

The Ineffable and the Ethical
On Judith Butler's *Senses of the Subject*
Amia Srinivasan
University College London

1.

A recurring theme of Judith Butler's *Senses of the Subject* (2015) is that which exceeds language, a difficult topic for something written in language. If we say, as Butler does, that 'the body', 'the subject' or 'the infinite' cannot be fully represented in language, then what is it exactly that we think we are doing when we say so? Either we are saying something that makes sense – in which case those things turn out *not* to exceed language after all – or we are saying something that makes no sense, that is simply nonsense. Ramsey joked that 'what we can't say, we can't say, and we can't whistle...either' (1931, 238). His target was Wittgenstein's apparent willingness to describe what, by Wittgenstein's own account in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, could not be described, namely the fundamental preconditions of linguistic representation. This hostility to expressing the supposedly inexpressible – shared by Ramsey's contemporaries Russell¹ and Neurath² – has largely been inherited by later analytic philosophers. Indeed this is as good a way as any of marking where analytic philosophers take their leave from the so-called 'Continental' tradition. Unlike Continental philosophers (the story goes) analytic philosophers pride themselves on confining their remarks to the coherent and non-paradoxical. But those who work outside the analytic tradition, like Butler, might very well think that Ramsey's joke is on him. After all, if I'm unable to tell you in words just how delighted I am, an ecstatic whistle might do the trick. Ramsey's metaphor is unfortunate, one might think, precisely because musical expression is the paradigm case of showing what can't be said.

¹ '[A]fter all, Mr Wittgenstein manages to say a good deal about what cannot be said, thus suggesting to the sceptical reader that possibly there may be some loophole through the hierarchy of languages, or by some other exit.' (Russell 2003, p. xxi)

² '[O]ne should indeed be silent, but not about anything' (Neurath 1931-2/1959, p.284)

In *Senses of the Subject*, Butler suggests that we don't have to employ non-representational forms of expression in order to get a grip on the inexpressible, that the work of music can be done with and through language itself: indeed, that it can be done by philosophy. We see this both in how Butler reads the historical figures with whom she's concerned, particularly Descartes and Kierkegaard, and also in how she invites herself to be read. This aspect of Butler's work – her willingness to use language not only to represent, but also to gesture, enact, provoke – has inspired much ire in analytic quarters. Some claim it disqualifies Butler's work from the category of genuine or respectable philosophy. Such a verdict is unfortunate because it betrays our own disciplinary history – what are we to make, say, of Plato or Nietzsche if we insist that philosophical language can never do anything but assert? But Butler (as I read her) would further argue that a philosophy confined to saying only what can be coherently said is a philosophy that cannot serve ethics – for the ethical, properly understood, is grounded in the ineffable.

I will end my comments by saying something about why Butler thinks this is the case. First let me to turn to Butler's treatment of those things that she suggests exceed language – the body, the subject, the infinite.

2.

Philosophy students are taught that Descartes' preoccupation in the *Meditations* is the mind: what it can be certain of, and how the world of the senses and objects might be rebuilt from its foundations. Butler suggests that while this might have been Descartes' preoccupation, it is nonetheless the body, and not the mind, that is the abiding preoccupation of Descartes' text. Descartes announces he will subject his body to doubt by imagining it to be an illusion perpetrated by an evil demon. And yet, Butler argues, Descartes' body re-asserts itself, haunting the *Meditations* like an un-exorcisable ghost. For the text is produced by the physical fact of Descartes' writing; the hand that he proposes to doubt is the very means of that doubt's expression. Thus Descartes' text works as a kind of *reductio* against the possibility of the thing it claims as its starting point. In reply to Descartes' famous question – 'how can I doubt that these hands or this body are mine?' – Butler offers the answer: I can't.

Whether we can really doubt the body matters for Butler because she has been accused of reducing the body (particularly the sexed body) to language: of saying that the body is a mere product of discourse, or (worse yet) is itself merely discourse. Butler agrees that there is something 'scandalous' in this version of constructivism (19), but denies that this is what her own view amounts to. Constructivism, she says, is no more successful in denying the

reality of the body than Descartes is in entertaining the idea that his body might be mere fiction. To say that body is constructed by language cannot be to say that it is wholly determined by, or simply is, language. For once we have said that the body is something constructed by language, we have already acknowledged its reality, that it is *something* after all. Thus Descartes' supposition of the irreality of his own body becomes an allegory for "a more general form of positing that is to be found in various forms of constructivism" (18). Butler goes on:

[I]n imaging the body, Descartes is at once referring to the body through an image or figure – his words – and also conjuring or inventing that body at the same time...Hence, for Descartes, the language in which the body is conjectured does not quite imply that the body is nothing other than an effect of language; it means that conjecturing and supposing have to be understood as fictional exercises that are not devoid of referentiality (31-2).

Perhaps another way to put Butler's thought here is this: constructivism about the body not only implies that the body is real (since constructed things exist) but also that it has a reality beyond language. For our language itself commits us to the extra-linguistic reality of the body. If we ask ourselves the question 'if there were no one to speak about bodies, would there still be bodies?', there would be something scandalous in answering 'no'.³

This might suggest that constructivism about the body collapses into realism about the body. If our grasp on the body is necessarily mediated through language – if there's no getting outside our representations of the body – then aren't we committed to the ontology that is contained within our representations, viz. a realist ontology of the body? In other words, isn't constructivism about the body self-defeating, with realism the only resting point? Consider, by analogy, Putnam's 'internal realism'. According to Putnam, the radical indeterminacy of reference means that there is no sense to be made of the realist notion of a theory's getting (or failing to get) onto the way the world really is (Putnam 1981)⁴ This leaves us with a radical, global constructivism according to which a word or concept can be said to correspond to an object only "within the conceptual scheme of [its] users" (ibid 52). "Objects", Putnam writes, "do not exist independently of conceptual schemes. *We* cut up the world into objects when we introduce one or another scheme of description" (ibid 52). As Millikan (1984) points out, this view of things falters on itself. If we take seriously Putnam's

³ Presumably what would also make such an answer 'scandalous' for Butler, though she doesn't discuss the issue explicitly in these essays, is her commitment to the Foucauldian thesis that acts of conceptualisation and categorisation are always acts of power. To say that there is no body that exceeds language might suggest that there is nothing that is harmed by such acts of power.

⁴ Putnam ultimately gave up this view, in part for reasons I'm about to detail.

claim that there is no stepping outside our conceptual scheme, then surely we must say from within it: there is a mind-independent world, and some theories are better than others at getting onto it. Thus Putnam's constructivism seems to give way to garden-variety realism.

Butler anticipates and resists this collapse of constructivism into realism:

Although the body depends on language to be known, the body also exceeds every possible linguistic effort of capture. *It would be tempting to conclude that this means that the body exists outside of language, that it has an ontology separable from any linguistic one, and that we might be able to describe this separable ontology.* But this is where I would hesitate, perhaps permanently, for as we begin that description of what is outside language, the chiasm reappears: we have already contaminated, though not contained, the very body we seek to establish in its ontological purity. The body escapes its linguistic grasp, but so, too, does it escape the subsequent effort to determine ontologically that very escape (21, emphasis added).

Butler hesitates, 'perhaps permanently', at the realist thought that there exists a pre-linguistic, pre-representational body. For the constructivist thought (that the body is only given to us in language) pushes its way back in. Butler cannot bring herself to abandon it. Where does this leave us? First we are told that a thorough-going constructivism is 'scandalous', unstable, in its denial of a body that exceeds language; then we are told to reject any realism that would posit an extra-linguistic body. We are left with a paradox: "The body...is and is not determined by...discourse" (35).

3.

What does Butler think she is doing when she tells us that the body both is and is not determined by discourse? That the body exceeds language but that there is no extra-linguistic body? In "Kierkegaard's Speculative Despair", Butler writes:

Aware of this paradoxical task of trying to write about what cannot be delivered in language, Kierkegaard insists upon the necessity of indirect communication, a kind of communication that knows its own limitations and by enacting those limits indirectly points the way to what cannot be communicated (128)

Like Butler, for whom the subject is simultaneously “acted on and acting” (6),⁵ Kierkegaard thinks the subject is simultaneously finite and infinite. We are temporally bounded, embodied creatures who are subject to the laws of human reason and morality; and yet we are grounded in and answerable to that which transcends reason and the moral sphere. For Kierkegaard it’s not possible to *think* our way into this paradox – indeed it’s misleading to say, as I did, that Kierkegaard ‘thinks’ the subject is at once finite and infinite.⁶ Thought, in its attempt to grasp the infinite, renders it finite, “negat[ing] what [it] seek[s] to affirm” (122). We exceed the finite, but this excess cannot be described. It can only be ‘indirectly’ gestured at, though a performance of language’s inability to grasp it squarely. Thus in *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous narrator Johannes de Silentio tells us that Abraham loved Isaac completely, and yet was willing to sacrifice him on God’s command, and that rather than this making Abraham a murderer, revealed him as a ‘knight of faith’. It’s not at all clear to Silentio how this could be true: a man who would kill his son for no reason could not really love him, indeed could be nothing but a common murderer. The truth of Abraham is something that cannot be coherently thought, can only be disclosed through language that deliberately misfires, “forc[ing] a crisis in thought” (128). So too, Butler might say, with the body. The body is at once determined by language and exceeds it, and this thought, though it cannot be coherently thought – indeed, is a bit of nonsense, a non-thought – is nonetheless something that we can be shown to be true.⁷

4.

For Kierkegaard’s Silentio, Butler writes, “the questions repeat themselves insistently, exhausting language and opening out into the silent void of faith” (130). Thus the crisis in thought ignites “the advent of passion” (128). What passion does Butler hope might be ignited by her exploration of the ineffable contradictions of subjecthood? For Kierkegaard the appropriate attitude to take towards the ineffable, namely faith, is an attitude opposed to the ethical. But for Butler, grasping the contradictions of the self – that our agency always presupposes others who act on us, that we are always in a sense ‘forced to be free’ – is fundamental to what she calls ‘ethical relationality’:

⁵ Misreadings of Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990) tend to emphasise one term in this formulation at the expense of the other.

⁶ Kierkegaard’s main criticism of Hegel is precisely that Hegel thinks such a paradox can be resolved through reason. Of course Kierkegaard doesn’t take himself to have an *argument* against this view. “If the issues he has with Hegel could be *rationally* decided, then Hegel would have won from the start. Kierkegaard’s texts counter Hegel...at the level of style” (Butler 2015, 116).

⁷ For a defence of the thought that certain bits of nonsense – including Putnamian constructivism – can be shown to be true, see Moore (1997), especially chapters 5-7.

[A] certain demand or obligation impinges upon me, and the response relies on my capacity to affirm this having been acted on, formed into one who can respond to this or that call...I am only moved or unmoved by something outside that impinges upon me in a more or less involuntary way. This uneasy and promising relation cannot be easily denied, and if denial does prove possible, it comes at the cost of destroying a social and relational world. I would say that we must affirm the way we are already and still acted on in order to affirm ourselves, but self-affirmation means affirming the world without which the self would not be, and that means affirming what I could never choose (11-12).

The denial of our dependency on others is not only a metaphysical mistake (a failure to understand the ontological preconditions of the self) but also an ethical one (a withdrawal of the self from the ethical sphere).

In “Sexual Difference as a Question of Ethics: Alterities of the Flesh in Irigaray and Merleau-Ponty”, Butler accuses Irigaray of both mistakes. For Irigaray, to relate ethically across the chasm of gender difference is to recognise the utter alterity of the other. Butler writes that for Irigaray ‘who are you?’ is “the paradigmatic ethical question...in the sense that it seeks to cross the divide of sexual difference, to know what is different, but to know it in such a way that what is different is not, through being known, assimilated or reduced to the one who seeks to know” (158). Irigaray’s foil here is Merleau-Ponty, whom Irigaray reads as advocating a mode of relating that strives to assimilate the other to the self, a mode that she charges with being characteristically ‘masculinist’ and ‘narcissistic’. According to Butler, the first mistake here is a metaphysical one, “the faulty presumption that to be implicated in the Other or in the world that one seeks to know is to have that Other and that world be nothing more than a narcissistic reflection of oneself” (167). Just because you and I depend on each other – just because I am myself only because you are you – does not make you nothing but me.⁸ The second, more severe, mistake is ethical: “if the ‘Other’ is so fundamentally and ontologically foreign, then the ethical relation must be one of sanctimonious apprehension from a distance” (168).

And yet one might not wonder if the ethics of ‘sanctimonious apprehension from a distance’ might not be preferable, in practice, to the ethics of mutual implication. Liberal political

⁸ Indeed Butler reads Irigaray’s treatment of Merleau-Ponty as an unwitting performance of just this fact: “[d]oes Irigaray’s own textual implication in Merleau-Ponty’s text not refute the very thesis that she explicitly defends?” (167).

philosophy is rife with calls for greater empathy and moral imagination.⁹ Such calls are alternately anodyne and presumptuous, commending us to do what is minimally required (think of others), or asking us to do what often can't be done (think our way into the other). Indeed the founding thought experiment of modern political philosophy, Rawls' original position (1971), presupposes that moderately idealised agents would be able to correctly evaluate what it would be like to live under various possible socio-political arrangements without first-hand experience of doing so.¹⁰ Feminists have pushed hard against the idea that the moral imagination is as powerful as liberals tend to presume – that oppressors can simply place themselves in the shoes of the oppressed – in turn insisting that imaginative representation give way to actual political representation (Jaggar 1993, Young 1997, Jaggar and Tobin 2013). Of course, Butler has no truck with liberalism's ethics of empathy:

[T]o be implicated elsewhere...suggests that the subject...is primarily an intersubjective being, finding itself as Other, finding its primary sociality in a set of relations that are never fully recoverable or traceable. This view stands in stark contrast...to the various forms of atomistic individualism derived from Cartesian and liberal philosophical traditions (168).

My question is how possible is it *for us* to achieve this form of intersubjectivity, to recognise our mutual interdependence while resisting the self-assimilation or self-projection that is characteristic of much liberal thought. Where should we look to see how such a possibility might be realised?

In "To Sense What is Living in the Other: Hegel's Early Love", Butler takes as her subject an early essay fragment of Hegel's (1963), entitled "Love". In this fragment we see Hegel's abiding concern with the oppositions of human existence, and in particular what Beauvoir calls consciousness' "fundamental hostility towards every other consciousness" (1953, 17). Whereas in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel 1997) this antagonism is worked out through a fight to death and the establishment of the master/bondsman relationship, in "Love" Hegel suggests that it can be transcended through love's accommodation with the impossibility of

⁹ For a recent example, see Nussbaum (2013).

¹⁰ Specifically, Rawls maintains that moderately idealised agents can use the maximin method (choosing the option that would lead to the least worst outcome) to choose between alternative political arrangements, with knowledge only of general economic, sociological and psychological truths. This means that Rawls' agents should be able to calculate the expected value of certain outcomes without having had any first-hand experience of, say, how bad it is to be racially discriminated against, or poor, or exploited. Presumably, then, Rawls supposes that rational agents can perform the relevant valuations simply through imagining different possible outcomes. Rawlsians might respond by expanding the facts to which parties in the original position have access to include these 'what it's like' facts.

dissolving the self into the other, a dissolution for which love by its nature yearns. As Butler writes:

Whatever union is achieved in love is not an absolute overcoming of difference, the finitude by which two individuals are separated...The couple does not dissolve into life itself without dying, since each would have to relinquish its determinate living form. And yet as separate and existing forms, each is understood 'to sense what is living in the other' (100-1).

The lovers achieve a reconciliation of what Hegel calls the "antagonism between....complete surrender...and a still subsisting independence" (1963, 306). They recognise and affirm both what unites and differentiates them. But Hegel reveals it's at best a fleeting reconciliation; that which divides the lovers – in particular their proprietary relationships to material reality – becomes too much. In the end for Hegel the transcendence of the antagonism isn't represented by the lovers, but by their offspring: "[a]fter their union the lovers separate again, but in the child their union has become unseparated" (ibid 308). It's left ambiguous, in Hegel's fragment, just how successful this makes the lovers' union.¹¹ We might ask: how hopeful is a model of relating that is by its nature temporary? This is a question very much at stake in contemporary feminism, one that divides those who aspire to a universalist grounds for feminist solidarity, and those (like Butler)¹² who advocate for more shifting and provisional forms of political coalition.

5.

One might further worry that to take Hegel's discussion of love as a model for politics is to beg the pressing question. For Hegel, love presupposes equality: "[L]ove proper...exists only between living beings who are alike in power and thus in one another's eyes living beings from every point of view; in no respect is either dead for the other" (Hegel 1963, 304). Of course the lover *tries* to deaden the beloved, to render the beloved a mere object. When the lover cannot do this the result is rage, Hegel says, but this rage gives way to shame, as the lover realises it is her *beloved* she seeks to destroy. This is how the lover and beloved are able to achieve, albeit fleetingly, the intersubjectivity that Butler exhorts as the proper basis of ethics. But what are the prospects for such intersubjectivity where the urge to deaden is met with no shame, no psychic resistance? How much can the image of lovers help us when thinking about the possibilities for intersubjectivity across the divides of race

¹¹ A deleted line from Hegel's fragment reads: "The child is the parents themselves."

¹² Butler 1990, 20-22.

or class or nationality?¹³ This is perhaps the most pressing question for any ethics that seeks to found itself not on general moral principles but on an ineffable movement of mutual recognition. What happens when we cannot see each other, or better yet when one party is all too seen, and the other invisible?¹⁴

In the final essay of this collection, Butler discusses Sartre's invitation to his fellow Europeans, in the preface to Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, to eavesdrop on the book:

Europeans, you must open this book and enter into it. After a few steps in the darkness you will see strangers gathered around a fire; come close, and listen, for they are talking of a destiny they will mete out...They will see you, perhaps, but they will be talking among themselves...This indifference strikes home (1967, 13).

Fanon's text, Sartre explains to his readers, isn't meant for them, but they should read it anyway, knowing that the text is indifferent to them. For this experience of reversed indifference is, as Butler says, an "epistemological requirement for understanding the condition of colonization" (2015, 174). Here we have a promising way into mutual intelligibility in the face of radical power differentials, not least because, on this schema, the responsibility does not lie with the oppressed to make themselves understood. (This schema also presupposes what is surely in general right, namely that the oppressed often understand their oppressors all too well.) And yet, Butler argues, Sartre's treatment of Fanon is ultimately self-centring: the 'scars and chains' of colonialism are interesting to Sartre for what they reveal about European violence and European humanism. For Butler, this narcissism is an unsurprising result of Sartre's insistence that Fanon isn't speaking to Europeans. She insists that there is a more inclusive reading of Fanon's 'you', for which she finds license in his *Black Skin, White Masks*. That book closes with a meditation on what would be needed "to create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world" (Fanon 2008, 181):

¹³ I don't mean to suggest that relations across the gender divide – and for Hegel the lovers are presumed heterosexual – do not involve power. Naturally they do; paradigmatically so. But I agree with Beauvoir when she argues that even as men objectify women (deaden them, in Hegel's terms) they often also need women to resist this deadening, so they (men) can feel that women's love has been freely given, not coerced. Of course there might very well be parallels in the case of other forms of oppressive power relations – most obviously, the capitalist's need to think that his relationship with the proletariat is one of free exchange, and the slave owner or colonist's need to think that the slave or colonised subject is best served by the arrangement, and thus would choose it if fully rational.

¹⁴ Utilitarianism, by contrast, can simply help itself to the empirical assumption that all the relevant parties are capable of pleasure and pain; the fact that not everyone will agree becomes a mere problem of implementation. Butler might say that this is a prime example of how philosophy is "one name for the deadening element in love" (Butler 2015, 107).

Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself? Was my freedom not given to me then in order to build the world of the *You*? At the conclusion of this study, I want the world to recognize, with me, the open door of every consciousness (ibid 181)

Butler admits that she “seize[s] upon this call...precisely because it posits an alternative to the hyperresolute masculinity of anticolonial violence” (193) of *The Wretched of the Earth*. But (as Butler acknowledges) the lines on which she seizes were written by Fanon nine years earlier. In *Wretched*, Fanon concludes that the colonised subject’s consciousness can only be opened through a violent shutting down of the consciousness of the coloniser. Butler hopes that Fanon’s earlier humanism can be reconciled with his later binarism:

At the moment in which I do violence to an other...then I make room not only for my own self-invention, but for a new notion of the human that will not be based on racial or colonial oppression and violence (194).

Even so, that would make Butler’s vision of mutual recognition a political goal, not a mode of politics. Fanon’s claim that in conditions of great oppression violence is sometimes necessary goes unanswered.

Works Cited

- Beauvoir, S. (1953). *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (2015). *Senses of the Subject*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Fanon, F. (1967). *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington. London: Penguin.
- Fanon, F. (2008). *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. C.L. Markmann. London: Pluto Press.
- Hegel, G.W.F. (1963), "Love", trans. T.M. Knox, in *On Christianity: Early Theological Writings*, New York: Harper Torchbooks, II.III, pp. 302-308.
- Hegel, G.W.F. (1977), *Phenomenology of spirit*, trans. and eds. A.V Miller and J.N. Findlay. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Jaggar, A. (1993) "Taking Consent Seriously: Feminist Practical Ethics and Actual Moral Dialogue" in E.R. Winkler and J.R. Coombs, eds., *Applied Ethics: A Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell, 67-86.
- Jaggar, A. and Tobin, T. (2013). "Situating Moral Justification: Rethinking the Mission of Moral Epistemology", *Metaphilosophy* 44 (4):383-408
- Millikan, R. (1984). *Language, Thought and Other Biological Categories*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Moore, A. W. (1997). *Points of View*, Oxford: OUP.
- Nussbaum, M. (2013). *Political Emotions*. Cambridge: HUP.
- Neurath, O. (1931/1959). "Sociology and Physicalism", *Erkenntnis* 2 (1931-2), pp. 393-431, repr. in translation in ed. A.J. Ayer, *Logical Positivism*, (Free Press, New York). Citations from reprint.
- Putnam, H. (1981). *Reason, Truth and History*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Ramsey, F. (1931). "General Propositions and Causality", in R.B. Braithwaite ed. F.P. Ramsey, eds. *The Foundations of Mathematics*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Rawls, J. (1971). *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge: Belknap Press.
- Russell, B. (2003). "Introduction", in Wittgenstein, L. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (transl.) London: Routledge Classics.
- Sartre, J. (1967). "Preface", in Fanon, F., *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Constance Farrington. London: Penguin.
- Young, I.M. (1997). *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy*, Princeton, NJ: PUP.