

ONTOLOGY AS A GUIDE TO POLITICS? JUDITH BUTLER ON INTERDEPENDENCY, VULNERABILITY, AND NONVIOLENCE

JACK WEARING

University of Cambridge

In recent work, Judith Butler has sought to develop a 'new bodily ontology' with a substantive normative upshot: recognition of our shared bodily condition, they argue, can support an ethic of nonviolence and a renewed commitment to egalitarian social conditions. However, the route from Butler's ontological claims to their ethico-political commitments is not clear: how can the general ontological features of embodiment Butler identifies introduce constraints on behaviour or political arrangements? Ontology, one might think, is neutral on questions of politics. In this paper I reconstruct Butler's response to this challenge, arguing that there is an interesting and plausible path from ontology to politics. I draw on Heidegger's ontological/ontic distinction to elucidate the central concepts of Butler's ontology: *vulnerability*, *precariousness*, and *interdependency*. I argue that one of Butler's central attempts to derive an ethic of nonviolence from ontology is unpersuasive, resting on a conflation of the ontological and ontic senses of 'interdependency'. Nonetheless, I contend that Butler is right that genuinely acknowledging our vulnerability is likely to make us more responsive to the claims of others, loosening the grip of ideals of invulnerability and sovereign independence. These ideals and the violence they encourage amount to a *disavowal* of our ontological condition, while commitment to nonviolence is a way of *acknowledging* it. Since a failure of acknowledgement is an *ethical* failure, we have a responsibility to act in ways that acknowledge our shared ontological condition—a general conclusion that is of interest even if one contests the specifics of Butler's ontology.

BEGINNING with work written in the wake of 9/11 and in response to the Iraq War, Judith Butler has recently been developing an ontology of the body that they hope will underpin a renewed commitment to egalitarian social condi-

Contact: Jack Wearing <jw811@cam.ac.uk>

tions. This ontology understands embodied life in terms of its constitutive vulnerability and interdependency. Butler's ontology is meant to have a substantive normative upshot: it follows from recognition of our shared bodily condition, they argue, that we must reject violence and contest inegalitarian distributions of precarity in our social world.

However, the route from Butler's metaphysical claims to their ethico-political commitments is not always clear. Why should recognising our vulnerability prompt us to contest existing differentials of precarity and violence? After all, there can be no direct contradiction between an ontological condition of embodiment and particular social arrangements. Social arrangements, whatever form they take—whether just or unjust, egalitarian or inegalitarian, violent or nonviolent—will all be made possible by our shared ontological condition. Thus, it is not obvious from the point of view of *ontology* why any particular social arrangement should be normatively privileged over any other. Ontology, one might think, is simply neutral on the question of politics. Indeed, this objection has been raised by Butler's critics and commentators alike. Seyla Benhabib argues that "social ontology, even one that is as sophisticated and psychoanalytically-inspired as is Butler's, [. . .] cannot lead us to normativity" (2013: 152), while Ann Murphy questions the legitimacy of a "scenario in which ontology is given priority [over ethics], or in which the 'ought' is somehow derived from the 'is'" (2011: 588).¹

In this paper I aim to reconstruct Butler's response to this challenge. I begin in Section 1 by introducing Butler's 'new bodily ontology,' situating it in relation to 'existentialist' attempts to provide an ontological analysis of the human being. In Section 2, I outline the key elements of Butler's ontology, explaining their conceptions of *interdependency*, *vulnerability*, and *precariousness*. I use Heidegger's distinction between the ontological and the ontic to illuminate the different senses these terms have for Butler. In the final three sections, I examine the relationship between Butler's ontology and their normative claims. I argue in Section 3 that one of their central attempts to derive an ethic of nonviolence directly from our interdependency is unpersuasive, resting on a conflation of that term's ontic and ontological senses. Nonetheless, I argue in Section 4 that Butler is right to suggest that genuinely acknowledging our vulnerability is likely to make us more responsive to the claim of the other, and to loosen the grip of the 'military fantasies' encouraged by an idea of absolute sovereignty. A commitment to nonviolence and a more egalitarian shared human condition amounts to an ontic mode of *acknowledging* our ontological condition, while the illusory ideal of sovereign independence and the violence it encourages amount

1. Admittedly, Murphy argues that Butler does not in fact give ontology priority, despite the passages in their work suggesting this. See fn. 34 below for critical discussion of Murphy's account.

to a *disavowal* of it. In Section 5, I conclude by briefly addressing the question of what makes these particular ways of relating to our ontological condition good or bad. I do so by examining two political stances—individualism and a narrow ‘politics of vulnerability’—and showing why these are politically inadequate from Butler’s perspective.

It is worth saying at the outset that my aim is a reconstructive one. Butler does not always draw a clear distinction between the ontological and ontic senses of their key terms that I identify. For this reason, my formulations conflict somewhat with the letter of Butler’s explanation of their bodily and social ontology. Nonetheless, I hope the usefulness of framing their project in these terms will be demonstrated in my discussion of the specific ontological features of embodiment to which Butler draws attention. Furthermore, whether or not one accepts the ontological or political views I attribute to Butler, my broader aim is to use their work to show that there is an interesting and plausible path from the ontological to the normative. Thus, my general conclusions in this paper will be of interest even to those unsympathetic to the specific claims Butler advances.

1. Butler’s ‘New Bodily Ontology’

Butler introduces their project in *Frames of War* as follows:

I want to argue that if we are to make broader social and political claims about rights of protection and entitlements to persistence and flourishing, we will first have to be supported by a new bodily ontology, one that implies the rethinking of precariousness, vulnerability, injurability, interdependency, exposure, bodily persistence, desire, work and the claims of language and social belonging. (FW 2)²

From the rather formidable list that closes this passage, it is clear that providing a new bodily ontology will involve ‘rethinking’ a whole constellation of concepts. In the next section I will give a brief outline of Butler’s conception of three of these: interdependency, vulnerability, and precariousness. Since the concepts making up Butler’s constellation are closely interconnected, however, the discussion will also shed light on their understanding of injurability, exposure, and desire.

First, allow me to make some general observations about the aims and scope of Butler’s project. To begin with, the ontological claims Butler makes are meant to be a prerequisite for ‘broader’ normative claims, in at least two senses. First,

2. I use the following abbreviations for selected works by Butler: *GT* for *Gender Trouble* (1990/2006); *PL* for *Prearious Life* (2004); *FW* for *Frames of War* (2009/2016a); *RVR* for ‘Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance’ (2016b); and *FN* for *The Force of Nonviolence* (2020).

their ontological claims are meant to prompt an extension of rights and entitlements to human beings and populations currently excluded from them; the sphere of ethico-political concern is thereby broadened. Second, their ontology is supposed to prompt us to rethink what would be involved in securing those rights and entitlements. Butler's view is that understanding these only in terms of the rights of *individuals* is insufficient. We must also take into consideration and ensure the protection of social *ties* between individuals, and the social *conditions* for flourishing. I shall return to these points.

Butler is not pursuing ontology in the sense most prominent in analytic philosophy, namely the project of determining what kinds of entities there are.³ Rather, Butler's 'bodily ontology' is an account of what it is to *be* a body. Butler seeks to do justice to the fact that a body is never completely independent of other bodies, nor of social norms that constitute what a recognisable body is. The notions of sociality and embodiment are interdependent for Butler: to be a body is always already to be exposed to "socially and politically articulated forces as well as to claims of sociality [. . .] that make possible the body's persisting and flourishing" (FW 3). It is misleading to treat a body in complete isolation from its connections to social forces and claims. Part of Butler's target, then, is the "individualism" that is often presupposed in contemporary politics and philosophy, and its attendant conception of personhood (FW 5, 20, 145).⁴

Furthermore, the bodies in question are *living* bodies. Butler is not offering a general account of what it is to be a material thing. Of course, not all living bodies are human bodies. Butler's ontological claims will have normative consequences that extend to our treatment of non-human animals, and of the inanimate natural environment insofar as it is a shared support of living creatures.⁵ Elaborating the conditions for human *life* involves showing what is needed to sustain both human and non-human animal life. Butler's account is therefore not, or not primarily, an *anthropology*, or an account of a specific difference between humans and other animals. Their ontological claims thus concern not so much our species-being as our 'genus-being.' Nevertheless, an account that gives ontological conditions for the possibility of life in general will *a fortiori* elucidate necessary

3. The 'analytic' conception of ontology is strongly indebted to Quine, especially the first essay in Quine (1980). As we shall see, I take Butler's approach to ontology to be more Heideggerian than Quinean. I am grateful to Nikhil Krishnan for pressing me to be more explicit about the conception of 'ontology' in play here.

4. In *Frames of War*, Butler leaves the critique of individualism mostly implicit. For a discussion of the contribution of their ontology to such a critique, see *The Force of Nonviolence*, especially chapter 1. See also Section 5 below.

5. For Butler, precariousness is both a "shared condition of human life," and "a condition that links human and non-human animals" (FW 13; see also xxv, xxx).

conditions for human life in particular.⁶ Embodiment is something that we share with other animals, and is indeed a constitutive feature of animality.⁷

Butler takes pains to distance their view from transhistorical accounts that downplay the contribution made by social factors to the constitution of bodies:

To refer to ‘ontology’ in this regard is not to lay claim to a description of fundamental structures of being that are distinct from any and all social and political organization. [...] It is not possible first to define the ontology of the body and then to refer to the social significations the body assumes. Rather, to be a body is to be exposed to social crafting and form, and that is what makes the ontology of the body a social ontology. (*FW* 2–3)

The phrase ‘fundamental structures of being’ might put us in mind of Martin Heidegger’s attempt in *Being and Time* to provide an ‘existential analytic of Dasein’—to uncover the necessary ontological structures, the ‘existentialia,’ that underlie any *particular* way in which ‘we ourselves’ can be.⁸ Heidegger introduces a distinction between the *ontological* and the *ontic* (*BT* 31/H11). Ontology is the inquiry into *being*, “that which determines entities as entities, that on the basis of which entities are already understood” (*BT* 25–26/H6), whereas ontic or ontical sciences deal exclusively with entities themselves. Philosophy is ontological, and Heidegger is concerned to distance it from the ontic; the existential analytic is distinguished from biology, psychology, and anthropology, for example (*BT* §10). Although Butler does not invoke the distinction between the

6. One of these conditions will turn out to be vulnerability; see Section 2. Like Butler, Erinn Gilson emphasises that vulnerability is part of the human *condition*, “in contradistinction to ‘human nature’” (2011: 327, fn. 5), but can also be understood as a condition of non-human animal life and perhaps nature in general. Gilson’s further claim that we have no grounds for understanding vulnerability as “an innate feature of human beings” (2011: 327), however, seems overly hasty. Vulnerability in Butler’s sense may not be a *unique* feature of human beings, but it is for all that an *innate* one, insofar as ‘innate’ means “belonging to the essential constitution” (*OED*).

7. Butler’s account thus seeks to “take seriously the chiasmic relation implied by the phrase, ‘the human animal’” (*FW* 17; see also 7). It is unclear whether Butler’s metaphor is grammatical (‘chiasmus’) or biological (‘chiasma’), but in either case the suggestion is of an ‘intercrossing.’ The point seems to be that our humanity cannot be extricated from our animality (and thus our embodiment). Interestingly, Adrian Moore has argued that Kant attempted to break from the Aristotelian tradition and do precisely that (Moore 2003: 138, 79).

8. Heidegger (1927/1962), henceforth *BT*; in accordance with standard practice in Heidegger scholarship, when citing this work I give the pagination of the English translation followed by the ‘H’ numbers, which are printed in the margins and which correspond to the page numbers of the seventh German edition of *Sein und Zeit* (see the ‘Translators’ Preface’, 13). See *BT* 36/H15 and 75/H50 for the identification of Dasein as ‘we ourselves,’ and *BT* 71/H45 and *passim* for ‘existentialia’ (and its singular form, ‘existentiale’). This kind of project is also pursued by other existential phenomenologists, such as Jean-Paul Sartre (see Sartre 1943/2003).

ontological and the ontic explicitly, I will seek to show its usefulness in clarifying their position, and I shall refer to it frequently.⁹ While Butler sometimes seems to utilize something like this distinction, at other times their failure to draw it explicitly results in problematic equivocations.¹⁰

The distinction between the ontological and the ontic gives us a way of positioning Butler in a critical relation to the project of existential ontology. In seeking the *a priori* structures of existence, Heidegger has to place social and political organization on the side of the 'ontic'—these are merely 'factual' or 'existentiell' arrangements of society that Dasein might find itself in, made possible by the more basic structures of existence: being-in-the-world, being-with others, &c. These latter can be described without reference to any *particular* social arrangement. Butler, on the other hand, takes ontology itself to be partly constituted by historically contingent social arrangements and power relations, citing Foucault's notion of the "historical *a priori*" in this connection (FW 6). Placing concrete social relations in the realm of the 'ontic' thus obscures the fact that what a human being is, what a subject is, indeed what a *body* is, is not entirely historically stable—it obscures the constitutive role of discourse and its material effects.¹¹

The account given so far is an oversimplification, in that it is not obvious that the 'existentialists'¹² really thought ontology could dispense with discussion of 'any and all social and political organization.'¹³ The more important point to con-

9. Aret Karademir also "read[s] Butler with the aid of Heideggerian concepts" from *Being and Time* (2014: 825), although he does not utilize the ontological/ontic distinction in his reading. His focus is on Butler's early work on gender and its relation to freedom, rather than on their later, more avowedly ontological work. Karademir views Butler's "social constructivism" as distancing their work and Heidegger's, which "interrogates the universal structures of human existence" (2014: 824). As will become clear, my suggestion is that some of the central claims of Butler's later work can fruitfully be read as contributing to precisely this latter kind of 'interrogation,' though the ontological structures Butler identifies differ markedly from those analyzed by Heidegger.

10. See Section 3.

11. The 'entirely' poses difficulties. See Srinivasan (2018: §2) for a discussion of the (ineffable?) body that exceeds language on Butler's account.

12. I use 'existentialists' and 'existentialism' in scare quotes to group Heidegger with Sartre and Beauvoir. This grouping is convenient, but somewhat tendentious; although Heidegger's early work inaugurated the tradition of existential phenomenology, he later disavowed the existentialist appropriation of his work. See his comments on Sartrean existentialism in Heidegger (1976/1998: 250–51, 254). When I use the terms *without* scare quotes, I intend to exclude Heidegger.

13. In different ways, Heidegger and Sartre give a prominent role to sociality. For Heidegger, there can be no Dasein without *Mitsein*, 'being-with' (BT §§25–26); we have an irreducible relation to others. Heidegger's discussion of historicity and the 'heritage' of possibilities we inherit (BT §74, especially 435/H383–84; see also 167/H129) also suggests that he views our understanding of the world and ourselves as socially mediated. Sartre, for his part, dedicates the entire third part of *Being and Nothingness* to discussing relations with Others. Finally, while neither of these philosophers devotes much space to discussion of concrete political organization in these works, this certainly could not be said of Simone de Beauvoir, another important existentialist philosopher. I consider Beauvoir's conception of the relation between ontology and politics in more detail in Section 4, arguing that her position bears affinity to Butler's.

sider here, however, is that it is not obvious that Butler's *own* account can avoid laying claim to a description of very general 'fundamental structures of [embodied] being.' There seems to be a non-sequitur in the passage quoted above: we are told that 'it is not possible *first* to define the ontology of the body and *then* to refer to the social significations the body assumes,' and this negative claim is apparently justified by the fact that 'to be a body is to be exposed to social crafting and form.' But this latter claim is itself extremely general—indeed, it is plausibly read as elucidating a 'fundamental structure' of the being of the body, *any* body. The particular kinds and effects of social and 'discursive' crafting by which the body is constituted and to which it is exposed are historically variant; what is *not* historically variant is the 'fact' of exposure to social crafting.¹⁴

This suggests that, for Butler, ontology itself can operate on two levels. The first is the level of 'fundamental structures of being.' As we shall see, Butler's account does attempt to elucidate necessary, transhistorical ontological features of embodiment: part of what it is to be a living body is to be vulnerable, exposed to social crafting, dependent, &c. The account at this level will have to do justice to sociality, insofar as our account of embodied being had better acknowledge the fact that an 'individual' body is always already a 'social' body, subject to all manner of impingement by social forces 'outside' of it. The second level would provide a 'social ontology' in a different sense, describing the norms that constitute the being of specifically social phenomena, such as political categories (e.g., 'citizen'), gender categories, and what one might call 'normative ideals of the body': the contingent, historically variable social and discursive norms that regulate what can be recognized as a (fully) human body.¹⁵ This second level is still 'ontological'—it still concerns what it is to *be* a citizen, a woman, an intelligible body. But it is a *social* ontology because a full account of the being of such entities must make reference to social norms local to their historical context.

Butler is interested in pursuing ontology at both of these levels, though I shall focus here on the first level—on general structural features of embodiment. But Butler is also interested in particular *ontic* situations that are made possible by these ontological features, and in the differential distribution of certain politically important ontic properties. We are all equally 'vulnerable' in a general ontological sense, but we are *not* all equally 'vulnerable' in the ontic sense. Furthermore, Butler's critique of ontic violence and inequality is meant to pro-

14. One could arguably draw a similar distinction regarding Butler's early account of gender performativity: what is not historically variant is that gender is performatively constituted, but the particular 'legible' formations of gender that are produced through its performance *are* historically variant. See *GT* Chapter 3, Section 4, and the Conclusion, for the classic statement of Butler's view; see also Butler (1988).

15. Butler's discussion of "contingent ontologies" of gender (*GT* 45–46) is strongly suggestive of this 'second level' of ontology; their later work seems to operate at both levels.

ceed via an appeal to our ontological condition. As we shall see, apprehending a *general* condition of (ontological) ‘precariousness’ is meant to lead us to contest unequal and differential distributions of (ontic) ‘precarity.’

2. A Post-Existential Analytic? (Inter)dependency, Vulnerability, Precariousness

Three ontological features of embodiment are especially central to Butler’s project: interdependency, vulnerability, and precariousness. These features play an analogous role in Butler’s account of embodiment to that played by the existentialia in Heidegger’s analysis of existence. Butler understands them to be constitutive features or conditions of embodied life. In this section, I examine them in turn, showing how a distinction between an ‘ontological’ employment and related ‘ontic’ uses of each term is in play in Butler’s discussion.¹⁶

(Inter)dependency:

Ordinarily, we think of the passage from dependency to independence as closely connected with the passage from infancy to childhood to adulthood. As infants, we are utterly dependent on the care of others; as Butler puts it, “none of us come into the world as self-sufficient beings” (2018: 246). Our passage to ‘maturity’ amounts to an overcoming of this dependency, and ‘independence’ thus acquires a positive valence. However, on Butler’s view, we *never* become fully self-sufficient, and we are always dependent on others in various ways, and they on us: the “struggle of dependency and separation [. . .] does not merely designate a stage of childhood to be surmounted” (FW 183). Simply in virtue of having needs that may or may not be met, we are always materially dependent on others and on a supportive environment. Butler relates this condition closely to our embodiment, going so far as to characterize “the human body [itself] as a certain kind of *dependency* on infrastructure, understood complexly as environment, social relations, and networks of support and sustenance” (RVR 21). Absolute self-sufficiency, absolute independence, is therefore a fantasy, and relative self-sufficiency is far from being guaranteed:

16. My account abstracts somewhat from changes in emphasis across Butler’s work. The arguments of Butler’s latest book, *The Force of Nonviolence*, draw particularly on interdependency, downplaying to some extent the significance of precariousness, which appeared as the “central concept” of Butler’s ontology in earlier works (Gilson 2014: 43). Nonetheless, Butler continues to view these phenomena as deeply interconnected. The apparent change in emphasis is therefore not indicative of a fundamental change of view.

Those of us who achieve some measure of self-sufficiency do so only [by] relying on social structures, including material infrastructures, that have been secured through political and economic means. Even our ability to stand, if we have that ability, depends on an existing surface or platform that provides the possibility of achieving balance and mobility. (Butler 2018: 246–47)

The example of the ability to stand suggests two different senses of ‘dependency.’ We can talk both of specific *ontic* dependencies, and a more fundamental *ontological* dependency. Which ontic dependencies characterize a particular person’s life will be a matter of their *situation* (to appropriate another piece of ‘existentialist’ vocabulary). Whether I have the ability to stand or not makes a difference regarding how social spaces must be organized to be accessible or navigable for me. I thus depend on my environment and on others in various concrete ontic ways. But there is a deeper, ontological sense of dependency that underlies these. To *stand* I must be supported by some particular surface or other; to *be embodied* is to be dependent at all times on infrastructure in Butler’s broad sense, on an entire social and material world. This dependency is thus a necessary, ontological feature of our embodiment.

Butler draws a further consequence: our condition of dependency is reciprocal, and is therefore a condition of *interdependency*. We depend on others, and they on us; we all depend on a shared social world, which we in turn help to sustain—or destroy. This interdependency is partly material, but it is also a precondition of identity and subjectivity on Butler’s view. This is “finally a Hegelian point” (*FW* 43), both recalling and transforming Hegel’s idea that self-consciousness is dependent on the recognition of an Other.¹⁷ One of Butler’s central arguments for ‘nonviolence’ will hinge on this claim: their view is that in ‘undoing’ the Other, one undoes oneself.¹⁸

Vulnerability:

It would be natural to construe ‘vulnerability’ as a special susceptibility to injury (physical or otherwise), to being wounded or subjected to violence. In positing an ontological condition of vulnerability, Butler certainly has this sense in mind. Connecting the three notions presently under discussion, they write: “To be dependent implies vulnerability: one is vulnerable to the social structure upon which one depends, so if the structure fails, one is exposed to a precari-

17. See Hegel (1807/2018: §§178–96).

18. I discuss this argument critically in the next section.

ous condition" (FN 46). Here, the implication is that *because* we always need and depend on a supporting social structure, we are always vulnerable to its possible withdrawal or collapse, always potentially exposed to injury and precarity. However, Butler is careful to resist any straightforward reduction of vulnerability to injurability (FW 34, 61). Their suggestion is that there is a broad sense of vulnerability that makes 'injurability' possible. Injurability is only one modality of vulnerability; being injurable is what Heidegger might have called a 'founded mode' of being vulnerable (cf. BT §13). As Butler puts it, "the body that exists in its exposure and proximity to others, to external force, to all that might subjugate and subdue it, is vulnerable to injury; injury is the *exploitation* of that vulnerability" (FW 61, emphasis added). This fundamental exposure is what Butler calls a "primary vulnerability to others" (PL xiv), a "primary human vulnerability" (PL 28). In the terms of the ontological/ontic distinction, this primary vulnerability, this fundamental 'exposure' to others, is *ontological*. The more specific modes of vulnerability that it makes possible are *ontic*.¹⁹

One such mode is vulnerability to injury or harm; some human beings may be more vulnerable to injury, or certain kinds of injury, than others. However, this is far from being the only important ontic mode of vulnerability on Butler's conception. On the ontic level, as Ann Murphy puts it, "no body is vulnerable in exactly the same way as any other" (2011: 578). There are various ways in which we can be vulnerable, and the fact that bodily vulnerability can be exploited in violence nevertheless leaves open the possibility of a *non-exploitative* relation to others' vulnerability. What is *definitive* of primary or ontological vulnerability is not the possibility of its exploitation (that is, injurability), but rather the more general condition of 'exposure and proximity to others'—to the "obtrusive alterity" the body "comes up against" (FW 34). This obtrusion is precisely what "animates responsiveness" to the world, where responsiveness includes "a wide range of affects: pleasure, rage, suffering, hope, to name a few" (FW 34). Butler's notion of vulnerability is, then, a markedly ambivalent one. The ontological condition that underlies our injurability ('suffering') also underlies affects with a more positive

19. It is often recognized in the literature on Butler that they have a two level or 'dualistic account' of vulnerability (Lloyd 2015: 185, cf. 175; Gilson 2011: 310; cf. Murphy 2011: 578). Commentators generally employ a contrast between 'primary vulnerability' and concrete forms of vulnerability, rather than couching the discussion in terms of the ontological/ontic distinction I develop here. Moya Lloyd comes close to marking this distinction when she notes that (primary) vulnerability is a "*condition of possibility* for love, desire, care, hope and life" (2015: 172, emphasis added). Gilson also notes that "vulnerability" is a "*condition of potential that makes possible* other conditions" (2011: 310, some emphasis added), including 'positive' modalities of vulnerability such as those mentioned by Lloyd, which I discuss further in the main text. Gilson emphasizes that we ought "to refuse to conflate vulnerability in its most profound and general sense [. . .] with specifically negative forms of vulnerability" (2011: 324). I discuss some consequences of such a conflation in Section 5 below.

valence ('pleasure,' 'hope'), or whose valence is itself ambiguous ('rage,' which Butler thinks can play an important role in critique and political resistance). Vulnerability, the condition of being necessarily "exposed to others" (FW 33) is not in itself something bad, something we should want to deny or will away.

While this notion of vulnerability expands on the ordinary use, then, it is not discontinuous with it. Nor would Butler want to deny that we should keep using 'vulnerable' in a narrower sense. Doing so can be a way of registering injustice: registering the fact that in violence, vulnerability can be differentially exploited.²⁰ But *ontological* vulnerability is a condition of possibility of *various* forms of ordinary 'ontic' vulnerability, and Butler's notion shows how vulnerability in a narrow and negative sense is necessarily bound up with more positive modalities of our exposure to others. Without a primary vulnerability to others, there would be no fear of injury, but also no possibility of affection, pleasure, or intimacy. Part of the task of ethics is to minimize the 'negative' modalities of vulnerability, especially where their distribution is inegalitarian, and to cultivate its 'positive' modalities.

Precariousness and Precarity:

Butler's discussion of precariousness and precarity also involves distinguishing between a general ontological condition, and specific, differential ontic modalities: "the more or less existential conception of 'precariousness' is thus linked with a more specifically political notion of 'precarity'" (FW 3). The link between the two is structurally similar to the relation between the two senses of 'vulnerable' identified above: the former (ontological, 'more or less existential') is a *condition of possibility* of the latter (ontic, 'specifically political,' capable of differential distribution).²¹ How should we understand each term? Butler glosses 'precariousness' as the fact "that life requires various social and economic conditions to be met in order to be sustained as a life" (FW 14). This fact is a completely general one, and is, as it were, indifferent to the political, 'ontic' matter of whether those social and economic conditions are in fact met for a given life or population.

20. Nonetheless, Butler has reservations about a 'politics of vulnerability' grounded on the identification of particular "vulnerable populations" (FN 186–92). See Section 5 below.

21. Catherine Mills uses the terms "ontological and ontic" in passing to describe the "differentiation of different kinds of precariousness" (2015: 45), though she does not develop a reading that uses the ontological/ontic distinction *systematically* to clarify Butler's ontology, as I attempt to here. The 'different kinds' Mills is referring to map onto the precariousness/precarity distinction, which she goes on to discuss. She rightly points out that Butler does not always maintain this distinction, occasionally conflating the two senses of 'precarious' (2015: 45–49). As I argue in Section 3, a similar conflation afflicts Butler's discussion of interdependency.

Hence, Butler talks of a “generalized precariousness” and a “generalized condition of precariousness.” Indeed, “lives are by definition precarious” (FW 25).

‘Precarity,’ on the other hand, “designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death” (FW 25). It is thus an ‘ontic’ condition or state: particular populations are especially precarious in this latter sense.²² This state is ‘politically induced,’ the result of both political and social formations. Indeed, Butler goes further, suggesting that the “differential distribution of precarity is at once a material and a perceptual issue” (FW 25). On Butler’s view, social norms structure perception, delimiting who can be perceived as fully human, and the distribution of rights and material goods is thus partly determined by the field of possible perception.

Butler provides a powerful ‘case study’ of this idea in their early essay ‘Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia’.²³ Butler argues that the acquittal of police officers who were tried for the use of excessive force against Rodney King, an unarmed black man, could only be possible on the basis of a prior “racist production of the visual field” (1993: 22). Jury members were shown a video recording that, as Butler unhesitatingly (and rightly) puts it, “shows a man being brutally beaten, repeatedly, and without visible resistance” (1993: 15). Nonetheless, one juror claimed that “she believed Rodney King was in ‘total control’ of the situation” (1993: 15)—a belief apparently typical of the jury, given the eventual verdict. Butler argues that such a perverse “feat of interpretation” (1993: 15) could only arise on the basis of a prior framing and schematization of the visual field, according to which “the black male body is always already performing [a threatening action] within that white racist imaginary” (1993: 19). Thus, a hand raised in self-defence to protect a black man from the blows of the police batons is immediately ‘read’ as signifying and foreshadowing a violent intent (1993: 20). In *Precarious Life*, Butler gives a somewhat similar analysis of the racist “bestialization” of prisoners detained indefinitely in Guantanamo Bay, who are figured as *essentially* exceptional individuals who

22. I would therefore contest Gilson’s claim that “precarity is just precariousness exacerbated” (2014: 45). Gilson does go on to note that precariousness (unlike precarity) is a general condition, but her gloss here fails to capture the sense in which Butler is talking about two different levels (ontological on the one hand, and ontic and political on the other). Similarly, Gilson writes that “whereas increased precariousness produces increased exposure to ‘injury, violence, and death[,]’ the consequences of increased vulnerability are indeterminate” (2014: 47). To talk of an ‘increase’ here strikes me as infelicitous if we remain at the ontological level: our condition of ontological precariousness and vulnerability is, as it were, a constant. We can talk of an increase in *precarity*, or in particular *modes* of vulnerability. But the reason the consequences of increased vulnerability might appear ‘indeterminate’ here is that the particular mode of *ontic* vulnerability in question is left undetermined. (These remarks apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to ‘dependency,’ as we shall see in the next section.)

23. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for suggesting that I address this paper here.

“must be constrained in order not to kill, [who] are effectively reducible to a desire to kill” (PL 78). This figuration is deployed in order to legitimate the suspension of international codes guaranteeing these people’s rights.

Butler’s point, then, is that the structuring of the field of perception can underlie and legitimize certain forms of violence, which then have a knock-on effect on the forms of precarity (and indeed vulnerability) to which certain populations are disproportionately exposed. A critical analysis of these perceptual schematizations is thus a necessary element of an explanation of differential precarity, though Butler does not claim that it is a sufficient explanation in itself.²⁴ This suggests that part of the explanation for this differential distribution will be given at the second level of ontology identified in Section 1: the level of constitutive but socially specific norms. By exposing the norms that constitute who can be recognized as fully human, we can understand how those norms support particular distributions of precarity.²⁵

3. From Ontology to Politics: Interdependency and Nonviolence

What normative consequences can be drawn from this ontological account of embodiment? Butler attempts to move directly to an ethic of nonviolence from the interdependency that is a constitutive condition of embodied life. Consider the following two passages:

We can assert in a general way that social interdependency characterizes life, and then proceed to account for violence as an attack on that interdependency, an attack on persons, yes; but perhaps most fundamentally, it is an attack on “bonds.” (FN 16)

Violence against the other is [. . .] violence against oneself, something that becomes clear when we recognize that violence assaults the living interdependency that is, or should be, our social world. (FN 25)

24. Lloyd suggests that Butler rarely, if ever, “explore[s] in detail the actual mechanisms that give rise to the concrete precarisation of a particular population beyond referring to it as a general ‘political’ process” (2015: 176). As I have suggested, the schematization of the perceptual field can be viewed as one such ‘mechanism’ of precarisation, though not the only one. More broadly, however, the potential fruitfulness of Butler’s account perhaps lies in its provision of a framework for discussing *various* modes of precarity and mechanisms of its production, regardless of Butler’s own success in explaining particular cases.

25. The question of *how* we can come to recognize and contest such norms, given that they structure our perception at a very basic level, is an important one for Butler. Lloyd worries that “it is not clear how *in determinate conditions* it is possible, if at all, to overcome the normative constrictions that prevent us receiving an ethical address” from those who are not perceived as fully human (2015: 186). I cannot pursue this question further here, though I hope to address it in future work.

Butler's point is not just the familiar idea that 'violence begets violence.' Rather, their claim is that there is something self-undermining about acts of violence against the 'bonds' that partly constitute the agent of that violence. A violent act against the other is *directly* violence against oneself, because one's 'self' is dependent upon its bond to the other.

It is not entirely clear whom Butler seeks to address with this argument. While some of the arguments Butler pursues for nonviolence address a presumptively left-wing audience, dealing with the question of whether tactical violence can be justified as a means to progressive or liberatory ends (FN 12–13), the appeal to the consequence of 'violence against oneself' here suggests that the argument is intended to have a more general import. Butler is interested in acts of self-defence as exceptions to prohibitions on violence. The intuitive, philosophically widespread view is that violence is justified (only) if it is committed in self-defence. But Butler responds that the 'self' to be defended in such cases cannot be straightforwardly delineated from the other. If the argument for nonviolence is successful in such a case, it also promises to speak more generally. Perhaps the argument is meant to have force even for a more or less egoistic agent, who does not yet acknowledge the claims of others. If the egoist recognizes their dependence on others, and further recognizes that violence is an assault on interdependency, on social bonds that sustain the self, they thereby recognize that they have a reason not to commit violence; the violence they exact on others affects them as well.

If this is the intention behind the argument, it is surely unsuccessful. For it trades on an ambiguity concerning the ontological and ontic senses of 'dependency' identified above. The argument seems to invoke the idea of an assault on interdependency *as such*—not this or that particular relation of dependence, this or that social 'tie,' but the whole social world. As Butler claims elsewhere, a self that sought self-preservation through violence "stands worldless, threatening this world" (FN 149). This might lead us towards an 'ontological' interpretation of the term. But does it make sense to talk about an assault on our interdependency in *that* sense? What could it mean for a self to stand genuinely 'worldless,' rather than standing in an impoverished or cloistered world?

If interdependency is part of what it is to be a living being, then an assault on 'living interdependency' *as such* would amount to a threat to our very being. The 'destruction' of our interdependency would mean *our* destruction. There may indeed be cases we would describe in such terms: our continued violence against the environment threatens to make life on our planet literally unliveable; nuclear disasters might have similarly grim consequences. But these examples, urgent though they are, make the appeal to interdependency superfluous. These are cases where the self-destructive nature of our violence is, as it were, transparent. One need not recognize our social interdependency to recognize that such

scenarios could utterly destroy the conditions for life. Of course, in the case of climate change such recognition has in any case proved insufficient to override the shortsighted profit motives of fossil fuel companies, to take just one example.²⁶ This is something Butler acknowledges when discussing the environmental policy of countries such as the US: “perhaps they do know that they are in the midst of a globally destructive activity, and that too seems to them like a right [. . .] that should be compromised by nothing and no one” (FN 44).

On the other hand, if we understand Butler’s argument as invoking the idea of an *ontic* interdependency, it matters a great deal *which* ontic social bonds are threatened by a specific act of violence. For why should an egoistic agent not be willing to accept *some* violence to themselves if compensated by some gain, especially if the dissolution of *some* social bond or other is unlikely to have a great impact on them? We are fundamentally (inter)dependent creatures. Perhaps the boundaries of the ‘self’ are unclear. But it does not follow that there are *no* such boundaries, or that the self could not survive the destruction of *some* of the social ties that it depends upon and that relate it to others.

The particular ontic dependencies each of us has are not symmetrical. The CEO of a transnational corporation depends on the workers in their warehouses, if their business is to be profitable. But the workers’ entire livelihood is dependent on keeping their substandard wage. The workers have a certain fungibility from the perspective of the company: if one is fired, someone else will be willing to take on the work. As individuals, workers are not able to effectively contest their treatment (to negotiate their wage, or to raise safety concerns, for instance): hence the political significance of unionization. It is not clear in what sense the exploitation and violence enacted on the worker in this situation is also violence against the CEO. Further, even if there *is* any such sense, it is not clear that it would provide the CEO with any new and overriding motivation towards nonviolence. Indeed, as Amia Srinivasan has suggested, it may be that some selves—including, plausibly, our CEO—depend precisely on violent exploitation to maintain themselves, their life, their ever-increasing ‘worth’ and social position.²⁷ If so, it is unclear how recognition of that dependency could motivate them to abandon their exploitative practices. From an egoistic perspective, perhaps the (prudentially) rational response to that recognition would be to shore up exploitation and ensure its perpetuation.

This leads to a more general worry about the sort of project Butler is pursuing, one that aims to make its way from ontology to normativity. The worry is this: ontology is normatively neutral. If we describe the *ontological* condition of

26. See Fraser (2021: 100–107).

27. See her conversation with Butler: “Judith Butler: The Force of Nonviolence,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HN5D9rlkRcA> (40:17–42:50).

interdependency or vulnerability, we are describing something that is in a sense inalienable. To live *just is* to be vulnerable and dependent. But if that is the case, ontology has nothing to say about the particular (ontic) modalities of dependency and vulnerability. No particular political arrangement can ‘contradict’ our ontological condition, so the latter places no constraint on the former.²⁸ Ontological dependency is not something that can be assaulted or destroyed, except in the sense that life itself can be destroyed. Its protection cannot be made into a political goal, and it offers no guidance regarding which political arrangements are to be preferred. Whatever ontic distribution of precarity, dependency, and vulnerability to violence obtains, our ontological condition remains untouched, for it is the background condition of *any* such arrangement. It is therefore tempting to be sceptical about the project of deriving normative claims from an ontology, whose proper domain is at best descriptive. Seyla Benhabib puts this point in stark terms:

Ethics is not social ontology. Social ontology, even one that is as sophisticated and psychoanalytically-inspired as is Butler’s, can help disclose the permutations of self-other relations as well as uncover the necessary bases for the formations of receptivity [. . .] but it cannot lead us to normativity. (2013: 152)

4. Vulnerability, Fantasy, and Acknowledgement

Butler’s ‘bodily ontology’ might seem, to many, undeniable. Many will find it intuitively obvious that we are exposed to others; that our persistence and flourishing depend on conditions outside ourselves; that we are always dependent on others, and they on us. Is Butler’s account then trivial? Did we not see Butler claim that it is true ‘by definition’ that life is precarious? In this section, I will address this worry about triviality. In doing so, I hope to show that Butler also has resources to respond to the problem identified at the end of the previous section—that there is a bridge from ontology to normativity.

If Butler’s ontological claims appear trivial, it may be difficult to see what form opposition to those claims might take, and why anyone might be resistant to them. But Butler insists that there is such opposition “to vulnerability,” and

28. There is nonetheless an obvious way in which ontology *might* constrain normativity: ontology might limit what is *possible* or, more controversially, what is *feasible*. For a (professedly opinionated) introduction to issues concerning the relevance of feasibility to normative questions, see Southwood (2018). See especially section 2.1 for a brief discussion of the idea that feasibility might place constraints on the normative domain. I shall leave this sort of constraint aside, as it is clearly not the sort of connection that interests Butler.

suggests that “it is probably best not to regard this opposition primarily as an ‘argument’” (PL 19). To see what they have in mind here, consider Kate Manne’s characterisation of Butler’s position:

We (a pronoun we can allow to have a somewhat open-ended referent) are simultaneously agents and subjects—acted upon as we act, and mutually impressionable via sense and sensibility. It is not just that others impinge on us causally, and make a difference to our sense of self, *which nobody would deny*. A *constitutive* dependency—or better, entanglement—is at issue here. Subjectivity is not thinkable without inter-subjectivity. Who I am depends partly on how I am regarded, treated, addressed, called upon, and spoken of by other subjects, with whom I share a historical, social, and material world. (2018: 234, first emphasis added)

While there is much that is right about this characterization, I want to draw attention to the phrase ‘which nobody would deny.’ In the latter part of this passage, Manne places the emphasis on what could be called our ‘discursive’ interdependency, while downplaying the interest of Butler’s commitment to our ‘material’ interdependency. It is the latter that Manne seems to have in mind when she claims that nobody would deny that others ‘impinge on us causally.’ There is of course a sense in which this *is* undeniable, as Butler is well aware. And yet, it is an important feature of Butler’s account that we nonetheless *do* deny the very obvious fact of our material dependence on others, and the symmetrical facts of their material dependence on us, their vulnerability to us, and our constant ‘causal impingement’ on them.

The most important point to make in relation to Manne’s claim is that there are *various* kinds of denial (or illusion, or fantasy) that might have different sorts of motivation and origin. Manne seems to have a highly intellectualistic conception of denial in mind: no one would deny these facts, because they are self-evident. But we can also talk about denial in a psychoanalytic register, for instance when we say that someone is ‘in denial.’ It is arguably a precondition of being in denial that on some level one knows precisely that which one is in denial about, so being in a position to know something just in virtue of reflecting on it (‘self-evident’) is perfectly consistent with denying it in this sense. Finally, and most importantly in this context, we can speak of denial in the sense of *disavowal*. ‘Disavowal’ has greater normative force than ‘in denial.’ It is not just an epistemic notion, but an overtly moral one. To disavow something is to refuse to associate oneself with it, to refuse to acknowledge it—to disclaim knowledge of something or responsibility for some action. To disavow is not *always* to do something wrong, since in some circumstances one might be called on actively to disavow something, to explicitly condemn and repudiate something with which one has

been associated. But in general, I take it that disavowal is a moral failing, insofar as to accuse someone of disavowal is to suggest that they are shirking responsibility, or refusing to own up to or properly respond to something. For instance, we could think here of Donald Trump's repeated disavowal of any role his tweets and speeches might have played in inciting violence, or in encouraging and pandering to his supporters on the extreme right. In such cases, the act of disavowal—the refusal to accept or recognize any responsibility for the (likely) effects of one's words—is itself a moral failure, not (just) an epistemic one.

Butler is primarily concerned with this final sense of denial (*viz.* disavowal), whereas the sense Manne apparently has in mind (*viz.* a narrowly epistemic form of denial) is of relatively little interest. Butler emphasizes this point when they write that “there is no thinking of life that is not precarious—except, of course, in fantasy, and in military fantasies in particular” (*FW* 25). They make a similar point in a discussion of vulnerability: “This is a condition, a condition of being laid bare from the start and with which we cannot argue. I mean, we can argue with it, but we are perhaps foolish, if not dangerous, when we do” (*PL* 31). It is striking that both passages begin with a claim even stronger than Manne's. It is not that nobody *would* deny our condition, but that in a sense nobody *could*: we ‘cannot argue,’ there is ‘no thinking’ of life that is not precarious. Yet for Butler, it is equally important to emphasize that in another sense, we can and often do put up resistance to such a self-conception, albeit at the cost of a flight into ‘foolishness’ and fantasy—and not an innocent fantasy, but a ‘military’ and ‘dangerous’ one.

The kind of denial operative in fantasy is closer to disavowal than to ‘intellectual’ denial or a lack of knowledge. In making this contrast clear, it will be useful to consider a distinction drawn by Stanley Cavell between knowledge and acknowledgement. The former, on Cavell's view, is a precondition of the latter:

From my acknowledging that I am late it follows that I know I'm late (which is what my words say); but from my knowing I am late, it does not follow that I acknowledge that I'm late—otherwise, human relationships would be altogether other than they are. One could say: Acknowledgement goes beyond knowledge. (Goes beyond not, so to speak, in the order of knowledge, but in its requirement that I do something or reveal something on the basis of that knowledge.) (1969/2015: 237)

Cavell's formulations bring out the normative dimension of acknowledgement. If I am in a position to acknowledge some fact that I know (that I am late, or indeed vulnerable), a ‘requirement’ is thereby placed on me to respond in some way to that knowledge—‘to do or reveal something.’ Cavell's example also serves to underline the fact that I make my acknowledgement *to* someone—though not

necessarily someone else, since I can also acknowledge something to myself. This suggests that to be confronted *by* another with a fact that in some way calls for acknowledgement is to be beholden to a requirement to respond. The way in which we respond will have more or less far-reaching consequences. Cavell notes that when we say, in sympathy, “I know you are in pain,” this is precisely a way of acknowledging the other’s suffering *to* them, of responding to the claim their suffering makes on us (1969/2015: 243).

I would suggest that for Butler, our ontological condition demands acknowledgement in just this way, acknowledgement that cannot be achieved if we deny that condition. To disavow it in ‘military fantasies’ is to fail to acknowledge the ethical claim it places on us. We can take up various lived relations to our knowledge: some of those will amount to acknowledging our shared condition, while others will involve disavowing it, repressing it, or alienating ourselves from our knowledge of it.²⁹ My suggestion is that for Butler, insisting on our condition is a way of demanding that we respond to it truthfully, without evasion. Although Butler, like Cavell, recognizes that “one may well register and resist the claim,” they maintain that if we become genuinely responsive to it, “it will become less easy to accept violence as a taken-for-granted social fact” (FW 166–67). Butler’s ontology is therefore meant to support ethical and political demands by helping us to register the claim made on us by our interdependency and vulnerability. Butler’s point is that a genuine responsiveness to our condition will involve non-violent modes of behaviour. As they put it, “Nonviolence would, then, be a way of acknowledging that social relation [. . .] and of affirming the normative aspirations that follow from that prior social relatedness” (FN 9). Furthermore, it is not just in individual ethical action that we can acknowledge (or disavow) our condition, but also through our political institutions: “The political organization of life itself requires that interdependency—and the equality it implies—is acknowledged through policy, institution, civil society, and government” (FN 46–47).³⁰

29. Gilson also highlights the need for acknowledgement of precariousness on Butler’s account (2014: 43), and provides a valuable analysis of the costs and dangers of its disavowal (2011; 2014: ch. 3). However, I take her account to differ from my own insofar as Gilson equates avowal and acknowledgement of something with “being aware of” it (2014: 61), thus understanding it in a primarily ‘intellectual’ or epistemic manner. On my account, however, genuine acknowledgement calls for expression in action, in particular lived relations to our knowledge. Furthermore, violent modes of action are not (just) *enabled* by disavowal, but themselves amount to a form of it. In that sense, the Cavellian conception of acknowledgement I attribute to Butler is more demanding than the one Gilson seems to have in mind. This helps to show why genuine acknowledgement will *already* involve an ethical response.

30. If it seems odd to talk about governments, institutions, &c. being capable of acknowledgement or in a state of disavowal, one need only think of Britain’s disavowal of its colonial past, or the US police force’s failure to acknowledge its institutionalized racism. Judgements about disavowal and acknowledgement need not always be judgements about the conduct of individual moral agents.

A comparison with Simone de Beauvoir might be helpful in elucidating Butler's view. Beauvoir adopts "the perspective [. . .] of existentialist morality," according to which subjects (human beings) posit themselves as a transcendence—they exist as "an autonomous freedom" (1949/2010: 17).³¹ On the existentialist picture, freedom (transcendence) is inalienable. But if all humans are fundamentally free, and if a successful ontology demonstrates this condition to us, how can there be such a thing as a liberatory politics? The answer for Beauvoir is that a subject can take up different relations to their freedom. There are both authentic and inauthentic modes of living one's freedom. From the standpoint of 'existentialist morality,' then, specific ontic possibilities, those that involve "lapses into immanence," are "an absolute evil" (1949/2010: 17), whether welcomed by the subject (complicity) or imposed from without (oppression). We know that we are free, but there is a great "temptation to flee freedom," to take the "easy path" of embracing immanence and making oneself "into a thing," albeit never completely (1949/2010: 15). Equally, there are powerful motivations for denying the freedom of others. Beauvoir's point could thus be reframed in Cavellian vocabulary: *knowing* that we are free is in one sense easy, insofar as all of our possibilities for action testify to our freedom. But properly *acknowledging* freedom—one's own, and that of others—is extremely difficult in the face of anxiety and in the situation of oppression.

Women's emancipation, on Beauvoir's view, can therefore only be achieved through particular modes of acknowledgement: the concrete positing of the subject's transcendence and the overcoming of the external limitations placed on her freedom. Progress is to be evaluated with respect to "the individual's possibilities, defined not in terms of happiness but in terms of freedom" (1949/2010: 17). But while Beauvoir takes up an analogue of the notion of authenticity, I would suggest that she understands that notion rather differently than Sartre or Heidegger did, in a way that is deeply connected with her project of liberation. In particular, the relationship between what we might call 'external behaviour' and authentic acknowledgement is construed differently. For Sartre and perhaps Heidegger, though 'authenticity' and its opposite ('bad faith'; 'inauthenticity') are surely evaluative terms, the distinction is essentially orthogonal to familiar moral and political evaluative distinctions. It is not the 'concrete content' of the external behaviour that determines whether an existentiell possibility is authentic, but rather the particular way in which that possibility is taken up, lived. The upshot of Sartre's waiter example (1943/2003: 82–83) is presumably *not* that

31. As Nancy Bauer convincingly argues, the phrase 'existentialist morality' or 'existentialist ethics' (*la morale existentialiste*) signals a departure from Sartre's existentialism (2001: 136–38). Although Bauer does not frame her discussion of the differences between Sartre and Beauvoir's respective positions in terms of the notion of authenticity, I take Bauer's account to be consonant in many respects with the view I sketch in the main text.

waiting tables is essentially inauthentic, but rather that to take up a particular subjective attitude to one's social roles—for instance, to “attempt to realize [. . .] a being-in-itself of the café waiter,” as if one were not always free to transcend this role (1943/2003: 83)—is to inhabit them inauthentically, to be in bad faith.

At the end of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre explicitly defers the project of providing an existentialist ethics. But it is unclear what room is left for him to recognize that the content of particular choices (rather than the subject's relation to them) might make a difference regarding the authenticity of that choice, or for him to view particular political situations as genuinely restrictive of subjects' freedom. As Nancy Bauer argues, “the idea that the choice of ‘immanence’ over ‘transcendence’ might be *inflicted* on a person—that oppression can be, as it were, genuinely oppressive—is entirely absent in the early Sartre” (2001: 138). Beauvoir, on the other hand, recognizes that the ‘lapses into immanence’ that function as an analogue to inauthenticity on her view are not essentially disconnected from *specific* political situations and modes of behaviour. Sartre's view abstracts entirely from the fact that “the feminine condition” (Beauvoir 1949/2010: 17) is characterized by an identification of femininity with immanence. It is the “myth of the Woman, of the Other” (Beauvoir 1949/2010: 14) and the modes of behaviour founded on that myth that prove determinative for the asymmetry in the relative standing of men and women. “Women's drama,” as Beauvoir puts it, “lies in this conflict between the fundamental claim of every subject, which always posits itself as essential, and the demands of a situation that constitutes her as inessential” (1949/2010: 17). Thus, on her view the question of freedom and authenticity cannot be separated from questions of politics.

Now, it is clear that Butler would contest the terms of appraisal invoked by Beauvoir here: Butler rejects “moves toward authenticity as a way of doing politics” in no uncertain terms (*RVR* 25). The shift from an individualistic conception of freedom to a relational understanding of the subject necessitates a shift in focus from ‘the individual's possibilities’ to the general shared conditions of liveable life—the social ‘ties’ that make life possible.³² What must be acknowledged is not (just) freedom, but our constitutive interdependency. Our “guiding social ideal” is “the equal claim to a liveable and grievable life” (*FN* 24), a claim whose acknowledgement involves striving to oppose the present, highly unequal distribution of ‘ontic’ violence and precarity. In this sense, while the terms of appraisal are different, the complex relationship between our ontology of the human being and the ethical and political tasks that confront us takes on parallel forms in the work of Beauvoir and Butler. For Butler, as for Beauvoir,

32. It is nonetheless an open question whether the ‘existentialist’ conception of the self, properly construed, is as individualistic as Butler seems to suggest. If it is not, the shift will be a matter of emphasis rather than a radical departure.

genuine acknowledgement of our ontological condition demands a transformation of our political situation.

Finally, allow me to consider one more variation on this theme. Butler writes that we have “a primary vulnerability to others, one that one cannot will away without ceasing to be human” (*PL* xiv). There are two points here. The first is the now familiar ontological claim that vulnerability to others is *constitutive* of what it is to be living, embodied, and therefore human. We can make no sense of the notion of a human being who is not vulnerable to others. In this sense, willing away one’s vulnerability is a literal impossibility. If, *per impossibile*, such an act of will were possible, one would cease to exist as human, so the desire for such an act is always mere fantasy. But there is an ethical point here too, which plays on another use of the term ‘human.’ ‘Human’ is contrasted here not just with the *non*-human, but with the *inhuman*—hence Butler’s critical claim that “we have yet to become human” (*PW* 100). In giving in to a fantasy of sovereign independence, one risks abnegating one’s humanity in the second sense, becoming inhuman: sovereignty is performed loudly and violently in the domination of the other, and the motivation for this fantasy arises in part from the anxiety that attends our vulnerability to others.³³

33. Butler draws our attention to two related senses in which anxiety about one’s vulnerability to others might underlie violent actions. The first is evident in Butler’s analysis of the political aftermath of 9/11. This “public display of our physical vulnerability” (*PL* 7) prompted recognition “that the national border was more permeable than we thought. Our general response [was] anxiety, rage; a radical desire for security, a shoring-up of the borders against what is perceived as alien” (*PL* 39). This ‘shoring-up’ took the form of a reassertion of sovereignty through military action, imperilling civilian populations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. Nonetheless, Butler also makes room here for a very different response to the anxiety attending injurability: “one can even experience that abhorrence, mourning, anxiety, and fear, and have all of these emotional dispositions lead to a reflection on how others have suffered arbitrary violence at the hands of the US” (*PL* xiv). This might prompt a politics more responsive to the ethical obligation “to stop [the] further dissemination” of violence (*PL* 8).

The second case Butler identifies is a more general anxiety about unstable boundaries, and a consequent terror of ‘pollution.’ Butler uses this idea to diagnose homophobic responses to the AIDS crisis, and the portrayal of homosexuality itself as “a site of danger and pollution” (*GT* 180; see further 178–83). Butler draws here on Julia Kristeva’s theorisation in *Powers of Horror* of abjection, the process by which the subject is constituted through the expulsion, othering, and rejection of an ‘object’: “the ‘not-me’ as the abject establishes the boundaries of the body [and] the first contours of the subject” (*GT* 181; see also Kristeva 2002a; 2002b). The abject is then perceived as threatening these boundaries; it is associated with that which “does not respect borders” and “disturbs identity, system, order” (Kristeva 2002a: 232). On Butler’s account, a particular understanding of bodily boundaries and permeability is sanctioned by the hegemonic order—instituted, policed, and enforced. Unsanctioned “bodily exchanges” and “sexual practices [. . .] reinscribe the boundaries of the body along new cultural lines” (*GT* 180). Because they disrupt established understandings of bodily permeability, non-hegemonic forms of sexuality are conceived as abject, potentially disruptive to order. And since the abject is that “against which the human itself is constituted” (*GT* 151), this heterosexist construction and policing of boundaries contributes to the dehumanization of those whose desire is illegible in the terms of the hegemonic order. Similarly, Butler analyses

5. Two Failures of Acknowledgement: Individualism and the Politics of Vulnerability

We are now in a position to see that while the relationship between ontology and normativity is not straightforward, on Butler's view the two are not straightforwardly separable either. Their ontological claims are not trivial: though 'self-evident,' they are constantly disavowed, and acknowledging them involves maintaining a certain practical relation to them. This means that, even though Butler gives ontology a certain 'priority,' they are nonetheless not trying to straightforwardly derive an 'ought' from an 'is'.³⁴ The normativity Butler is concerned with is located in the relation of acknowledgement: to act in ways that acknowledge our ontological condition is ethically better than acting in ways that disavow it. Furthermore, our mode of acknowledging (or failing to acknowledge) our ontological vulnerability will have various downstream consequences for the ontic possibilities and ideals that are salient and attractive to us. Disavowal is an ethical failing in itself, but it also encourages us to remain in the grip of unattractive and illusory ideals.³⁵

the "fear" and "anxiety" provoked by those who "perform [their] gender wrong" and are disciplined with punishments and marginalization (1988: 527–28). The "boundary-trespass that is homosexuality" (*GT* 179) is perceived as inherently threatening from the hegemonic point of view, provoking anxieties about the body's permeability and leading to the violent suppression of those who are perceived as bringing the established, compulsory order into question. The body's *openness*, the potential for the resignification of the "fixed sites of permeability and impermeability" that underlie "stable bodily contours" (*GT* 180), becomes a site of anxiety and is violently policed.

In *The Transmission of Affect*, Teresa Brennan develops the theme of 'contagion' and its relationship to anxiety in a different though perhaps complementary way. Like Butler, Brennan brings into question the assumption "that the individual is an energetically self-contained or bound entity, whose affects are his or hers alone," prevalent in modern Western approaches to mental illness (2004: 24). She seeks to explain the mechanisms by which, far from being *contained* in an individual subject, affects can be transmitted between subjects. Discussing rising levels of aggression and "waves of violence that sweep over whole populations in active persecutions" in particular, Brennan suggests "that violence can be *contagious*, that it is an affect that is readily transmitted either directly or through anxiety and depression" (2004: 48; see also 46).

I am grateful to an anonymous referee for encouraging me to elaborate on the claim about anxiety in the main text, and to address Brennan and Kristeva's work here.

34. Cf. Murphy's discussion of the relationship between ontology and ethics (2011: 588–89). Murphy seems to assume that a problematic derivation of an 'ought' from an 'is' is the only model we have for supporting normative claims with ontology. On my account, however, the demand to *acknowledge* one's ontological condition bridges this gap, generating ethical obligations. This helps to answer the critical question Murphy raises regarding "what in Butler's description of precariousness motivates [our] obligations" to others (2011: 583). I am not certain how Murphy's account, on which ontology and ethics are "intertwin[ed]" rather than either having (explanatory?) priority over the other (2011: 589), answers that question satisfactorily.

35. Erinn Gilson's account of the 'ideal of invulnerability' is highly relevant here: see Gilson (2011) and (2014: Part II). Gilson argues that this ideal is the product of a form of "willful ignorance" (2011: 313). On her account, denial of one's vulnerability is "motivated by the desire—con-

However, so far I have said relatively little about what makes a particular lived relation to one's ontological condition good or bad. In this concluding section, I shall try to give a preliminary answer to this question, first by making some general remarks about the status and aspirations of Butler's claims, and then by analysing two particular political stances that Butler finds wanting: individualism, with its attendant fantasy of invulnerability, and a 'politics of vulnerability' that seeks to turn (I shall argue, *ontic*) vulnerability into an identity and a basis for politics. Ultimately—perhaps surprisingly—it will turn out that *both* these stances assume the incompatibility of vulnerability and genuine agency, and are therefore myopic and politically inadequate. Butler's position, on the contrary, advocates a commitment to social transformation on the basis of a *shared* vulnerability and interdependency.

Butler is responding to an illusory ideal of independence, mastery, and impermeability that they take to be endemic and actively harmful. The negative aspect of their project consists in attempting to loosen the grip of this ideal, in part by telling a more *truthful* story about our condition. Butler's account is responsive to very general facts that are obscured by an individualistic conception of the human being that counterposes agency to dependence on and vulnerability to others. However, the truthfulness of Butler's metaphysical account is only part of the story. For even if they have exposed the illusoriness of certain conceptions of independence and mastery, it might be objected that Butler has not given us an overriding reason to abandon those ideals. Given that Butler recognizes the anxiety produced by our exposure to others and the idea of incursions into the self, they need an account of why it is not in our interests to persist in the illusions they identify. For this reason, Butler aims to offer not just an alternative, more convincing ontology, but a "counter-fantasy" (FN 44). The attractiveness of Butler's picture turns not just on the veridicality or intellectual plausibility of their ontology, but on its potential political efficacy and its capacity to offer us a vision of our shared life with others to which we can genuinely aspire. This is why Butler suggests that their social ontology is "to be understood more as a social imaginary than as a metaphysics of the social" (FN 16). Butler aims to show us how deeply unappealing the individualistic ideal turns out to be, and to furnish us with a new, more desirable way of conceiving our relations to others on the basis of the ontological notions of vulnerability and interdependency.

scious or not—to maintain a certain kind of subjectivity privileged in capitalist socioeconomic systems, namely, that of the prototypical, arrogantly self-sufficient, independent, invulnerable master subject" (2011: 312). Gilson, like Butler, views this desire as ultimately illusory and unachievable, so this self-image must "be continually shored up" through a disavowal of vulnerability if we are to be able to continue to ignore the features of our existence that "might unsettle us" (2011: 313). I am grateful to an anonymous referee for emphasizing the importance of Gilson's work regarding the 'illusory ideals' I discuss in this section.

Butler associates the narcissistic fantasy of invulnerability and the disavowal of dependency with “the assertion of masculine impermeability” (FW 24).³⁶ There is an affinity here with an idea developed by Adrienne Rich:

There is much to suggest that the male mind has always been haunted by the force of the idea of *dependence on a woman for life itself*, the son’s constant effort to assimilate, compensate for, or deny the fact that he is “of woman born.” (1986: 11)

If the dominant normative understanding of masculinity connects it with independence and self-sufficiency, the recoil from the ‘haunting’ memory of an original dependence is likely to result in ultimately violent disavowal of that condition by the ‘male mind.’ That repression of the fact of existential dependence on the mother is, on Rich’s account, part of the cause of misogynistic violence and the denigration of motherhood under patriarchy.³⁷ Butler makes a structurally similar point about the relation between the illusory ideal of absolute self-sufficiency and the awareness of original dependency:

As we reflect back on [our infantile] condition [of dependency] as adults, perhaps we are slightly insulted or alarmed, or perhaps we dismiss the thought. Perhaps someone with a strong sense of individual self-sufficiency will indeed be offended by the fact that there was a time when one could not feed oneself or could not stand on one’s own. I want to suggest, however, that no one actually stands on one’s one; strictly speaking, no one feeds oneself. (FN 41)

The idea of dependency might strike one as ‘insulting,’ ‘alarming,’ and inassimilable (‘we dismiss the thought’). But the solution to this psychic trouble is not to repress our awareness of our interdependency, but to see that the fan-

36. Butler frames the idea of bodily impermeability as an “impossible” and therefore illusory achievement in *Gender Trouble* (GT 182), foreshadowing their later invocations of that notion. This suggests an important continuity of interest between Butler’s early work on gender and the body and their later ‘ethical turn,’ though I cannot pursue this line of thought further here.

37. Kristeva also links patriarchy and misogyny to horror of this original dependence on the mother, though her account is rather different. For Kristeva, the mother is “coded as ‘abject’” (2002b: 255; see also 2002a: 239), because the formation of the subject’s ego requires a separation from and rejection of the mother as the ‘not-me’. This means that the masculine subject is haunted by the “fear of his very own identity sinking irretrievably into the mother” (2002b: 254), a fear warded off through religious rituals of purification. Kristeva then draws a connection between this psychological process and political arrangements: “ritualization of defilement is accompanied by a strong concern for separating the sexes, and this means giving men rights over women” (2002b: 260). The horror of the abject, strongly associated with the maternal, motivates misogyny: the feminine “becomes synonymous with a radical evil that is to be suppressed” (2002b: 260).

tasies of invulnerability, impermeability, and absolute self-sufficiency are not only untenable, but ultimately undesirable. Sartre again makes for an interesting contrast here. In a famous passage, he writes:

Pure shame is not a feeling of being this or that guilty object but in general of being *an* object; that is, of *recognizing myself* in this degraded, fixed, dependent being which I am for the Other. Shame is the feeling of an *original fall* [because] I need the mediation of the Other to be what I am. (1943/2003: 312)

While Sartre in some sense recognizes my dependence on the Other—on his account, it is only through the other that “I gain my objectness” (1943/2003: 294), that the objective side of my existence can be disclosed—this dependence is essentially something lamentable. It is the source of a sense of “*uneasiness*” and perpetual “*danger*” (1943/2003: 299). There is little room on the early Sartrean picture for our dependence on others and our vulnerability to them to take on a positive valence—hence, the infamous claim in *Huis Clos* that “hell is other people!”³⁸ What is of special interest here is that Sartre conceives of the limitation placed on my freedom by the Other as something essentially degrading. Freedom is figured as the individual’s absolute sovereignty over their actions, meaning that the incursion of the Other becomes something inherently menacing and limiting. But this conclusion seems deeply unattractive, and threatens to close us off from the positive possibilities that openness to and dependence on the Other may hold out. It is Butler’s aim to make such possibilities imaginatively accessible.

One might think that the view sketched here is a product of specifically Sartrean commitments, rather than a general consequence of individualism. However, I would argue that similar fears and fantasies can be discerned, albeit in a more moderate form, in the work of other philosophers who share little with Sartre other than a commitment to an individualist conception of free choice. For instance, explaining the normative commitments of her liberal feminism, Martha Nussbaum writes:

Liberalism responds sharply to the basic fact [. . .] that each person is one and not more than one, that each feels pain in his or her own body, that the food given to A does not arrive in the stomach of B. The separateness of persons is a basic fact of human life; in stressing it, liberalism stresses something experientially true, and fundamentally important. [. . .] The

38. I am indebted here to Nancy Bauer’s account of Sartre’s early conception of relations with the Other, and its connection to *Huis Clos*. See Bauer (2001: ch. 4).

fundamental entity for politics is a living body that goes from here to there, from birth to death, never fused with any other. (1997: 10)

Nussbaum's claim that 'the food given to A does not arrive in the stomach of B' contrasts sharply with Butler's view that 'strictly speaking, no one feeds oneself.' It is of course true that when A eats, their food will end up in A's stomach, not B's. But if B is, for instance, A's child, and A is deprived of the means of subsistence, B will most likely also go hungry. And if B is a foster, growing inside a gravida, A, B is quite literally sustained by the food A consumes.³⁹ The situation of pregnancy apparently gives the lie to Nussbaum's claim that no living body is ever 'fused with any other.' It is perhaps significant, then, that she shifts over the course of this passage from talk about 'persons' to talk about 'living bodies.' The person is an individual, but the living body is not always obviously so.

Nussbaum's description of her own pregnancy suggests she might demur here. She recalls her impression of a "distinct separateness," writing that "before even her hair got into the world a separate voice could be heard inside, proclaiming *its individuality or even individualism*" and surmising that her daughter would "be quite outraged by the suggestion that her own well being was at any time merged with that of her mother" (1997: 44, fn. 98, emphasis added). Although this passage is clearly rhetorical in intent, it is also striking in its refusal to countenance anything recalcitrant to individualism in the situation of pregnancy.⁴⁰ What makes the suggestion—which Nussbaum describes as "overweening"—that one human being's well-being might literally be merged with (or dependent on) that of another so 'outrageous'? It seems that here a prior commitment to individualism provides the cover for a refusal to acknowledge any sense of human interdependency.

Nussbaum is nonetheless right that in some sense the 'separateness of persons' is a basic fact—and not one that Butler would reject. Rather, I want to suggest, Butler seeks to complicate our understanding of the sense in which persons—or perhaps better, embodied beings—are separate. The apparent separateness of bodies serves to mask the ways in which they constantly depend on other bodies, and, to that extent, are inextricably connected with them:

For if we accept that part of what a body is (and this is for the moment an ontological claim) occurs in its dependency on other bodies—on liv-

39. I borrow the terminology of 'foster' and 'gravida' from Kingma (2019: 611). See especially fns. 7 and 8 for her justification of her terminological decisions.

40. Nussbaum's depiction of her pregnancy seems to fit neatly into the dominant 'containment view' discussed extensively and criticized by Kingma (2019). Although Butler has not written much about pregnancy, I suspect that they would be sympathetic to the 'parthood view' Kingma defends (that is, the idea that the growing foster is literally part of the gravida).

ing processes of which it is a part, on networks of support to which it also contributes—then we are suggesting that it is not altogether right to conceive of individual bodies as completely distinct from one another; and neither would it be right to think of them as fully merged, without distinction. (FN 197)

The upshot of this view is that we can no longer take the individual body as the ‘fundamental entity for politics,’ as Nussbaum does. On the contrary, for Butler, equality—whose realisation is after all also a liberal goal—is “a feature of social relations that depends for its articulation on an increasingly *avowed* interdependency—letting go of the body as a ‘unit’ in order to understand one’s boundaries as relational and social predicaments” (FN 45). Even if we could easily settle the *metaphysical* question of the boundaries of the individual, we would still have to grant Butler’s point that the individual cannot be the sole locus of *political* concern, because to be an individual body is to be dependent on conditions *beyond* one’s bodily boundaries. To contest the violence endemic in our political arrangements, we must rethink the body, contest our individualistic self-conception, and avow—that is, acknowledge—our interdependency.

Liberal individualism, however, is not the only political stance that Butler seeks to question. They also argue that vulnerability cannot “serve as the basis for a politics” (FN 186). This claim might seem surprising, given that I have been arguing throughout that Butler wants to make political claims supported by an ontology that counts vulnerability as a constitutive feature of embodied life. However, these two positions are not in fact incompatible. On the contrary, the ‘politics of vulnerability’ that Butler opposes is in some respects closer to individualism than to Butler’s own position. What Butler finds problematic is the “discourse of ‘vulnerable groups’” or “vulnerable populations” that creates “a class of persons who identify primarily with vulnerability” (FN 186). Butler has three connected worries about this model for political action. The first is that it licenses paternalistic impositions, supposedly in the interests of ‘the vulnerable.’ The second is that it implicitly relies on a binary opposition between agency and vulnerability; indeed, this is precisely what licenses paternalistic intervention. Vulnerable groups are figured as *lacking* agency, and the goal of political action is ostensibly for them to attain it. Finally, this position treats vulnerability as a property that an individual may or may not possess, but which is then treated as *definitional* of specific groups of individuals (RVR 22–25; FN 186–92). The ‘politics of vulnerability’ may appear to be a way of doing precisely what Butler demands—*acknowledging* our vulnerability. But it does so in a radically distorted way, by mislocating and misconstruing that condition. To use a phrase of Erinn Gilson’s, it conceives of it as a “reified negative property of certain types

of individuals” (2011: 311). To put the point in the terms developed above, the mistake is to try to ground politics on a particular *ontic* form of vulnerability. This vulnerability may well be real, and it may be politically urgent to address it. But it should not be conflated with our *ontological* vulnerability, which is not a property that individuals may or may not have but a generalized, shared condition of being embodied.

This dynamic is at play in certain forms of response to the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the term ‘vulnerable’ has been ubiquitous. In a recent lecture, Butler describes how, in the aftermath of the first US lockdown, the response of many young people—those “not *vulnerable*—or so they think”⁴¹—was to return to the ‘normality’ of gathering in public without maintaining social distance, drinking together, homosocial touching, &c. Here, the discourse of ‘vulnerable populations,’ far from attuning us to a shared, inherently *relational* vulnerability, instead encourages the fantasy that vulnerability is a property that some people have and others do not—as if the ‘vulnerability’ of ‘vulnerable groups’ has nothing to do with the behaviour of those who are ‘not’ vulnerable. This is not to deny that (ontically speaking) some groups *are* more vulnerable than others, for instance at higher risk if they contract the virus. This is both undeniable and ethically important. The point is rather that the pandemic represented an opportunity to recognize a deeper vulnerability and interdependency. It has made (and continues to make) salient the fact that part of what my body is and what it does can only be understood in the context of its “communion”⁴² with that which is outside it—a communion that is not always visible or acknowledged.

As Butler puts a similar point elsewhere, the “bodily boundary” is not so much an “end” as it is a “threshold of the person, a site of passage and porosity” (FN 16). The regulations suggested in the pandemic make this manifest: the sphere of influence of one’s body, one’s breathing (roughly: two metres!), invites reflection on the unseen effects of one’s body on those of others. Reciprocally, the closeness of others, say, the crush of pedestrians on a narrow street, or the cough of a fellow passenger in a train carriage, suddenly becomes threatening. The situation testifies to general facts about what it is to be an embodied human being that have always been true, even if they are not generally acknowledged. The ‘individual’ body is always already in communion with others, its boundaries

41. “Judith Butler: The Force of Nonviolence,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HN5DgrlkRcA>

42. This term is drawn from Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012: 219). In Butler’s lecture discussing the pandemic, they suggest in passing that we re-read Merleau-Ponty in the light of the current crisis. Part of the value of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the body is perhaps that it contests the natural conception of bodies as individual and discrete, with well-defined boundaries, drawing attention to modes of (inter)action that we do not always recognize.

always already porous and permeable. It is therefore not enough to think of ethics and politics in terms only of the actions and fortunes of discrete individuals.

I hope it is now clear that the opposition to Butler's theses—primarily psychic, rather than argumentative—is not only real, but indeed “highly consequential” (see *PL* 19–20). It is incumbent on us—especially on those of us who are ‘not’ vulnerable—to resist the entrenchment of current patterns of ontic vulnerability and precarity that has been the disheartening (but not inevitable) result of the pandemic. It is also incumbent on us to begin to imagine a social order that will properly acknowledge our interdependent ontological condition, and to recognize that that condition is not something to be regretted or willed away in favour of a fantasy of sovereignty or invulnerability. To live is to be exposed to others, and much of what is valuable in life is only made possible by that exposure.

Conclusion

I have argued, albeit briefly, that Butler is right to diagnose a certain kind of denial as lying behind much of what is troubling in contemporary politics: our disavowal of our ontological condition, understood not just epistemically, but *ethically*, as a failure of acknowledgement. However, even if the cursory arguments developed in the previous section do not convince you, I hope that I have nonetheless made plausible the broader methodological point that Butler's project need not rest on a conflation between the ontological and the ontic—that there is an interesting path from the ontological to the normative. Disavowal—failure of acknowledgement—is an *ethical* failure. For this reason, the fact that some of our actions count as an acknowledgement of our ontological condition, while others count as a disavowal of it, enables ontological description to support substantive normative claims.

Furthermore, I argued in the final section that we can make good on Butler's promissory claim that ontology can provide not just a more truthful metaphysics, but also a ‘counter-fantasy.’ I have suggested that foregrounding our ontological condition might open up ontic possibilities that would otherwise be closed off, obscured by the fantasies and ideals that involve a tacit disavowal of our condition. Our ontological commitments colour our understanding of our relations to others, and a new ontology has the potential to transform that understanding. Nonetheless, as the comparison with Beauvoir suggests, accepting these general points need not mean subscribing to Butler's particular political views, or indeed to their ontological claims. Because of this, I hope that the broad argument of this paper will remain of interest even to those who reject the specifics of Butler's account.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Amia Srinivasan for her illuminating comments on countless earlier drafts. I am also grateful to two anonymous referees for *Ergo* and to Nick Clanchy, Maya Krishnan, Nikhil Krishnan, Paul Lodge, and Zoe Walker for their helpful comments; to an audience at Oxford's Post-Kantian European Philosophy Seminar, especially to Rachel Fraser, Joseph Schear, and Mark Wrathall; to Sadie Wearing for many discussions of Butler's work; and to the AHRC and Oxford's CSEF for funding that made this research possible. Finally, my thanks to Sophie Russell for all her encouragement and insight.

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