, proximate or far off).

As I hope to have established, this failure follows directly from the centrality given to the ecstatic and unbounded relationality of the body taken as point of departure for rethinking the central themes of ethical responsiveness, responsibility, and community bonding. Indeed, such a point of departure commits us to a position in which vulnerability is experienced in relation to an anonymous “field of objects, forces and passions that impinge upon and affect”¹²⁵ us in some way.

To overcome this impasse, I have argued for an alternative framing of vulnerability by drawing inspiration from Levinas’s reflections. The core of Levinas’s teaching is that the capacity to be ethically responsive for the suffering of others (both at a distance or within relations of proximity) implies a vulnerability experienced in relation to a singular “you” – whether friend or foe – that shapes me from within, at the most fundamental level. From this alternative perspective, vulnerability should be thought as an “affective disposition towards alterity *within* the subject,” as the very structure or pattern of subjectivity. It is only by virtue of this original opening to the Other, whose significance is ethical, that a sense of responsibility for the lives of one another (and potentially for all the others) occurs.

To summarize the main point, my argument can be formulated as follows: to make sense of Butler’s ethical and political claims, we have to take up a phenomenological conception of vulnerability as a disposition towards alterity *within* the subject, as the subject’s vulnerability to the other. It is precisely in this sense – I would like to stress – that vulnerability could be said to heighten a sense of responsibility for the lives of one another, and potentially at least, to sustain a cosmopolitan commitment to a community extending beyond national borders. Moreover, if a humanity-wide we-feeling has the opportunity to emerge, it would take its departure neither from a recognition of the

124 According to an expression borrowed to Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, 55.

125 Butler, “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance,” 25.

injurability of all people (however true that might be), nor from a recognition of an anonymous and generalized state/condition of corporeal vulnerability, but rather from a vulnerability experienced in relation to a “you,” and even more precisely, from the experience of a traumatic demand (the other’s demand) at the heart of my subjectivity that undoes (or dispossess) me and requires me to do more in the name of a powerful exposure, vulnerability and responsive responsibility towards the other.

To be clear: I do not want to contest that Butler is here onto something important. The reminder that we are, by necessity exposed to one another and that our political task consists in a sense in learning to handle this constant and necessary exposure is valuable, but I think that the ontological, rather than ethical, notion of vulnerability which she brings into play is insufficient to ground the conclusion she reaches concerning its normative and political implications.

In conclusion, an account of vulnerability that leans upon Levinas’s work cashes in on the ethical and political promises that are immanent yet unrealized in Butler’s recent work, providing a new orientation for thinking how a humanity-wide we-feeling could grow from the historical experiences of vulnerability and loss.