

## Butler for and against Levinas

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### ❖ ABSTRACT

This paper aims to examine Butler's assessment of Levinas. Specifically, it focuses on clarifying where Butler converges and diverges with Levinas's philosophy, and how her appropriation of Levinasian thought manifests in her own philosophy. Scholars who found important philosophical insights in Butler's feminism theory and gender theory have expressed deep concern about her focus on ethics and Levinas. They argue that she substitutes ethics for crucial political issues, uncritically adopts Levinas's concept of the face. So, was Butler duped by ethics or Levinas? No, she is not. Her interest in Levinas merits an effective critique of Enlightenment rationality, more precisely of the atomistic, autonomous subject. What she sought to discover in Levinas was a fundamental orientation toward others, that is, the interdependency among me and the other, among ethics and politics. She aims to extend Levinas's concept of responsibility into the realm of politics. Thus, Butler grounds the ethics of asymmetry in reciprocity. Whereas vulnerability in Levinas is essentially the subject's vulnerability to the Other, in Butler it is defined as the common nature of the subject in general. If Levinas sought to argue for the 'vulnerable subject,' Butler seeks to speak of the 'vulnerable humans.' And through these vulnerable, interdependent subjects, she seeks to devise ways to resolve the unjust forms of inequality accelerated by neoliberalism. So, we can say, borrowing Derrida's terms, as follows: Levinas did not visit Butler. He was invited by her.

Keywords : subject, other, face, responsibility, vulnerability, ontology

## I . Butler and Levinas

Emmanuel Levinas told us in *Totality and Infinity*: “It is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality”(1969:21). This sentence, as the opening line of the French edition’s preface to this book, serves to evoke the history of philosophy where morality—that is, ethics— had bowed its head before the reason as self-interest and the politics as the calculation of self-interest. So how does Levinas approach this problem? In conclusion, he challenges traditional philosophers who “found morality on politics,”(1969:22) by reversing the relationship between ethics and politics. Levinas’s approach to this issue is to rethink ethics in a new way, relating ethics to beyond politics while confronting ethics with politics. This issue is supported by conceptions such as the infinity of the Other,<sup>1)</sup> the constitution of the subject through the relationship to infinite Other, and the one for the Other.

As is well known, since 2000, Butler has been deeply engaged with questions of ethics, referring on the work of Levinas. Many scholars who had found important political insights in Butler’s feminism theory and gender theory have expressed concern about her interest in ethics and Levinas, namely about her so-called ‘ethical turn.’ Criticisms such as Butler “substituting[substitutes] ethical abstraction for political analysis in some of her recent Levinasian and Arendtian turns”(Segal 2008:384) or “instead of subjecting to critical scrutiny the ‘Levinasian’

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1) In this paper, I distinguish between ‘the other’ and ‘the Other.’ The term ‘the other’ means the human other in its specificity. But the term needs to mean something significantly different. In Levinas, the human other is not only different from me but also transcends me. To express Levinas’s thoughts that emphasize the asymmetry between the self and the other and the transcendence of the other over the self, we use the word ‘the Other’ instead of ‘the other.’

idea of the face as the means by which others make ethical demands on us, Butler simply concurs with it”(Lloyd 2008:103) are representative. Given that Levinas contrasts the ethical with the political and links politics to judgment, ethics to responsibility, such concerns are not entirely misplaced. It is of the highest importance to know whether Butler is not duped by morality and Levinas. Was she duped by him? My answer is no. Her interest in ethics and Levinas is less about ethics itself than about ethics in relation to politics. One might say she seeks to transcend the dichotomy between ethics and politics. To borrow her expression, her primary concern was the “ethical stakes” in “political encounters”, “the political modalities” that constitute “fundamental ethical questions”(2013:74). So, she “takes distance from Levinas”(2015:108) in many ways. She made this point in several places. Examples include as follows: “[to] use Levinas against himself to help in the articulation of a global ethics,”(2013:107) or “I would prefer to think with Levinas against Levinas and to pursue a possible direction for his ethics and his politics that he did not pursue”(2012:61).

Therefore, Butler does not simply accept Levinas, but interprets and appropriates him. Her attention to Levinas represents an effective criticism of Enlightenment rationality, above all of the modern conception of the subject as an individualistic, atomic, autonomous agent. What she finds in Levinas is an original orientation towards others, namely other-directedness. The subject is for and by the other and is responsible for him. In particular, She tends to extend his ethics, his notion of the responsibility into the domain of politics. This paper aims to examine Butler’s assessment of Levinas. More specifically, it focuses on clarifying where Butler converges and diverges with Levinas’s philosophy, and how her active appropriation of Levinas’s philosophy is revealed in her

own philosophy. This kind of discussion will help us confirm the possibility of dialogue between Levinas and Butler, and examine how her appropriation of Levinasian thought manifests in her own philosophy, how Levinas's philosophy—sometimes criticized for being unrealistic and very limited in its scope—can be translated into our reality.

## II. Butler's appropriation of Levinas

Butler was skeptical of the role that ethical discourse plays in radical political theory. But Butler recently has developed her thinking by placing ethics at the center of political affairs and critical theories. Butler, who had focused on gender politics surrounding the signifier 'woman,' began to explore issues of ethics and political philosophy centered on the concept of 'human/the human.' As we know, Butler seeks to replace the sovereign and self-sufficient model of subjectivity with a relational model of subjectivity. Unlike her previous work that emphasized social norms in the production of the subject, and beyond Foucault's emphasis on subjugation and exclusion, how does Butler understand the subject after the so-called 'ethical turn'? In other words, how does she explain how the subject is formed? We can evaluate her explanations of human have both continuity and change. Regarding continuity, it can be mentioned that Butler believed there was a close relationship between norms or power and the process of subject formation. However, after the ethical turn, Butler reformulated her interest in the subject by examining the possibilities of human beings (Cyfer 2019:7-9). What is important here is that she is emphasizing the other. Butler refers to Levinas's views on the Other, responsibility, and vulnerability in her exploration of the

possibility of a new subject. Works such as *Precarious Life*(2004), *Giving an Account of Oneself*(2005), *Frames of War*(2009), and *Parting Ways*(2012) are relevant to this discussion.

Butler explains Levinas's view of the subject as follows.

“After all, for Levinas, the subject is constituted by the other. ... it[the Levinasian position] also assumes that this other is already me, not assimilated as a ‘part’ of me, but inassimilable as that which interrupts my own continuity and makes impossible an ‘autonomous’ self at some distance from an ‘autonomous’ other.” (2012:38)

Butler's understanding of the subject is not significantly different from this. What we should note here is that Butler does not merely state that I am dependent on the other. What she emphasizes is the fact that we are overwhelmed by the other and the relationality.

“If I am confounded by you, then you are already of me, and I am nowhere without you. I cannot muster the ‘we’ except by finding the way in which I am tied to ‘you,’ by trying to translate but finding that my own language must break up and yield if I am to know you. You are what I gain through this disorientation and loss. This is how the human comes into being, again and again, as that which we have yet to know.” (Butler 2004:49)

As revealed in the above statement, even in Butler, the other is one who intervenes in my life beyond my control—or rather, one who has already intervened. In Butler's work, the other is also posited as someone who is part of me but cannot be assimilated into me, someone who constitutes ‘I’ through relation with me. In this way, Butler accepts

Levinas's claim that we are bound to the Other from the outset, and especially that encountering the Other unsettles me and deprives me of my place. For Butler, too, what constitutes the subjectivity of the subject is "the fact that I am called outside myself, and that this relation to an alterity defines me essentially"(2012:41). For all of them, 'human' is a different name for the disorientation and dispossession caused by the situation of being interrupted by the other(Ruti 2017:93-94).

Following Levinas, Butler who had noticed "that there are others out there on whom my life depends, people I do not know and may never know,"(2004:XLII) seeks to understand "how it is that others make moral claims upon us, address moral demands to us, ones that we do not ask for, ones that we are not free to refuse"(2004:131). And she "relates this to some of the more pressing questions of violence and ethics"(2004:131). At this point, it is important to understand that our primary, unwilling relationality forms the basis of Butler's ethics of precarity. This ethics has "the very unbearable of exposure as the sign, the reminder, of a common vulnerability, a common physicality and risk"(2005:100). In this way, Butler emphasizes that our exposure to others is something we share with them, and that this shared vulnerability makes us ethically responsible to them. In other words, Butler accepts Levinas's conclusion that our fundamental condition of being bound to others, especially our condition of being interrupted by someone's demands and suffering, gives rise to a kind of responsibility that cannot disappear under any circumstances(Ruti 2017:94). Above all, she makes it clear that this responsibility is not the result of my volitional actions. The pre-historical or pre-ontological state of the subject includes passivity of 'I'. It is not something that comes from my own will or choice, and it precedes the emergence of the 'self' that is capable of such actions.

“It is interesting that Levinas insisted we are bound to those we do not know, and did not choose. ... After all, Levinas also gave us a conception of ethical relations that make us ethically responsive to those who exceed our immediate sphere of belonging and to whom we nevertheless belong, regardless of any choice or contract.” (2012:23)

It is not a problem of what I do, but of what has been done to me at the level of my fundamental sensibility. In summary, Butler’s ethics originates from the opacity and the unknowingness of the subject. And this is precisely why her ethics is ethics of vulnerability, ethics of non-violence. Ultimately, as she defines violence as “act by which a subject seeks to reinstall its mastery and unity,”(2005:64) non-violence means accepting the opacity and the unknowingness of the other as my own, accepting our common vulnerability(Cyfer 2019:7).

### III. Butler against Levinas

Butler goes the same way as Levinas in accepting that when the self is exposed to the face of the other, its perspective of life is interrupted and he suffers from disorientation. Since the self cannot understand the other, the foundation of the self becomes unsettled. This infinity of the other corresponds to the opacity and precariousness that challenge the self-confirming knowledge of the self. However, Butler distances herself from Levinas in various ways. First, her approach to ethics is almost entirely different from Levinas’s. While Butler tries to construct ethics from the opacity of self-understanding, what Levinas emphasizes is that this infinity which questions the certainty of the self demands concrete, infinite, and asymmetric responsibility from the self. In addition, she

finds ethics in reciprocity, in “our shared, invariable, and partial blindness about ourselves”(Butler 2005:41). When confronted with others, the self becomes incapable of forming a coherent narrative because it cannot grasp others and cannot remove social norms from its description of itself. Faced with this self-opacity, the self assumes that others are experiencing similar crises. This is an ethics based not on differences with the other but on equality(Simmons 2011:168).

“The uniqueness of the other is exposed to me, but mine is also exposed to her. ... My singularity has some properties in common with yours and so is, to some extent, a substitutable term.” (Butler 2005:34)

In this way, Butler introduces reciprocity into the realm of absolute alterity and fundamental asymmetry that characterizes Levinas’s ethics. Both Butler and Levinas emphasize alterity that transcends identity, but in Butler, the fundamental nature of this alterity becomes the principle of reciprocity.

In this regard, Butler seems to mention two points. The first is that the opacity of myself and of the relations that constitute ‘I’, which myself have never chosen is shared by all of us. We must all mutually acknowledge that we are fundamentally opaque and that we experience the alterity of the other within this opacity. The second is that our relationship with the other presupposes the precariousness of our physical lives, and that these conditions are shared by everyone. Whether wanting or not, each of our lives is generally conditioned by the dependence and the precariousness of life(Bierhanzl 2021:41).

“Precariousness implies living socially, that is, the fact that one’s life is always in some sense in the hands of the other. It 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 not at all. Reciprocally, it implies being impinged upon by the exposure and dependency of others, most of whom remain anonymous.” (Butler 2009:14)

Even in discussions concerning the face, a divergence exists between Butler and Levinas. Following Levinas, Butler first accepts the infinite dimension inherent in the face of the other. She largely agrees that the face transcends vision and representation, that it demands ethical responsibility from us, and that the command of the face precedes my own position or circumstances, my freedom or choice. This line of thinking aligns with her context of asserting a dimension of humanity that cannot be fully captured by social, linguistic, or cultural norms. For both Levinas and Butler, a complete response to the face of the other is impossible. This is an inevitable impossibility. They believe no system of meaning or reference can fully contain the human. Despite this similarity, Butler’s emphasis is not the same as that of Levinas. For Levinas, the human is unrepresentable. To put it differently, representation is not the way to encounter the other. Therefore, Levinas speaks of an immediate response to the call of the Other beyond representation. In contrast, Butler emphasizes that there exists a context in which the ethical demands of the other are revealed. She seems to link the infinite responsibility for the other to ‘understanding.’

“Philosophically, Levinas outlines an ethical scene in which we are obligated, under most situations, to preserve the life of the other

— obligated by the alterity we encounter there. Upon closer inspection, however, it turns out that this scene, which would seem to obligate us universally, is restricted culturally and geographically. ... the ethical demand is not prior to notions of cultural autonomy, but is precisely framed and restricted in advance by certain notions of culture, ethnicity, and religion.” (2012:39)

This kind of discussion leads Butler to argue for the inevitability of representation.

“For representation to convey the human, then, representation must not only fail, but it must show its failure. There is something unrepresentable that we nevertheless seek to represent, and that paradox must be retained in the representation we give. In this sense, the human is not identified with what is represented but neither is it identified with the unrepresentable; it is, rather, that which limits the success of any representational practice. The face is not ‘effaced’ in this failure of representation, but is constituted in that very possibility.” (2004:144)

In Levinas, the face of the Other is placed beyond ontology and epistemology, that is, at the level of ethics. Therefore, what is demanded of the subject is an immediate response to the Other, namely an infinite responsibility. However, what is important for Butler is the recognition that the other is not subsumed under my comprehension, that my understanding of the other is incomplete. To put it in her terms, we must recognize that there exists something incomprehensible that we must understand. In this sense, what confronts Butler’s subject is not responsibility but the recognition of the insufficiency of my cognition, of the subject’s opacity. Moreover, what she takes issue with is that

there are things that cannot even be represented, things deliberately excluded from representation. She cites as an example “In the Vietnam War, ... the pictures of the children burning and dying from napalm that brought the US public to a sense of shock, outrage, remorse, and grief,”(2004:150) were “pictures we were not supposed to see ... a reality that disrupted the hegemonic field of representation itself.”(2004:150) She aims to question not only the limitations of representation itself, but also the limits of representation as it is currently maintained and managed.

There is also a parting way between Butler and Levinas in their discussions of responsibility. To conclude, Butler does not remain within Levinas’s argument that ethics is the infinite responsibility of face-to-face relationships. As you can see from the saying, “I cannot think the question of responsibility alone, in isolation from the other,”(2005:84) Butler accepts Levinas’s mode of thinking that links ‘responsibility’ to ‘the Other,’ but what she emphasizes is not the infinity of the other but the opacity of the subject. It means that the subject cannot know itself, and thus a complete explanation of the subject is impossible. If in Levinas the source of responsibility is the call of the Other, then in Butler the source of responsibility is the impossibility of self-understanding. She repeatedly states, that “it is precisely by virtue of the subject’s opacity to itself that it incurs and sustains some of its most important ethical bonds,” (2005:20) and “that my own foreignness to myself is, paradoxically, the source of my ethical connection with others.”(2005:84) The responsibility Butler asserts is not ‘my responsibility for the other,’ but “our responsibility for them[others]”(2005:88) in general. It is that we are all responsible to us. This stems from the fact that we are inevitably bound to relate to the other. This is because Butler’s concern lies not with the other but with the subject

—that is, she seeks to establish a new subjectivity. It may be for this reason that Butler rarely mentions the idea of ‘responsibility as an infinite demand’, which is the core of Levinas’s discussion. Butler and Levinas hold similar positions in that they both consider relationships with others to reveal my own finitude and the strangeness of the other. However, she seeks to explain this relationship not from the perspective of the other who introduces this strangeness, but from the perspective of the subject who becomes unstable because of the other. What she wants to overcome through this is the traditional ethical position that regards autonomy as a condition of responsibility. What is important in her ethics is not the achievement of autonomy but the inevitable failure of autonomy. In addition, Butler considers this failure to be an inevitable attribute of ethical subjectivity(Mills 2015:52-53). She wanted “to establish these limits[the limits of any self-understanding] not only as a condition for the subject but as the predicament of the human community.”(2005:83)

In the same way as the generalization of responsibility, Butler reflects on vulnerability, a core concept in Levinas’s philosophy. “The subject will be described denuded and stripped bare, as one or someone, expelled on the hither side of being, vulnerable, that is, sensible.”(Levinas 1998:53-54) As can be seen in the quoted passage, Levinas usually these two adjectives “sensible” and “vulnerable” together, which are related to the establishment of subjectivity and its mode of operation.

“In vulnerability there then lies a relationship with the other which causality does not exhaust, a relationship antecedent to being affected by a stimulus. ... Vulnerability is obsession by the other or an approaching of the other. It is being for another, behind the other of a stimulus. This approach is not reducible to the representation of

the other nor to consciousness of proximity. To suffer from another is to have charge of him, to support him, to be in his place, to be consumed by him.” (Levinas 1987:146)

As can be seen from the above discussion, in Levinas, vulnerability is presented within the discussion of the subject’s subjectivity—that is, the inevitability of the subject’s openness to the Other. Levinas emphasizes that “The subjectivity of a subject is vulnerability, exposure to affection, sensibility, a passivity more passive still than any passivity.”(Levinas 1998:50) The subject is not defined by autonomy. It is fundamentally for the Other. Since the subject is fundamentally open to the Other, the subject’s self-stability or self-certainty is impossible. Due to this vulnerability, the subject is fundamentally obsessed with the Other and faced with the Other’s call. And it unconditionally assumes responsibility. Thus, the relationship between the subject and the Other caused by vulnerability is a relation without relation. And the subjectivity that this enables can be called “the subjectivity … prior to essence.”(Levinas 1987:147) In this way, Levinas assigns ethical value to vulnerability. This is because responsibility for the Other is primary. Vulnerability, that is, “this sensibility has meaning only as a “taking care of the other’s need,” of his misfortunes and his faults, that is, as a giving.”(Levinas 1998:74) In Levinas, vulnerability is essentially the subject’s vulnerability to the Other, while in Butler, vulnerability is defined as the common nature of the subject in general. We know that Butler has deal with the issue of ethics, that is, the question of responsibility in this manner. Levinas’s emphasis on the asymmetry between the subject and the Other no longer holds true in Butler’s work. Butler argues that what is characterized as vulnerable is not ‘I’ but ‘we’, that its orientated relationship is not only ‘my vulnerability to the other’ but also ‘the

other's vulnerability to me' and 'our vulnerability to the world'. This line of argument naturally leads Butler to define the subject and the subject's actions in a way fundamentally different from Levinas.

#### **IV. Vulnerable subjects in Butler**

If Levinas's discourse on vulnerability aims at the subject's inevitable opening toward the Other and the inevitable failure of the subject striving for self-sufficiency within itself, then Butler's theory of vulnerability aims to challenge the image of the subject as a proactive, autonomous agent that seeks self-control, that is, "an entrepreneur of oneself,"(2015:15) and the modern neoliberal political discourse founded upon it. Using Levinas's argument as a stepping stone, Butler attempts to present her own new conception of humanity and a new vision for a movement confronting modern politics. What, then, is the new understanding of humanity—or more precisely, this new subject—that she proposes? Butler posits the body against the mind, relationality against individuality, and passivity before activity. This means that as a physical being existing within relationships with others, I cannot control my own life. Of course, such statements are also found in Levinas. Does this mean Butler makes the same claim as Levinas? Not at all. We noted earlier that Butler characterizes vulnerability as the vulnerability of the subject in general. While Levinas sought to argue for the 'vulnerable subject,' Butler seeks to speak of the 'vulnerable us.' Let us examine the following discussion.

“Vulnerability is not a subjective disposition. Rather, it characterizes a relation to a field of objects, forces, and passions that impinge on

or affect us in some way. As a way of being related to what is not me and not fully masterable, vulnerability is a kind of relationship that belongs to that ambiguous region in which receptivity and responsiveness are not clearly separable from one another.” (2016:25)

“Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure.” (2004:20)

The expressions we should note here are “vulnerability is not a subjective disposition” and “our being socially constituted bodies.” What does this mean? In my view, Butler presents a conception of the subject that is clearly distinct from Levinas’s at several points.

First, if Levinas sought to assert the argument that “the subject resists … ontologization,”(1998:18) namely, posit ethics beyond ontology by emphasizing the infinity of the Other and the vulnerability of the subject, then Butler aims to invent a new ethics and an ethical politics grounded in it by ontologizing relationships among humans in a new way. Specifically, what Butler questions is not ‘ontology in general’ but “the ontology of individualism,”(2009:33) and what she proposes is a “new bodily ontology.”(2009:2) Through this, she seeks to “conceptualize the body in the field of politics”(2011:385) and ultimately establish a “new body politics.”(2012:14) Butler focuses on the fundamental dependence of the body on the basis that the body is provided to others, norms, cultures, and political apparatuses, that is, the body is fundamentally incapable of being free from external influences. The body belongs to the individual but is not his property. The body is “not only in the vector of these relations but as this very vector.”(2011:385) In this

sense, the body is already public and social. In other words, the body has a “socially ecstatic structure.”(2009:33) Thus Butler argues that “to be a body is to be exposed to social crafting and form, and that is what makes the ontology of the body a social ontology.”(2009:3) Here, the difference between Levinas and Butler becomes clear. Whereas Levinas contemplated the vulnerability of the body within the ethical realm, Butler considers that the vulnerability is historical and social. In Levinas, without sensibility, there would be no subjectivity. Without an exposed and vulnerable body, there would be no ethics. In Butler, without sensibility and such bodies, there would be no ethics or politics. Just as the subject of responsibility is not merely ‘me’ but ‘us,’ the body is not singular but plural. It is not the bodily ‘I’ but the bodily ‘we’ that comes to the fore.

“I have suggested that we rethink the relationship between the human body and infrastructure so that we might call into question the body as discrete, singular, and self-sufficient, and I have proposed instead to understand embodiment as both performative and relational, where relationality includes dependency on infrastructural conditions and legacies of discourse and institutional power that precede and condition our existence.” (Butler 2016:21)

The body makes us come out of ourselves. We might call this the body-subject. Its social or public dimension renders every subject susceptible to influence, mortality, injury, and obstruction through the desires and capacities for action inherent in life. “The body is exposed to socially and politically articulated forces as well as to claims of sociality-including language, work, and desire-that make possible the body’s persisting and flourishing.”(2009:3) Vulnerability is the vulnerability

of the body. For Butler, this universal vulnerability is always entangled with bodily interdependency or fundamental relationality that constantly shipwrecks subjectivity. This relationality produces a duality. We are constituted by our relationships with others, yet simultaneously dispossessed by them. In this sense, it is necessarily ecstatic (Mills 2015:43). Therefore, the social ontology of the body functions as a critique of atomistic or possessive individualism. We are vulnerable not only to each other but also to all institutions and economic, social, and cultural relations. For Butler, the starting point of ethics is the subject constitutively entangled with others, and this constitutive entanglement gives rise to humility, generosity, patience, tolerance, and forgiveness. These virtues stand in opposition to the ethical violence that stems from a complete self-consistency that disregards our constitutive relationship with others (Abadía 2021:112).

Second, Butler adds Foucauldian discussions of truth systems to Levinas's ethical thought. In Butler, truth systems and their norms are not unrelated to the self, the other, the relationships with the other, and the responses to the other. Hegemonic discourse is omnipresent within these, and the self is already ensnared within the network of social norms. Both the response to the face of the other and the recognition of the other's vulnerability are situated within the horizon of understanding. She notes how norms regulate the social domain and, consequently, ethical encounters.

“Our capacity to respond to a face as a human face is conditioned and mediated by frames of reference that are variably humanizing and dehumanizing. The possibility of an ethical response to the face thus requires a normativity of the visual field.” (Butler 2005:29)

“A vulnerability must be perceived and recognized in order to come into play in an ethical encounter. ... if vulnerability is one precondition for humanization, and humanization takes place differently through variable norms of recognition, then it follows that vulnerability is fundamentally dependent on existing norms of recognition if it is to be attributed to any human subject. ... Norms of recognition are essential to the constitution of vulnerability as a precondition of the ‘human’.” (2004:43)

In Levinas, the face of the Other transcends all ontology. It precedes all norms, all politics, all culture. To borrow Levinas’s expression, the face of the Other is naked. Thus, this call of the Other and the response to it interrupt hegemonic systems. Yet in Butler, the encounter with the other seems to occur already within the network of norms. “There is a language that frames the encounter, and embedded in that language is a set of norms concerning what will and will not constitute recognizability.” (Butler 2005:30) Does Butler’s argument then end with the same thing as Hegel’s discourse on recognition? No, it is not. In the same passage, Butler asserts that the other is one who cannot be captured by social norms or their recognition. The other marks “a site of rupture within the horizon of normativity and implicitly call for the institution of new norms, putting into question the givenness of the prevailing normative horizon.”(2005:24) How should we understand this kind of ambiguity? One reason might be that, for Butler, what shatters hegemonic discourse is not the face of the other, but the self’s response to that face. What we must be mindful of is that, for Butler, it is not the face of the other that leads ethics beyond norms. Rather, it is because my relationship with the other requires me to explain myself. Yet, an account of the self cannot be perfect. This is because I cannot fully know the other, and

I am already situated within a normative system of truth—“the terms by which I confer recognition are not mine alone.”(2005:35) According to Butler, the face of the other interrupts the self. The self must hear the other’s call and respond to it. Yet this relationship occurs within the system and inevitably must. Neither the self nor the relationship with the other—that is, the response to the other—can transcend the system (Simmons 2011:169-170).

Finally, for Butler, one can note that the universal vulnerability inherent in human existence itself has a kind of normative power. “From where might a principle emerge by which we vow to protect others from the kinds of violence we have suffered, if not from an apprehension of a common human vulnerability?”(2004:30), she says, adding, “By insisting on a ‘common’ corporeal vulnerability, I may seem to be positing a new basis for humanism.”(2004:42) Butler seeks to establish an approach to ethics grounded in universal corporeal vulnerability. This raises a problem concerning the ethical obligations and normative status. Butler emphasized the common, what we humans share. That is, it is because of what we commonly possess, because of what we share, that we enter into ethical relations with others. Her ethics can be said to be grounded in two concepts: subjectivity and community. What provides the essential motivation for ethics is the fundamental vulnerability that emerges from our relational corporeality. As humans, our vulnerability inherently signifies the way that each of us is offered to others. This common condition problematizes the moral ideal of the self-oriented, rational, self-affirming subject(Mills 2015:42). Butler’s account of corporeality as vulnerability thus posits the following: bodies are always situated within a “community” with other bodies due to their relationality, this relationality constitutes the “descriptive or historical fact” of subject

formation and the “an ongoing normative dimension of our social and political lives,”(2004:27) thereby demanding that we consider our mutual interdependency. This demand naturally leads to a discussion of the politics of vulnerability, exemplified by her distinction between ‘precariousness’ and ‘precarity’. In *Precarious Life*, Butler primarily addressed physical vulnerability or precariousness. However, in *Frames of War*, she uses this term distinctively from precarity. Here, precariousness is “the more or less existential conception”, which refers to the ontological vulnerability inherent in the physical, social, and relational nature of human beings, on the other hand, precarity is a “more specifically political concept”, which arises from specific conditions that place certain humans at risk of exploitation, injustice, and violence. After distinguishing between precariousness and precarity, she argues that it is precisely the differential allocation of indeterminacy that must provide the starting point “for both a rethinking of bodily ontology and for progressive or left politics.”(2009:3) In several books, she outlines various conditions that define this precarity: arbitrary violence, inadequate social and economic support networks, situations of war, occupation, imprisonment, forced displacement, exposure to unemployment or disposable labor(Lloyd 2015:172-174). Butler contends that all of this is “the aims and effects of neoliberal forms of social and economic life.”(2013:21) And then She states, “The vulnerability to dispossession, poverty, insecurity, and harm that constitutes a precarious position in the world itself leads to resistance,” and is dedicated to exploring the possibility to “overcome that vulnerability, at least provisionally, through acts of resistance.”(2016:12)

## V. Levinas invited to Butler

Let us ask again: Was Butler duped by Levinas? Butler argues that “this interdependency ... articulates an alternative to both liberal and neoliberal forms of individualism as well as to unjust and accelerating forms of inequality.”(2013:107) What is the interdependency she asserts? In what ways do we depend on each other? To put it differently, in what ways are we mutual, and in what ways are we dependent? It is not the mutuality of freedom, nor is it the kind of dependence where the self, posited as an atomic entity, joins with you and society by ceding its sovereignty to secure its own freedom and rights. Rather, it is a mutuality of responsibility stemming from the fact that “the ‘I’ is invariably implicated in the ‘we.’ ... because I am from the start implicated in the lives of the other ... the ‘I’ is already social.”(2013:107) Therefore, it is a dependence that precedes any conscious renunciation born of selfishness, in that sense, it is an inescapable, inevitable dependence that can never be cast off. She argues that these interdependent subjects—that is, vulnerable subjects—must reveal themselves in the public sphere through their vulnerability while fulfilling their responsibilities to one another. Such performative political resistance, she contends, is the new way capable of transforming our reality. Thus, Butler’s use of Levinas was thoroughly intentional and deliberate. To put it in Derrida’s terms (1999:70-71), Levinas did not ‘visit’ Butler. He was ‘invited’ to her.<sup>2)</sup>

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2) Derrida distinguishes between ‘invitation’ and ‘visitation.’ Regarding invitation, the invited must be chosen by the inviter, who can anticipate and prepare in advance for when they will come and how to receive them. But visitation is not like that. Here, the alterity of the other who visits the host’s house is emphasized over the host’s sovereignty. The visit of an unexpected other, not a scheduled guest, can completely defy my expectations or anticipations. Therefore, it always

Butler's goal is clear. It is "to extend his notion of the 'face' further into the domain of politics ... to strengthen the ethical injunction signified by 'the face'."<sup>3)</sup>

Butler's interpretation and appropriation of Levinas contributes to resolving ambiguous elements within Levinas's thought. For instance, Butler's argument that political powers represent certain faces for specific purposes and strategically enact dehumanization can be seen as a contemporary interpretation of Levinas's theory of the face that "The nudity of a face is a bareness without any cultural ornament, an absolution, a detachment from its form in the midst of the production of its form. ... The signifyingness of a face in its abstractness is in the literal sense of the term extraordinary, outside of every order, every world."(1987:96) More importantly, Butler embraces the Levinasian subject's fundamental sensitivity, and describes our concrete vulnerability to the Other within mourning and desire. By situating the self in concrete physical terms, she explains Levinas's claim of asymmetrical responsibility toward the Other in a more familiar way. She establishes that responsibility within a universal foundation. By emphasizing that we are always already given to the other, and that the boundary separating one human from another is far more blurred than we expect, she argues that political rights must be recreated to provide this relationality. Through Butler's appropriation and interpretation of Levinas's

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gives rise to an unforeseen surprise, an 'absolute surprise'. In that sense, Levinas can clearly be said to have been invited by Butler. She had it all planned out!

3) This reference is a part of Butler's response to Bruno Chaouat's critique that she deliberately misread Levinas's philosophy in her book *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*(2013). The full text is reproduced below.

Le monde(2013.3.21.), "Levinas trahi? La réponse de Judith Butler", [https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2013/03/21/levinas-trahi-la-reponse-de-judith-butler\\_5994702\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2013/03/21/levinas-trahi-la-reponse-de-judith-butler_5994702_3232.html) (검색일: 2025.10.17.)

ethics on being-for-the-other, we confront the true challenge that arises when Levinas's ethics of the Other is actually applied. Simultaneously, her attention to our embodied vulnerability presents the possibility of recreating community. This is true only if such shared experience is recognized not as hidden weakness but as an inexhaustible source. Now we can answer: Butler was not duped by ethics or Levinas.

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❖ 국문초록

## 레비나스에 대한 버틀러의 찬반

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이번 논문은 레비나스에 대한 버틀러의 평가를 살피는 것을 목적으로 한다. 구체적으로, 본 논문은 버틀러가 레비나스의 철학과 어떤 면에서 만나고 헤어지는지, 또 레비나스 철학에 대한 버틀러의 전유가 그녀의 철학에서 어떻게 드러나는지를 해명하는 데 집중한다. 버틀러의 페미니즘 이론에서 중요한 철학적 통찰을 발견했던 학자들은 윤리와 레비나스에 대한 그녀의 관심에 깊은 우려를 표명했다. 복잡한 정치의 문제를 윤리로 대체한다거나 레비나스의 얼굴 개념을 무비판적으로 받아들인다는 것이 그들의 견해다. 그렇다면 버틀러는 윤리와 레비나스에 속은 것인가? 그렇지 않다. 레비나스에 대한 그녀의 관심은 계몽주의 합리성, 더 정확히는 원자론적, 자율적인 주체에 대한 효과적인 비판에 값한다. 그녀가 레비나스에서 발견하고자 한 것은 타자들을 향한 근원적인 정향, 곧 나와 타자 사이의, 윤리와 정치 사이의 상호의존성이다. 그녀는 레비나스의 책임 개념을 정치의 영역으로 확장함으로써 비대칭성의 윤리를 상호성 속에 정초한다. 레비나스에서 취약성이 본질적으로 타자에 대한 주체의 취약성인 반면, 버틀러에서 취약성은 주체 일반의 공통된 본성으로 규정된다. 레비나스가 ‘취약한 주체’를 주장하고자 하였다면, 버틀러는 ‘취약한 인간’에 대해 이야기하고자 한다. 그리고 이 취약한 상호의존적인 주체들을 통해 신자유주의가 가속화하는 부당한 형태의 불평등을 해소할 방안을 강구하고자 한다. 따라서 우리는 데리다의 말을 빌려 다음과 같이 말할 수 있을 것이다. 레비나스는 버틀러를 방문한 것이 아니다. 그는 그녀에 의해 초대되었다.

주제어: 주체, 타자, 얼굴, 책임, 취약성, 존재론

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