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# Judith Butler's 'not particularly postmodern insight' of recognition

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## Abstract

Although Judith Butler regards recognition as the theme unifying her work, one finds a striking absence of dialogue between her and the authors of the normative theories of recognition – Honneth, Habermas, Ricoeur, etc. In the present article I seek to call into question this sentiment, shared by the two sides, of a radical theoretical heterogeneity. First I seek to show that the theory of performativity which Butler developed initially, contrary to all expectations, sets her relatively apart from the tradition to which she conforms (the French reading of Hegel), and brings her closer to the proposition represented by the normative theories of recognition in general, and that of Honneth in particular. Then I highlight how the recent modulations in her theory, through the appearance of the idea of a constitutive vulnerability, which enables her to found an ethics, undermine for once and for all the claim of irreducibility maintained by each of the two theories in relation to the other.

## Keywords

Judith Butler, ethics, Axel Honneth, recognition, vulnerability

Since first publishing *Subjects of Desire*, entirely devoted to the French reception of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Judith Butler has frequently used the word 'recognition'. Moreover, along with the authors of what, out of convention, we will refer to as the normative theories of recognition – Axel Honneth, Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, Nancy Fraser, or even Paul Ricoeur – she shares the same preoccupation with the conditions on which a subject and/or an agency are constituted. Whereas in her case agency is a contingent and fragile possibility opened up in the midst of constituting discursive relations, according to Honneth, misrecognition is a 'moral injury', and every

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moral injury represents an act of personal harm ‘because it destroys an essential presupposition of the individual’s capability to act’ (Honneth, 2005: 48).

Butler and the other authors again attribute the same cardinality to the idea of reciprocity in the process of recognition: ‘recognition cannot be unilaterally given’, she writes in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (Butler, 2005: 26), while Honneth unambiguously poses the three forms of recognition as ‘three patterns of reciprocity’ (Honneth, 1995a: 94). His aim is indeed to show that ‘theoretical attention must be shifted to the intersubjective social relations that always already guarantee a minimal normative consensus in advance, for it is only in these pre-contractual relations of mutual recognition – which underlie even relations of social competition – that the moral potential evidenced in individuals’ willingness to reciprocally restrict their own spheres of liberty can be anchored’ (ibid.: 42).

Finally, both theories borrow strongly from Hegel. Admittedly, they do not draw from the same Hegel; Honneth studiously avoids *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the Master and Slave episode which is at the heart of Butler’s reading. He finds *The Struggle for Recognition* on the Iena writings, and confirms his will to keep away from the content of the *Phenomenology* in *Suffering from Indeterminacy*, where he seeks to show that the *Philosophy of Law* in reality returns to the essential intuitions which guided the practical philosophy elaborated by Hegel in his youth. It is these same Iena writings which Ricoeur draws on (2005: 152–62) as is more generally the case of all those who pass through George Herbert Mead in their reflection on intersubjective recognition.

The question of which Hegelian text is worthy of consideration would doubtless be sufficient grounds for a quarrel. Yet, what one finds in its place is an absence of dialogue between the two theoretical constellations, an obstinate indifference. And consequently, in the literature on the subject there is hardly any comparison or confrontation of the two theoretical constellations.<sup>1</sup>

There was indeed a short-lived clash between Judith Butler and Nancy Fraser, at the end of the 1990s; the former refuting the latter’s explanation of the gay and lesbian movement in terms of misrecognition: ‘This is not simply a question of certain people suffering a lack of cultural recognition by others, but, rather it is a specific mode of sexual production and exchange that works to maintain the stabilization of gender, the heterosexuality of desire, and the naturalization of the family’ (Butler, 1997b: 274). However, this skirmish opposes arguments which give away no conceptual intimacy; focusing on the material dimension of struggles to transform the social field of sexuality, they rather construct or reiterate the irreducibility of the two theoretical frameworks.

As for the dialogue between Judith Butler and Axel Honneth – a late dialogue at that since it dates only from 2008 – in reality it deals with the concept of reification. The theory of recognition on which Judith Butler comments at length, in ‘Longing for Recognition’, an article written in 2000, is that of Jessica Benjamin. Although Benjamin’s theory presents similar traits to that of Jürgen Habermas, for the place she attributes to communication – instituted both as a vehicle and as an example of recognition – she places herself in a very psychoanalytic and therapeutic perspective, and does not directly have the political and moral aims which characterize the authors which I have grouped under the heading of ‘normative theories of recognition’.

In the present article I will seek to call into question this sentiment, shared by the two sides, of a radical theoretical heterogeneity. Naturally, one must not negate the reality of some major dissimilarities, such as Butler's assumption of the necessary failure of recognition and the impossibility of an absolute and complete recognition, which leads her to promote an account of recognition taking the form of a question to be kept open: who are you? For Honneth, on the contrary, misrecognition can only be described in terms of an experience of being disrespected carrying with it the danger of an injury. By the same token, the two theories rely on strongly divergent traditions: intersubjectivism in one case, structuralism in the other, which resulted for a long time in a definition of the subject as a linguistic reality: 'The subject is the linguistic occasion for the individual to achieve and reproduce intelligibility, the linguistic condition of its existence and agency' (Butler, 1997a: 11). Rather, I will seek to contest, on the basis of the strong proximities mentioned above, the assumed discordance of the two theories.

I will proceed in two steps: first I will seek to show that the theory of performativity which Butler developed initially, contrary to all expectations, sets her relatively apart from the tradition which she conforms to (the French reading of Hegel), and brings her closer to the proposition represented by the normative theories of recognition in general, and that of Honneth in particular (1). Then I will highlight how the recent modulations in her theory, through the appearance of the idea of a constitutive vulnerability, which enables her to found an ethics, undermine for once and for all the claim of irreducibility maintained by each of the two theories in relation to the other (2).

## **I Recognition and performativity**

From the outset, the question at the heart of Butler's thinking is the non-ownership of self: 'One comes to "exist" by virtue of this fundamental dependency on the address of the Other' (Butler, 1996: 5). This encounter and the constitution of self it allows cannot be understood in terms of intersubjectivity, in the strong and non-metaphorical sense Honneth gives to his own interpretation of recognition: when a self does appear, it always involves an experience of another. For Butler, the Other, far from being a concrete other, is a generalized structure.

She develops her theory around a reformulation of a particular French reading of Hegelian thinking initiated by Kojève, the subject of her first book. Here we find a hypothesis assumed in particular by Lacan and Althusser whereby recognition is nothing more than the ideological reflection of dominant social structures; in each recognition there is a misrecognition. Thus, in the famous situation of 'interpellation' depicted by Althusser in 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' (Althusser, 1989) which many passages of Butler's thinking draw from, the passer-by only acquires identity by turning in response to being hailed by the policeman ('Hey you there'), and by this same gesture assumes guilt. Thus, as Butler sums up, 'Althusser conjectures this "hailing" or "interpellation" as a unilateral act, as the power and strength of the law to compel fear at the same time that it offers recognition at an expense' (Butler, 1993: 121).

In order to conform in turn with this tradition, Butler resorts to J. L. Austin's theory of speech acts, which at the same time enables her to take a distance in relation to the Althusserian model.

On the one hand, she accepts the premise according to which if we are constituted by the address of the other, the latter finds himself or herself able to *create* what he or she names. Thus, when this interpellation takes the form of a hateful discourse, the subject finds herself or himself constituted in the very assignation to a subordinate position. 'Imagine the quite plausible scene in which one is called by a name and one turns around only to protest the name. ... And then imagine that the name continues to force itself upon you, to delineate the space you occupy, to construct a social positionality. ... Indifferent to your protests, the strength of interpellation continues to work' (Butler, 1996: 33).

Both gender, which is 'always a doing' (Butler, 1990: 33), and subject, are encompassed in her theory of performativity which refers to a set of acts (without actors) which produce reality, which have the power to make happen what they describe and/or interpellate, but which do not exert themselves on any substance, any ontological 'before' that must be modified. Even the illusion of the subject's interiority and integrity is manufactured by this type of act.

On the other hand, referring to Austin enables Judith Butler to undertake corrections to the Althusserian interpellation, which for her appears to define a model both too demiurgic and too dyadic. These corrections number at least three.

First, she points out that the fact that identity or sexuality are constructed from within existing relations of power does not signify that it is impossible to subvert them. This position, she writes in *Gender Trouble*, 'presumes, of course, that to operate within the matrix of power is not the same as to replicate uncritically relations of domination' (Butler, 1990 : 40). The starting point in Butler's reasoning lies in a rarely mentioned character of the performative act: it can fail, as Austin demonstrated by seeking to establish the list of necessary conditions for such an act to be 'felicitous'. By accepting this hypothesis, 'such a loosening of the link between act and injury, [one] opens up the possibility for a counter-speech, a kind of talking back, that would be foreclosed by the tightening of that link' (Butler, 1996: 15).

In other terms, the possibility of a resistance opens up. Thus, despite a theory which at the time was devoid of the idea of a political subjectivity in the full meaning of the term, she returns to the Hegelian motif of struggle, which had disappeared in Althusser's work, and is a prevalent motif in Honneth's. Certainly, she made it clear that there is no room in her theory for a struggle between two consciousnesses. Resistance is the product of the structure itself. As we shall see, the norms that take shape and proceed through repetition, are suddenly called upon to proliferate in a surprising, disordered, shocking manner. The critical and subversive moment does not result from an action and an intentionality. Nonetheless, Butler suggests an intrusion into forms of power which give them access to other possibilities, and the spectre of a political struggle comes into sharper focus when she raises, without developing it further, the possibility of an 'agency that outruns and counters the conditions of its emergence' (Butler, 1996: 130).

Her proposal lacks coherence, as pointed out in one of the rare remarks which Honneth devotes to Judith Butler's writings from this period:

... regarding the question of whether there could be a unified source of all impulsive rebellion against established forms of recognition, we find ourselves in the domain of wild speculation: this can easily be made clear in the case of the difficulties that Judith Butler

gets into when she reflects on the psychological causes of the rejection of regimes of recognition and notoriously vacillates between a theory of drives and a theory of consciousness. (Honneth, 2002: 503)

It remains that the idea put forward here is clearly that of a power that is redeployed in relation to the appearance of an agency.

Furthermore, for Butler, gender performance supposes a ‘tacit collective agreement’ (Butler, 1990: 178); in this way it is about filling out Althusser’s theory, in the sense that for him only the power of the state apparatus was in a position to produce physical behaviour, particular representations, and through the latter a subject. It is the only instigator of a disciplinary or ideological mechanism capable of making an individual turn round ‘believing/suspecting/knowing that it is for him’ (Althusser, 1989: 96). For Butler, the constitution of a subject does not occur within a dyadic relationship, even if as asymmetrical as the one linking the subject to the state. The participation of all or of many within a society is necessary; it is what guarantees that the performance is continually repeated. Indeed it matters that the performative acts follow each other without interruption as the subject is constantly constituted and reconstituted. Butler borrows this insistence on continuity from Monique Wittig, according to whom language operates a ‘plastic action’ on the real, and categories must continually be done, at every moment (Butler, 1990: 158).

Moreover, while the performative act in some way supposes the agreement and participation in the accomplishment of the act of people other than the speaker, as Austin foresaw, the act of recognition is limited, as a performative act, in relation to a simple act of ascribing. One cannot impute just any identity or characteristic; the hailing which recognizes/attributes does not derive from the speaker’s will alone, failing which the performative act is destined to fail. Not just anything can count as an identity, a status, or a capacity, and the speech act is limited by already available and constraining models and roles, by the constant effects of what has already been done. Thus, as Butler writes, ‘the terms that facilitate recognition are themselves conventional, the effects and instruments of a social ritual that decide, often through exclusion and violence, the linguistic conditions of survivable subjects’ (Butler, 1996: 5).

Butler does not vary on this last point. The repudiation of the possible dyadism of the recognition schema, coupled with an insistence on the strength of norms, is again strongly emphasized in her recent writings:

... it cannot merely be the other who is able to know and recognize me as possessing a special talent or capacity, since that other will also have to rely, if only implicitly, upon certain criteria to establish what will and what will not be recognizable about the self to anyone, a framework for seeing and judging who I am as well. (Butler, 2005: 29)

Here, her move away from Althusser’s demiurgic story leads her to a position that can be described as a toughening of Honneth’s. For him, every era produces its own norms of recognition, which notably materialize in reasons rooted in social practices, in generalized expectations of behaviour that function implicitly, and finally in models of interpretation and evaluation institutionalized in law, public policies, or even the economy.

Finally, and this stems from the above point, recognition should not be understood as the interpellation of another whose existence and/or intention we ignore, and that would drop out of the sky. It is not entirely correct that we come to be by being *addressed* by the other, *ex nihilo*. Butler criticizes Althusser's theory of interpellation for obscuring a necessary condition for the formation of the subject: 'a certain readiness to be compelled by the authoritative interpellation' (Butler, 1997a: 111).

Butler frequently refers to this psychic and social cog which precedes recognition and makes it possible as passionate attachment. She therefore reads the act of turning around in Althusser as the sign of the individual's passionate attachment to the law hailing him or her. For it is the law, and only the law, which provides access to an identity. Similarly, her own category of performativity cannot be elucidated without resorting to a disposition for being performed which is rooted in a passionate attachment to one's own existence: 'Called by an injurious name, I come into social being, and because I have a certain inevitable attachment to my existence, because a certain narcissism takes hold of any term that confers existence, I am led to embrace the terms that injure me because they constitute me socially' (Butler, 1997a: 104).

To a wider extent, the development of the child supposes, in her point of view, the formation of a 'primary passion in dependency' (Butler, 1997a: 7), which combines passionate attachment to the people to whom the child is subordinated in virtue of its condition of dependency, and attachment to the perpetuation of its own existence.

What appears here, and which sweeps aside the Althusserian perspective of an individual struck by recognition, is that something precedes it and makes it possible; this is the *claim* to recognition itself, even if Butler does not name it as such.

This complexification of the description of the process whereby the subject is constituted through acts of recognition brings it closer to the normative theories of these acts, in comparison with what Althusser named recognition. It admits three fundamental elements of the normative theories, and in particular of the conception of recognition defended by Axel Honneth. There are claims for recognition, and recognition occurs if expectations precede it; recognition relies on the agreement or the participation of many, which implies the existence of norms and models of recognition; finally, such as it is socially shaped in a given society, both in its denial and its granting, recognition can be displaced and reconfigured, which opens up the possibility of struggle or subversion, in Butler's words.

Nonetheless, there remains at this point an insurmountable problem which precludes any attempt to establish a bridge between the two sets of theories. For Butler, each recognition is a subjection. She transcribes the Foucauldian reasoning according to which subordination is the inevitable price of subjectivation, into the schema of recognition. For her also, there exists an insurmountable primary submission to power:

... it is not simply that one requires the recognition of the other and that a form of recognition is conferred through subordination, but rather that one is dependent on power for one's very formation, that that formation is impossible without dependency, and that the posture of the adult subject consists precisely in the denial and re-enactment of this dependency. (Butler, 1997a: 9).

In other terms, the problem is not limited to the fact that being addressed by the other is what introduces the possibility of agency, i.e. that we come to be through a dependency on the other. The notion of dependency can be perfectly limited to this constraint whereby the relationship with the other always already forms the framework of the description of self. It can also be limited to the fact that our relations to others, the world, language and power are ‘not of our making’. But with Butler it ends up being identified with subordination. In the absence of a proposition such as that put forward by Robert Goodin, for example, according to whom a dependency relationship becomes problematic when the capacity of the notionally subordinate party to *withdraw* from the relationship does not exist or is threatened (Goodin, 1985), in the absence also of any consideration for the difference between the emergence of a power, its actualization and sedimentation into domination, there is no means of distinguishing between constitutive dependency and oppression. As Kelly Oliver sums up: ‘for Butler, then, primary attachments, dependency, and subordination all amount to the same thing’ (Oliver, 2001: 65).

In Honneth’s theory, as Butler points out, not only are ‘the dynamics of subjugation and fear of death found in Hegel’s discussion of recognition in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* . . . nowhere to be found’ (Butler, 2008: 101), but in addition he perceives the argument of a primary submission to power as an ‘objection’ to the idea of recognition. The existence of such a mechanism by which ‘To recognize someone . . . means to encourage him by means of repeated and ritual invitations to adopt precisely that self-conception that conforms to the established system of behavioral expectations’ (Honneth, 2007: 324), in his view is characteristic of ideological forms of recognition, which are the symptoms of social pathologies. In response he seeks to establish instruments – for all intents and purposes quite unconvincingly – which would enable us to distinguish these ideological forms from full forms of recognition.<sup>2</sup>

In Honneth’s theory, which we will not be able to develop extensively here, the gesture of recognition is endowed with at least two characteristics which must be recalled: first, it constitutes a moral act; second, it consists in an intentional attitude affirming the partner of the interaction.

On the one hand, responding to an expectation of recognition stems from moral obligations, even though the circle of persons supposed to assume such moral attitudes varies from one mode of recognition to the next (Honneth, 2005: 51 ff.).

On the other hand, the idea of the affirmation of the partner is linked to that of a limitation of the egocentric perspective, of a decentring of self, which consists in granting another subject a ‘value’ which is the source of legitimate demands, and which implies, as with Kant’s idea of respect, a limitation of our action which is contrary to our self-interest. ““Confirmation” or “affirmation” thus means that the addressee is equipped with as much moral authority over one’s person as one knows oneself to have in being obligated to carry out or abstain from certain classes of actions’ (Honneth, 2001: 122).

For Butler, the mechanism of recognition is not articulated with any ethical or moral requirement, which stems from and reinforces the impossibility of distinguishing between dependency and subjection. The confrontation of normative theories of recognition and Judith Butler’s theory of performativity thus reveals relatively homologous motifs, but ones whose foundations are radically different.

All the same, the presence of certain elements in Butler's theory which relate to a more normative horizon provides grounds for the same type of exercise of establishing correspondences between remote theoretical worlds as she applied to Foucault, discovering 'a questionable patrilineage' and 'post-Hegelian' themes in his work; she defended the idea that Foucault reformulates the life-and-death struggle in contemporary terms.<sup>3</sup> For instance, she sometimes in reality uses a more exacting definition of recognition than one might think, and which is revealed, implicitly, in passages such as the following which separates (true) recognition from the act of addressing which subordinates: 'We may think that to be addressed one must first be recognized, but ... the address constitutes a being within the possible circuit of recognition, and, accordingly, outside of it' (Butler, 1996: 5).

The new theoretical constellation she has developed since *Precarious Life* makes it possible to go further than this exercise of correspondences: it brings her account drastically in line with those of normative theories by outlining a similar anthropology.

## 2 An anthropology of vulnerability and its ethics

Following George Herbert Mead, for Charles Taylor, Jürgen Habermas, Ernst Tugendhat and Axel Honneth among others, the self can only develop in a process of interaction. They consider the formation of identity as dependent on multiple recognitions or misrecognitions. Accordingly individuality is constituted both through intersubjective recognition and through one's self-understanding as mediated by intersubjectivity. Hence the need for the other's recognition experienced by each of us, and our *vulnerability* to its possible denial.

Thus from the intersubjectivity of the human life-form follows the possibility of moral injuries. Axel Honneth wrote that 'human beings are vulnerable in the specific manner we call "moral" because they owe their identity to the construction of a practical self-relation that is, from the beginning, dependent upon the help and affirmation of other human beings' (Honneth, 2005: 51).

Jürgen Habermas is the one who links his theory of recognition to an anthropology of vulnerability in a way that is both the most asserted and the most repeated, speaking of 'extreme vulnerability' as a central aspect of discourse ethics: 'unless the subject externalizes in interpersonal relations through language, he is unable to form that inner centre that is his personal identity. This explains the almost constitutional insecurity and chronic fragility of personal identity – an insecurity that is antecedent to cruder threats to the integrity of life and limb' (Habermas, 1995: 199).

In other words, current theories of recognition tend to present human beings as constitutively fragile and exposed, and reformulate normative concepts like autonomy in terms of this new ontology of the individual.

Judith Butler used for a long time the term 'vulnerability', or the expression 'linguistic vulnerability', to account for the fact that if the address of the other is what initiates the possibility of agency, the latter emerges from the scene constituted by what she called an 'enabling vulnerability' (Butler, 1996: 2). In her recent writings, she has made a much more abundant use of the notion of vulnerability itself. She still refers sometimes to a linguistic variant, but the vulnerability usually in question now is much

more material. It is also much more fundamental than the impossibility of any control suggested by the expression. It is not even so much that we do not have *any means of protecting ourselves*<sup>4</sup> against this vulnerability and this primary sensitiveness to the call for recognition which gives rise to existence. This new vulnerability is synonymous with destructibility; it is an exposure, an openness to physical and psychic injury: 'Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure' (Butler, 2004: 20).

This move implies that physical vulnerability, first simply taken into account in order to theorize through analogy, makes way for the thesis of a form of transitivity between psychic vulnerability and physical vulnerability. Similarly to the way that Axel Honneth concludes from the common description of the consequences for individuals of the three forms of disrespect with metaphors derived from the decay of the human body that 'if there is any truth in this link suggested by the conventions of our language, it follows that our survey of the various forms of disrespect should also enable us to draw conclusions as to the factors that foster what may be termed psychological "health" or human integrity' (Honneth, 1992: 192), Judith Butler, at the time of *Excitable Speech*, proved to be just as fascinated by the frequency of physical images, to the point of concluding: 'that physical metaphors seize upon nearly every occasion to describe linguistic injury suggests that this somatic dimension may be important to the understanding of linguistic pain' (Butler, 1996: 5). When one takes a closer look, it is clear already at that time that both authors sought to establish a lot more than a 'metaphorical link' between physical vulnerability and constitutive vulnerability, which would simply render the former necessary to the comprehension of the latter; Butler evoked for her part the fact that 'the body is alternately sustained and threatened through modes of address' (ibid.: 3) and, more fundamentally still according to her, 'it is by being interpellated within the terms of language that a certain social existence of the body first becomes possible' (ibid.: 5).

She has recently radicalized this underlying frame by developing a strong account of the transitivity of the vulnerability of the body to that of the subject:

I am, prior to acquiring an 'I', a being who has been touched, moved, fed, changed, put to sleep, established as the subject and the object of speech. My infantile body has not only been touched, moved, and arranged, but these impingements operated as 'tactile signs' that registered my formation. . . . They are signs of an other, but they are also the traces from which an 'I' will eventually emerge. (Butler, 2005: 70)

And this physical vulnerability takes on a considerable theoretical importance, conferring a precedence in the reasoning for an idea of destructibility, of the availability of the human body to injury, of the fact that it is presented with no control to the other's will: 'we are in our skins, given over, in each other's hands, at each other's mercy' (Butler, 2005: 101).

Butler seeks nonetheless to escape from the spectre of an anthropology underlying her work, too much in contradiction with the premises of her theory of performativity, of an emerging agency without anything preceding it. She resorts to a kind of theoretical loop, whereby vulnerability could not be anterior to its recognition: 'vulnerability is

fundamentally dependent on existing norms of recognition if it is to be attributed to any human subject' (Butler, 2005: 43). In reality, by pointing to two irreducible dimensions of dependency and human sociality, violability and affectability, she cannot avoid assuming a physical life prior to its emergence in language: 'The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence' (Butler, 2004: 26). Although she poses the question of what is defined as life, and highlights that an encounter with a life in its precariousness is not something which happens, but is socially constructed, Butler can escape neither the vocabulary, nor the perspective of a body preceding and, in its affectability, almost resisting its recognition. In other terms, the vulnerable body is a reality which is prior to and refuses to be reduced to its constitution in a human body worthy (or not) of being loved and mourned. This shared vulnerability even ends up being instituted as a foundation which holds or which should hold humans together, establishing a minimal imperative of solidarity, which appears when she mentions 'our collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another' (ibid.: 30).

For the theme of vulnerability carries within it the necessity to react to the different forms of violent infringements to physical *integrity* and the sort of autonomy it makes possible, and therefore the necessity to become the object of a politics and an ethics.

Just as in Honneth's work (and also in Levinas<sup>5</sup>), the fact that the other, due to her or his vulnerability, finds herself or himself in a state of total nudity, absolutely lacking defence in relation to my destructiveness, *founds the ethical requirement not to infringe the integrity whose continued existence is in my hands*.

In other terms, with this change of direction, the motif of recognition finds itself inscribed into an ethics by Butler.

Formally, her discourse concerning the primary submission to power and necessary subjection has not been erased. In *Precarious Life* one still finds the idea that 'what is prematurely, or belatedly, called the "I" is, at the outset, enthralled, even if it is to a violence, an abandonment, a mechanism; doubtless it seems better at that point to be enthralled with what is impoverished or abusive than not to be enthralled at all and so to lose the condition of one's being and becoming' (Butler, 2004: 45). It is the theoretical framework, radically transformed here, which undermines the argument.

The extent of the recomposition of the framework in which recognition inserts, can be measured by comparing two extracts from two texts which are separated in time but very similar semantically, *Subjects of Desire* (1987) and 'Longing for Recognition' (2000a). In *Subjects of Desire* she considered:

The dynamic of lord and bondsman emerges as an externalization of the desire to annihilate but, because annihilation would undermine the project altogether by taking away life, this desire is held in check. Domination, the relation that replaces the urge to kill, must be understood as the effort to annihilate within the context of life. Rather than become an indeterminate nothingness through death, the other must now prove its essential nothingness in life. (Butler, 1987: 52)

In 2000, what holds back the gesture of destruction in the other in the same scene is of another nature, henceforth the key element is ethical:

The moment in Lordship and Bondage when the two self-consciousnesses come to recognize one another is . . . in the life and death struggle the moment in which they each see the shared power they have to annihilate the Other, and thereby, to destroy the condition of their own self-reflection. Thus, it is at a moment of fundamental vulnerability that recognition becomes possible and need becomes self-conscious. And what recognition does at such moment is, to be sure, to hold destruction in check. . . . And the ethical content of its relationship to the Other is to be found in this fundamental and reciprocal state of being 'given over'. (Butler, 2000a: 1986)

It is in this way that she comes to put forward the principle of a consistent ethical attitude to perceive and respond to fragility, to abstain from making the fatal blow.

Here, I am not trying to say that she has an ethics of recognition as such; her ethics first aims at addressing physical violence, and might be characterized as an ethics of non-violence.<sup>6</sup>

But it happens that recognition is the starting point, a tool *and* one of the goals of her ethics. It is the starting point in that Butler indicates that she founds her ethics on a 'post-Hegelian account of recognition', basing herself on the works of Adriana Cavarero, insofar as Cavarero provides a theory of subject formation that acknowledges the limits of self-knowledge that can serve a conception of ethics and responsibility: 'we might consider a certain post-Hegelian reading of the scene of recognition in which precisely my own opacity to myself occasions my capacity to confer a certain kind of recognition on others. It would be perhaps, an ethics based on our shared, invariable, and partial blindness about ourselves' (Butler, 2005: 41). It is a tool, a necessary moment of the ethical gesture, since the recognition of the other's humanity is a condition for taking into account and responding to his or her vulnerability. Regardless of whether we share a language or a community, fragility and need make a claim upon me, but require a certain kind of recognition to be perceived and responded to. In such a recomposed landscape, her statement according to which a life is only a life if recognized as such<sup>7</sup> simply means that the ethical attitude does not appear outside of everyday interpretative frameworks, and that it fits in with the ethical aims of her own theory to fight against the conditions which cause certain lives to be more exposed than others, and/or worthy of being mourned.

Finally, it is an ethical goal in itself, for recognition is asked for or demanded *per se*, and the expected object of this recognition at the same time as survival, is the possibility of an autonomy. Asking for recognition, 'is to solicit a becoming, to instigate a transformation, to petition the future always in relation to the Other' (Butler, 2004: 44). As such, not responding to this expectation, and closing off such a possibility, constitutes as much a violation of moral obligation as not holding back a gesture of physical destruction of the other. One can even observe a hardening of the ethical requirement in the most recent evolution of Butler's theory. When the dialogue with Axel Honneth is finally engaged, on the category of the reification, which Honneth defines as the forgetting of recognition, she criticizes him all in all essentially because he does not defend a sufficiently ethical position. He proposes the idea of a form of affective involvement, in opposition to detachment and observation as a way of engaging in the relationship to the other, subject or object, and which characterizes reification. Butler counters that affective involvement

is not intrinsically normative or moral: 'I can care for someone to the point that he loses all independence' (Butler, 2008: 101); conversely, hatred is also a mode of affective engagement. The argument is the same against the thesis defended by Honneth which states that 'we are recognitional if we are able to adopt the other's point of view'. She responds: 'Honneth seems to subscribe . . . to the view that to understand properly the expression of another human being is to respond appropriately' (ibid.: 114).

If we now return to her long-defended assumption that subjection is always inherent in the constitution of a subject, it appears to collapse of itself. Posing a requirement, of the ethical type, to respond to the other's vulnerability and need implies therefore that there are different means of constituting the other, for one could not qualify as ethical one's subjection to the status of legitimate object of violence.

Finally, it should be pointed out that the rapprochement with the normative theories of recognition marked by this turn is made all the more possible in that the difficulties stemming from the strong differences in the meaning attributed by the various authors to the concepts of subject and agency are fading. For example, while Honneth, Fraser, or Habermas make a relatively traditional and straightforward use of the idea of autonomy, the Butlerian agency loses the extremely limited meaning it had for a while, when agency was conceived primarily as a property of linguistic structures rather than individuals engaged in the world. As for the subject, Butler no longer limits her or him to a linguistic reality. The subject finds himself or herself henceforth endowed with relatively traditional attributes, such as consciousness and reflexivity. Borrowing from Nietzsche the idea that responsibility gives rise to reflexivity, she considers, notably in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, that I begin to think of myself as a subject when I am held responsible for what I have done. From then on, her response to the question of why a theory of consciousness is necessary for the analysis of the formation of the subject is that 'consciousness is the relation to oneself that is formed in a way as a substitute and as a transfiguration of primary relations to others, and it is the moment when reflexivity emerges as a structure of the subject that is relatively independent of its relation to concrete existing social others' (Butler, 2000b: 748).

In this new theoretical framework, through the displacement of the motif of recognition from a theory of performativity which makes the act of recognition a gesture of subjection, to an ethical perspective founded on an anthropology of vulnerability, the demand for recognition is reinterpreted as the demand to be the object of certain addresses, and establishing a scene of interlocution becomes the object of a struggle for recognition.

Butler then finds herself attempting to respond to well-known problems of normative theories of recognition. In particular, her calls to distinguish recognition and recognizability (Butler, 2005: 23 ff.), i.e. not to omit these cases of claims for recognition expressed by someone whose status is lost, or not yet developed, or else where there exists a demand but no language to transmit it and/or no receiver of the demand, resonate with the broadly debated question of the availability of a grammar capable of accounting for the wrong that was undergone. In modern societies characterized by reflexivity, either the injustice or the denial of recognition perceived by a group is justified, in the sense that another group in a position of domination has integrated the practice or the

discourse of denial, by means of a discourse of coherent legitimization, in a social order which is apparently neutral from the moral and epistemic point of view, or else it quite simply does not appear, as the available grammar precludes the characterization of what occurred. As many of Honneth's commentators have shown, actualizing the denial then implies overcoming an epistemic deficit which prevents making a lived experience intelligible to oneself and to others.<sup>8</sup>

By concluding that

... if and when, in an effort to confer or to receive a recognition that fails again and again, I call into question the normative horizon within which recognition takes place, this questioning is part of the desire for recognition, a desire that can find no satisfaction, and whose unsatisfiability establishes a critical point of departure for the interrogation of available norms (Butler, 2005: 24)

she enters directly in resonance with Honneth, according to whom: 'It is by way of the morally motivated struggles of social groups – their collective attempt to establish, institutionally and culturally, expanded forms of recognition – that the normatively directional change of societies proceeds' (Honneth, 1992: 93).

In other words, what Butler henceforth defends, to borrow an expression she uses to characterize her conception of relationality, is 'a not particularly postmodern insight' of recognition (Butler, 2000a: 288).

## Notes

1. With the notable exception of Kelly Oliver in her *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (2001) and to a lesser extent Lois McNay, in *Against Recognition* (2007).
2. The latter being provided with a material component, 'which, according to the degree of complexity of a given social interaction, consists in either appropriate individual conduct or suitable institutional procedures' (Honneth, 2007: 345).
3. 'In a Nietzschean transvaluation of Hegel, Foucault appears to value the affirmation of life as the highest ideal, an ideal that works in the service of life and therefore, cannot be part of any slave morality. Life, however, is not affirmed in a simple self-generated act; it requires resistance and struggle, and so requires a domain of Others, and a form of struggle' (Butler, 1987: 230).
4. And by assuming this position, she stands apart from the normative theories of recognition, regularly tempted by the law, 'dreaming, against their better intuitions, that vulnerability can be overcome' (Markell, 2003: 23).
5. Butler borrows a great deal from Levinas on this theme of the absence of defence, without concluding like the latter that the radical exteriority of the other is what must be encountered, but one does not recognize the radical exteriority of the other: according to him, radical exteriority undoes the notion of recognition.
6. If one draws on her reasoning on violence and non-violence (Butler, 2006).
7. See above, pp. 9–10.
8. See, for instance, Laden (2007); Deranty and Renault (2007).

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