Ethics at the Scene of Address: A Conversation with Judith Butler

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EIN DRÖHNEN: es ist die Wahrheit selbst unter die Menschen getreten, mitten ins Metapherngestöber.

A RUMBLING: truth itself has appeared among humankind in the very thick of their flurrying metaphors.

— Paul Celan

MURRAY: I thought perhaps I would begin not in my own words but with those of the Jewish poet, Paul Celan. His short poem poses for us a question of truth and of the sound that truth might be said to make. In this scene, truth arrives not in clarion tones, but as a menacing roar, ein Dröhnen, perhaps too easily distanced or safely domesticated by the translation, “rumbling.” It is the sound of the flurry or flood of metaphors, recalling Nietzsche’s mobile army of tropes. A certain confusion marks this scene, if not a terrible beauty. Truth appears, metaphorically, in the midst of metaphors, in fugitive movement. This, we might say, is the scene of truth-telling, of Foucault’s dire-vrai. It is my hope that these words will provide an occasion for us to think about such a scene, the scenes of address and of recognition that have been so important in your work, most notably in your account of truth-telling in Giving an Account of Oneself (2005). For many philosophers, it is not without tremendous provocation that you claim in these pages a certain priority for the scene of address, and hence for rhetoric and rhetorical criticism as the originary and enabling condition for ethics, or indeed for philosophy.

Without quite leaving this scene, I should add here that I cannot help reflecting on the occasion of our conversation today, which is for me also a complicated scene of address, a flurry of metaphors: your thought has been so formative of my own that I am at pains to formulate an address that would locate me at or as its obvious origin. Of course, these multiple iterations are inevitable, often desirable. I add Celan’s voice to complicate the address. In what follows, I invite you to share your thoughts on poetry and poiesis, on the scene of address, on identity, the Jewish question, and feminist politics today.

To begin, perhaps you can say a little about what is at stake for you in conceiving a rhetorical approach to ethics? Rhetoric has been a concern in your work most explicitly, I think, since Antigone’s Claim (2000), where the fateful scene between Antigone and Creon is theorized. How might rhetorical criticism avoid the usual pitfalls of a
“poststructuralist ethics,” a phrase which for many philosophers is counterintuitive?

BUTLER: This is a wonderful, rich question, and I hope you won’t mind if I say that it comes at me in a flurry. Let’s talk a little about the Celan poem and then move to some of the other questions you raise about rhetoric and philosophy, and lastly, we can turn to the question of politics.

Celan writes, “truth / itself has appeared / among humankind / in the very thick of their / flurrying metaphors.” This is very interesting because truth begins here as a figure, something that steps in among men, and so something that walks, or that abides with human movement; it is, as well, something that comes upon us, even as we don’t quite know what it is that has arrived. This arrival takes place through, or at the same time as, a crossing of the senses. We hear a rumbling, which is not quite a word, not quite something we could understand as semantic; but then it is something almost visual, almost embodied, that appears among humankind. Although we might expect the truth to appear among persons, it appears instead “in the very thick of their / flurrying metaphors.” We have metaphors in the midst of which truth abides, and also a kind of crazy, maybe directionless speed—a flurrying. There is no telos here exactly, they are being hurled or thrown or scattered or they are running somewhere, but where, we don’t know. Of course, we expect truth to be stable, we expect it to be logos, we expect it to be spoken and spoken in words that we understand; as you yourself have pointed out, we expect to find our humanness in our relation to that logos, in our relation to that spoken truth. But here, instead, we do not get articulate speech. We get a rumbling. We get a kind of strange appearance, reminiscent of human morphology, that is in the midst of a thick and flurrying set of metaphors.

The poem opens up the question of whether truth can be defined as something that is opposed to metaphor; it opens as well the question of what we have taken truth to be, and poses the question of how we might have to revise our ideas of truth. In the poem, truth is a kind of menacing roar. “Ein Dröhnen” in the German contains “drohen” which is a threat, as you point out. I guess it would be interesting if this is “truth-telling,” as you suggest. I think of Foucault’s truth-telling as being bound up with the logos and the bios: how is it that one tells the truth about a life or how is it that one puts life into truthful form? Maybe Celan is doing something more disruptive than this. This poem pertains not to the question of what can be said truthfully about a life, but whether truth arrives with the human, and whether it is articulated through a kind of
human speaking. There is a persistent question in this poem: is there a one who is speaking? Truth is appearing and sounding, but it is not exactly a human utterance proceeding from a discernible body. In fact, maybe the way to think about Celan here is to accept the challenge that the poem poses to the conventional scene of address. In that scene, we expect one to speak to another, or one set of people to speak to another—a scene of interlocution. We expect some kind of truth to be portrayed or demonstrated in the course of that speaking. But now it seems like truth is coming from an inhuman sound, and it's appearing in the midst of metaphors. What is it, who is speaking, and what are they speaking about—if, indeed, there is speech? How are we to decode this question?

What I love about the Celan poem—I just have to say—is that it is not a critique of truth. Although it is a critique of certain notions of truth, it is not sceptical or cynical about the question of truth. It is still there. Truth appears, but not through any shape or sound we already know. It is as if the messianic is recast as this shadowy and sonorous truth that only partially appears in the very thick of flurrying metaphors. It is not as if he denies this truth; it is rather that he gives us a poetic rendition that comments on the relation of poetry to truth, suggesting that whatever might be expected of the messianic (itself a certain heightened notion of expectation) will be at once disappointed and fulfilled in the course of poetic discourse.

MURRAY: Is this not your project, in a certain sense, to resituate truth from philosophy onto (or into) the rhetorical scene of address? In this I might say that you follow Adorno’s project, which is the critique of metaphysical truth after Auschwitz, signifying the loss of the metaphysician’s presumed adequation of being and conceptual meaning.

BUTLER: I am not sure if this is my project. It is always possible that I am guided by a project that I only partially understand at this point. The Celan poem reminds me a little of Kafka and “The Cares of a Family Man,” which is that brief parable about the figure of Odradek. Odradek is a spool of thread, but he is also human—at least he sounds human when he laughs and his laughter sounds like “the rustling of fallen leaves” (161), as Kafka writes. This sound is our indication that something human or alive is there. Throughout this brief parable there is a question of whether we as readers—or, indeed, whether the narrator—can still respond to this being as a human. After all, it is not quite a “voice” that we are given, but “the rustling of fallen leaves”—something sonorous and inhuman. If these are the sounds that emerge from those lungs,
what kind of address is being made to us? Can we offer acknowledgement to this strange creature who no longer conforms to the idea of the human that we have conventionally understood? I think of the "rustling of fallen leaves" alongside the "rumbling" that opens the Celan poem: neither of these sounds belongs to the human voice or to human breath, traditionally understood. Is this a sound that emerges after something traditionally human has failed or has been destroyed? Does this sound signify that destruction, or is this sound the trace that is left when signification itself is destroyed? The question for us becomes, what kind of sound is it that comes our way, and which is there for us to respond to, now that the traditional notions of the human voice no longer operate to situate and to secure the human?

I am reminded too of Levinas's "Peace and Proximity," in which he discusses Vassili Grossman's text, Life and Fate. There Levinas asks about the face of the Other and how we might find the face. He argues that the face is not the literal human face—although it can be, it is not necessarily literal. For Levinas, "the face" is a catachresis and so never quite refers properly: he says it can be the nape of a neck that is hunched over in suffering, or it can be a cry. Anything that alerts us to the suffering of another sentient being is the face. The face calls upon us to respond to suffering. Similarly, the face might be said to appear under certain conditions in which the human voice is lost, when one can no longer speak. One might think of the Müsselmann in Primo Levi, for instance, where the sounds of suffering are not yet speech, are not yet logos in any established way. Yet we can be and are addressed by this kind of cry and vocalization. Here Levinas insists that there is a sonorous dimension of human existence, one that we hear from the Other, or that we hear from humankind. The Other can make a sonorous claim on me. It doesn't necessarily take place in syntactically and grammatically articulated words. The language of legal testimony may very well appeal to us, but if it appeals to us it is not because it is grounded in the logos but because the language is grounded in that prior sonority. That might mean as well that only the logos that is grounded in that prior sonority can appeal to us.

In any case, I think that all of these examples challenge us to consider the scene of address in which we live, along with the means by which we are brought into responsible proximity to the suffering of others. In order to have that relation of responsiveness, one needs already to be in a relationship to a set of others in which one can be addressed or can be appealed to in some way. In other words, one needs to be disposed to hearing, one needs to be in the scene of interlocution, one needs first to establish such a scene in order to be res-
responsive. Troublingly, however, many of our ideas of responsibility continue to be very much bound up with a subject who poses reflexive questions: What do I need to do to be responsible? What is the right thing for me to do in this or that situation? To pose questions of responsibility exclusively in this self-reflexive way suggests that responsibility is a problem that the subject has with itself and that these questions, important questions, can be answered simply through recourse to one's own self.

I think that the problems of responsibility emerge invariably within the scene of interlocution, or a scene in which one is addressed and responds to an address. These are invariably intersubjective scenarios in which the question of responsibility emerges. Otherwise, we end up with a self-referential idea of responsibility and this very concept wrenches us out of the social context in which the most pressing notions of responsibility emerge. We become irresponsible in relation to our social lives in becoming "responsible" on this model, so it is better, surely, to avoid such irresponsibility.

Here we can turn to your question of what is at stake in conceiving a rhetorical approach to ethics and how rhetorical criticism "avoids the usual pitfalls" of "poststructuralist ethics." Maybe it is important to back up a little, and to ask, what have been the conventional criticisms of a so-called poststructuralist ethics? The most obvious of these would be that poststructuralism destroys the idea of foundations, a position that holds that without certain foundations, we cannot have an ethic. In response to this criticism, we would need to pause and ask in return, which foundations have come under criticism, and how is it—through what means—did we come to understand foundations to be a kind of sine qua non of ethics in the first place? I would suggest that part of poststructuralism suggested that the subject is not at the center, or is not the ground, of its own ethic. Let's put it this way: the subject needs to be reconceived as part of a network of relations, produced through differentials of power, which is to say, its boundaries are defined through exclusion but also through contact and proximity. Its own ontology is implicated in the ontology of others, and so a certain kind of displacement or a decentering of the subject occurs.

One can take this a few steps further, and say, if it is the case that I am not the center of myself, or that in my relations to others or in my relationship to my history or in my relationship to language and power, that I am displaced and decentered, then it is not so many steps to the conclusion that, when I try to take account of myself and when I try to be accountable for myself, I find that I am addressing someone and, so, already bound up with the world of others. This self is distributed in its
relational, social, and historical dimensions. But this fact does not destroy the idea of responsibility; all it does is to relocate responsibility as a problem of my relationality, of the fact that I am constituted fundamentally in a relationship with others, and that that constitution does decenter me; it both decenters me and provides the condition of a certain kind of responsibility. Although I understand that people worry that poststructuralism is only a kind of devastating critique of certain notions that have been at the core of ethical philosophy, I think we might see that it also relocates responsibility in a way that takes into account the social and linguistic constitution of personhood, the way that the scene of address is bound up with what it is to be a subject.

This last point brings us back to rhetoric. Levinas is the one who points out that the reason we are not unified as subjects is that we are interrupted by the call of the Other, by the face of the Other, by the demand that the Other puts upon us to respond, to safeguard the Other's life, to acknowledge and to safeguard the precariousness of life, to combat and to ameliorate the suffering of the Other. It is one thing to have a poststructuralist view that the subject is internally divided, but it is another thing to say that the divided status of the subject is both emphatically ethical and rhetorical at the same time. I, the subject, am appealed to by the Other, and this appeal actually divides or produces a rift in me, so that I am never fully coincident with myself. I am always in some sense constituted by this demand that the Other puts upon me to respond. The division that constitutes me is neither fully internal nor fully external, but becomes precisely the interlacing of the two.

I don't think one can understand this appeal outside the scene of address. Rhetoric is, among other things, the study of the scene of address: rhetoric inquires into those scenes of address through which very fundamental questions are posed—by what means and in what kinds of presentation does, for instance, the question of truth appear? This is the question that Celan's poem posed for us. The question of who I am, that ontological question, only follows from being addressed by this Other: I am that being who is already riven by the address of the Other. This shows how rhetoric establishes the ontological conditions of the subject. I only acquire a certain "being" in relation to another who impinges upon me and interpellates me, and I do not live or survive as a being without the primary care of others. This seems to be true from the perspective of subject formation. But this insight bears with it ethical implications as well. If I cannot be responsible without being responsive, and I cannot be responsive unless I am appealed to or addressed in some way, that means that who I am is bound up with the question of
ethics, and further that the scene of address is a presupposition of both becoming a subject and becoming ethical.

MURRAY: Yet we would not seek to valorize this decentering *per se*. Is there a risk that subjective fragmentation, destitution, ungroundedness, and incoherence will themselves become normative or desirable as such? My question comes somewhat circuitously by way of Edward Said's remarkable reading of Freud's last published work, *Moses and Mono­theism*. According to Said, what is most compelling in Freud's depiction of Moses is that Moses, the father of Judaism, is both a non-European and a non-Jew. This suggests that the historical Jewishness that derives from Moses is far from univocal and stable; consequently, Moses's non-Jewishness is for Said a kind of opening or promise that might help disrupt current forms of Jewish identity politics and nationalism. While Said has been no ally of poststructuralism, I think his reading of Moses is meant to stand as a kind of allegory for poststructuralist subject formation in our globalized world. Here Said's position comes close to yours, I would say: the subject is fraught and fragmentary, exposed to doubt and unknowingness, interrupted by a temporality that does not belong to it and which it cannot contain or fully narrate. It is this vulnerability that we share, this ineradicable alterity at the heart of who we are. For Said, this offers some hope for a non-identitarian politics, where "identity" is not based on nationality, religion, ethnicity, or race; it is a politics of miscegenation. Perhaps it verges on the utopian. What I had in mind in formulating this question is Jacqueline Rose's critical postscript to Said's lecture—and it is a question that I pose, in turn, to you: "Are we at risk of idealizing the flaws and fissures of identity?" (*Freud and the Non-European*, 76).

BUTLER: First, to think of Said as a poststructuralist is amusing and wonderful because he is a secular humanist and actually spent a good deal of time criticizing Foucault and worrying about the critique of the subject and its deleterious effects on humanism. *Freud and the Non-European* is interesting because here Said allies himself, at least temporarily, with the idea of the fissure of the subject, with the idea that the subject is somehow non-unitary and cannot be made whole again. The passage to which you refer is one in which he is trying to ward off a misconstrual of his own position. I think we need to ask why Said finds himself in this position.

More concretely, he is saying that there are two peoples in the Middle East, the Palestinians and the Jews, both of whom have suffered dis­possession, and both of whom have had to live in close proximity to
others with respect to whom there are relations of responsibility, of conflict, and of difficulty, to say the least. He is actually trying to find a common basis for a polity in the Middle East, and he is holding out—at least in imagination—for a one-state solution that would bring Jews and Palestinians together. His view is that both peoples suffer a history of dispossession and exile; because of this, there are ethical resources in both traditions that insist upon harboring the dispossessed, insist upon finding a place for those who are without nationality or without land—the displaced, the exilic. Said goes back and finds that this is an extremely important part of the Jewish value system. It is a very different value system from cultural homogeneity, nationalism, or Zionism—"coming home." It is a different Judaism that he is recalling and to which he appeals.

Something similar holds for the Palestinians. How might we tell the history of the Palestinians? We can only tell the history of the Palestinians in light of the land on which they have lived, how they have fared, and how they have managed to build and maintain their autonomous cultural practices. But is there, strictly speaking, "autonomy" for either group, given the proximity of the two? What kind of hybridity do we find in Palestinian history, not only with Jordan and Egypt, with the pan-Arab cultural domains, but also with the Jews of Palestine and that complex mode of living together? To be defined, in part, through one's relation to the other is what Said underscores in that text, and it does produce a destabilization of identity, as he himself underscores. To be a Jew is to care about the dispossessed, whether or not they are Jewish (this was clearly Arendt's political ethic, in my view). To be Palestinian is to find oneself in many places, dispersed, and so bound up with alterity in everyday life.

I think Said is saying that those are the ways we experience limits on discrete and autonomous identity. This is not a celebration of the idea of fragmentation or non-identity as such. It is a limit to identity politics that is imposed by political conditions. It follows from the insight that these two peoples have been formed through the history of dispossession. Of course, historically, one has more often dispossessed the other; and surely the Israeli state and the settlement movement has very clearly aimed to dispossess the Palestinians. But such actions "forget" the lessons of having been dispossessed. If both groups understood themselves as dispossessed, they would, in his view, have an alliance precisely on such grounds, forming a kind of diasporic self-understanding, one that could serve as an ethos for a new political arrangement. I see the rifting of identity as a political concept, and not as a purely metaphysical celebration.
MURRAY: Is critique secular? I ask this because Said's Moses is a secular Moses; Said's Jew a secular Jew. There is no account—if this word still works in this context—of religious orthodoxy or dogmatic faith. In a work in progress that you have been kind enough to share with me, you write that "the distinction between a dogmatic and a critical perspective does not line up perfectly with the distinction between religious and secular thinking" ("Sexual Politics, Torture, and Secular Time"). Here you are taking issue with secularism, which you rightly suggest takes many forms, including a species of fundamentalism. Fine. But can you say what, conversely, a "religious criticality" might look like? Would such critique have to adapt Kant's Enlightenment motto, "sapere aude"?

Certainly there are religious traditions that promote the virtues of interpretation; however, there is an epistemic limit beyond which one must rely on faith and obedience to the Word. At this limit, critique is impermissible; critique is heresy, faithlessness, sin. We see this same model in politics today: to critique openly the War on Terror is to be aligned with terrorism, to be treasonous, anti-American. I therefore worry about fundamentalisms of all stripes, secular and religious: to me, both represent a collapse, a closure of the rhetorical scene of address, if I could put it that way.

This is especially dangerous when religion and the state make the same sorts of transcendent claims and command the same sort of obedience. I suppose my question is an impossible one, and it is a task for all of us to think together. What can our reference points be, and how might we imagine ways of opening the current collapse or closure of politics, religion, and culture? I suppose it is impossible to ask this question without raising the specter of anti-Zionism in the Israel-Palestine context, or, similarly, in the United States we would have to ask, how do we get Jesus out of politics, which also means out of the military?

BUTLER: Of course I agree with you that few things could be worse than a religious authority that allies itself with totalitarian state power. This is the specter under which we all live. It's terrible. Fascism, although profoundly anti-Semitic, was not for that reason particularly Christian. Indeed, its hatred of religious minorities was not so much based on an elaboration of a Christian totalitarianism than on a nationalist totalitarianism. It was the nation-state that sought to exclude a religious minority in order to produce a homogenous nationality. We can have forms of both fascism and totalitarianism that are not primarily religious forms.

Certainly, we can always find forms of religious totalitarianism in which religious identity is crucial to national identity. We can imagine
several contemporary states, including our own, in which certain kinds of religious values have come to form the background for a certain kind of politics or that threaten to become so hegemonic that we have the persecution of new religious minorities as well as the persecution of secular minorities. At that point, religion becomes not only dogmatic but also part of a political dogmatism, and that clearly has to be opposed. My question would be whether all religion takes this form or whether we have (or can have) religious critics of dogmatic religious politics.

We have some African-American churches in the United States, for instance, whose congregations object to the kind of political theocracy that Bush invokes to wage his war against Iraq. We have modes of resistance or even modes of contestation within the Catholic Church on key social issues, such as abortion or homosexuality or reproductive technologies. What are the schisms within Catholic communities and how would we find differences in the ways in which various Catholic churches in Latin America view these issues versus what is happening in Poland right now as a Christian conservatism tries to roll back both feminism and lesbian and gay rights? How do these contestations work themselves out not only in Catholic doctrine but by producing more schisms between contemporary Catholics and ex-Catholics, between Catholics who will go to church and Catholics who will no longer go to church because they feel like the only way to be a good Catholic is not to go to church? At present, there are a number of people in Peru who will not go to church because they disagree with the politics of the Church, but that does not stop them from being religious. Instead, they have a critique of a certain kind of religious dogmatism and they feel that their religion is betrayed by the current forms of its institutionalization. Similarly, we have Jewish Voice for Peace that opposes right-wing religious fundamentalism and sometimes also the religious basis of the state of Israel: how many of them nevertheless go to synagogue? On the other hand, there are Jews who think that opposition to right-wing settlement, religious dogmatism, and religious restrictions on citizenship in Israel requires that they renounce religion as such. But this is to suggest that one could not be religious at the same time that one accepts a radical distinction between religion and state, and that would be non-sense. For those who hold both critical views of Israel and maintain a religious tie to Judaism, religion is politically non-dogmatic (and there is a rich tradition within Jewish philosophy and religious traditions that supports the idea of a non-dogmatic Judaism).

My sense is that there are many contestations within the domain of religion. Islam is extremely interesting in this regard as well. As Saba Mahmood's work shows us, there are schools of Koranic interpretation in
Egypt that are led by women who are wrestling with many questions: “How do I honor the Koran and how do I get to work and get my kids to school and can I put on my jeans and can I vote this way?” There are all kinds of complex religious and practical questions that the Koran does not answer. Koranic interpretation itself is complex; it involves a great deal of hermeneutic savvy and there are, as we know, several competing schools of interpretation. Mahmood makes clear that the women who practice various interpretations of the Koran are not pawns or dogmatically subordinated in such a way that makes them into non-thinking, docile beings. They are actually trying to think through their own cultural and religious formation to find a position that neither immediately succumbs to the cultural imperialism of the West nor abandons their own formations. I would say that these are extremely vexed positions. We see it in India as well, in the very struggles that take place between the two legal systems, the one which is considered “secular” but which is also understood as Hindu, and the other which is Sharia, or Islamic law. It sometimes happens that secular law proves to be bound to a particular religious tradition and disavows the specific religion that supports its own self-understanding.

Further, I don’t think we can say that there is one secularism or one kind of religious attitude. We can decry and oppose those forms of religious dogmatism that take on the form of political totalitarianism; we have to oppose them, they are unacceptable. But, given that there are religious perspectives for which such dogmatic and totalitarian consequences are also profoundly unacceptable, we must therefore distinguish between the different ways of being religious and the different ways of practicing religion. Some will lead to political consequences that we would describe as totalitarian, but others will surely oppose such consequences, or will be indifferent to them. It is a complex field.

Indeed, in Islamic philosophy there are entire traditions in which the practice of Islam is precisely prohibited from taking on a political solution. There are specific prohibitions against using the sword to convert anyone to Islam. We forget this about Koranic traditions, and we see instead certain kinds of political seizures of Islam right now in the promulgation of certain wars, or at least this is the media interpretation of what is happening. In fact, many of these conflicts may or may not be about religion, fundamentally. We tend to think of terrorists as Islamic “fundamentalists,” but maybe Islam is being made use of as part of a larger political network, and some of those we would call Islamic fundamentalists were not born into it, or maybe came into it, but I am not sure we can attribute all of their actions to a kind of fanatic religious zeal. Maybe there are other geopolitical crises at work and other kinds of
reasons for a turn to Islam or an exploitation of some of its doctrines or practices. We need to see this as a complex field. After all, there is no religion and, indeed, no secularism that is "pure," even if some of the advocates for both positions understand themselves to be in a position of purity. We cannot simply say about secularism or religion that it is good or bad, that it is critical or dogmatic; it can be either or both, or neither.

MURRAY: In this light, perhaps I can ask, do you have a position on the veil? There are those on both sides of the debate who are very critical of what they call the "politicization" of the veil. Some have taken what might appear at first as a more neutral stance, arguing that wearing the veil is a "practice of the self," in the Foucauldian sense. But I don't see how this must not also be political (to invoke the old feminist slogan concerning the personal and the political). To complicate matters further, shouldn't we "theologize" the veil as well as "politicize" it? Here once again we are faced with the triangulation of religion, culture, and politics. If we assume (as "good liberals") that it is impertinent if not impermissible to critique religious values and beliefs, should a critique of culture also be off-limits? What about political critique? Again, I worry when religious absolutes are applied to culture and, especially, to politics. Surely this is a form of governmentality, as Foucault describes it. Can we update Foucault's triangulation of governmentality, sovereignty-discipline-government, with a new one, religion-culture-politics?

BUTLER: I certainly followed the debate on the veil in France, and I have read a bit about the veil especially from anthropologists who have been working on the topic and in the work of Joan Scott, whose *The Politics of the Veil* will appear with Princeton University Press this fall. I think that maybe both of the options you have given us here are not quite right for thinking about how the veil works or what the veil is. You suggest that it can be seen either as a practice of the self or else as a political statement of some kind. I guess I would say "no" to this either/or, without denying that it can sometimes be both of these things. First, it depends what veil we are talking about: a full-body veil, a veil in India or in Iran, a veil used in an urban space in Denmark or in the Netherlands or in New York? I think we have something quite variegated going on in each case. But my understanding from Lila Abu-Lughod, Saba Mahmood, and others who have worked extensively on the veil for many years is that it is very much not just a symbol of cultural belonging but a condition for moving through space. It gives women a certain mobility outside the purely private sphere. If they wear the veil, they can move, and they can move at the same time that they can maintain certain kinds of religious
prohibitions on exposure or honor certain codes that have to do with shame.

In most of the anthropological work that I have seen, the veil allows for a woman to go into the public space without being sexually exposed or sexually defiled, so it produces both mobility and it conforms to certain cultural and religious ideas of belonging. The stripping off of the veil, if it were forcibly done, would be a kind of sexual violation. The conditions under which the veil can be removed or not have everything to do with when and where a certain permission is granted, and when and where a private relationship can become erotic. It is also about establishing the non-accessibility of the body for public sexual consumption, and this is really crucial for maintaining certain religious distinctions between the public and private domains.

The "de-veiling" of Islamic women is in this sense far from a liberatory exercise or, if it is, it is a liberation that becomes indissociable from violation. As an imposition of cultural norms, it constitutes a "liberation" from certain codes that may not easily be distinguished from a forcible estrangement of that woman from her community of belonging, an exercise of coercive assimilation and the effacement or breakage of ties to cultural communities. It seems to me that there are many complex ways of handling this. Many Islamic women in urban spaces negotiate when and why to wear the veil and when and why to take it off. There are certainly debates within Islamic feminism documented by Mahmood that reflect on the conundrum that while removing the veil completely might comply with certain Western ideas of emancipation, public exposure, and shamelessness, it might also be read as a "going-over" into a certain kind of Western culture and thus as a disparagement or a breaking-off from a community of origin, which includes one's family, one's uncles, aunts, cousins, children, and an extended kinship network. You can only imagine that women who are in this situation are actually trying to negotiate a complex set of demands and are living in the vector of competing cultural norms. How they determine this and how they decide strikes me as a key feminist issue and even a mode of feminist agency that we have yet to theorize particularly well, though Mahmood paves the way for this.

My understanding of the cultural meaning of the veil would certainly dispute the Foucauldian reading that it is simply a "practice of the self," although it might depend on how that practice is understood. It is not self-stylization—hardly! The notion of the self is not there in the same way. One belongs to a community and one functions in it by abiding by certain protocols that have to do with dress and gait and showing and not showing. Those are key to the reproduction of that community's
norms. These norms are historical; they have changed and will continue to change. My question as a feminist is, how have women intervened in the changing of those norms, what are the struggles, and what produces a maximum of mobility while honoring those cultural ties that need to be honored and while being able to function in the world in ways that maximize freedom and possibility? This seems to me to be the crucial point. Nor do I think that all women who wear the veil are taking a stand on political Islam. Here again I would say that Islam is a set of cultural and religious practices, and, as such, far exceeds whatever is signified by “political Islam.” We cannot conflate them. It may be that they have become conflated imagistically in the West precisely because of the ways the media has failed to study Islam or to understand what the difference is between, say, somebody who studies and practices the Koran along orthodox lines, and someone who is a politically zealous terrorist who may or may not be religiously formed within Islam. Until we are actually able to hold that distinction, I am not sure we can think very productively about this.

In France, I went to a couple of meetings where some major feminists were debating the veil. One of them, Elisabeth Roudinesco, who has written on Lacan and Derrida, got up and said that the veil has one meaning, and the one meaning it communicates is that women are inferior. Because that is what it communicates, she continued, it undermines the French commitment to *égalité*, and so we are under no obligation to protect this cultural expression as free expression or as freedom of religious affiliation. In other words, for her, to defend the veil would be to undermine the key principles of Western democracy! I thought that this was hysterical and extreme. It also showed absolutely no understanding of what the veil means or how it functions, nor did it show any obligation to learn those meanings.

One of the big questions in France was whether young girls who are coming out of traditional Islamic communities can go to their primary schools and wear the veil there or whether they need to take the veil off in order to enter the public school. The public school being a place of *laïcité*, of secularism, the argument is that they need to take off the veil, to leave the private religious tradition in order to enter into the common secular world. There are many problems with this. First, the “secular” world in France is so extraordinarily underwritten by Catholicism that it raises the question of whether what is secular encodes and transmits certain religious values under another name. Second, other religious symbols can be worn, but they may not be “ostentatious.” Who decides what is ostentation or not? Could we say that the veil has come to define the very meaning of ostentation? How rigorous is this rule in its
application? What if you’re wearing a cross? Can you come to school wearing a cross? Apparently you can, if it is appropriately subdued. How do we decide what is too intrusive? Why is the veil any more intrusive than a yarmulke or a cross? It might be visually intrusive precisely because the media has built it as the most visually intrusive image. Also, the French have certain ideas of the veil from the war in Algeria where the veil was sometimes used literally to conceal bombs that were used against the French colonial government. I think this is compounded in the idea of the “veil” as hiding a secret and dangerous missive.

But to say that the veil is always harboring a destructive political message is overwrought. Especially for young girls aged eight, nine, or ten—they belong to their families, they have only lived in their families. Remember, they are coming to public school in part to become literate. What is the feminist issue about the veil in the schools? For me, the feminist issue is that the more women you get from orthodox religious backgrounds—where women are generally kept illiterate or semi-literate—into public schools to read, to write, to think, to learn about their own culture, and to learn about other cultures, then the more likely it is that such girls will become reflective and deliberate and think well about society and their place in it. This goes for all women and all girls who are coming out of these situations. For the schools to let them in with the veil will actually increase their chances of literacy and will allow them to know the broader world and to find their way in it and to come up with their own interpretations for how they want to live in it. That, to me, is a much more important feminist concern than whether they should be forcibly stripped of a garment that articulates and enacts a certain mode of cultural belonging and, without which, may well put them at peril for a kind of radical estrangement, even excommunication, that I think is way too much of an emotional and psychic burden for a young child to bear.

I should add that the person who is arguing these points against Elisabeth Roudinesco is Françoise Gaspard, who is one of the founders of the Parité movement, who was the first woman mayor of a city, Dreux, in France, who sat in the Assemblée Nationale, and who currently serves on the United Nations Committee on the Status of Women. She is a very strong feminist with a very strong view that the state should not be coercively stripping these women of the garments that establish their modes of cultural belonging and affiliation.

MURRAY: In a similar vein, your recent work has taken up the Dutch government’s “civic integration examination,” which is required since March 2006 for would-be immigrants from certain countries. Part of the exam, as I understand it, asks applicants for immigration to look at
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photographs of two men kissing and to answer questions about personal liberties, democracy, and freedom of expression. You raise a number of interesting points, not least about whether an embrace of homosexuality is or ought to be the hallmark of "modernity," or whether there is an implicit anti-Islamic bias in this exam, but more, you ask some difficult questions of liberalism itself: "Is this a liberal defense of my freedom, or is my freedom being used as an instrument of coercion, one that seeks to keep Europe white, pure, and 'secular' in ways that do not interrogate the violence that underwrites that secularism?" ("Sexual Politics, Torture, and Secular Time"). This raises a host of questions. Should liberal "values" be promoted, and if so, how? In answering this, must we bear in mind the ways that religious values are being promoted, and how? Is the liberal state ultimately incompatible with religion? From a legal perspective, how should a liberal state respond to the demands of Sharia Law?

BUTLER: One of the interesting things about the "civic integration exam" is that a number of people are excluded from having to take it. In addition to applicants from a list of certain countries, anyone who earns more than €45,000 a year is presumptively excluded. Of course, we can imagine any number of extremely well-heeled people who may find it completely repugnant to see gay people kissing on the streets of Amsterdam. But because they are bringing their money, the Dutch government is willing to live with their intolerance. The real question, then, is whether the Dutch government really cares so deeply about being tolerant of gay men kissing on the street, or whether it is using this show of tolerance to exclude differentially people from Islamic formations—people who may well have difficulty with homosexuality precisely because of their upbringing. It is one thing to insist that gay people should be able to kiss in public. I myself would fight for that right and would oppose any law that would preclude it; and if there were a law that precluded it, I would be on the street kissing (you know, I did participate once in a kiss-in in Washington, D.C., despite some difficulty on my part!). The kiss-in, I am all in favor of it; I do not want to restrict that right and I would not allow others to restrict that right. I feel that it is crucial; I am not even willing to restrict it strategically or instrumentally or provisionally. On the other hand, one has to ask what the Dutch government is really doing by imposing this particular image on people who are unprepared for it culturally, and who may have strong reactions against it. It strikes me as a way to stoke a culture war rather than to find ways to ameliorate existing social antagonisms.

It seems to me that if you are committed to being a multicultural society in which there are lesbian/gay people and trans people as well as
other sexual minorities, and there are people from Islamic backgrounds, religious minorities, living together in the same neighborhoods, then you have to think of positive ways to provide cultural and civic structures for greater cultural understanding among such groups. You have to figure out how, over time, to allow these groups to achieve understandings of one another. What do you do, for instance, at the level of art and with the media, with public events and social programming and education, with your K-12 curriculum, for instance? What do you do in order to produce a culture in which greater understanding will flourish? It seems to me that you may well bring people in with the idea that they may not have a particularly open or accepting relationship to another minority, but they may over time gain that, especially if they are living in a culture that manifests that norm. I should add, this norm of acceptance must go both ways. We do not ask wealthy gay white men to go through training to be sensitive to Islamic communities; we do not ask wealthy gay white men to look at picture after picture of people praying in mosques and ask how that makes them feel. The Dutch “civic integration exam” is not exactly a reciprocal test of tolerance! I think the test in some sense evacuates the responsibility of the government and of the culture to produce education, art, media, and public life that would allow for greater understanding and greater exposure to what is going on. This is, I think, the only way to build a long-term cultural possibility for a multicultural democracy. This is the only option for all these countries, not just the Netherlands and France.

I also think, sadly enough, that this kind of thing divides progressive gay people from a broader leftist concern with anti-immigrant politics, so I see it as a state strategy to divide parts of the left from one another. If you’re anti-immigrant because you’re pro-gay, then what has happened to those alliances where you have sexual and religious minorities who are struggling for a more radical notion of democracy? What has happened to those ideas of the left in which you can be really strongly in favor of gay and lesbian rights, strongly in favor of feminist innovations against forms of racism, against forms of prejudice, against forms of religious bigotry, and against immigration policies and whole wars that are based upon notions of guarding or preserving the cultural supremacy or purity of a northern European people or their putative descendents in North America? You need a left that is able to encompass all of this. My sense is that the “civic integration exam” splits the left into gay libertarians who only care about the defense of personal liberties and those who are concerned with state racism and its anti-immigration policies. It is this too that has to be overcome. One way of overcoming it is to think in
more complex ways about freedom itself, and whether freedom has become unwittingly tied to problematic conceptions of progressive history.

You ask if the liberal state is incompatible with religion. I am sure that most defenders of liberalism understand its secular commitment to guarantee the “private” practice of various religions and so to represent a posture of public neutrality with regard to those practices. I also think, however, that any liberal state that you could point to makes certain presumptions about which religions are crucial to its operation and which are not. There are several nations that presume a certain version of a Judeo-Christian background as necessary for culture, for humanization, for civilization as we know it. How should a liberal state respond to Sharia Law? That is a very vexed question with no easy answer. I am very interested in what happens in India, say, when certain kinds of issues are referred to Sharia Law and other issues are referred to “secular” law, and how this works. At times there is an appeal to the “secular” (which is defined by Hindu nationalism for the most part) to overcome the Sharia, though it probably does not work the other way around. I think it is really complicated. I am not opposed to certain liberal postulates. I think, in fact, we do need a set of laws that supervene, that bind us all together regardless of our religious affiliations. I am just not sure that such laws ever truly transcend the religious background in the culture that formulates such laws. I suppose in that way, in the end I am, in part, a liberal—while knowing that there is an originary violence to this position as well. Maybe it is a violence we have to live with at the same time that some of its forms of violence must be opposed.

MURRAY: Is this the clash between positive law and a presumptively natural law? Is Antigone situated somewhere between these two? In the figure of Antigone you read a “promiscuous obedience,” an obedience that is, in part, secular, perverse, and only obliquely references the gods. This probably does not help us. She cannot be much of a model for religious obedience, nor is she a model for obedience to state law.

BUTLER: Antigone is not a model. The law to which she refers is “un-written.” I am not sure it is natural. Hegel says this but Sophocles doesn’t. She appeals to the gods, but it is to the penates, the gods of the household. The question is whether this appeal is to nature or a kind of pre-political sociality of the oikos, the household. If it is the latter, then it is economic: it is organized on the basis of power and it is associated with kinship rules. I would say that the law to which she appeals is not precisely a natural law. I understand how Antigone can be deployed for a
natural law argument, but I am not willing to do that. I do think she is holding out for an idea of law that is not the same as positive law, that is not encoded somewhere, that is not written. There is a critique of positive law; I am just not sure that this critique comes from natural law. Of course, the other thing about the law to which she refers is that, apparently, it applies singly to her, and to her brothers; it cannot be universalized or codified.

MURRAY: This singularity reminds me of Levinas in his claim that there is a singularity of Jewish law for the Jews, and a singular persecution that can itself never persecute.

BUTLER: Yes. There are two points in Levinas here. The one is highly controversial, that there is a law for the Jews that is singular and exclusive to the Jews. This is very problematic in my view. But there is another one that suggests that the commandment addresses you singly, and there is something complicated in that, since the commandment should be addressing everyone equally. But it cannot actually operate without addressing you singly. You must understand yourself as bound to the commandment and as responsive in some way. This is a singularizing moment to which I have to answer. We could say “any I” has to answer, and that would be true. But the universal character of this claim falls apart when the demand is addressed to the single individual.

MURRAY: This is interesting to me because you are not quite describing the scene of address that you lay out in Giving an Account of Oneself. The religious scene of address, unlike the secular, is hardly interlocutory.

BUTLER: It's just the beginning of the story, though. Here's the problem: the commandment is hopelessly general. It says, “Thou Shalt Not Kill.” I am appealed to by this commandment, I am bound to it, but it does not mean that I follow a Kantian maxim that says that I shall in no case kill and that I shall consistently apply this maxim as if others were applying it as well, and so on. No, it means that if I have to kill, I must come to terms with my decision in light of that commandment. In other words, I must “answer” to the commandment. My answer can take any number of forms. It means I have to figure out how to apply that commandment to this or that situation, when someone is, say, about to kill my child, and I have to find a means of defending my child. This also happens when someone comes after me, and I am confronted with the problem of self-defense. The ethical prohibition becomes poignant precisely in such cases.
There is the commandment, but in Judaism there is also the Talmud. The Talmud talks about all the problems in *applying* the commandments, and it turns out that there are myriad problems! The entire history of interpretation emerges precisely out of the massive vexation that the commandments produce about how best to handle them. The commandment is there to be struggled with. Benjamin calls it an *Auseinandersetzung*, which is a debate, a struggle; you struggle with it as you would struggle with the angel. The fruits of that struggle are what you yourself have to live with as your decision, but the commandment does not determine your action. If it were deterministic, in fact, there would be no history of Jewish interpretation, there would be no Talmud, there would be no application of Jewish law. Everything starts with the *problem* of the commandment. But nothing is solved there. In that sense, I do not understand the commandment as despotic. In fact, Benjamin argues emphatically that the Jewish commandment is a *critique* of despotism. He actually sees the commandment as another model of law, as a certain critique of law, as an alternative model to one that works through violent coercion. The commandment is not coercive; the commandment abandons you. It gives you a kind of a general guideline, a *Richtschnur des Handelns*, says Benjamin, but then it abandons you to the whole problem of what to do. Then you have anxiety, you have confusion, you have interpretation, you try to apply a general guideline to a situation that is not anticipated and is not addressed by the generality of the law. Everything begins there, with the commandment and with its radical incommensurability with the ethical situation at hand.

MURRAY: Perhaps we can turn more specifically to *Giving an Account of Oneself* because I would like to press you further on this idea of a commandment or a relation that guides us somehow but does not operate deterministically. Here, I am fascinated by your account of the self and its relation to what you call the “prevailing matrix of ethical norms and conflicting moral frameworks” (7). You write that we should consider these existing norms as the “condition of the emergence of the ‘I’” (7); however, in the same breath you insist that this is not a “causal” or deterministic relation. Norms “constrain” but they do not wholly “determine” (21–2); norms merely provide, as you write, a “framework” and a “point of reference” (22) for the ‘I’. What, then, is the power of the norm? You write that these very norms “have the power to install me or, indeed, to disinstall me” (23). The subject seems to emerge between freedom and determinism, but I suspect that you would take care to deconstruct this binary.
I wonder how such “installations” and “framings” are not deterministic, both epistemologically and ontologically. Indeed, elsewhere you discuss concrete instances of “framing” in which you suggest as much, at least in my reading. In your recent discussion of Susan Sontag’s work, for example, you argue that what is often purposely left out of wartime photojournalism will determine the manner in which these images will be received and understood. You write: “To learn to see the frame that blinds us to what we see is no easy matter” (“Photography, War, Outrage” 826). Another example of racist blindness is discussed in your much earlier essay on the Rodney King trial (“Endangered/Endangering”), where you argue that the presentation and reception of the videotaped beating of King were informed by a racist episteme. What is the relation here between the epistemic and the ontological, between self-knowing and self-being? I ask because I am interested in possible forms of resistance or revolt or even refusal. While you write, “There is no making of oneself (poiesis) outside of a mode of subjectivation (assujettissement) and, hence, no self-making outside of the norms that orchestrate the possible forms that a subject may take” (Giving an Account of Oneself, 17), I worry that this hermeneutic circle is too hermetic! I am not suggesting a creation ex nihilo, but I would like to hold out for a poiesis, for something new. An Ereignis, perhaps?

BUTLER: When I say that norms constrain but do not determine who we are, or that norms provide a framework and a point of reference, I would have to add that such norms are not static; they are historical, and hence dynamic. They revise themselves and they shift forms in the process of that revision. This is part of the meaning of iterability. There are also convergences of different kinds of norms that work together in many constellations. There are possibilities for norms to be interrupted by other norms, to be revised, and resignified, turned around, by the various ways in which they are embodied and enacted. I think sometimes when I am describing how norms work, I do stabilize a set of norms to show this functioning. But what gets lost here is the sense that the stability of these norms is also called into question, not only by the intersection of that set of norms with another, but precisely by the historicity of their own transformation and iterability—and hopefully our critiques enter into the rearticulation of norms too.

When we speak about “framing,” for instance, like what happens in embedded reporting, there the frame of the photograph is attempting to
install a kind of cultural norm: this is how we will look at the war, this is how we will see the enemy, this photograph will re-enact and reposition the viewer as a fighter in the scene, and so enlist or recruit the viewer into the army, so to speak. You remark that in my "recent discussion of Susan Sontag's work, for example, I argue that what is often purposely left out of wartime photojournalism will determine the manner in which these images will be received and understood." But I am quite sure that I do not use the word "determine" here, nor does the argument amount to a determinism. Does the photograph always successfully recruit the viewer into the war effort? I think not! Although that may well be the "intention" or manifest aim of the photographic frame, photos have a way of taking in more than they mean or of becoming recontextualized in light of other images and so confounding the original purposes for which they are made and distributed. An image will look a certain way depending on the image that is next to it; a radical juxtaposition, say, of one image alongside another that comes from the other side, or that is aerial, or that depicts the war dead, can actually bring out this implicit framing as an object for critical scrutiny and allow us a critical distance from its affective claims. Under such conditions this dismantles the image's power to make us deterministically see as we are "supposed" to see.

There are all kinds of other disruptions that potentially allow for these kinds of normative efforts to capture and structure the visual field or the field of intelligibility. Part of the political task for me is to think, what are the available instruments through which we can intervene in photographic war journalism? How, for instance, do Internet images intervene, and how do they enter into the battle of images? How does public art work here, if we think of the Botero Exhibition or some of the exhibitions at the International Center of Photography in New York? How does the recent 60 Minutes rendition of Abu Ghraib relocate and recontextualize those photos? Every time they are re-broadcast and re-framed, this reiteration becomes part of the history of their reception, and the history of their reception becomes part of what they are, the historicity of the photograph, inseparable from the history of its reception.

In the sentence that you cite, I can understand that it sounds like a closed hermetic circle: "There is no making of oneself outside of a mode of subjectivation and, hence, no self-making outside of the norms that orchestrate the possible forms that a subject may take." But actually, the conditions of possibility for such self-making do not determine in advance what form that self-making will assume. These are two different operations, and the very notion of "genealogy" that we find in both Nietzsche and Foucault depends upon this very important distinction. I could say
further that when there is a making of oneself outside an established mode of subjectivation, the self is regarded as monstrous and unintelligible or incendiary and a threat. At this point a serious insurgency at the level of power discourse takes place! Or when there is self-making outside of the norms that orchestrate the possible forms that a subject may take, then that self becomes im-possible, becomes not-a-subject, risks the inhuman, and produces a scandal in the epistemological scene. I would want to add that we never establish a norm for the human without at once establishing a specter of the non-human, of the inhuman, or of the deformed and non-recognizable.

But then the question becomes how to work that border between the two or to mobilize those phantom figures, the precariousness of shadow lives, in order to call into question what those norms are and to produce different possibilities for life. I can see that when I speak in the ways that you have cited, there seems to be a dampening down of insurgent potential. But I think the point to these kinds of claims is to show, simply, that we cannot separate self-making from subjection, and we cannot separate either one from social practice that has the possibility of transformation in it. I am trying to work against the reception of Foucault that sees him as merely aestheticizing the subject or turning away from politics towards affects when he does that. I think that self-making, ethics, and politics are profoundly linked, as I think we see in his *Hermeneutics of the Subject* and also throughout Foucault’s later work. This does not mean that the three are linked for all time in some one form. I think we have to work with the possibilities of remaking in order to show what can be made. The point, of course, is always to keep the possibility of transformation alive. This might come from another idea of poiesis, as you rightly suggest.

MURRAY: Or, perhaps, a politics of love? You mentioned *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, and so I cannot resist recalling the relation of Socrates to Alcibiades that Foucault makes so much of in that text. It is a relation of love and a relation of care (epimeleia), which Socrates defines as the art or technē of “making better [veltion poiēi]” (*Alcibiades* 128b)—so this scene of address does involve a poietic moment. Importantly, Socrates cares not just for Alcibiades, but he cares for Alcibiades’s care of himself. It is not selfish or egoic; the lover wishes for what is best for the beloved himself. It is both amorous and ethical.

BUTLER: I don’t know about a politics of love. I feel a little stupid about this. I do want a politics that will avow the ways in which we are bound up with one another in passionate ways, but my sense is that “bonds”
are invariably ambivalent. We are bound up with one another not necessarily in ways that are ecstatic and full of love; sometimes, these ways are even destitute and full of hatred, or sometimes these occur at once or in rhythms of vacillation. The social bond is one that can produce a kind of life-preserving love at one extreme, and then at the other extreme a kind of life-eradicating hatred, and it seems that for the sake of ethical reflection we have to take into account this spectrum. Our ethics, our politics, and our play all emerge from this loving and difficult bind, from this double-sided possibility. We need to find ways to manage our destructive affect, find ways to preserve the life of those we disdain and those we adore, those toward whom we may feel vengeful, or even those whom we may wish to harm or forever keep from harm. Similarly, in domains of love, I think there are modes of loving that are crucial to maintain, but so much depends on how one loves and whether one loves well. In the name of love, of course, certain harms can also be done. Ethical questions emerge from both sides.

One of the issues I have been working on lately is the status of love in Hannah Arendt and in the Palestinian poet, Mahmoud Darwish. First, there is a very interesting exchange, as you know, between Hannah Arendt and Gershom Scholem in this light, and I would like to cite it here at length. In a public exchange after the publication of Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Scholem impugns Arendt’s personal motives in the following way: “In the Jewish tradition there is a concept, hard to define and yet concrete enough, which we know as Ahabath Israel. ‘Love of the Jewish people.’ In you, dear Hannah, as in so many intellectuals who came from the German left, I find little trace of this.” Arendt, after disputing that she comes from the German left (and, indeed, she was no Marxist), replies:

You are quite right—I am not moved by any ‘love’ of this sort, and for two reasons: I have never in my life ‘loved’ any people or collective—neither the German people, nor the French, nor the American, nor the working class or anything of that sort. I indeed love ‘only’ my friends and the only kind of love I know and believe in is the love of persons. Secondly, this ‘love of the Jews’ would appear to me, since I am myself Jewish, as something rather suspect. I cannot love myself or anything which I know is part and parcel of my own person. To clarify this, let me tell you of a conversation that I had in Israel with a prominent political personality who was defending the—in my opinion disastrous—non-separation of religion and the state in Israel. What he said—I am not sure of the exact words anymore—ran something like this:
‘You will understand that, as a Socialist, I, of course, do not believe in God; I believe in the Jewish people.’ I found this a shocking statement and, being too shocked, I did not reply at the time. But I could have answered: the greatness of this people was once that it believed in God, and believed in Him in such a way that its trust and love towards Him was greater than its fear. And now this people only believes in itself? What good can come of that? — Well in this sense I do not ‘love’ the Jews, nor do I ‘believe’ in them; I merely belong to them as a matter of course, beyond dispute or argument (The Jew as Pariah, 246–7).

In Darwish’s book, Memory For Forgetfulness, he also takes up this question of love in a way that resonates beautifully with Arendt. The following is a scene that is narrated by an Arab man who recounts a conversation between him and his Jewish (female) lover. It is five o’clock in the morning and they are in her bed, at her house:

I asked, ‘Do the police know the address of this house?’
She answered, ‘I don’t think so, but the military police do. Do you hate Jews?’
I said, ‘I love you now.’
She said, ‘That is not a clear answer.’
I said, ‘And the question itself wasn’t clear. As if I were to ask you, Do you love Arabs?’
She said, ‘That’s not a question.’
I asked, ‘And why is your question a question?’
She said, ‘Because we have a complex. We have more need of answers than you do.’
I said, ‘Are you crazy?’
She said, ‘A little. But you haven’t told me if you love Jews or hate them.’
I said, ‘I don’t know, and I don’t want to know. But I do know I like the plays of Euripides and Shakespeare. I like fried fish, boiled potatoes, the music of Mozart, and the city of Haifa. I like grapes, intelligent conversation, autumn, and Picasso’s blue period. And I like wine, and the ambiguity of mature poetry. As for Jews, they’re not a question of love or hate.’
She said, ‘Are you crazy?’
I said, ‘A little.’
She asked, ‘Do you like coffee?’
I said, ‘I love coffee and the aroma of coffee.’
She rose, naked, even of me, and I felt the pain of those from whom a limb has been severed.
Silence.

When asked by his Jewish lover whether he hates Jews, he cannot really even understand the question. Jews are not something one can love or hate. Doesn’t he sound just like Arendt here? I don’t love Jews or hate them; I don’t love Arabs or hate them. I love wine, I love Picasso’s blue period, I love coffee; there are all these particular things he loves.

I harbor some of this same suspicion toward the notion of love, because of “the love of the people” and the kind of politics that follows from this. I do not want to be subject to the coercions of love, where you are forced to show your love by showing your fidelity to this or that state policy of communal identity, where being a true patriot of this country means you are in favor of the war in Iraq, for instance. This kind of patriotic love I would want to avoid. But if we can embrace a notion of love that knows it always carries the risk of hatred, that it is bound up both with affirmation and potential destruction, and that our ethical and political binds make it necessary for us to sustain reflection on that delicate balance and constitutive ambivalence—then I can follow that path. It might be the love of persons, it might be the love of particular things, or the love of environment—not of territory, but environment—and finally, it might be the love of lives the specificity of which we can somehow acknowledge.

One other reason your question makes me a bit nervous has to do with the context of global politics. I am also responsible for those I do not know and whom I will never meet, or to whom I may never be proximate. What is my responsibility to those who are nameless and far from me? Can I say that I “love” them? I think probably Christianity has a discourse of love that extends this way, a love of humanity. But for me, I am not sure that I can say that I love them. However, I can, and must, say that I am bound up with them, regardless of love or hatred. They are part of my world and thus essential to whatever “being” I participate in; they disrupt me, they are Other to me, and I am also not thinkable without them. I would like some way of thinking these kinds of binds. But my worry is that “love” returns us to a communitarianism that, in the end, returns us to the familiar, to identity and to those who are already proximate.

MURRAY: In teaching a class on the rhetoric of torture, I recently returned to Stanley Milgram’s famous experiments at Yale in 1961. According to Milgram, the experiment was designed to answer the
question that the Eichmann trial had raised: how obedient are ordinary citizens to authority figures and, moreover, to what lengths will they go in their obedience? Milgram’s short essay, “The Perils of Obedience,” begins with the following claim: “Obedience is as basic an element in the structure of social life as one can point to. Some system of authority is a requirement of all communal living...” (62). A paradox arises, however, when Milgram further defines obedience and its horrific implications for the subject:

The essence of obedience is that a person comes to view himself as the instrument for carrying out another person’s wishes, and he therefore no longer regards himself as responsible for his actions. The most far-reaching consequence is that the person feels responsible to the authority directing him but feels no responsibility for the content of the actions that the authority prescribes (76–7).

Milgram’s distinction here between “responsibility to” and “responsibility for” is telling: while the former passes along and potentially abrogates responsibility, the latter assumes responsibility in an almost Levinasian way, that is, to the point of being responsible for the Other’s responsibility. I would locate much of your work in this struggle. Can we make sense of “responsibility for” in terms of our being responsible for the scene of address in and by which we ourselves are constituted?

BUTLER: Let me start with one remark about Milgram and authority, and then go on to this interesting distinction between “responsibility to” and “responsibility for.” One worry I have about Milgram, along with the Stanford Prison Experiments conducted a few years later by Philip Zimbardo, is that they tend to assume that authority is necessary for social life. They also tend to produce a certain kind of alibi for the military and military hierarchy, in particular. It may well be that authority is necessary for social life, its regulation and control. But it may also be that the means for a critical contestation of authority in the name of justice is equally important for social life, or any number of other political matters, such as the sufficient and equal satisfaction of material needs. My worry is, then, that these experiments tend to produce a notion of the social as held together by authority. I would say that it is not only authority that integrates or maintains the stability of a social structure. Of course, some of the hierarchical arrangements are there in the test setting itself: the director of the test requires submission to his authority, and so there is a rhetorical re-enactment of a certain kind of authority
rule in the experimental scene itself. The rule of authority, uncritically, is already established by the protocol of the experiment, so what sense does it make to “test” for that as a result? In Zimbardo’s work, time and again he is looking at soldiers and outsourced prison guards who torture, such as those who tortured at Abu Ghraib. He describes them as regular, good people, as patriotic, but points to something that has gone wrong in their work environment. His framework suggests that either something is morally wrong with the person or something is faulty about the environment. Do we want to stay within this framework? If we stay within that framework, we become stopped from asking how the norms that govern the war effort in general actually enter into and play themselves out in the scenes of torture as well as the scenes of experimentation.

This becomes especially important to remember in the context of Abu Ghraib. The war against Iraq has been, from the start, a lawless war. The Bush administration did not really care whether the Congress said yes, whether the United Nations said yes, whether its own efforts complied with the Geneva Accords; it has been breaking national and international protocol, it has been setting aside the Constitution, *habeas corpus* at Guantanamo, and so on, for some time. We have nothing but an extralegal war effort in the name of national security, and the expansion of U.S. sovereignty in and through the abrogation of Iraqi sovereignty. Security has trumped legality repeatedly. Why should we be surprised when security personnel trump legality (in particular, the fair treatment of prisoners of war whose protocols have been part of the Geneva Convention for several decades) in the war effort that is played out in these scenes of torture? My worry about these experimental scenarios is that they cannot actually look at the generation of political, social, and cultural norms—in particular, those that valorize lawless violence in the name of the nation—in the context of a war effort and see how they actually enter into the individual actions of prison guards. Zimbardo and others are constantly separating the individual subjects from the broader agency of norms, we might say, and this is a fatal error. As a result, he can say that these guards are patriotic, but still they did horrible things, and point to environmental conditions. But what if torture has become the very sign of patriotism within the lexicon and normative culture of this war? What happens to his argument then?

On the other hand, do I think that those individuals are responsible? Yes. Eichmann and the individual Nazis and the individuals at Abu Ghraib should have stood up and said, “Look, this is wrong, do what you will with me but this is wrong, I oppose it, and I will not comply and I will organize people against it.” I do hold these individuals responsible; in
claiming that broader social norms are operating I am not claiming there
is no individual responsibility. It’s my view that there is a singular strug­
gle with norms, even as norms constrain the terms in which that struggle
takes place. I’m not looking for “heroic” individuals who transcend their
cultural predicament, but those who struggle within its terms and with
their own formations.

If we want to know how it comes to be that certain kinds of “war
workers,” as I’ll call them, do not assume responsibility for the policies to
which they are responsible, then we do need to think a little bit about
how the notion of responsibility gets flattened or vacated or displaced in
those scenes of war. It does not always happen because one charismatic
individual is responsible for their articulation. I do not think there is one
Subject, there is no Hitler, as it were, who singularly plans out our war
efforts, although we might be tempted to demonize Dick Cheney or Paul
Wolfowitz or others. War efforts such as these come from several
converging agencies. There is no single Subject as its cause, and even if
there were, the aims and purposes of war far exceed those for which
they are designed, as we see now. The war in Iraq is completely dif­
ferent from the one that was planned.

I would add here that Arendt makes a very interesting argument
about moral responsibility. She says very clearly that even though Nazi
prison guards were living in a legal system that not only permitted but
that mandated their actions, they nevertheless had a moral responsibility
not to comply with that positive law, and even to oppose it. The big
question is, then, on what is such moral responsibility grounded? For her,
there are claims of justice that are, interestingly, not “natural.” Indeed,
Arendt is against a natural rights or natural law perspective, but she does
think that there is a kind of political concept of justice that is beyond
positive law and that has to be held as the measure of positive law. One
might usefully discuss her view in relation to Antigone’s.

For Arendt, though, it is the responsibility of individuals to seek re­
course to it and to try to articulate it in those cases when positive law
diverges from the claims of justice itself. I too think there is a respons­
ibility of this kind. One would need to be supported in this; that is, there
would have to be other cultural norms and other cultural resources and
other legal traditions to which one could turn in order to draw upon the
resources that one needs to make the claims of justice. This is because
we do not have access to some Platonic idea of justice and we do not
have access to a natural right. Instead, we have a set of texts, cultural
traditions, various kinds of philosophical and social movements and
institutions that have been articulating justice and producing it as a
cultural resource precisely for these moments.
MURRAY: This is why Arendt distinguishes power from authority.

BUTLER: Yes, especially because for her power has very interesting valences. Sometimes it is positive, such as in On Revolution. But she obviously argues against the kind of Thrasymachian position that says we will call good only what the powerful name as good. Authority will, in her view, be legitimate authority precisely when it is not based in power of the Thrasymachian sort. It would have to include broad principles of authority. In any case, I am not sure this quite answers your question.

I think that with the Milgram and Zimbardo experiments, the danger is that we are asked to accept an idea of individuals who have it in themselves to call upon their own moral courage to say “no.” I would like to say that I am all in favor of individuals calling upon their moral courage, who resolve, “No, I will not torture, no I will not kill,” but how do we understand the formation and availability of “moral courage” in such instances? What do these individuals call upon? Do they not call upon other cultural and political resources than the ones that happen to be codified in the law or by the authority that is mandating the torture? This is different from a resource that is purely “in” or “of” the self. The self itself has resources that are to be found in the broader culture, and we have to understand how such cultural resources become available in subject formation. This is why we can think outside the absolutism of the contemporary frame, that is, about other legal regimes, other precedents, international law, or other social and political movements, other historical times of oppression. They can “flash up” for us, as Benjamin says, in moments of danger and interrupt the naturalizing hold that the political present has upon us. We need to draw upon analogies from various competing times in order to find a position that is not always mandated by the contemporary positive laws or cultural norms by which we are constrained. I want to suggest that the past and other temporalities “call upon us” when the present time of war threatens to articulate reality in totalizing ways. We are asked to respond, critically, sometimes with courage, and this is part of what is meant by the ethical demand and the scene of address.

Works Cited


—. "Photography, War, Outrage." *PMLA* 120, no. 3. May 2005.


