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The relational ethics of conflict and identity

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Abstract The contemporary psychoanalytically inflected vocabulary of relational ethics centres on acknowledgement, witnessing and responsibility. It has become an important code for efforts to connect with otherness across fractures of hurt, oppression and suffering. One can see the deployment of this vocabulary to challenge patterns of exclusion and dehumanisation in zones of intense political conflict in many situations in which destructive hatred reigns. This paper traces some of the use of and disputes over this 'acknowledgement-based' relational ethics in the recent work of Jessica Benjamin and Judith Butler. The field of application is their response to Israel's treatment of the Palestinians, given their position as Jews. The challenge of the acknowledgement agenda leads back to an issue of general concern – the degree to which relational ethics can prise open apparently closed and defensive psychosocial identities.

Keywords: relational ethics; recognition; acknowledgement; conflict; Jewish identity; Israel-Palestine

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Context

The contemporary psychoanalytically-inflected vocabulary of relational ethics, which is concerned with the quality of the connections that people ('human subjects', as they seem to be known) form with one another, centres on acknowledgement, witnessing and responsibility. This vocabulary draws on some philosophical luminaries, notably Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas, as representatives of a tradition of thought that focuses on the project of living an ethical life. Relational ethics is consequently a term used to describe this project. It has become an important way of thinking about and promoting efforts to link with otherness across fractures of hurt, oppression and suffering. One can see the deployment of this vocabulary to challenge patterns of exclusion and dehumanisation in zones of intense political conflict in many situations in which destructive hatred reigns, including several where there have been post-conflict 'truth and reconciliation commissions' (eg, Potter, 2006). It is also used in some situations in which conflict continues, especially where there is a history of oppression and injury looming menacingly over the present.

Perhaps because it is one of the most intractable of these situations, the theory and practice of recognition and acknowledgement is particularly visible in relation to the Israel-Palestine conflict. The orientation of this work, articulated especially by Jewish critics of Israel, is towards advocacy of Jewish 'responsibility' for conflict and suffering there. This intervention is not just theoretical, though theory is important both for its rhetorical force in sending messages through the Jewish, Israeli and Palestinian communities and also because of the concepts it offers that can be worked with in a practical way. Such practice includes political engagement, group

meetings among Israelis, Palestinians and 'internationals', and psychotherapeutic work by activist groups in Israel-Palestine (eg, BISR, 2009).

This paper traces some of the use of and disputes over this 'acknowledgement-based' relational ethics in the recent work of two highly significant Jewish writers, Jessica Benjamin and Judith Butler. The field of application is their response to Israel's treatment of the Palestinians given their position as Jews. In this instance, the complex layering of such responses has provoked a kind of crisis for many Jews influenced by, and feeding back into, their notions of Jewish ethics, culture and historical legacy, as well as their attachment to and identification with Israel. The challenge of the acknowledgement agenda leads back to an issue of general concern – the degree to which relational ethics can prise open apparently closed and defensive psychosocial identities. But it also raises a number of reflexive problems, in particular around accusations of a kind of reverse Jewish exceptionalism that makes Jews *more* responsible than others for suffering and a related set of questions concerning what it is that each of us is responsible for and what might be the role of therapeutic relational practices in advancing this responsibility in situations of conflict. The recognition paradigm is a powerful one, but it has its limits, to which I will return in this paper.

The Vocabulary of Relational Ethics

The vocabulary of relational ethics leans heavily on articulations of brokenness. Hurt and abasement figure prominently in this vocabulary; as do, in more hopeful moments, reconciliation and reparation. Presumably this is because relationships are so obviously central to human subjects, even constitutive of them; yet they are also so difficult to manage, so frequently damaged and damaging, so forlorn. They fail, as psychoanalysts have always known: dependency, from earliest infancy onwards, signals vulnerability and the prospect of intentional

or unintentional betrayal. The ethical relationship is one that responds to this necessary difficulty , trying to find a way around it, trying to find a way (as Marshall Berman, 1982, so poignantly wrote) to 'keep on keeping on', without sacrificing the subject or the other, but also without losing the impulse towards connectedness. The ethical relationship is built on the capacity to recognize the other as a subject; but what is meant by this 'recognition' is not always clear. The ethical relationship does not deny that hurt occurs and acknowledges this when it happens; but it also sees that full acknowledgement is impossible, because it too is embroiled in the dynamics of hurt.

The vocabulary of relational ethics draws on the terms that swirl around in the thinking of contemporary philosophers and philosophically oriented psychoanalysts. 'Recognition', for example, is drawn from Hegel and is the topic of intense debate amongst social theorists who wish for equality and benevolence to operate between social subjects. An exemplary sociological figure here is Axel Honneth (1996), for whom 'affective recognition' grounded in childhood experiences in the family is the source of the kind of emotional stability and security of selfhood that is necessary for social life. It is also a term employed by psychoanalytic theorists who wish for equality and benevolence to operate between analysts and patients. Much of what is discussed under this heading concerns the questions of what constitutes recognition and whether it can ever be enough to sustain an ethical relationship. In social theory, recognition is one focus of a debate about equality that addresses identity politics: without recognition, identity cannot be manifested in an emancipatory way; groups are disowned, sidelined, stigmatised. Recognition politics demands that a space is made for these stigmatised groups; that they are acknowledged as a site of existence, of actuality and value. Nancy Fraser (2000) comments,

> [T]he politics of recognition aims to repair internal self-dislocation by contesting the dominant culture's demeaning picture of the group. It proposes that members of misrecognized groups reject such images in favour of new self-representations of their own making, jettisoning internalized, negative identities and joining collectively to produce a self-affirming culture of their own—which, publicly asserted, will gain the respect and esteem of society at large. The result, when successful, is 'recognition': an undistorted relation to oneself. (pp. 109–110)

Recognition therefore follows from the assertion of identity by stigmatised groups; it is a bootstrapping exercise in which subjects come together to say 'I am'. As Fraser points out, tactically this results in encouraging stigmatised groups to assert their identities; it makes identity politics the core of emancipatory practice. But this reading also underplays an important element of the recognition hypothesis, the idea that it is in being recognized *by the other* that existence comes into being. Fraser herself proposes a reworking of recognition theory based on 'social status', in which it is exclusion from social interaction that matters. That is, in her status model, 'misrecognition constitutes a form of institutionalized subordination' related to injustice: in being misrecognized, people are denied their rights. But, she states, '[N]ote precisely what this means: aimed not at valorizing group identity but rather at overcoming subordination, in this approach claims for recognition seek to establish the subordinated party as a full partner in social life, able to interact with others as a peer' (p. 114).

The notion of justice will be returned to, 'aimed not at valorizing group identity but rather at overcoming subordination.' The idea of justice raises the issue of the *insufficiency* of recognition, how reliance on recognition threatens to obscure power differentials in a move that makes everyone equally responsible for ethical acts. Attending to justice has implications for the distribution of responsibility and of emancipation. It reminds us that some people are more dispossessed and victimized than others; so if the reparative urge implicit in recognition is to mean anything, it will have to mean restitution as well as reconciliation. But here it is sufficient to note that Fraser links the act of recognition with how one is treated by the other; and it is through that treatment that one adjusts how one relates to oneself.

Despite significant differences in their tolerance of identity politics as a potentially emancipatory category, there are reverberations of the sociological position on recognition in much intersubjective psychoanalytic work. Fraser's description of Hegel's originary version might have come out of Jessica Benjamin's psychoanalysis. Fraser (2000) writes:

> According to Hegel, recognition designates an ideal reciprocal relation between subjects, in which each sees the other both as its equal and also as separate from it. This relation is constitutive for subjectivity: one becomes an individual subject only by virtue of recognizing, and being recognized by, another subject. Recognition from others is thus essential to the development of a sense of self. To be denied recognition – or to be 'misrecognized' – is to suffer both a distortion of one's relation to one's self and an injury to one's identity. (p. 109)

Benjamin (2000) writes, 'The problem of whether or not we are able to recognize the other person as outside, not the sum of, our projections or the mere object of need and still feel recognized by her or him, is defining for intersubjectivity' (p. 294).

What Benjamin calls a ‘subject-subject’ psychology grows out of recognition as the capacity to appreciate the other as a centre of consciousness, separate from the subject but also in relation to it. Recognition is defined in opposition to omnipotence, though perhaps it is better expressed as in opposition to what can be seen as a form of colonisation: we see the other and we see the limit of what we can see; we do not try to take it over or make it part of the self. It is in not invading the other that ethical relationality based on recognition adheres; as Judith Butler (2005) says, ‘If letting the other live is part of any ethical definition of recognition, then this version of recognition will be based less on knowledge than on an apprehension of epistemic limits’ (p. 42). We do not know the other; we know the other only as a subject we cannot fully know. In her account of what it might mean to give an account of oneself, Butler links this epistemic limit with *opacity*, with the awareness that each of us is opaque to ourself, hence we are in the same relationship to the other that we are in with ourselves when we face that dark hole of non-knowing that is, amongst other things. perhaps, the unconscious. Some time ago, Julia Kristeva (1988) commented that the existence of an unconscious ‘inside’ each of us means the haunting of the individual human subject by something else, strange, foreign, and real: the ‘uncanny, foreignness is within us: we are our own foreigners, we are divided’ (p. 181). Butler (2005) translates a similar idea into the language of sight and blindness and hence of visual perception: ‘[W]e might consider a certain post-Hegelian reading of the scene of recognition in which precisely my own opacity to myself occasions my capacity to confer a certain kind of recognition on others. It would be, perhaps, an ethics based on our shared, invariable, and partial

blindness about ourselves' (p. 41). Seeing the other is based on an appreciation that we *cannot* see the essential part of them, the part that passes between us, 'enigmatically' in the vocabulary employed by Laplanche (1999), who is Butler's psychoanalytic source. It is a message that reaches us but cannot be read, a text in an uninterpretable foreign language. Recognizing this, we must try not to spoil the other by making it something else than what it is.

Recognition staves off damage by holding back. This does not mean that the other is left untouched. In line with the general orientation of psychoanalysis, Benjamin (1998) offers a developmental account of the intersections between subjects involved. She adopts Winnicott's (1969) idea that an object becomes 'useful' if it can survive the subject's destructive attacks, demonstrating that it is resilient and has a real existence outside the subject's fantasy. Benjamin makes this capacity to test and be tested by the other part of the central dynamic of intersubjectivity and hence of recognition. We hurt the other and yet the other stays alive; this dynamic makes mutual recognition possible, creating the Hegelian and intersubjective subject. The resilience of the other in the face of our attacks on it, and its continuing willingness to recognize us as subjects, is what constitutes us as real and as available for a relationship. Relational ethics is founded on the capacity to test and respect the other, to find the limits of destructiveness through which the other's autonomy can be established and pleasure in its separate being can be enjoyed. In 'the intersubjective conception of recognition,' writes Benjamin (1998), 'two active subjects may exchange, may alternate in expressing and receiving, cocreating a mutuality that allows for and presumes separateness' (p. 29).

The cycle here is the classical one of negation and survival, of a destructiveness that does not ultimately destroy, so that the subject can know the limits of its own being. The subject may feel that it has destroyed the other; but, if the other survives and remains non-retaliatory in its

attitude, then the subject experiences the difference between its fantasy of destructive omnipotence and the reality of a world full of separate subjects. As Winnicott (1969) put it, the other then becomes of *use*. But perhaps this is too ameliorative, too neglectful of the actual damage that destructiveness can cause. Butler (2000), perhaps taking the Winnicottian dimension of destruction in fantasy too literally, writes, '[I]f negation is destruction that is survived, of what does survival consist? Certainly, the formulation implies that destruction is somehow overcome, even overcome once and for all. But is this ever really possible – for humans, that is? And would we trust those who claim to have overcome destructiveness for the harmonious dyad once and for all? I, for one, would be wary' (p. 285). That is to say, how real is destruction if it never destroys? What, exactly, is being recognized here?

The Economy of Injury and the Acknowledgement Agenda

We are talking here not solely of how to recognize others, but of harm done and how to undo it. This is where the language of acknowledgement starts to displace that of recognition. For Butler (2004), there is a Levinasian element at play in which appreciation of the precariousness of the other is central to ethical subjectivity. Levinas demands a response to the Face that is founded not in some abstract privileging of the other, but, rather, in awareness that we might be tempted to murder the other and must fight that temptation in ourselves. The struggle is 'within' the subject; if it were not so, then there would be no ethics at stake – all would be smooth and easy; there would be no temptation that one needs to resist. It is like the old religious issue of freedom of choice and evil: what is the virtue of virtue if one cannot choose to do wrong? Butler writes, 'If the Other, the Other's face, which after all carries the meaning of this precariousness, at once tempts me with murder and prohibits me from acting upon it, then the face operates to produce a struggle for me, and establishes this struggle at the heart of ethics' (p. 135). Ethics has a struggle

at its heart, the heart that reflects a face that could be the stimulus to murder. 'If the first impulse towards the other's vulnerability is the desire to kill, the ethical injunction is precisely to militate against that first impulse' (p. 137). Psychoanalytically speaking, as Butler (2009a) points out in her more recent work, it is Klein rather than Winnicott who comes into the frame here. The subject is formed through an act of violence that nevertheless leaves the subject needing to find ways to contest or renounce violence in order to preserve itself *as a subject*. This follows directly from Butler's reading of Levinas's temptation to murder: violence exists; it is not ameliorated into an aggression that simply tests the reality of the other through its moments of survival; it can really kill. Violence is itself a force; the subject is 'mired' in it.

Yet all this does not mean that the response to the constitution of the subject in violence must itself be a violent response; rather, it shows how the struggle with and against violence is intrinsic to elemental human subjectivity. Non-violence as an *ethical* possibility arises from the struggle against the violence that is constitutive of the human subject. Ethical violence means that the subject is made through the enforcement of regulatory categories on being; Butler (2009a) names 'genders or social categories' (p. 167), but all structures come from 'outside' the subject, whether as the desire of the other that is focused on by Lacanians or the enigmatic message that comes from Laplanche.[1] It is in the nature of the human subject to be subjected to this violence, just as it is in the nature of the social polity to be formed through an act of violence, an exclusionary act that produces the outside other (Palacios, 2009). This violence creates its own responsibility: there would be no *ethical* stance involved if there were no struggle to be undertaken. Butler (2009a) writes,

[1] ,COMP: FN HAS BEEN MOVED TO END>

> It is precisely because one is mired in violence that the struggle exists and that the possibility of non-violence emerges. ... Non-violence is precisely neither a virtue nor a position and certainly not a set of principles that are to be applied universally. It denotes the mired and conflicted position of a subject who is injured, rageful, disposed to violent retribution and nevertheless struggles against that action (often crafting the rage against itself). The struggle against violence accepts that violence is one's own possibility. (p. 171)

That is what makes the brutality of Klein superior to the gentility of Winnicott, however much one might have preferred to be his analysand rather than hers. Lacan (1953–54, p. 69) referred to Klein's 'animal instinct', her capacity to home in on what is needed, even when her theory is too clumsy to encompass it fully. Discussing her case of 'little Dick' (Klein, 1930), Lacan commented that, '[s]he slams the symbolism on him with complete brutality, does Melanie Klein, on little Dick!' (p. 68). Such brutal truth-telling is sometimes needed. For Klein, envy exists from the start of life as the pure manifestation of the death drive; it does not have to be conjured by some environmental failure, some inattention on the part of the mother or hole in the protective atmospheric layer offered by the father. In fact, it is exaggerated by *too much* goodness: the breast that gives is also the one that is envied and attacked for its capacity to give, a capacity the subject knows itself to lack. So the task of life is to find ways to overcome this destructive urge. As Michael Rustin (1991) notes, writing this into sociology means asserting that the task of *social* life is to create conditions that can cope with the potential destructiveness of human subjects and of the social itself. Horrible things cannot be wished away; they are there in the construction of the subject. Butler (2009a) comments, 'For Klein, as well as for Levinas,

the meaning of responsibility is bound up with an anxiety that remains open, that does not settle an ambivalence through disavowal, but rather gives rise to a certain ethical practice, itself experimental, that seeks to preserve life better than it destroys it' (p. 177).

To preserve life better than it destroys it: Butler explores the economy of injury that enters into intersubjective conflicts. Making all subjects produced from the injuries of neglect can work against taking responsibility for violence: one is always injured oneself, through lack of recognition and failures of holding or containment; and rage emanates from that injury. An injured subject, seeing itself as constantly responding to the violence done to it, blocks acknowledgement of the violence it might gratuitously do. A reason can always be found for violence, something done to the subject that legitimises or excuses it. It may be that the gradations in how much some people act out the injury they feel, and how much others hold back from such retaliatory violence, is connected to the capacity for recognition. If the subject is constituted by and in violence, then whether or not it has suffered injury is no longer the point: the temptation to violence is in any case there, and acknowledgement of the violence one does arises from, as Butler (2009a) puts it,'[A]n 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 stipulation of contract' (p. 179).

We are inching closer to the question of acknowledgement, perhaps. It is not that everyone suffers injuries, which they do, but that everyone is subjected to injury *by every other subject*. Every subject has injuriousness within it and is tempted to express that in relation to others with whom it has contact and on whom it is likely to be dependent. When we share a space, whether physical or psychical, we are likely to do harm. Recognition of this tendency to

violence, this temptation to destroy everything, leads to recognition of the responsibility one has to struggle against the temptation and to acknowledge what one has done when the struggle fails. It is not for nothing that Levinas (1990) called his Talmudic reading on the Revelation at Mount Sinai the 'Temptation of Temptation', indexing the opportunity the Jews had then to destroy the world rather than accept the constraints of the Law. Destruction is an impulse that arises out of the tendency to violence and may be pinned onto the injury one suffers, but is not produced by it.

Jessica Benjamin has worked acknowledgement into both her clinical and her political practice. One can see how it operates as a mode of recognition 'that has a transformational effect, modulating the traumatic reactions that perpetuate cycles of reactivity and creating the sense of a lawful social world that witnesses pain and takes responsibility for injustice' (Benjamin, 2009a). Lawfulness and justice is at the heart of this effect of recognition; the act of acknowledgement confirms these things and is not an idealisation, does not imagine that a holistic oneness with the other can be achieved. Whatever the doubt that she might not pursue destructiveness to its depths, whatever the theoretical worry that there is a brand of psychoanalytic humanism at work here that wishes troubles away, Benjamin is a forceful advocate for a mode of taking responsibility through acknowledgement that leaves no stone unturned. In the clinic, she asserts the efficaciousness of a mode of mutuality that she calls the 'moral third', defined as 'the courage for the nonjudgmental awareness that honestly recognizes moments of dissociation, misattunement, defensiveness – aspects of what was called in the narrow sense countertransference' (Benjamin, 2009b, p. 442). The analyst takes responsibility for harm done, even if not *caused*, by her or his failures of attunement and recognition; these are not countertransference responses to failures in the patient, but real moments of destructiveness that may parallel the patient's own 'unintegrated or warring self-parts' (p. 441) but are nevertheless the analyst's responsibility. The moral third, she writes,

> becomes more urgently relevant as we increasingly accept the analyst's role in contributing to breakdown, rather than simply being the one responsible for repairing it. This awareness of the analyst's contribution goes along with an examination of how the analyst may have dissociated along with the patient and requires that the analyst take responsibility for her failures. The principle of acknowledgment may only reveal its true value when we are able, as a community, to give up the ideal of being a 'complete container', to surrender to the fact that we survive causing pain. (p. 442)

Benjamin's emphasis on responsibility has direct implications for working with others and governs her thinking on reconciliation work in Israel-Palestine (Altman *et al,* 2006). Political involvement in this specific instance is coded as the need for engagement with Palestinian suffering from the perspective of accepting responsibility as a Jew. Benjamin links this involvement with the analyst's realisation that, whilst she or he might be the 'activator of old traumas, old pain' rather than their instigator 'you acknowledge that you have, you know, bumped into the person's bruise, and you acknowledge that there is hurt and pain and that you may have responsibility for that, and in doing this, you alleviate a whole level of tension that makes it possible, then, to talk about, to explore' (p. 170). In both the political and the therapeutic context, recognition and responsibility go hand in hand, each entailing the other.

Taking responsibility for others arises from recognition of their existence as genuine centres of subjectivity, not just as possessing rights but also having the capacity to be hurt. The analyst 'bruises' the patient merely by being there, by the inevitable clumsiness and failure that come from being different, though her or his infelicities might make this bruising greater. Hence, in the tradition of Winnicott, Benjamin advocates acknowledging mistakes rather than simply

interpreting their effects. For her, this is not a matter of making the patient in some way responsible for the analyst's actions, nor of requiring from the patient forgiveness of the analyst. 'On the contrary', she writes, 'it should serve to reveal how the analyst takes on the responsibility for forgiving herself and thus being able to transcend the shame of her difficulties enough to talk about and analyze them (without excessive or impulsive self-disclosure)' (Benjamin, 2009b, pp. 449–450). By this means the patient may be helped to contribute reciprocally to the analytic relationship, becoming 'an interpreter of the analyst and a co-creator of dialogue, and so develop her own sense of agency and responsibility' (p. 450). The emphasis on mutuality here is strong, but it still relies on the analyst's capacity to start it off. 'Bumping into the person's bruise' is bound to occur; it is a necessary part of therapy because, if one is to look truthfully at what exists, then pain is bound to be felt. But this does not mean it can all be put back onto the other; the subject/analyst has responsibility, even if the damage is unavoidable.

Can this argument be extended into a way of affecting the social violence that is found throughout the world, and is there some area of responsibility that has to be acknowledged even when we are not, individually, 'to blame'? When she is in Israel as a visiting Jewish academic and analyst, Benjamin's stance, she thinks, makes a difference.

> [A]cknowledgement of the other person's suffering that we may not have directly caused, but in which we participate as Americans, and in which I participate, in some sense, as a Jew, was enormously important. I found that because this is being done in my name, regardless of the political background of the oppression being carried out in the Territories by the Israeli army, I need to acknowledge responsibility. My identification of responsibility for, first, not really being able to know or understand the

> suffering of the Palestinians, and, secondly, being in some way allied with those who cause it, was important to me, and had a huge effect on people there. In many cases they were less interested in political details in many ways than they were in having this acknowledgement. That is to say that this was the first step in any political process. (Altman *et al*, 2006, pp. 169–170)

For Jews, Benjamin argues, there is special responsibility, and special power to taking responsibility, in the case of violence towards Palestinians. Butler (2009b) also takes up the theme of damage done 'in my name' simply by being a Jew: 'Given that Israel acts within the name of the Jewish people and casts itself as the legitimate representative of the Jewish people,' she says (13 mins), 'there is a question of what is done in the name of the Jewish people, and so all the more reason to reclaim that tradition and ethics in favour of another politics.' For both these psychopolitical advocates, speaking of acknowledgement as a Jew raises the stakes. It opens them up to accusations of Jewish anti-Semitism, a calumny contested head-on by Butler (2004): 'With what difficulty does one vigorously defend the idea that the Israeli occupation is brutal and wrong, and that Palestinian self-determination is a necessary good, if the voicing of those views calls down upon oneself the horrible charge of anti-Semitism?' (p. 104). It might be said here that this charge of anti-Semitism is, indeed, a crucial silencing device within the Jewish community and that it is not only imposed from outside: a good deal of self-censoring goes on, fueled by anxiety about being marginalised, but also by a genuine dread of hurting those to whom one is close. It is an act of ethical bravery to take a stand here, exactly the contrary of the 'self-hating' sobriquet so commonly used against Jewish critics of Israel. Butler herself , going

on to surmount the difficulty she names,; establishes a critical stance towards Israel in the name of Jewish ethics itself, a stance with a long Jewish history and, one hopes, a future.

Benjamin is well attuned not just to the political difficulty, which does not seem particularly to worry her, but also to the psychological one. In a passionate speech provoked by a conference on psycho-political resistance in Israel–Palestine, 'fired up', as she said privately afterwards by the reiteration of experiences of struggle, oppression and attempts at reconciliation, she describes different types of 'unbearable knowledge', the most recalcitrant being the unbearable knowledge that one is oneself a 'perpetrator' (Benjamin, 2009a). Renouncing the victim position is a necessary step in the acknowledgement process, one that parallels Butler's call to move beyond recourse to one's own injuries as a justification for violence. It is also, however, a vast existential move for those whose status has been defined in terms of the victim position. 'What do you do when you live in a society where you are a perpetrator and everyone is in denial of that?' Benjamin asks (7 mins). Humanising the perpetrator becomes the challenge that the victim can make: 'You are a human being who is capable of taking responsibility, now please do this for me' (12 mins).

But for the one who is doing the injury, the perpetrator, things are not necessarily so easy. From where does one draw the strength to acknowledge the damage done through one's own acts of violence? Benjamin argues that a process of dissociation goes on amongst perpetrators in which even the genuine hurt they may have suffered themselves becomes somehow cut off, as if it were not actually felt; otherwise, she claims, it would be impossible for them to perpetrate such hurt on others. *Really* feeling one's own suffering should, in this humanistic vision, make it impossible to inflict such suffering on others. By implication, however, this means that acknowledging the damage one does also brings to the fore, in a felt way, the damage done *to*

oneself. The ‘witness’ is important in facilitating this. Just as a psychoanalyst needs to adopt the position of the moral third in order to reveal how we all cause pain, so the witness in the triad ‘perpetrator-victim-witness’ makes it possible for the perpetrator to shift from defensive denial and for the victim to be empowered, by acknowledging her or his own complicity in perpetuating the abusive situation. ‘The only way to get out of the perpetrator position,’ Benjamin says (23 mins), ‘is to recognize that that is a part of you, but also be able to feel that it is not the *only* part of you; and the only way for that to be not all that you are, this bad perpetrator, is for the witness to say, “I also am that, and I have that in me”’.

But who can be this witness? In the context of the Israel–Palestine conflict, there is a role for the West and particularly perhaps for America in acknowledging its position in maintaining the troubles. Benjamin calls all who have such a role but do not fulfil it ‘failed witnesses’, perhaps the worst kind – those who appear to be witnessing but are not, in fact, doing so. However, it seems from this material that the primary witness here will be the Jews, in whose name Israel operates and for whom it ostensibly exists. There is an enormous amount of friction in Benjamin's apparently simple statement, a friction played out throughout the Jewish community in the diaspora as well as in Israel. This friction gives rise to a wide range of defensive statements and a great deal of internecine antagonism. For some, any criticism of Israel is an anathema, a betrayal of identity and identification. For many others, it is legitimate but immensely painful and always likely to implode when it seems ‘unbalanced’ or unfair. What is it that we are supposed to acknowledge? What damage have I done if I am a critic of Israel? For what can I be called into account? What about Jewish suffering and, of course, the victims of Palestinian terror? Who cares for us that we should care for them? If ‘I go first’, as some Israeli Jews believe themselves to have done, what guarantee is there that anyone will go *second*? What about the blending of anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism, which even careful, progressive and

scholarly critics of Israel such as Butler (2009b) acknowledge exists? 'For the record,' she states, 'I would like to make clear that some of those criticisms do employ anti-Semitic rhetoric and do engage anti-Semitic sentiment although many of those criticisms do not, especially those but not exclusively those that emerge from within Jewish frameworks of social justice' (11 mins).

The array of defensiveness to be found amongst Jews is not always cynical; one has to read it as a consequence of a deeply felt and painful immersion in the hope and pride of Jewish national identity, now gone sour for many Jews but still felt, still a space for a certain kind of optimism and security. Under such circumstances, how can acknowledgement come about, without a move to self-abasement that will poison as much as it will cure?

Butler addresses the dilemma of Jewish identification and self-criticism by uncovering a strand of Jewish tradition that refuses the defensive retreat into the self-justifications provided by even genuine injury. She calls on 'Jewish frameworks of social justice', which she pursues through a series of moves that draw on Hannah Arendt and Walter Benjamin. Butler (2004) announces the foundational position in a long passage from *Precarious Life:*

> [I]t is probably fair to say that for most progressive Jews who carry the legacy of the Shoah in their psychic and political formations, the ethical framework within which we operate takes the form of the following question: will we be silent (and be a collaborator with illegitimately violent power), or will we make our voices heard (and be counted among those who did what they could to stop illegitimate violence), even if speaking poses a risk to ourselves. The Jewish effort to criticise Israel during these times emerges, I would argue, precisely from this ethos. And though the critique is often portrayed as insensitive to Jewish suffering, in the past and

> in the present, its ethic is wrought precisely from that experience of suffering, so that suffering itself might stop, so that something we might reasonably call *the sanctity of life* might be honoured equitably and truly. The fact of enormous suffering does not warrant revenge or legitimate violence, but must be mobilized in the service of a politics that seeks to diminish suffering universally, that seeks to recognize the sanctity of life, of all lives. (pp. 103–104)

As Butler notes, that is very much the standard post-Shoah progressive Jewish ethical stance. It is also in the tradition of the Biblical injunction about learning from one's own experience: 'And you shall not wrong a stranger, nor shall you oppress him; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt' (Exodus 22: 20). The suffering of the Jews does not mean that everyone else should be damned; rather, it sensitises Jews to the suffering of others. One's experience of injury does not legitimise injurious behaviour; instead, it places one in the position of empathy. As Benjamin suggests, really feeling one's own hurt should mean that one acts to prevent others' having to go through the same experience. Butler's ethic is both general and specific: in *general*, the experience of suffering should lead to 'a politics that seeks to diminish suffering universally'; *specifically*, Jewish suffering means that Jews should prevent suffering befalling others. This is why, she states, '[T]o openly and publicly criticize such violence is in some ways an obligatory ethical demand from within certain Jewish frameworks, both religious and non-religious' (Butler, 2009a, 11 mins).

Once again, however, the fraught question of the inequality of suffering is raised by Butler's powerful and poignant argument, which goes to the heart of the questions of recognition and acknowledgement and is both more rigorous and in some ways less consistent than

Benjamin's intersubjective approach. For Benjamin, destruction can be survived; mutual recognition is a real possibility, however difficult it is to achieve, and it has the power to shift the trajectories of insult that inflict such damage on the world. The responsibility of perpetrator and witness is to make this happen through the act of acknowledging the pain one causes. For Butler, the temptation to violence is intrinsic to the human condition, linked to dependency and vulnerability and making the embrace of nonviolence an ethical act. However, Butler is also a clear expositor of the way in which certain lives are more vulnerable than others, more 'precarious', and of how some people are systematically ruled out of the domain of the 'human' precisely so that they can continue to be exploited and oppressed. One might ask a very conventional question about this: are such precarious subjects exempted from the full weight of responsibility for all the hurt that occurs in the world? Or is it actually the case that all human subjects are equally responsible? Does the ethical universalism that makes taking responsibility an act required of every subject also place an unbearable ethical burden on those who have been victimized more than others, perhaps because they have been subjected to systemic or institutional violence? Or does Butler's own highly principled adoption of the precarity framework lie in tension with the equally principled Levinasian assertion of universal responsibility?

Whilst those may indeed be familiar questions, dangerously establishing the ground for an opt-out from responsibility ('We have been so badly hurt that recognition and acknowledgement does not apply here; we are the victims of violence so why should we forgive?'), they have both practical and theoretical consequences. Practically, they form exactly the argument adopted by many Jews in their defence of Israel: the hurt we have suffered is such that we cannot be held responsible in the same way. For those of us ranged against this position, it is almost unbearable to hear it expressed, which is why the careful arguments advanced by

Butler and others are so precious and so worthy of dissemination. But this does not mean that one can ignore the problem: at what point does my injury and victim position mean that others have to go first in their acknowledgement before I am called on to own up to my own destructive urges?

In terms of *theory*, we might be in the realm of the contestation indexed by Slavoj Žižek (2005) in his debate with Butler over the issue of 'ethical violence'. Žižek disputes what he calls the 'solidarity of the vulnerable' (p. 139) opened up by Butler's insistence on human 'weakness' and her reinstatement of a prospect of ethical recognition. In contrast, Žižek proposes that an ethical act *breaks up* the encounter with the other by introducing the realm of the 'third', in a very different way from that proposed by Benjamin. Instead of the third being a space of mutual encounter, it is, rather, a force – the symbolic – that comes from outside the intersubjective order and regulates it according to some other principle. This necessarily *disjunctive* element introduced into the subject–other relation constitutes a form of violence; hence, Žižek's rendering of 'ethical violence' is very different from Butler's.

> In order to render our coexistence with the Thing minimally bearable, the symbolic order qua Third, the pacifying mediator, has to intervene: the 'gentrification' of the Other-Thing into a 'normal human fellow' cannot occur through our direct interaction, but presupposes the third agency to which we both submit ourselves – there is no intersubjectivity (no symmetrical, shared relation between humans) without the impersonal symbolic Order. (pp. 143–144)

The opacity of the other or 'neighbour', in Žižek's view, is not something to be 'gentrified' and romanticised; it is the arena of threat and horror, and the point of a social ethics is lost if one

converts this into an appeal for recognition and responsibility. The polarization here might be too great, but the debate uncovers some of the political tension surrounding an ethics based on recognition. Recognizing the other through the Levinasian dynamic adopted by Butler ameliorates something that has to be kept alive in its forceful destructiveness; a true ethics will be one that breaks into this and usurps it with a commitment to an objective – hence truly 'ethical' – justice. Whilst this argument has many ramifications and its own aporias (Frosh, 2010), it also latches on to an issue that the recognition literature has never resolved. If it is truly the case that destructiveness is endemic to relational encounters, then the move towards an ethical system cannot rely on the face-to-face but instead requires something else to intervene, something that restricts and regulates, facilitates and judges. If this can go by the name of 'justice', it suggests that not everyone will be equally responsible for everything that occurs. True justice treats every subject equally, but it also differentiates among them in its judgements.

It is no accident that Butler's (2009b) articulation of a maximalist position of ethical relationality and responsibility takes her to a messianic frame, albeit a famously secular one. Taking opacity to be the heart of identity and estrangement from self to be the condition of relationality, Butler sees the *exilic* condition as the source of Jewish ethics. Following Hannah Arendt and Walter Benjamin, she takes diaspora as key and regards the nationalism that produces unquestioning identification with the state of Israel as a defensive regression. For her, drawing from but opposing Gershom Scholem (1941), the kabbalistic imagery of the breaking of the ten *sefirot* (the vessels set aside to hold God's holiness) during creation represents the divine scattering of light across all peoples and thus marks out the necessity of Jews living amongst others. The messianic gathering-in of these holy sparks is not a metaphor for gathering in only the Jews; reading messianism through Walter Benjamin's secular eyes, it represents the

‘suffering of the oppressed that flashed up during moments of emergency and that interrupted both homogenous and teleological time’ (Butler, 2009b, 30 mins). The sparks are distributed precisely so that they can be found everywhere, in the other (including the non-Jewish other) as well as in the subject. They can never be fully gathered together into one place; that is the point, the reason why the vessels broke in the first place, because sanctity can never be made one subject’s possession.

‘Dispossession’ is key, dispossession without the idea of redemption, of gathering in. In line with other recent attempts to contest Zionist appropriations of Jewish history as solely a history of despair, awaiting the Zionist redemption (Frosh, 2009), the diasporic and exilic are advanced here, made the condition for recognising the suffering of others and proceeding towards an assault on that suffering rather than a replication of it. ‘Redemption is to be rethought as the exilic without return – a disruption of teleological history and an opening to convergent and interruptive sets of temporality,’ says Butler (2009b, 32 mins). Jewish history is not one of gathering in the sparks to redeem only the Jews; it is one of allowing the sparks to infiltrate, to penetrate or interrupt the continuation of suffering, so that what has been experienced can become the source of an ethical stance, so that ‘because we were strangers’ we do not become oppressors. It is thus an emancipatory vocabulary, despite its melancholic structure. The breaking of the vessels is usually interpreted as the source of a fragmented system that needs to be put right, demanding a reparative response that is itself the marker of the messianic as ‘end of history’. By contrast, Butler’s use of Walter Benjamin here advances the cause of continuing ‘flashing up’ of the hidden sparks, in which those who have lost most and who are written out of humanity have the chance to return, to make their presence felt. Perhaps recognition and acknowledgement culminate in this, a kind of return of the repressed that has to be worked for rather than defended against.

A Dark Vocabulary

The vocabulary of relational ethics becomes in this context a socio-religious vocabulary as well as a psychoanalytic and psychosocial one. It is a dark vocabulary, one that causes strife. It demands renunciation of the preciously cultivated victim position that is so often used to warrant violence. It is a vocabulary not of forgiveness, but of responsibility, including responsibility for hurts that one has not perpetrated oneself but has witnessed. It is a vocabulary of active witnessing that opposes the failed witnessing of those who watch but do not intervene. It is a vocabulary of acknowledgement, if acknowledgement means going first into the domain of witnessing and taking on the responsibility of stating one's own injurious behaviour, one's own destructive intent. In relation to the damage done, this is a dark vocabulary that stirs up wounds and that faces people with existential anxiety. If we cannot take refuge in our victimhood but instead have to face the reality of suffering, we have to face both the suffering we have undergone and the suffering we cause. This prises open identities closed around historical self-justification; it reveals not only the opaque domain of each subject, but also the dependence of each of us on the others amongst whom we live. The building of walls, the shutting down of communication, the separation of communities are all modes of defence, explicitly and intentionally; they are also acts of violence that explicitly and again intentionally rule the other out of the domain of the human, to whom damage can be done.

But maybe context also matters, and the universalising tendency of this work is less helpful than its focus on particular contexts. Butler's appeal to Jewish ethics, for instance, is a statement of her own personal specificity: this is one place from where she comes, this is the relevant pull and source for her thinking about Israel, this is the grand sweep of a history and philosophy that has something more to say than that 'God gave us the land'. Read this way, it is

not a programme of *universal* ethics, because to claim that it is – however beautifully it might read – would be to make the Jews somehow responsible for *all* hurt. The philosophy of ethical relationality has by no means been formulated solely by Jewish writers, yet they have been very present in its history, and there is a danger that they – we – might mistake it for our own. Claiming a universal 'Jewish ethics' promotes the disappearance of any specific Jewish identity in a kind of 'reverse exceptionalism' (others are entitled to their 'own' identity, but the Jews are responsible for everything), with certain dangers in tow. We are not responsible for everything.

On the other hand, the work on recognition and acknowledgement promotes the realisation that what we are genuinely responsible for is quite enough. Without a level of self-abasement that makes recognition of the other meaningless (I have to be a subject if my recognition of you is to be worth anything), we have to find a way to achieve recognition in acknowledgement; that is, to know that what we say is worth saying, because it relates to what is, without its theoretical caveats, the real. For maybe the authors drawn on here are correct in their contentious claim that if one truly feels the injury done to oneself one cannot do it to others, except if these others are defined as non-human, as not suffering in the same way, as not amenable to the imaginative link that makes our suffering generalisable. If the sparks of light can do anything at all, as they mix up between people, they should at least bring these derogated others to life again; and in so doing, they will disturb us all – not just Jews in relation to Palestinians, but human subjects in relation to ourselves.

About the Author

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Notes

1. Given the extensive use that Butler (2005) makes of Laplanche, it might be useful to note that the notion of an 'enigmatic signifier' actually derives from Lacan's (1957) essay, 'The Agency of the Letter' (see Fletcher and Stanton, 1992). John Fletcher (personal communication, July 2010) writes, 'Laplanche uses the same phrase but gradually gives it a different meaning; for Lacan it references the "letter in the unconscious" that has been substituted for by the symptom in the subject of "sexual trauma". Laplanche uses it in the context of the situation and structure of primal seduction to reference the traumatizing transmission from the other that is enigmatic because of its own repressed dimension'.

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