

## REVIEW

**Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), ISBN: 978-0823225040**

With succinctness and clarity, Judith Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself*, delves into the meaning of what it is to put into practice an ethical life. From the outset of chapter one, "An Account of Oneself," Butler establishes an important corollary that will frame this philosophical treaty. Points of inquiry with respect to morality result within the context of social relations. Thus, "To pose this question in this way is already to admit to a prior thesis, namely, that moral questions not only emerge in the context of social relations, but that the form these questions take changes according to context, and even that context, in some sense, changes according to context." (3) To elucidate for the reader what she means by context, Butler begins by examining Adorno's critique of Max Scheler who mourns the loss or the undermining of the collective ethos. She emphasizes Adorno's restraint for grieving the decline of the characteristic spirit of society by noting that Adorno sees the collective ethos mostly as a conservative one. Furthermore, the fact that the collective ethos is no longer shared means, "...it can impose its claim to commonality only through violent means." (4) The author goes on to argue that it is anachronistic because it seeks to eclipse the present as it vehemently suppresses the rights of the individual. Because of the impetuous force which defines the form in which ethical ethos imposes itself, Adorno uses the term *violence* to describe the relationship between ethics, or what he more often calls *morality*, and its claim to universality.

An insight into Adorno's notion of ethical violence is necessary because Butler wants to impart an important point for her audience, namely the fact that a poststructuralist analysis of ethics does not signify a stance for moral nihilism as some too quickly may suggest. Rather the idea is to consider Adorno's perspective in which ethics is only possible if it can be made one's own. "If no living appropriation is possible, then it would seem to follow that the precept can be undergone only as a deathly thing, a suffering imposed from an indifferent outside at the expense of freedom and particularity." (7)

By reminding the reader that Adorno prompts us to consider then the impossibility of morality without an "I" and that it has no story of its own, Butler can move forward into a consideration of what entails this particular set of relations. "If the "I" is not at one with

moral norms this means only that the subject must deliberate upon these norms and that part of deliberation will entail a critical understanding of their social genesis and meaning.” (8) Through Butler’s interpretation of Adorno, we come to understand that if leading an ethical life “...is to yield nonviolent results, [one] must find a living place for this “I.” (8) Butler continues by suggesting that Adorno’s Nietzschean hinting at a negative view of a bad conscience as an “...ethics that cannot be appropriated in “a living way” by individuals under socially existing conditions ‘is the bad conscience of conscience.’” (9)

Adorno’s stipulation, however, does not resolve Butler’s ethical question. She wonders whether he “...consider[ed] the very operation of norms in the very constitution of the subject, in the stylization of its ontology and in the establishing of a legitimate site within the realm of social ontology.” (9) When considering the “scenes of address,” the moment when the “I” is asked to respond or to account for itself, Butler notes a “...prior relation: the force of morality in the production of the subject.” (10) Although Adorno’s work will be considered again later in the book, he is put aside in favor of Nietzsche’s idea that “punishment is the making of memory.” (10) Through this premise, Butler traces out the consequences that result when the demand to explain oneself is made. The “I” endeavors to give an accurate account behind its actions, the reason as to why the “I” has acted in such a manner, and finally attempting to defend or in some way justify a particular deed. It makes sense then to accept Nietzsche’s concept in which moral accountability is “...as a consequence of fear and terror.” (11)

Sometimes, however, instead of trying to explain oneself, the individual remains silent. Silence or the lack of a narrative also is bound to narrative and the moment that one is addressed. The absence of words could signify an inability for the subject to find the adequate means to tell its story or it could signify a refusal to answer or to question the legitimacy of the “you” at the scene of address. Still, narrative capacity is necessary for accountability. Conscious that her readers will relate Nietzsche’s aggression, the “you” that demands from me an account of myself, with Foucault’s account of disciplinary power, Butler points out the distinction between Foucault and Nietzsche when considering the formation of the subject. On the one hand, Nietzsche “considers the force of punishment to be instrumental to the internalization of rage and the consequent production of bad conscience...” (16) On the other, for Foucault, after distilling earlier work on the formation of the subject as an “‘effect’ of discourse,” “...the subject forms itself in relation to a set of codes, prescriptions, or norms and does so in ways that not only (a) reveal self-constitution to be a kind of *poiesis* but (b) establish self-making as part of the broader operation of critique.” (17) Notwithstanding the difference between Foucault and Nietzsche, both see how morality transfers a creative impulse.

What does Butler mean by morality redeploying the creative impulse? In attempting to answer the question, she asks if “...the postulation of a subject who is not self-grounding, that is, whose conditions of emergence can never fully be accounted for, undermine the possibility of responsibility and, in particular, of giving an account of oneself?”

(19) Butler explains that Foucault does not seem to think that this is the case. In fact, by calling "...into question the limits of established regimes of truth, and there a certain risking of the self becomes, he claims, the sign of virtue." (24) Because the norms which govern an established regime of truth "are to some extent impersonal and indifferent," they can cause a disorienting perspective for the subject. (25-26) The subject or "I" is bound by the norm and in seeking to express or narrate itself truthfully, it is caught up or *used* as Butler suggests by the norm itself. However, this contentious wrestling between the "I" and the norm could certainly suggest a desire to acknowledge and admit the "you." Aware of Hegel's argument that recognition is not a one-way street and that the "I" is "ecstatic," literally outside itself when in relation to the other, Butler considers what it means for the subject to have a "constitutive loss in the process of recognition." In other words, at the moment of "recognition" the subject has already suffered a change. Consequently, to understand the "I" it is necessary to understand the language that is articulated when the subject and object face each other when seeking recognition.

Perhaps counter-intuitively to readers' expectations, Butler begins not with seeking to understand the "I," but rather she asks "who are you?" Through Adriana Caravero's counter-Nietzschean approach, the author "...affirms that there is an other who is not fully known or knowable to me." (31) This incomprehensibility of the other, his or her motives, desires, needs, etc., not only exposes the other, but makes the other assailable. As a result, the other's vulnerability "makes a primary ethical claim upon me." (31) With this ethical duty or claim in mind, how does one respond to the other if the "I" will never have a full recollection of its own life. Butler goes on to list five primary reasons that result in a state of vexation or distress for the subject when attempting to give an account of oneself: first, the inability to narrate one's life; second, the *primary relations* that create enduring and re-iterative impressions cannot be recuperated by the self; third, a history that creates a *partial opacity* to the self; fourth, although the norms provide the mode by which the self narrates its history, the subject did not author the norms themselves; and finally, the *structure of address* results in interference between the account that the subject narrates for the other.

Having established the conundrum faced by the subject's opacity to itself, Butler admonishes the reader from a naïve or simplistic perspective to one's own very opacity. Acknowledging opacity, lack of understanding, does not in turn yield transparency. For her, recognition of this opacity in oneself is more about knowing one's own limits or boundaries in understanding. (42) Because we are limited and unaware, this should create a sense of humility in ourselves, while cultivating a forgiving attitude towards the other. Butler concludes the second chapter, "Against Ethical Violence," by stating that "...the "I" that I am is nothing without this "you," and cannot even begin to refer to itself outside the relation to the other by which its capacity for self-reference emerges." (82)

The final chapter, "Responsibility," shows how inextricably bound the "you" and the "I" are. The "I" grapples with the historicity that forms its identity, while forced to confront the other. At this cross-road, the subject faces a moral responsibility to the other even

when we are susceptible to the other. The very inability for us to exclude or remove the other in the “primary helplessness” of infancy does not mean, however, that the adult subject is suddenly less vulnerable. Butler reminds us that our adult experience also consists of “injuries, even violations.” Although it is natural to take a defensive stance against injury, being completely walled off from the other would make us inhuman, unable to love. Very perceptively, she calls attention to the very irrationality of love itself, as we almost always open the possibility for hurt and injury. “That we are compelled in love means that we are, in part, unknowing about why we love as we do and why we invariably exercise bad judgment.” (103)

Exposed before the other even when in or because of love, there is still a need for critical autonomy, a critical autonomy, however, that is grounded in the knowledge of the opacity of the human subject. But self-knowledge comes at a price. The price is to tell the truth while suspending a “...critical relation to the truth regime in which one lives.” (122) After all when one tells the truth one must consider not only the self, but also how that self is “produced and producible.” (132) Butler explains how Foucault “...locate[s] the practices of the subject as one site where those social conditions are worked and reworked.” (133) In other words, the subject is in constant struggle between a critical relation to the truth regime and giving a “truthful” account of the self. It is in this difficult moment when Butler urges us “to risk ourselves” and to be “undone by another is of primary necessity.” (136) “If we speak and try to give an account from this place, we will not be irresponsible, or, if we are, we will surely be forgiven.” (136) Ultimately, Butler wants to demonstrate that although the opacity that constitutes the self limits self-knowledge, recognizing our relational condition will determine our ability to act with agency and the hope for leading an ethical life.

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