Introduction

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As Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen, and Rebecca Walkowitz write: 'From Aristotle and Kant to Nietzsche and Hegel to Habermas and Foucault to Derrida and Lacan and Levinas…the concept of ethics and the ethical has been reconceptualized, reformulated, and repositioned' (2000: viii). Originating from the ancient Greek word *ethos*, used to denote the customs or character of the *polis* and its citizens ethics, it has been suggested, consists in the study of 'what is morally good and bad, right and wrong' (Singer 2014); and the 'systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong behavior' (Fieser 2012). Jacques Rancière offers a different formulation, however, classifying ethics as a mode of thinking in which 'an identity is established between an environment, a way of being and a principle of action' (2010 [2006]: 184). Conventionally, ethics, often distinguished as 'normative ethics',[1] has been sub-divided into three fields: deontology, which takes duties that are obligatory, irrespective of their consequences, as the focus of ethics; consequentialism, of which utilitarianism is most influential form, which stresses the results of actions, as in the maximisation of happiness; and virtue ethics, which focuses on moral character or 'the virtues' such as generosity or compassion.

Not all recent accounts of 'ethics', however, conform easily or neatly to the three approaches listed. Levinas, for example, defines ethics as 'first philosophy' (1984), and understands it in terms of a relation to – and an impingement by – the other that precedes the formation of the self. Within poststructuralism broadly conceived, ethics has been theorised variously as a mode of self-fashioning or 'care of the self' (Foucault 1985, 1991, 2000), and as an 'ethos of critical responsiveness' (Connolly 1995: xvi) or of 'generosity' (for example, Connolly 2002a, 2002b). Just as ethics was once seen as the province of 'an ideal,

autonomous and sovereign subject' and a universal humanism (Garber et al., 2000: viii), so too of late the subject has come to be regarded as the 'problem' of ethics, not its ground (Loizidou 2007: 46).

Troubling definitional matters do not end there. Paradoxically, ethics has been seen simultaneously as 'the philosophical study of morality' (Deigh 1999: 284); as a synonym for both morality (Deigh 1999) and for 'moral philosophy' (Singer 2014); *and* as conceptually distinct from morality. Thus, according to thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas, ethics addresses questions about the 'good life' while morality focuses on the rules or norms that ought to govern human interaction, such as principles of justice. Alternatively, ethos is understood by Theodor Adorno as commonly accepted or collective ideas, interpreted by Annika Thiem as meaning 'habituated frameworks and rationales for action' (2008: 233),[2] whereas morality, by contrast, is conceived of as a 'practice of reflection and deliberation' (Thiem 2008: 233), of questioning and inquiry (Adorno, 2000; see also Menke 2004; Butler, 2005: 3-6).

During the last decade or so of the twentieth century a 'turn', or perhaps more accurately a '*re*turn' to ethics took place. It is this return that sets the context for *Butler and Ethics*. According to Peter Dews, this reappearance of ethics was marked by a number of features, including a re-centring of questions of obligation, respect, recognition and conscience that 'not so long ago would have been dismissed as the residue of an outdated humanism', an increased focus on the work of Levinas, and by a growing curiosity about questions of 'radical evil' (2002: 33; see also Garber et al., 2000; Davis and Womack 2001; Myers 2008; Rancière 2010 [2006]). Not everyone greeted its return positively. Chantal Mouffe considers it to be a retrograde step signalling the 'triumph of a sort of moralizing liberalism', and producing a 'moralization of society' (2000: 86). Ethics, that is, as a 'retreat from the political' (Mouffe 2000: 85). Frederic Jameson views 'the return to ethics … and its

subsequent colonization of political philosophy' as 'one of the most regressive features' of postmodernity (2010: 406). Intriguingly amongst these critics is Judith Butler who, in a now much-cited conversation with the renowned political philosopher William Connolly, remarks:

> I confess to worrying about the turn to ethics, and have recently written a small essay that voices my ambivalence about this sphere. I tend to think that ethics displaces from politics, and I suppose for me the use of power as a point of departure for a critical analysis is substantially different from an ethical framework (2000; see, for instance, Lloyd 2007, 2008; Chambers and Carver 2008; Rushing 2010; and Schippers 2014).

Butler is, of course, best known for *Gender Trouble* (1990), the book that helped inaugurate queer theory, shifted the course of debates within feminism by challenging its conventional wisdom about the relation between sex and gender, and introduced the idea of gender performativity. Since *Gender Trouble*, Butler has published another nine books: *Bodies that Matter* in 1993; *Excitable Speech* and *The Psychic Life of Power* in 1997; *Antigone's Claim* in 2000; *Undoing Gender* and *Precarious Life* in 2004; *Giving an Account of Oneself* in 2005; *Framing War* in 2009; and *Parting Ways* in 2012. To this can be added several co-authored volumes: including *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* with Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek in 2000; *Who Sings the Nation State?* with Gayatri Spivak in 2007; *Is Critique Secular?* with Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, and Saba Mahmood in 2009; and *Dispossession* with Athena Athanasiou in 2013, as well as chapters, interviews and journal articles too numerous to mention.[3] It is the publication of one of those works, however, that is the main prompt for this edited volume.

Given her public reservations and confessed 'ambivalence' about the return to ethics, it surprised many when in 2005 *Giving an Account of Oneself* appeared, a book described on its dust jacket as 'her first extended study of moral philosophy' in which Butler is said to

elaborate ‘a provocative outline for a new ethical practice’. Could it be that Butler had overcome her doubts and was now actively embracing – turning to – ethics? Did she no longer regard the return to ethics as ‘an escape from politics’ or as entailing a ‘heightening of moralism’ (Butler 2000b: 15)? Was there, perhaps, another explanation for the publication of this tome? Could it even be that ethical considerations were never, in fact, fully absent from Butler’s work to this point?

Certainly *Giving an Account of Oneself* is something of a departure from her other work insofar as it takes moral philosophy as its starting point, however, Butler’s *explicit* embrace of ethical considerations occurs *before* its publication, with, for example, the ‘small essay’ mentioned above, ‘Ethical Ambivalence’ (Butler 2000b), as well as with *Precarious Life* (Butler 2004a), the volume of essays written in response to the events of 9/11 and its aftermath. I say *explicit* embrace here deliberately for two reasons. First, these texts mark the start of Butler’s on-going critical reflections on Levinas (see, for instance, Butler 2013), regarded with disquiet by some of her interlocutors who consider her ‘turn’ to Levinas as provoking a regretful and problematic shift in her thinking, but viewed by other readers as simply emblematic of a change of focus to matters ethical.[4] Secondly, there is an unresolved debate amongst her critics, shared by the contributors to this volume, as to whether Butler’s interest in ethicality is, in fact, a new development in her thinking or whether it is, instead, a persistent feature of her thought.

A brief mapping of the terrain will help to give a flavour of this debate. On the one side there are those who propose that, in one form or another, ethical considerations have been an ever-present theme in Butler’s oeuvre.[5] Sara Salih was one of the first commentators to contend that ‘Butler’s work as a whole’ may be defined by ‘its ethical impetus’, which she construes in terms of an extension of ‘the norms by which “humans” are permitted to conduct liveable lives’ (2004: 4). Annika Thiem likewise proposes that ethical considerations have

'characterized her [Butler's] work all along'. For Thiem this is evident in its focus on the norms and structures that 'condition, enable, and animate forms of marginalization' (2008: 9, 8). Equally Samuel Chambers and Terrell Carver, in their co-authored book *Judith Butler and Political Theory*, maintain that '*Butler has raised questions concerning ethics throughout her writings*'. This is discernible, for them, in Butler's 'distinct and considered concern with the way in which a theory of subjectivity, or an ontological formulation, shapes, enables, constrains or produces particular sorts of ethical relations' (2008: 94, original emphasis). Acknowledging that Butler's interest in ethics has certainly 'intensified' since 9/11, Hannah Stark concludes that this has only rendered 'explicit … what has always been implicit' (2014: 89) in her thought. Together with Chambers and Carver, Stark dates Butler's initial exploration of ethicality to her first major published work, *Subjects of Desire* (Butler 1987). In marked contrast to those who trace the ethical dimension of Butler's thought to her exploration of Levinas, Stark ties it to Butler's enduring concern with the Hegelian theme of recognition.

Other critics, however, disagree that the entire compass of Butler's writing is ethically oriented. Some discern a 'definitive turn' in Butler's work 'toward ethics' (Mills 2007: 133) after 9/11,[6] a reorientation that a number regard as highly problematic, particularly because her alleged 'turn' *to* ethics is seen as occasioning a flight *away* from politics.[7] Jodi Dean, for instance, contends that Butler's 'ethical sensitivity' is bought at 'the cost of politics'; indeed, she avers 'Butler presents ethical resources as available only under conditions of the denial of politics' (2008: 109). Plotting changes in Butler's work in the decade and a half following *Gender Trouble*, Lynne Segal declares her scepticism about 'what might be read as her substituting ethical abstractions for political analysis', which Segal locates in 'some' of Butler's 'recent Levinasian and Arendtian turns' (2008: 384; see also Gies this volume), a position echoed by Diana Coole who worries about the 'more abstractly normative Kantian –

and more recently, Levinasian – aspect' of Butler's thinking '[p]ulling against the possibility' of 'political engagement' (2008: 27). Lauren Berlant likewise expresses reservations that Butler's account of ethical commitment, not only eliminates the unconscious, but ends up assuming an intentionalist subject who is able consciously to 'short-circuit foundational affective attachments in order to gain a better good life', thus displacing politics (2007: 294).

This concern about the link between ethics and politics in Butler's work – whether ethics supplants politics, subtends politics, is itself politically inflected or involved in an agonistic duel with it – is something that several authors in this volume explore, and, as might be expected from the foregoing discussion, in relation to which they adopt a variety of divergent positions.

For all their differences, however, there is one matter that all commentators more or less agree upon: that Butler – whether always or belatedly – advances an ethical discourse *of some kind*. The question is: what kind? The appellations abound. Annika Thiem talks of Butler's 'ethics of critical inquiry' (2008: 8); Slavoj Žižek describes Butler's ethics as an 'ethics of finitude' (2013: 137); while David Gutterman and Sara Rushing, focusing on *Precarious Life*, explore her 'ethics of grief' (2008). Bonnie Honig aligns Butler's work with what she calls an 'ethics of mortality and suffering' fastened to '*mortalist* humanism' (2010: 1, original emphasis). Elena Loizidou cautions that Butler does not 'offer an ethical code for action' but rather a 'philosophical account of ethical responsibility' (2007: 14, 76). Butler describes her own project in terms of an 'ethic of non-violence' (in Stauffer 2003), while contributors to this volume characterise it variously as 'an ethics of failure' (Mills), an 'ethics of grievability' (Walker), and an 'ethics of vulnerability' or 'precariousness' (Rushing).

In spite of the different lexical terms used to describe Butler's ethical discourse, there are, nevertheless, a number of common themes that normally come to the fore in these discussions, some of them newer additions to Butler's theoretical vocabulary, others of longer

standing; they include the body, corporeal vulnerability, precariousness and precarity, grief and grievability, together with notions of the 'human', intelligibility, liveability, and the possibility of a liveable life, as well as questions of violence, and particularly in the context of this book, of 'ethical violence' (see Jenkins, Mills, and Schippers this volume). In addition, scholars have also begun to draw attention to the language of affect that has begun to seep into Butler's writings of late (see Rushing and Schippers, this volume).

Butler and Ethics opens with a chapter by Nathan Gies that takes as its starting point Butler's engagement with the work of Levinas and its role in understanding the relationship between ethics and politics in the former's work. In particular, Gies confronts head-on the charge that Butler's encounter with Levinas has resulted in both a certain moralism and flight from politics in her work. Instead, Gies asserts that Butler's reading of Levinas enables her to build on and develop the themes of 'liveability', present in one form or another in her work since *Gender Trouble*. It is Gies' argument that Butler's use of Levinas thus extends her thinking in significant ways, enabling her to develop and 'politicise' Levinas's apprehension of 'the ethical'. In the final part of the chapter, Gies turns the tables and offers a Levinasian reading of Butler, focused on Levinas's discussion of communication, which Gies regards as offering both a useful supplement to Butler's *ethico-political* approach and a corrective for some of its limitations. Far from her encounter with Levinas resulting in a retreat from politics, for Gies, it enables Butler to produce work on liveability that is *more* radical, and by implication *more* open to politics, than her earlier work.

In Chapter Two, Catherine Mills explores the idea of vulnerability in the construction of Butler's ethics, tracing its evolution as a concept from *Precarious Life* (Butler 2004a) onwards. Vulnerability has been a common concept in feminist discussions of ethics, including the ethics of care and discussions of relational autonomy. While some of these accounts construe vulnerability primarily in terms of contingent social factors, Butler,

according to Mills, offers a different approach. Without totally disregarding situational vulnerability (or what Butler calls 'precarity'), Butler understands vulnerability primarily as a constitutive condition of subjectivity which has a certain 'normative force'. Turning to Butler's encounter with Levinas, Mills argues that although she is often read as advancing an 'ethics of relationality' drawn from the latter's work, in fact, Butler's ethics displays little similarity to his. Hers is rather an ethics that sites responsibility in the subject's opacity to itself; as such, it is an 'ethics of failure'. For Mills, Butler never fully addresses the problem of responsibility for the other. Rather her discussion of substitutability (in the context of discussing the normative force of shared human vulnerability) results in Butler's ethics foundering on what Mills calls 'the twin of sovereign conceptions of subjectivity', namely 'community conceived as commonality' (XX).

The next two chapters explore the role of affect in Butler's ethical work. In Chapter Three, Sara Rushing returns to her paper, 'Preparing for Politics' (2010), to raise questions about the nature of Butler's ethics in the light of her references in *Frames of War* to 'feelings' and sensations. In the earlier piece, Rushing characterised Butler's ethics as not requiring affinity between participants in an ethical encounter, what she describes in this chapter as 'an ethics without affect'. With the shift in Butler's language, however, Rushing wants to know: 'What is the relationship…between being responsible, feeling responsible, and acting responsible?' (XX). She begins by reflecting on the affective turn in political and social theory in order to help determine what kind of work 'affect' is doing – or *might* do – in Butler's ethical theory, and how Butler conceives affect. A number of critics have drawn attention to what might be called a motivational deficit in Butler's work: that is, how it is possible to cultivate ethical responsiveness in conditions of precarity when the vulnerability of the other is not perceptible to us (see, for instance, Lloyd and Schippers this volume). Rushing indicates that Butler's discussion of affect as a political and ethical resource has the

potential to help here, though at present her account is too thin to do so satisfactorily. A 'constructive engagement' with virtue ethics, she proposes, might provide Butler with the conceptual resources to better connect being, feeling, and acting, and to link ethics affectively with politics.

Like Rushing, Birgit Schippers is interested in the link between affect and ethics, and like Rushing she situates Butler's discussion in connection to the 'affective turn'. However, what concerns Schippers in Chapter Four are the connections between affect, violence, and ethical responsibility in Butler's discussions of conflict and war, and what Butler's account of global ethics looks like (see also Schippers 2014). In contrast to Rushing who draws a qualitative distinction between Butler's earlier references to affective language and her treatment of affect in *Frames of War*, Schippers contends that the affective dimension of political and social existence form an 'integral part' of her work from the beginning. Specifically, she proposes that affect appears in three modes in Butler's writings: first as desire in *Subjects of Desire* (1987), next as trauma in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997b), and finally as excitability in *Excitable Speech* (1997a). The precise link between affect and ethics, however, is less well developed in Butler's texts. While Schippers charges that a focus on affect ought to be part of any conception of ethics, including especially global ethics, she also notes that at the moment it is not entirely clear from Butler's thought 'how ethical responsibility becomes an affective demand' or in what contexts 'I *feel* ethically responsible' for the other (XXX, original emphasis).

Perhaps one of the most discussed features in Butler's work since 9/11 has been the idea of grievability. In Chapter Five, Fiona Jenkins takes up this theme.[8] Rejecting an understanding of grievability as simply charting the 'prohibitive or censorial power' (XXX) to withhold recognition from particular populations, Jenkins contends that for Butler grievability is tied to the idea of a pluralising critique directed at contesting dominant norms;

a contestation that Jenkins sees as immanent to Butler's idea of 'sensate democracy' and to ethics, itself understood as critique. Against those such as Bonnie Honig who have suggested that Butler's recent emphasis on grief and mourning portends a depoliticising 'universal humanist ethics of lamentation' (Honig cited by Jenkins, XXX), Jenkins argues that Butler's interest in what she refers to as the 'nationalism of grieving' (XXX) is political, and that what is important about her work is precisely the significance for politics of the ethical framework she outlines. Like Gies, Jenkins thus sees Butler as advancing an ethico-politics. For Jenkins, however, this ethico-politics is concerned with contesting ethical violence as 'an *anachronistic nationalist* violence' (XXX), with the 'obligation of dissent' (XXX) that characterises a living practice of critique, with demands for pluralisation, and with what she suggests Butler regards as the potential of post-nationalist political formations.

In Chapter Six, Drew Walker also attends to grievability. His focus is the place of the 'human' in Butler's thought. It is Walker's contention that 'both before and after her "ethical turn"' (XXX), Butler has deployed two distinct images of the human, each aligning with a different theme in her work. The first, tied to the idea of survival, entails a politically problematic view of the human as a subject position necessary for persons to count – or to 'matter' as he puts it – and is detectable in her discussions of grievability, dehumanization, and abjection; Walker suggests that this understanding operates within a 'framework of recovery' (XXX) and is the basis for ethics. The second image, tethered to the notion of subversion, construes the human more dynamically, and to Walker in more radical political terms, as an entity always 'in the flux of reiteration' (XXX). Invoking Stanley Cavell and Jacques Rancière, and exploring various examples including the AIDS crisis in the US and the activities of the Zimbabwean women's movement, he argues *contra* Butler that the lives that are seen to be problematic – dangerous, deviant or the like – matter intensely because they are always already human. Politically, for Walker, the issue is not whether people are

grievable or not; the issue is to contest the unjust and brutal conditions within which humans live.

We return in the next chapter to the theme of vulnerability, first introduced by Mills in Chapter Two, though the focus this time is on the idea of corporeal vulnerability and ecstatic relationality. Readers often equate Butler's account of vulnerability with a sense of injurability, harm, or propensity for suffering. In Chapter Seven I argue, however, that to focus exclusively on vulnerability as injury is to overlook a second sense of vulnerability at work in Butler's writings: vulnerability as impressionability, which, I commend, is central both to Butler's understanding of ethics and politics. For me, as for Gies and Jenkins, ethics and politics are complexly intertwined. What I am concerned with, however, is the question of how it is possible to practise politics and ethics in concrete conditions of precarity. That is, where certain lives are produced historically as less protected or more impoverished than others, and where certain bodies are unrecognisable as human; when to borrow from Butler, a 'vulnerability' can be neither 'perceived or recognized' and thus cannot 'come into play' (2004a: 43). What, I inquire, if anything, may be done in such a context to facilitate ethical responsiveness, given Butler's own assertion that ethical solicitations cannot be prepared for in advance?

The final chapter of the volume takes us in a new direction. Critical interpreters of Butler have supposed that her putative 'ethical turn' is a response to a gap in her writing. Samuel Chambers advises otherwise. For him, what is missing from her earlier work is not ethicality but rather an account of the social formation that furnishes the condition of possibility for all subjects. To explore this, he turns to the theory of subjection outlined by Butler in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997b), honing in on her evaluations of Hegel and Althusser in that text. Chambers claims that the 'Hegelianized' reading of Althusser she advances here divests Althusser's account of the social formation of its complexity. As a

result, the theory of subjection that she allegedly derives in part from Althusser lacks an adequate concept of the social order. Chambers suggests, however, that in her so-called ethical writings after 9/11, Butler introduces an alternative conception of 'the social', tied to an ontology of finitude and vulnerability. This is an attempt, he proposes, to respond to the deficit in her earlier work. The problem with her new account, however, is that it offers, at best, 'little more than a liberal conception of the social' (XXX). For Chambers the end result is that 'something significant has been lost' in her writing: namely, the radicalism of her earlier work (XXX).

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[1] For Fieser this might entail exploring where ethical principles derive from and what they connote (metaethics); examining the moral standards that determine what constitutes wrong or right behaviour (normative ethics); or deciding what the morally appropriate response or course of action might be in specific areas, such as abortion, capital punishment or animal rights (applied ethics) (2012).

[2] An ethos that for Adorno might, in certain contexts, 'acquire repressive and violent qualities' (2000: 17).

[3] She is also the author of *Subjects of Desire* in 1987, which was her first book, the published version of her doctoral thesis.

[4] For competing assessments of Butler's debt to Levinas in this volume see the chapters by Gies, Mills, and Rushing. Interestingly, in 'Ethical Ambivalence' Butler dates her own reading of Levinas to a point in the 1990s, the same period, in other words, when the resurgence of interest in his writings roughly began, at least 'among the deconstructively minded' (2000: 19).

[5] In addition, to those noted here, see also Loizidou 2007, and Rushing 2010.

[6] Although Mills spots a certain continuity in Butler's concerns from *Bodies that Matter*, *Excitable Speech*, and *The Psychic Life of Power* to *Precarious Life* and particularly *Giving an Account of Oneself*, to do with her 'critical ontology of subjectivity and materialization', she argues that where initially this centred on 'political resistance and agency, her recent reflections … are turned more specifically toward the ethical dimensions of social existence' (2007: 133, 134).

[7] On the displacement of politics in Butler's more ethically-oriented writings, see also Shulman 2011; Benhabib 2013; and Walker this volume.

[8] Grievability is also discussed by Lloyd, Schippers and Walker, this volume.