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Abstract:

This thesis examines the idea of the non-sovereign self and the role it plays in the work of Hannah Arendt, Judith Butler, and Stanley Cavell. Based on their critiques of the subject a philosophical anthropology is forwarded that stresses that humans can only be understood in relation to their environment. This highlights the role of language, embodiment, and psychic attachment for the notion of the non-sovereign self and maintains that humans are finite and contingent beings. The finiteness of the self's knowledge of itself and others also implies that the self cannot give a cohesive narrative account of its emergence. Moreover, its relationship to the unknowable other is constitutive for the relational self. The notion of the other signifies not only the concrete other person, but also those other living beings and social structures on whom the self depends for its survival.

From this notion of non-sovereign, relational selfhood the thesis forwards an argument about the interrelation between ethical and political thought. Ethics is defined not in terms of the subject's accountability for its past actions, but by a primary responsibility for the other. By showing that ethical and political thought are closely intertwined, an understanding of political community is forwarded that highlights the role of responsibility towards those excluded from current forms of political representation. Turning to the role of affects for our understanding of political agency the role of cohesiveness, permeability and durability for political communities is interrogated. Stressing that the self remains a 'structure in formation' allows to account for the possibility of political agency which is not bound to a pre-established, shared social identity, but is motivated by one's ethical responsibility for others.

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Introduction

In recent discussions in political theory non-sovereign ideas of the self have played an important role. Non-sovereign concepts of the self stress the ways in which thinking, language, and ultimately our very survival depend on our social relationships. From this the insight follows that human beings are finite and relational beings. The intersubjective nature of human existence the notion of non-sovereignty builds on has been emphasised by many of the major directions of western thought such as hermeneutics, poststructuralism and post-analytic philosophy. Together with the critique of humanism in the last half of the 20th century this has led to a reformulation of philosophical anthropologies, where the psychic and bodily aspects of human existence are accentuated. While this relational account of human existence has become widely accepted, there is an ongoing debate about its precise nature and the consequences it has for our understanding of the political. In particular the relationship between moral responsibility for others and political judgement remains disputed. My thesis thus investigates how a non-sovereign, relational understanding of the self influences notions of political community and responsibility. I argue that the notion of the non-sovereign self can help us to develop an understanding of the political as closely intertwined with ethics.

To flesh out the notion of a non-sovereign self as both a political agent and a moral subject, I draw on the works of Hannah Arendt, Judith Butler, and Stanley Cavell. Their approaches highlight a productive tension between assertions regarding the 'communal' character of subject-formation, and the uniqueness or separateness of each human

existence. While notions of relationality imply that we cannot define our ethical and political positions independently from the formative influence of society, an emancipatory and critical stance towards the political sphere might make it necessary for the individual to distance herself from her social environment, to rely on her unique self and develop independent judgement.[1] I develop a notion of non-sovereignty that not only retains the possibility for critique but defines a critical stance towards any formulation of community as the precondition for emancipatory political action and an ethical relationship to others.

This work rests on the assumption that our political convictions and moral values are grounded in broader ontological notions. Asserting ontological grounds that direct ethical and political judgements, however, has become controversial. Previously the nature of our common existence could be explained and justified by reference to a belief in an omnipotent God, or the cognitive powers of the rational human subject. At least from the 19th century onwards, however, critical voices against the idea of an 'ultimate foundation' have become abundant. Any ontological project, it has been argued, is not only historically contingent, it also often functions as a justification for the form of society and government it is connected with. As post-structuralist critiques of modern ontological and epistemological projects have pointed out, there is a close interrelation between our underlying 'foundational' beliefs about 'what is', our conceptions of knowledge, and the societal and political frameworks within which such notions are coined. The situatedness of language and discourses of knowledge implies that there is no access to a completely neutral 'meta-language' that would allow us to objectively describe social realities. As Richard Rorty puts it, while the world is certainly out there,

[1] A note on the use 3rd person personal pronouns: As I find to write 'he or she (or it)' somewhat bulky, I tend to write 'she', given that I am female and following what seems to be the convention in contemporary writing. However, I leave pronouns unchanged when I quote or directly comment on a quote. Hannah Arendt, for example, generally only uses the male form and habitually refers to 'the human being' as 'man'. I therefore do not signal two different conceptual positions by changing the gender of personal pronouns.

the truth about it is not.[2] What counts as knowledge is situated in terms of fundamental beliefs about existence, and, in turn, these convictions are affected by what we consider authentic knowledge. In other words, what we believe there *is* to know might to a certain extent limit what we *can* know. As Alexandros Kiopkioulis sums up this notion: "ontology in the guise of fully fledged narratives about nature and humanity is not 'antecedent' to values, politics and epistemic assumptions." Therefore, "[f]undamental beliefs about the defining features of being can be imbued and inflected by evaluations that incline agents to isolate, to stress and to variously construe different elements of the real."[3]

To assert that ontological notions are neither universal nor neutral, however, does not mean they can be light-heartedly discarded. Moreover, the relationship between knowledge, ontology and experience is not static. If, within an accepted epistemological framework, we find out that we were wrong about 'what is out there', this new knowledge not only adapts our ontological outlook, we might also find it necessary to amend our belief-systems, and in turn rethink how we should act as political and moral agents. Accepting that we can neither completely do away with foundations to ground our moral and political thinking, nor claim that these foundations are universal and neutral, my thesis thus adopts a 'weak' ontological outlook. The term 'weak' here refers to Stephen K. White's notion of 'weak ontologies', which he understands as ontological projects which, while grounding ethical and political thought, accept their own contingency.[4] Following White, I argue that when thinking about our political existence we should accept and reflect upon the situatedness of our approaches. To do so, I believe

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2 Rorty, 1989, p. 5
3 Kioupkiolis, 2011, p. 702
4 White, 2000 a, 2000 b, 2005

it is important to start from a thorough consideration of what 'being human' could imply in our concrete social, historical and political situations. Instead of speaking from an 'impersonal' position, which is often favoured by post-structuralist and post-Marxist thinkers concerned with analysing broader notions of 'the political' or historical and social developments, I thus wish to stress the role of individual human agents in shaping what we come to consider the conditions of our existence. At the centre of my thesis are therefore not statements about the structural form society takes, but how we, as singular beings, relate to each other in personal, ethical and political terms. This outlook is connected to the political focus of my investigation. While I do not wish to deny the importance of studying institutional and juridical models of democratic states for our understanding of political agency, I choose an approach to political action that concentrates on interpersonal relationships, which are more likely to occur in 'non-institutional' forms of political organisation. I follow this approach when considering the role of ethics, where I concentrate on the question of how we could assume responsibility for those excluded from our current understanding of political agents. Instead of trying to approach the indisputable important question of how to make legal frameworks more attentive to the claims of those insufficiently recognised by current juridical systems, I therefore concentrate on the question how we, as individuals, can increase our moral and political awareness towards the demands of those we understand as 'different' or 'other'.

While it would run against the 'weakness' of a weak philosophical anthropology to assert definite claims about human essence, I offer a figuration of human being that relates ontological claims about the human to ethical and political values. The non-sovereign notion of the self I forward relies on what White calls *existential realities*. Existential

realities are conditions which appear as relatively stable or 'essential' to human existence. Starting from the assertion that we are all born as vulnerable and dependent embodied beings, I thus propose a number of positions from which to discuss the notion of non-sovereign selfhood. I argue that our condition is one of fundamental non-sovereignty because we are *relational*, *situated*, *finite* and *precarious* beings. Human beings are finite, not only in the sense that they have a finite life-span, but also because their abilities of knowledge and action are not unlimited. Our finite capacities to gain knowledge about ourselves, others and the external world, and our vulnerability and bodily dependency necessitate social cooperation. The relational character of our existence comes to the fore in our roles as members of social communities and as political actors. Our relationships to others are expressed in language, and linguistic philosophy has thus played an important role in establishing the ethical and moral content of human relationships. Moreover, our understanding of these conditions relies on our perception of the interconnection between body, psyche, and cognition. My reading of Arendt, Butler and Cavell will thus show how establishing different connections between these dimensions of human existence, or a different weighting or understanding of one of these dimensions, can have decisive influences on our understanding of selfhood, politics and ethical responsibility.

Cavell – Butler – Arendt – a very short introduction

Reading Arendt, Butler and Cavell together, their positions both reinforce each other and can be used as critical interventions against each other. This allows me to stage a debate between some of the most influential strands of 20th century western thought such as the

'linguistic turn', phenomenology, post-analytic and poststructuralist thinking and psychoanalytic theory. While Arendt and Butler have been widely discussed by political theorists, Stanley Cavell's work so far has found little consideration in political thought.[5] I argue, however, that his perspective on the self and his discussions of scepticism and perfectionism can be used productively when thinking about the relation between moral agency and political community. Reading the three authors together makes it possible to develop a more thorough and refined understanding of the non-sovereign self and its ethical and political implications. Instead of assuming anti-foundationalist positions, all three thinkers *complicate* the notion of foundations without rejecting their importance for the history of thought and the possibility of judgement and agency. Moreover, the ways the tension between particularity and universality are expressed in their works allows for a fresh perspective on some of the most prevalent debates around identity and difference in recent decades. To provide a clearer understanding of why Arendt, Butler and Cavell are eminent figures in today's philosophical and political debates regarding non-sovereignty, I will now turn to a short overview of the main themes I discuss in their works.

Cavell's philosophical project starts from a critique of modern epistemology and the notion of the subject related to it. This critique is rooted in his Wittgensteinian discussion of scepticism and language. For Cavell scepticism is closely related to modern epistemology as both hinge on the separation between (knowing) subject and external objects of knowledge. This separation could lead us into a sense of existential loneliness, a danger he seeks to confront in his writing. Cavell's critique of scepticism

[5] See for the discussion of Arendt and Butler in political theory for example Benhabib, 2003; Cavarero, 2000; Dean, 2005, 2008; Dolan, 2000; Carver and Chambers (eds.) 2008; Honig, 2010; Kateb, 1984; Lloyd, 2007, 2008; Lorrey, 2012; White 2000 a. For the role of Cavell's thinking for political theory see for example Norris (ed.) 2006, Norval 2007; Owen 2006

and modern epistemology has a strong normative or 'moral' dimension. He understands morality as a stance we have to choose towards our communities and individual others, as well as towards ourselves – a stance he terms 'Emersonian perfectionism'. Here the tension between connectivity and separation is investigated as a striving for a more authentic or 'full' way of existence. This requires the individual to set herself apart from the inauthenticity of society, without refusing responsibility for her community. Cavell's approach centres on the notion of 'getting to know' oneself and others, an endeavour that can only take place if conversation with others (and oneself) is maintained. He stresses the communal character of meaning inscribed in the very character of language as a shared activity. Meaningful human existence thus relies on relationality. For Cavell any private ethical concern can also become a collective political one, where a more just form of society is continually sought. The interplay between identity and difference plays an important role in the perfectionist development of self and society. On the one hand, the individual gauges her identity with and difference from her current society; on the other hand, a temporal notion of difference is introduced. Cavell points out that while we understand ourselves as identical or continual beings over time, perfectionist thinking also creates a difference between our current state of moral existence and an imagined future state. It is from this split or difference introduced into the structure of selfhood that moral and political change becomes possible. Perfectionism has therefore a strong 'futural' orientation, where an authentic and just existence will always be in part deferred to a future state. This emphasises the necessary openness of any process of political and ethical deliberation, as well as of the processes of self-formation. Cavell's perfectionism relies on a reformulation of the subject that questions the separation between subject and world as well as between body and mind, but still wishes to retain the importance of the autonomous thinking self. This, for him, seems to be necessary in

order to retain an understanding of aesthetic self-creation. The aesthetic dimension of Cavell's work combines the creation of moral selfhood with narrative art forms. To Cavell, autonomy is an important aspect of creative processes and moral thought; a notion which separates his understanding of the self from Butler's, who appears highly critical of any over-statement of the human capacities for aesthetic self-creation.

While Cavell's formulation of perfectionism hinges on the notion that a critical stance towards the justness of society is necessary for the individual's personal development, it may seem disappointing that he pays little heed to relations of power and structural inequalities, apart from his concern about letting people speak 'in their own voice'. Turning to Butler, then, allows me to thematise how relations of power and societal structures demarcate what can be heard and who can appear in the public sphere as a legitimate speaker. If Butler's work should be summed up under one over-arching goal, the best formulation might be that she is concerned with the relation between the way in which societal norms violently structure our understanding of the subject (what she terms 'normative violence') and our need to become recognisable as subjects in order to live in community with others. While some theorists have noted that Butler's work shifts from the politics of sexuality and gender towards ethical considerations around the change of the millennium, this shift should not be understood as an abandonment of her former concerns with the intelligibility of unique individuals.[6] By turning to the question how we can understand ourselves as moral agents, Butler adds a further dimension to her critique of the subject. She endeavours to rearticulate the relationship between ethical and political thought, by stressing that morality should not be understood as a concern with the accountability of the subject, but with a responsive stance towards the other. This highlights that ethics needs to remain attentive to relations of power that

[6] See for example Lloyd, 2008; Dean, 2005; Thiem, 2008

structure our encounters with others. Particularly in the collections of essays *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War*, written after 9/11, what is at stake is how a non-violent political response to violence, and the perceived loss of sovereignty, could be achieved. Butler argues that a non-violent response to a potentially threatening other could transform not only our relations to society and individual others. By giving the other ethical precedence over the self, it also challenges our very understanding of sovereign subjectivity. To explore the connection between selfhood, ethics and political thought will be one of the guiding threads linking my reading of Butler to the engagement with Arendt's and Cavell's thought.

Hannah Arendt was inspired by the need to renew our awareness of the uniqueness of human life. Her critique of the modern subject is closely linked to her wish to reawaken the activities of political action and independent moral judgement in a time where we have lost our ability to think and act 'for ourselves'. While appreciative of the Arendtian stress on uniqueness, it is the implicit statement of self-reliance in one's moral thinking that is troubling to thinkers like Butler, who are influenced by the poststructuralist understanding of norms, where morality is understood, at least in part, a social practice. For Arendt, however, it is precisely the possibility of independent thought that allows for the survival of morality in the absence of a free public sphere. Arendt's endeavour is deeply influenced by the impression of totalitarianism and the Holocaust. In her mind, the threat that human existence can become devoid of meaning is linked to the disappearance of a free and equal public sphere, as it was most dramatically shown under the Nazi-regime. This threat, however, is not averted with the demise of totalitarian rule. The encroachment of 'the social' and the accompanying infringement of automatism and mass production and consumption on every aspect of our lives

complicate the possibility for the establishment of a truly political sphere. This is deeply problematic, because such a sphere is the precondition for free political action and with it the establishment of a unique personality. By linking uniqueness to appearance in the public sphere, Arendt stresses that individuality depends on an existence that is shared with others. Arendt's political thought thus highlights the necessary plurality and communality of human existence. She tries to rearticulate notions of political thinking and acting that would safeguard us against falling into the ‘sameness’ and moral immaturity Arendt regards to be typical of people living in contemporary western societies. Her endeavour could therefore be tentatively described as one of excavating an understanding of particularistic political action that has been buried within the tradition of western philosophy. By doing so, Arendt also offers a notion of political 'self-creation' that stresses both singularity and non-sovereignty. In Arendt's distinction of the deed from the doer, it is action itself that 'writes' the unrepeatable life-story of the actor. The appearance of something new relies on our inability to control the outcome of actions. It is this Nietzschean understanding of selfhood, together with her agonistic understanding of the public that has sparked a renewed interest in Arendt's work in recent years. In particular for feminist political theory, Arendt's thought has provided an important impetus to rethink political agency apart from identity-based models.[7] This will play an important role in my formulation of political communities at the close of this thesis.

Arendt, Butler and Cavell each offer unique view-points on notions of sovereignty and subjectivity. By reinforcing and supplementing each other their approaches allow for a new understanding of non-sovereign selfhood, which stresses that human beings can only be understood in their relationship to their social environment. We are always necessary in community with others, and it is this 'being-with' that should guide our

[7] Zerilli, 2005; Honig, 1993

understanding of morality and politics.

Chapter outlines

My thesis is structured into six chapters. The first chapter outlines a definition of non-sovereign selfhood and situates this notion within current debates about the role of 'foundations' or 'ontologies' for political thought. Stephen K. White's concept of 'weak ontologies' and Oliver Marchart's discussion of post-foundationalist approaches to the political discuss the ways ontological concerns are formulated in contemporary political theory, and provide important conceptual tools to structure my own investigation. White's and Marchart's projects finally differ, however, because the former concentrates on the role of the self as a singular political agent, while the latter focuses on the notion of 'the political'. Following White's approach, in the remainder of the chapter I forward a 'weak' philosophical anthropology, developing a notion of the 'non-sovereign self'. Concentrating on Butler and Cavell I distinguish the notion of the non-sovereign or finite self from a modern, sovereign understanding of the subject, by discussing its relation to language. Finally, I argue that the 'linguistic turn' needs to take into account the close relationship between language and embodiment, and show how Butler does so when turning to the psychoanalytic notion of the emergence of the self. In the second chapter I then explore how the notion of a non-sovereign self relates to concepts of political and moral agency. Here I critically discuss Arendt's understanding that human activities should be separated into public and private ones. This would dissociate political action from moral thought and finally enable a return to the disengaged subject. By turning to Cavell's notion of the perfectionist self I forward the view that moral considerations need to take

place as part of an ongoing conversation with one's community. Taken together, the dimensions of selfhood discussed in the first two chapters highlight our necessary relationships to others, where the self is not only constituted by the other, but finally the separation between self and other, but also subject and object, needs to be scrutinised.

My argument rests on the assertion that each human being is a unique and singular existent and thus differs from every other being. In chapter three I therefore address a tendency in contemporary thought I call the 'avoidance of otherness'. I argue that theories of the political sphere which stress the universality of human existence, or the importance of shared (political) identities, risk understanding the relationship between the self and others in reductive terms. To establish a sense of equality and communality, at times, the similarity of human beings is overemphasised. Narrative theory approaches to the self build on this notion of similarity in order to argue that the self, 'who' we are, is essentially communicable to others. By sharing our unique stories we could gain comprehensive knowledge of others – a notion that makes the other an assessable entity. Moreover, that we can tell stories about who we are establishes the self as a unified entity. By criticising narrative theory approaches to selfhood, I seek to refute the notion of a unified and knowable self. Moreover, I argue that some narrative recognition approaches misconstrue the Arendtian notion of the self which they invoke, by simplifying Arendt's understanding of temporality. While a narrative theory approach risks understanding time in a one-dimensional model of linear and cohesive narration (of one's life story), Arendt points towards a more complicated understanding of time that highlights not cohesive narration but breaks and aporia. Understanding time as discontinuous holds the future open and forwards the insight that knowledge must remain finite – an insight whose significance she however fails to develop fully in her understanding of political actors. Arendt

maintains a problematic conception of the structural similarity of human perception and emotions. This allows her to forward a 'representative' model of the self's relationship others. This notion enables the thinking and judging self to escape non-sovereignty into a sphere where clarity and knowledge are not only attainable but also communicable to others. Ultimately, Arendt's notion of the finite, acting self I outlined in chapter two thus appears to be incommensurable with the notion of representation, that relies on our possibility to fully grasp or 'know' the external world.

In chapter four I turn to the role of otherness for our understanding of the self. I forward an understanding of ethics as responsibility for the singular other human being, drawing on Stanley Cavell's notion of other-mind-scepticism and Butler's and Derrida's engagements with Levinas's notions of 'the Other' and 'the face'. I start my argument by asserting that knowledge of others is fallible and finite, but that our relationships with others are not a function of 'knowing'. To the contrary, accepting the finitude of knowledge and communicability allows for a deeper appreciation of responsibility towards others in our ethical thinking – a responsibility that is groundless and infinite. I argue that Cavell's understanding of acknowledgement where the self needs to find an emphatic and open stance towards the unknowable and surprising other person allows for an important insight in the affective dimension of political and ethical relationships. It is, however, necessary to go beyond Cavell's discussion of our concrete relationship with fellow human beings to understand otherness as constitutive of selfhood and ethical agency. Understanding ethics in terms of responsibility for others, then, is based on a notion of the subject as constituted by its relationship to the other. Stressing the role of relationality decentres the self. This helps to develop an ontology that goes beyond the subject/object distinction and serves as a ground for an ethics of mutual responsibility. Here the self comes into being by

welcoming the other, a welcoming that establishes the self as open and relational and, at the same time, questions our right to 'own' the world. Instead, we have to understand our being-in-the-world as always already shared. From this perspective the subject cannot claim any space as her own. The claims of others to the enjoyment of the world, or a specific space, always need to be taken into consideration.

This notion sets the stage for my discussion in chapter five where I forward an understanding of ethics that criticises the anthropocentric approach prevalent in modern moral thought. I argue that we cannot maintain a clearly bonded notion of 'humanity' as an ethical concept. This means that first, it is not possible to claim that human beings are inherently 'moral', and second, that our responsibility cannot be restricted solely towards human forms of life. Concentrating on Cavell and Butler I maintain that the human is a malleable and contingent concept. Moreover, it is precisely when we encounter problems of definition (i.e. where human life starts) that the necessity for ethical and political decisions arises. While discourses which attempt to ground ethics on notions of universal human nature have been central to modern thought, we might - in the light of the critique of the subject - ask whether such notions do not inadvertently cement the logic of exclusion they have sought to overcome. The status of the human and its relation to wider notions of life and embodied being thus need to be interrogated. I argue that our thinking about ethics and the political indeed has to start from the view-points of particular human beings, however, this does not necessitate that we maintain a concept of human exceptionalism.

In the final chapter of my thesis I return to the notion of the political I have shortly outlined in the first two chapters. Doing so, I forward a critique of sovereign political

entities and instead plead for an open, 'net-work' approach to political communities. Importantly, such a structure highlights the plurality of political communities and the possibility of fluctuating or circulating membership. This necessitates the openness or permeability of political communities. Such a view constitutes a theoretical and practical alternative to established forms of political participation and organisation within the institutional boundaries of liberal nation-states. By imagining possibilities for political communities I thus aim to bring to the fore the political relevance of formulations of the non-sovereign self and concepts of relational ethics. In this chapter the tension between connectivity and boundlessness on the one hand, and separateness and autonomous agency on the other, informs the relation in which the singular actor stands towards her political community. Moreover, I ask how members of a community relate to those currently excluded. Turning to Arendt's discussion of revolutionary political practice I advance an understanding of the political that calls into question a clearly bordered understanding of political communities. This allows, inter alia, for a more productive critique of the nation-state system, whose relevance I wish to exemplify by discussing the pertinence of migrants' rights for current political activists. Moreover, I stress that understanding individuality as interwoven with current forms of society and government, makes it necessary that political thought and action accounts for the complicated relationship between forms of government, societal norms, economic relationships and forms of selfhood. Arendt stresses the interconnection of society and forms of human existence in her critique of the modern individual, who is conditioned by mass society. Her 'spherical' understanding of human existence, however, still provides for the possibility of a clean break with the social. This notion is clearly denied by a Butlerian understanding of sociality. Butler's nuanced understanding of the psychic dimension of political relationships provides the necessary compliment to Arendt's 'disinterested'

understanding of the political sphere. Turning to the role of affects for our understanding of political agency then makes it possible to critically renegotiate the harsh distinction between the political and the social Arendt insists upon. By doing so, I interrogate the role of cohesiveness, permeability and durability for political communities, but also our motivations to act politically.

Finally, my discussion of non-sovereign moral and political agency hopes to contribute to an understanding of political communality after 'identity politics'. Stressing that the self remains a 'structure in formation' allows to account for the possibility of political organisation which is not bound to a pre-established, shared social identity, but takes into account our responsibility for those others we might never get to know personally.

Chapter 1 – Dimensions of the non-sovereign self

Introduction

This chapter explores how a non-sovereign understanding of the subject could be defined. While the notion of non-sovereignty calls the Cartesian *cogito* into question there remains ambiguity on the precise content not only of the critique of the modern subject, but also how human existence could be understood differently. I propose that a non-sovereign understanding of the human has to engage with the notions of finitude and situatedness. In this appraisal finitude should not simply be identified with (an awareness of) mortality, because this would risk downplaying the relational character of human existence. Instead, finitude is understood as a necessary limitation to our abilities to know and control ourselves and the external world. This emphasises an understanding of the self as vulnerable and radically dependent on others. However, awareness of human finitude also allows for a positive evaluation of non-sovereignty where lack of control does not diminish but enable freedom and agency. It is precisely from the realm of the uncontrollable and unknown that newness and creativity spring. Moreover, I argue that our very understanding of the subject depends on the way it is defined and situated in wider societal contexts. Therefore, linguistic philosophy, where language is understood as a social and shared practice, offers an important conceptual tool to help understand our relationships with others. In this chapter I will thus concentrate on exploring how the 'linguistic turn' in contemporary thought allows for a critique of the modern subject and a formulation of the non-sovereign self. By showing how language is connected to both

materiality and our personal relationships to others, I bring to the fore a concept of the self as on the one hand closely connected to social norms, but on the other hand able to establish a critical distance to its social environment.

My notion of selfhood is situated within a wider debate about the role of ontology for contemporary political theory. This discussion has been analysed incisively by Stephen K. White's work on 'weak ontological' approaches and Oliver Marchart's exposition of 'post-foundational' notions of the political. The first section of this chapter will thus seek to situate my approach in relation to these two authors. While they concentrate on different authors, Marchart and White both stress the influence of Martin Heidegger's work on the contemporary discussion of ontology.[1] Taking Heidegger's critique of the subject as my starting point, I will thus in the following section formulate a philosophical anthropology that considers how human beings are conditioned by the way they relate to their environment. In this endeavour language plays an important role. I therefore explore how Cavell forwards a critique of modern epistemology that is related to Heidegger but stresses the role of language. Finally, turning to Butler allows me to forward how the critique of the subject and a linguistic notion of non-sovereign selfhood is linked to political and social critique. Butler combines a nuanced understanding of the role of language for social thought with a genealogical and psychoanalytical perspective. This makes it possible to grasp the interrelated cognitive, bodily and psychic dimensions of the relationships the self has to its environment.

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1 In *Sustaining Affirmation* White analyses how George Kateb, Judith Butler, Charles Taylor and William E. Connolly relate to ontological concerns. Marchart's book *Die Politische Differenz* focuses on Jean-Luc Nancy, Claude Lefort, Alan Badiou, Ernesto Laclau and Giorgio Agamben. See White 2000 a, Marchart 2010

Post-foundationalism, weak ontology and a return to philosophical anthropology after the critique of humanism

Whether foundations are necessary to ground ethical and political thinking has been a pressing concern in contemporary political theory.[2] For many theorists, considering the role of ontology starts from the reception of Heidegger's critique of the subject in 'French' or 'continental' thought. This reception has influenced the development of post-foundationalist approaches to the political which, as Oliver Marchart argues, would distinguish themselves from foundationalism on the one hand and anti-foundationalism on the other. A foundationalist position of social and political theory maintains that "society and/or politics are 'grounded on principles that are (1) undeniable and immune to revision and (2) located outside society and politics'."[3] Rejecting the possibility of such universalist principles an anti-foundationalist position, by contrast, argues that we do not need any form of foundation for political thinking. Such an attempt to leave ontology behind, however, ultimately remains caught within the universalist ontological project by simply reversing the argumentative framework of foundationalism. Doing away with foundations would, as Judith Butler states, remain entangled within the same issues as "foundationalism and the sceptical problematic it engenders."[4] This would result in the assertion of complete meaninglessness, absolute freedom or total autonomy. A post-foundational position, then, does not stop with proclaiming the absence of a final ground, as anti-foundationalists would do. Rather, post-foundationalism undertakes "a constant interrogation of metaphysical figures of foundation" where these grounding concepts are not erased but their 'ontological status' weakened. This "ontological weaning of ground

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2 See for example Bennett, 2000; Connolly, 2005; Glyn, 2008; Kioupkiolis, 2011; Marchart, 2007 and 2010; Markell, 2003 and 2006; Strathausen, 2006; White, 2000, 2005 and 2009

3 Herzog quoted in Marchart, 2007, p.11

4 Butler, 1992, p.7.

does not lead to the assumption of the total absence of all grounds, but rather to the assumption of the impossibility of a *final* ground." This "implies an increased awareness of, on the one hand, contingency and, on the other, the political as the moment of partial and always, in the last instance, unsuccessful grounding."[5] Post-foundationalists thus argue that even though societies and their political organisations are metaphysically unfounded, they necessarily seek to ground themselves in historically and culturally contingent terms. Movements of foundation are regarded as integral to the formulation and cohesion of the political sphere. Foundational formulations only become problematic when they deny their own contestability, by masking their contingency and situatedness. To avoid such closure, a post-foundationalist approach not only needs to question classical philosophical concepts of foundation such as 'substance,' 'essence,' 'subject,' or 'structure.' They also need to scrutinise the founding roles concepts like the market, genes, gender, ethnicity, cultural identity or the nation-state play in contemporary political thought.[6] These movements of critique imply that we have to retain an open-ended notion of the political, where neither a certain underlying force nor a pre-known goal or teleological development of the political realm can be ultimately asserted. In our common existence we would then have to learn to live with an 'abyss of freedom', where political identities cannot assume a definite form. Moreover, the critical move integral to a post-foundationalist approach implies a preoccupation with the justice of current formulation of the political. This has to focus on the necessary exclusions any ontological formulation entails. As Butler writes "the task is to interrogate what the theoretical move that establishes foundations *authorizes,* and what precisely it excludes or forecloses."[7] Asserting that ontology and epistemology are closely related, we should ask not so much *if* or *how* we can gain objective knowledge of the social world and its foundation in

5 Marchart, 2007, p.2
6 Marchart, 2010, p. 16
7 Butler, 1992, p. 7

ontological notions, but how certain forms of knowledge and ontology are constituted and used in concrete historical situations.[8]

In the post-foundationalist position Marchart forwards the notion of *the political* is central. 'The political' describes not the way a society is organised in terms of political institutions, but how our understanding of political community enables recurrent movements of grounding and contestation of ground. At issue in discussions of the political is thus a critical stance towards the ontological beliefs upon which our common lives depend. There is, however, another way of approaching the question of ontology. Instead of focusing on the role of the political, and then discuss human existence in relation to it, I argue for an outlook on the shared world that begins with the position of the singular human actor. While I acknowledge the importance of the anti-humanist critique of the subject poststructuralist thinkers have forwarded, I am wary of the tendency in post-foundational thought to overlook the role of individual human agency. Instead of understanding the social world in the anti-humanist terms of 'impersonal' social relations or structures, I argue that it is only from the specific perspective of each singular human self that the relationship between human beings and their environment becomes graspable in ethical and political terms. I share this position with Stephen K. White, who discusses the role of 'weak ontologies' for the concept of the 'late-modern citizen'.[9] Drawing on the Heideggerian concept of finite *Dasein* (being-there), he forwards a contingent philosophical anthropology, which describes human existence in terms of being-in-the-world, and being-with-others. Drawing on Arendt, Butler and Cavell, my own project is at some distance from White's reading of Heidegger. Heidegger, or, in the case of Butler, his post-structuralist reception, has, however, been an important common

[8] See Daly, 2008
[9] See White, 2009

reference point for all three thinkers. Turning to a 'continental' reception of *Dasein* thus helps to establish a general outline of the notion of the self I further discuss in reference to Arendt, Butler and Cavell in this and the following chapter.[10]

The Heideggerian intervention in modern philosophy hinges on the argument that being can only be grasped through an existential analysis of human being (*Dasein*). This, however, is not solely a cognitive matter. Ontological reflection thus becomes inextricably entangled with distinctive characteristics of human being, such as mortality, and 'mood' (*Stimmung*).[11] To understand human existence in terms of *Dasein* brings to the fore a way of being that is concerned about its own being. Such an ontological figuration of human existence implies the self's responsibility for the world. As François Raffoul states "[t]he very concept of Dasein means, to be a responsibility of being." As an "archi-ethical" notion *Dasein* "designates that entity for whom being is at issue. Being is given in such a way that I have to take it over and be responsible for it. This determination of Dasein from the outset determines it as an originary responsibility."[12] The concept of *Dasein* develops from a critique of the modern subject. While accepting that any ontological understanding starts from the particular position of *Dasein* (as being that is concerned about its own being), the notion of *Dasein* rejects the foundational ontological and epistemological role of the subject. The Heideggerian critique of the subject, as it has been interpreted by continental political thought, is not directed against the idea that human intellect and perception could be a starting point for what we can know about the world, but against the assumption of an ultimate ground or absolute knowledge as such. This criticises that western philosophical tradition has always depended on the notion of

[10] It should be noted that Heidegger has been interpreted in often grossly diverging ways. As this is not the place for arguing for a 'correct' reading of Heidegger, my short exposition is orients itself on readings of Heidegger that have been influential for post-foundational or weak ontology approaches.

[11] White, 2000, p.4

[12] Raffoul, 2010, p.35

an *ultimum subjectum* which serves as the metaphysical source of knowledge.[13] Modern philosophy did not overcome metaphysics, but only shifted the location of the ultimate ground from an external source into the human being itself. The universal human subject thus appears as a 'quasi-transcendental' notion. To raise the human subject into a transcendental position, however, misrepresents the relationships between human beings and the external world. Defining the human primarily as consciousness, as the solipsistic thinking self, the notion of the modern subject impoverishes our understanding of (human) existence. In the modern interpretation our relationship to the external world is primarily one of knowing, and moreover one that is bound to a specific understanding of what knowledge and rationality are. Here the subject's relationship to the world becomes fixed. The subject opposes the world, which is understood as objective realm.[14] Therefore, the idea of the human subject allows modern philosophy to define itself as a theory of knowledge, where the subject accesses the objective world in a theoretical or contemplative way, or to state it in Husserlian terms, via certain 'objectifying acts.' Criticising this notion, the Heideggerian position asserts that human existence is embedded in and conditioned by its environment. We are thus unable to step out of the world to perceive it 'objectively'. This interrelation is what the notion of *Dasein* seeks to express. It asserts that any understanding of existence begins with our being-in-the-world, that is, with the fact that we exist within, as integral part of, the world. As Heidegger

[13] It is only with modernity that this ground shifts from an external source towards the human being itself. In *Sein und Zeit* Heidegger argues that Western philosophy from Plato onwards has always posited the notion of an *ultimum subjectum*, an absolute foundation, from which the world as such can be understood. The subject, understood as the absolute foundation and starting point for all knowledge is as such metaphysical. It is, as Simon Critchley remarks, 'the very element of metaphysical thinking'. In pre-modern thinking the *subjectum* is external to the human - the metaphysical source of knowledge resides in a form, a substance or a deity. In modern philosophy, from Descartes onwards, the ultimate foundation for our understanding of entities is the human being itself. Here Heidegger states 'Man has become the *subjectum*.' As Simon Critchley sums up this point: "The human subject – as self, ego, or conscious, thinking thing – becomes the ultimate foundation upon which entities are rendered intelligible, that in virtue of which entities are understandable in their Being." However, for Heidegger the way the subject has been understood allowed it philosophy to forget or pass over the most important question philosophy is supposed to ask, and that is the question about Being (Seinsvergessenheit). See Martin Heidegger, 1984, p. 46 and Critchley, 1999, p. 52-54

[14] Critchley, 1999, p. 56

writes in the 1924 lecture, “Der Begriff der Zeit”:

> *Dasein* is that entity which is characterized as *Being-in-the-world*. Human life is not some subject that has to perform some trick in order to enter the world … As this Being-in-the-world *Dasein* is, together with this, *Being-with-one-another* [Mit-einander-sein], being with others: having the same world there [da] with others, encountering one another, being with one another in the manner of *Being-for-one-another* [Für-einander-sein].[15]

While Heidegger has been criticised for not following through on his notion of being-with-others [Mitsein], it is my claim that Arendt, Butler and Cavell do so in their work on the self, (political) community, and ethics.[16]

A second aspect in which I draw on Heideggerian thought is the concept of *existential realities*, Stephen K. White forwards. While the notion that we are conditioned by our environment implies that there could not be an unchanging essence of the human, the fact that we are finite embodied beings, which are born and eventually have to die, provides a certain framework for thinking about human existence. These 'existential realities' play an important role in weak ontological formulations of the self and its relationship to sociality and politics. In early Heideggerian phenomenology (as well as in White's concept of the late-modern citizen) the decisive 'existential reality' that defines human existence is (the awareness of one's own) mortality.[17] An orientation towards or appreciation of mortality, it is argued, would allow for a clearer, more authentic view of one's own existence. Death here serves as the ultimate expression of human finitude. Human existence can only be understood in its relationship to death, where non-being demarcates a limit to our capability of understanding. Therefore, all knowledge is defined against a horizon of the essentially unknowable. In Heideggerian terms authenticity can be understood as a

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15 Heidegger 1989,p.12; transl. William McNeill,1992, pp.7-8

16 Jean-Luc Nancy for example remarked that Heidegger did not take his analysis of *Mitsein* far enough. As a result his thinking remained committed to hierarchies: "The analytic of *Mitsein* that appears within the existential analytic remains nothing more than a sketch; that is, even though *Mitsein* is coessential with *Dasein*, it remains in a subordinate position" Nancy, 2000, p. 93

17 See White, 2009 and for a critical appreciation of this notion Honig, 2010

glimpse, as awe in the face of the unknowable, and as the understanding that all existence is utterly contingent or unnecessary. While this emphasis on finitude and contingency is important, I argue that finitude can be thought in more ways than the individual's relationship to its own mortality. Human existence is not only one that ends with death, it also starts with being born in a pre-existing world, that is shared with a plurality of other living creatures. Stressing natality and plurality as equally important 'existential realities' allows for a more 'social' definition of finitude. Here the role of language, embodiment and affective relationships as conditions of human life comes to the fore. Finiteness and contingency then find their expressions in the interrelations which follow from the conditions of embodied, plural existence. This also allows redefining authenticity as a critical stance we take towards the political and social world. To start with the 'existential realities' of embodied existence makes it possible to develop a philosophical anthropology that, in difference to former humanist accounts, takes its beginning not from a notion of universal rationality, but from the conditions that enable human lives.[18]

Stressing the role of relationality for human existence, also makes it possible to consider language as an 'existential reality'. The 'linguistic turn' has not only played an important role in critiques of modern epistemological projects and the notion of the sovereign subject related to them, it also brings to the fore that human existence is 'plural' in the

[18] As White argues "Weak ontologies do not proceed by categorical positings of, say, human nature of telos […] Rather, what they offer are figurations of human being in terms of certain existential realities, most notably language, mortality or finitude, natality, and the articulation of "sources of the self." White, 2000, p.9.
In my approach these existential realities are articulated slightly different than for White. While "sources of the self," which is supposed to be the human capability to give definition to itself against some 'source' that elicits awe, wonder, or reverence, will play little role in my exposition – if one does not count the ethical importance of the other as such a source – I highlight the importance of relationality and plurality, and the relationship between mind, psyche, and body in a form that is not present in White's discussion. Moreover, particularly in *Ethos of a Late-Modern Citizen* White concentrates on finitude almost exclusive by reference to the notion of mortality. As I will show in this chapter, however, it appears politically and ethically more productive if finitude is defined not primarily with reference towards my own, singular mortality, but as my inability to know and control my environment and the other persons I encounter within it.

sense that it is always already shared with others. Moreover, despite it being a social and shared practice language awards each speaker the possibility to bring something genuinely new into the world – in this sense it is also related to the human condition of natality. Engagement with language as an 'existential reality' of human existence helps to formulate a critique of the sovereign subject and forward an alternative notion of the self as social, situated and finite being. In the following two sections I will expand this argument by drawing on Cavell's discussion of Wittgenstein and ordinary language philosophy, and Butler's engagement with 'deconstructive' or 'poststructuralist' notions of language. While Cavell's and Butler's approaches to language overlap to a great extent, they differ in the role they give to the singular speaker. This difference is partly due to their starting points. Cavell considers how we become competent speakers of a language by defining ourselves in relation to our linguistic communities. While he acknowledges that we learn to speak by being instructed about linguistic rules and concepts, it is only when we start to go beyond our teaching and project rules and concepts into new contexts that we become 'subjects' or competent speakers. By contrast, for Butler an individual becomes a subject within language by coming to accept the normative structure of language. The subject comes to define itself in relation to linguistic and societal norms and in this way becomes recognisable to others. Read together their approaches bring to the fore how selfhood emerges from a tension between conventionality and change. While on the one hand we can only speak by being integrated within a pre-existing social and linguistic world, on the other hand each of us is able to use language in new and unique ways. This, in turn, helps to change those social realities that are interlinked with our use of language, and, moreover, condition our very understanding of selfhood.

Language, knowledge and taking responsibility for oneself

Cavell's critique of the subject takes its bearings from his engagement with scepticism. For him, scepticism is an unavoidable effect of modern notions of epistemology which, in turn, are closely linked to a fallacious understanding of how meaning is established in language. Reconsidering the role of scepticism in modern thought, however, allows for a re-appreciation of the self in social, political and moral terms. Cavell's discussion of scepticism and language thus helps us to understand selfhood as openness to, or acceptance of, finitude and sociality. This section concentrates on the way Cavell differentiates his understanding of the self from an early modern 'epistemological' one. This shows more concretely how his notion of the self links selfhood to concepts of community and moral responsibility.

In the notion of the modern subject Cavell rejects the subject possesses a potentially infinite capacity to gain objective knowledge of the world. This idea, he argues, hinges on a misrepresentation of the way meaning is established in language. By understanding language as a 'mirror of the world', modern conceptions of language have relied on the notion that there is a direct correlation between a given concept (signifier) and the object it relates to (signified).[19] Such an understanding makes it possible to maintain a notion of the subject that is not only able to grasp the 'truth' about the external world, but to express this 'truth' in a universal and objective language. The meaning of language is therefore seen as independent of the linguistic community or the specific speaker. Language appears as a sublime given, external to the speaker and corresponding directly to external reality. This picture of language, however, can be easily attacked and therefore engenders sceptical doubt. Accepting the 'mirror' notion of language, the sceptic would demand of

[19] See Rorty, 1979

linguistic criteria to deliver proof of the existence of a certain object – 'its *being* so'. When we realise that language cannot fulfil the role ascribed to it, that is, when the linguistic criteria fail to deliver certainty about the existence or 'essence' of a given object, sceptical doubt arises. For Cavell, scepticism is not wrong about identifying that language fails to establish with certainty the existence of an external object, but about expecting that it should. This misunderstands what criteria are supposed to do. Instead of establishing certainty about the existence of an object, criteria merely describe the identity of a certain concept - 'its being *so*.'[20] Cavell draws on Wittgenstein to argue that "criteria, in association with grammar, tell us 'what kind of object anything is' (sec.373), thus leaving open what kind of issue is posed by the sense of needing some further proof of existence."[21] In Cavell's view, the true aim of Wittgenstein's discussion of criteria is not to show the nonsensical character of scepticism, but to find out why the sceptical impulse arises. At the root of scepticism Wittgenstein would identify a 'craving for generality'. This craving means that we are unwilling to accept the particularity and conditionality of knowledge. The sceptical insight that language fails to establish with certainty the existence of the external world, however, calls the firm ground for knowledge into question.[22] Cavell thus argues against a metaphysical notion of language and philosophy that would allow us to transcend our own limited understanding of the world. To wish for firm and universal meaning of linguistic concepts is an expression of the human fantasy "to transcend itself, make itself inhuman," by overcoming precariousness and finitude. In more general terms, drawing on Wittgenstein's understanding of language, Cavell claims that many intellectual and practical problems humanity faces do not stem from human finitude, or the inability to find firm ontological and epistemological ground, but from the

[20] Cavell, 1999, p. 44, 45

[21] Cavell, 2005 c, p. 166

[22] As Rorty phrases it, the critique of the 'modern' view of language is then one way of criticising a strand of modern philosophy that would expect of philosophy "what we once thought religion might do—take us right outside language, history, and finitude and put us in the presence of the atemporal." Rorty, 2005, p. 17

denial of finitude and our craving for an unmovable foundation. The sceptic impulse, triggered by the wish for epistemic certainty, is thus an expression of existential fear.[23]

The relationship between scepticism, language and epistemology has an important normative dimension. In Cavell's view, scepticism, just as the modern notion of the omniscient subject, presupposes a clear separation of subject and world. Only if the subject stands apart, the external world can appear as an object about which we could gather knowledge (or fail to do so).[24] To assume that the human subject can inhabit an Archimedean point, however, has dramatic political and ethical consequences: to see oneself as separated from the world allows for a denial of *responsibility* for it. Denying its close entanglement with the world, the subject either assumes a sense of sovereignty, where the world appears as an external object which needs to be mastered, or, by inversion, a sense of helplessness, an inability to influence the world at all, a state Cavell calls 'deprivation of voice.'[25] Such deprivation, however, would entail a loss of meaning. While he criticises the notion of the subject, Cavell takes the experience of being removed from the world seriously. It is a standing possibility for human existence. He identifies philosophy as one way to engage with this condition, where we seek to overcome our sense of separation by trying to understand that "the world's presentness to

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23 As Cavell states: "Horror is the title I am giving to the perception of the precariousness of human identity, to the perception that it may be lost or invaded, that we may be, or may become, something other than we are, or take ourselves for; that our origins as human beings need accounting for, and are unaccountable." Cavell, 1999, p. 418

24 Richard Rorty points out that Cavell in part I and II of *The Claim of Reason* conflates three notions of scepticism: "the "professional" philosopher's skepticism created by what Reid called "the theory of ideas" (the theory that analyses perception in terms of immediately, certainly known givens)"; "the Kantian, Romantic worry about whether the words we use have any relation to the way the world actually is in itself" and the notion of 'standing outside the world' alluded to here. He argues that Cavell is unable to proof that these three types of scepticism are intimately connected. I will sidestep this argument here, however, and instead follow Cavell's argumentation.

25 As Cavell argues "that experience I have called "seeing ourselves outside the world as a whole," looking in at it, as we now look at some objects form a position among others. … I have found sometimes presents itself to me as a sense of powerlessness to know the world, or to act upon it; I think it is also working in the existentialist's (or say, Santayana's) sense of the precariousness and arbitrariness of existence, the utter contingency in the fact that things are as they are." Cavell, 1999, p. 236

us cannot be a function of knowing."[26] Instead, Cavell claims that "[t]he world is to be accepted."[27] While such acceptance is not a simple task, it starts from grasping the possibility of a self that is both non-sovereign *and* capable of agency. Knowledge, both of oneself and of external objects or other living beings, only becomes possible via an active engagement with the world.

To examine how meaning is established in language is one way of learning to accept our situatedness within a social world. Communication with others here becomes the contingent ground of meaning. In this argumentation linguistic activities cannot be seen in isolation from the background in which they take place. That "[l]anguage has no essence" implies that our understanding of concepts relies on agreement with other speakers.[28] These agreements, as it turns out, are fragile. There is nothing which guarantees meaning. While we learn what a word means in a certain context, to become a competent speaker we have to be able to use a word in a new, unexpected context. This, however, relies on a creative act of the speaker. As Cavell argues:

> We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected … to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures that this projection will take place … just as noting insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humour and of significance and of fulfilment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal … - all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls 'forms of life'. Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this. It is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying.[29]

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[26] Hammer, 2002, p. 56

[27] Cavell, 1976, p. 234; Cavell claims with Wittgenstein and Heidegger that the existence of the world is beyond demonstration and there will always remain "some question as to the mystery of the existence, or the being, of the world." ibid, p. 241

[28] To make this argument Cavell draws on Wittgenstein's discussion of the word 'game.' There are many very different activities we call 'game.' It would be misleading to look for something all activities called 'game' have in common. To know whether we rightly apply the name 'game' to something, we rely on our agreement with others. See Cavell, 1976, p.50

[29] Ibid, p. 52

Cavell stresses that a fragile linguistic community relies on the active engagement of speakers. He does not only point out the importance of community, of shared 'forms of life', for the working of language, but also emphasises the personal contribution we make to words when we apply them in a new context. Thus agreement or communality and unique selfhood or agency stand is a productive tension with each other. Because of the taut relationship between the singular being and the wider community of speakers, communication can always fail. Every new speech-act is a testing of community, where I try out if others share enough with me to accept the projection I have made. Our personal contributions to words then at the same time engender the possibility for the break-down of communication and allow for creative change of language, necessary for any functioning of language. In this sense, individual speech (and arguably agency as such) is enabled by the engagement with others (I could not understand myself as a 'speaker' if what I 'say' is not recognised by anyone as language). The relationship between language and the self then goes in both direction. While the creative agency of the speaker enables the functioning of language, language, as a pre-existing structure, is also the occasion for the speaker to develop her uniqueness.

Importantly, becoming a creative speaker appears as a *voluntary* act for Cavell. Because speaking involves the danger of being misunderstood, we can always choose to remain silent. For Cavell, if and how we engage with others and the way we use language shows something about ourselves as unique beings. At the same time as the individual renews her connectedness to others by communicating with them, she defines herself as autonomous. In this formulation relationality and separateness exist together, depending on each other. That revealing our unique selfhood is an activity we have to actively pursue means we can also choose not to do so, and thus remain undistinguished. We

'remain unknown', and therefore, as it were, unable to insert ourselves in a common human world. In Cavell's terms, however, this amounts to a refusal to *let yourself matter.* Letting yourself matter

> is to acknowledge not merely how it is with you, and hence to acknowledge that you want the other to care, at least to care to know. It is equally to acknowledge that your expressions in fact express you, that they are yours, that you are in them. This means allowing yourselves to be comprehended, something you can always deny. Not to deny it is, I would like to say, to acknowledge your body, and the body of your expressions, to be yours, you on earth, all there will ever *be* of you.[30]

In this sense, our engagement with language allows us to grasp ourselves as individual, finite, and embodied beings. As language relies on our connection with others it is only when acknowledging relationality that we encounter the possibility of acknowledging our own human selves.[31] While following Cavell's engagement with language thus allows it to understand selfhood both in term of situatedness within the world and as an active, deliberate stance we can take towards the world by engaging with it, this notion risks overemphasising the possibility of voluntaristic agency. When engaging with others through language, moreover, in Cavell view, individuals do not only develop a more authentic notion of selfhood, they also form language.

The notion that meaning is established in conversation with others takes further the insight that living in a shared world necessitates that everyone contributes to the form of this shared (linguistic) space. Language is not static – linguistic rules and concepts are flexible *because* each speaker is a unique and creative being. Every individual contributes to language, creatively altering concepts and linguistic rules by using or interpreting them

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30 Cavell, 1999, p. 383

31 As I will expand upon later in this chapter and return to in chapter four, the reference to the body shows that Cavell – like Butler – seeks to avoid linguistic idealism. Instead, he points to an interwovenness of physical bodies and 'bodies of expression.' Stressing the role of acknowledging your body also means that in exchange with others an identity is established for the self, which is at the same time changing and consistent. While who we are is developed by what we say, and thus seems unstable, these various expressions become unified as they are related to the same, but also changing, body.

in new and unexpected ways. Relating language to social norms, this provides for an understanding of agency where each individual has the possibility to alter our common social existence, albeit mostly not in a 'revolutionary' but in a 'reformative' sense. Because any new interpretation of a norm or concept relies on the others' acceptance, new projections should build upon already existing frameworks in order to maintain their intelligibility. In this sense, creative change is not so much the adding of something entirely new, but the rearrangement of the familiar, which allows for a new outlook. The insight that linguistic shifts (and our view of the social world) are often a rearrangement of what is already known, rather than a sudden rupture, also limits the voluntaristic tendency of Cavell's notion of the autonomous speaker. While the speaking subject is a creative and independent agent, she cannot step out of her social and linguistic community. Stressing the interrelation between singularity or autonomy on the one hand and connectivity on the other, Cavell reorientates the discussion of the modern subject, without rejecting modern thought as such. In this discussion, he thus takes the sceptic's experience of separation or loneliness seriously. While we might be situated within a wider social reality this does not preclude the possibility of feeling separated from others. How to live with the finitude of knowledge (about ourselves and others), and the wish to assert sovereignty and certainty, then is a standing and ultimately never completely surmountable task of human existence.

Cavell's notion that scepticism is a standing possibility of our life with others helps to bring the idea of the non-sovereign self more clearly into focus. It highlights the finitude and conditionality of knowledge as a condition of our life with others. Stressing that meaning is established in relation to a wider linguistic community establishes the self as a necessarily relational being. The notion of linguistic community forwarded so far,

however, is, in a certain sense, still too removed from a critical engagement with the social and political world. This is due to a decisive draw-back to Cavell's understanding of the community of speakers. For him meaning seems to be established in a conversation between equals, where neither power-relations nor the pervasive influence of historically established interconnections between linguistic and normative or social structures is given much weight. Turning to Butler's engagement with language serves as a first step to address the role of power for interpersonal relationships.

Language and the social critique of the subject

Butler's understanding of language is rooted in a close engagement with poststructuralist debates. This enables her to conceptualise language as a practice that is part of wider socio-historical structures. While she and Cavell engage in similar ways with the question how the meaning of concepts is established, Butler puts more emphasis on the way social power structures are connected to our understanding of epistemology, ontology and linguistic practices. This affirmation of the historicity and situatedness of linguistic practices and meaning brings a genealogical and political perspective to Butler's critique of the subject. The subject is therefore not only a philosophical notion of what it means to be human, but also expresses how we become recognisable to others through processes of subjection to social and linguistic norms. Butler thus interrogates how the need to correspond to a certain notion of universal subjectivity is experienced by the self as 'normative violence'. Moreover, concentrating on the role language plays for our understanding of gender and sex, she points out that, instead of assuming a notion of 'linguistic idealism', language is closely related to materiality. While the meaning of a

certain concept is not connected directly to the essence of a given object, it is also not established solely by agreement between speakers. Understanding materiality and language as complexly interrelated allows Butler to emphasise the role language plays in moulding social reality, without denying the importance of embodied existence. While Butler, just as Cavell, understands meaning and linguistic (or social) rules as necessarily malleable, her poststructuralist discussion of language does not highlight individual agency in the same way Cavell does. However, even though her position stresses the importance of hierarchies and power as an integral part of social life, her idea of critical agency is not as far apart from Cavell's understanding of the self's creative approach to language as it might seem at first glance.

The critique of the subject Butler forwards is not only concerned with the definition of a philosophical concept, but also with the question how unique individuals come to 'occupy' the position of the subject. The term 'subject' then designates an 'attainable' linguistic category, which is analytically distinct from the living body or the individual. As a universal category the subject denotes those criteria (i.e. rationality and sovereignty) a being has to correspond to in order to be recognisable as human by its social environment. Arguing that these criteria are not 'natural' properties of every human being means that we, as unique existents, have to 'learn' or acquire certain abilities or traits by following social and linguistic norms. As Butler writes: “[i]ndividuals come to occupy the site of the subject (the subject simultaneously emerges as a “site”), and they enjoy intelligibility only to the extent that they are, as it were, first established in language. The subject is the linguistic occasion for the individual to achieve and reproduce intelligibility, the linguistic condition of its existence and agency.”[32] Butler argues that the subject is not only a modern philosophical concept, but that this notion is closely linked to wider social and

[32] Butler, 1997, p.10-11

political debates, mirroring the structures of western societies. Connecting a philosophical critique to a socio-political one, Butler thus agrees with other feminist and post-colonial writer, who argue that in the modern formulation the subject has been not only understood as sovereign, but also as white, male, bourgeois, and heterosexual. Instead of describing a 'universal' and 'objective' cognitive power, the subject's capacity for rationality has been historically connected to categories such as race and gender. In turn, the cultural contingency of these categories has been disguised by the claim that they are based on biological facts. The task of critical thought about the subject is then to reveal the historical contingency and contestability of allegedly essential or factual categories.

In a double sense, then, the subject is 'a structure in formation.' On the one hand, the commonly accepted definition of 'the subject' is open to reformulation. What we mean by 'subject' evolves in the course of philosophical and political debates (e.g. on the notion of universal human rights that would include women and people of colour). On the other hand, every human being defines itself in relation to current norms of the subject and, in this sense, is in an always ongoing process of 'inhabiting the place of the subject.' As both movements overlap, we strive to become recognisable in terms of the subject and at the same time take part in a process of negotiating what we mean by 'subject'. The term 'subject' then designates a paradoxical grammatical situation where we try to put into language the story of the emergence of something which, as yet, does not exist in language. In this sense, the subject is talked about prior to its emergence, as a not-yet, or a never fully attainable or defined ideal. Thus, any notion of the subject must come belatedly. There cannot be a clear distinction between past and present, as the emergence of the subject is at the same time prior to our existence as subjects and always ongoing. The making of subjects, and the precarious situation of the subject this making or

becoming entails, is never a closed accomplishment. Importantly, however, while for Butler the subject is a structure in formation, there is no final teleological goal where 'true' universality would be reached, or where the concrete individual would be able to fully 'embody' the subject. While it is possible to strive towards a more inclusive understanding of the subject, its definition will always rely on an outside or 'other'. In other words, one can only understand what is meant by 'subject' if one could also point towards someone (or something) who is *not* a subject. The important insight of Butler's discussion, which will become clearer when we turn to her notion of language, is that any ontological notion entails a moment of exclusion.

The emphasis on the socio-historical character of concepts puts into focus how language is interconnected to our perception of external reality. When Butler stresses the close connection between language and social norms this highlights the intersection between materiality and language in terms that have not come to the fore clearly enough in my exposition of Cavell's notion of criteria. When concepts relate not directly to an external reality, but are defined in a shared social practice, this risks to sever language from materiality. Arguing that what is meant by 'subject', 'human' or 'woman' is discursively constructed makes the connection between those terms and actual existing, living, human beings somewhat unclear. Turning to the connection between materiality and language is thus necessary to avoid slipping from a 'mirror' notion of language, where language expresses material reality, into a position of linguistic idealism– the notion that only what is spoken or written about exists.[33] Against those readings of Butler which have, in my view wrongly, interpreted her as stating that the sexed female or male body is entirely a

[33] As we will see below Arendt, albeit taking a very different argumentative route, is close to an idealist position. Cavell, by contrast, does not wish to argue for linguistic idealism, but in fact understands the connection between body and mind or language and materiality in terms similar to Butler's, as we will see when we reconsider his notion of scepticism in relation to other minds in chapter three.

product of discursive practices, she maintains that bodies and materiality cannot be reduced to a linguistic effect. In her understanding, the connection between materiality and language cannot be put into terms of priority – that there is first, or primarily, one determining the other. Butler does not argue that there are no 'real' sexed bodies. The decisive point of her discussion is that there is no way of *perceiving* the body prior to language. She thus argues that "it must be possible to claim that the body is not known or identifiable apart from the linguistic coordinates that establish the boundaries of the body without thereby claiming that the body is nothing other than the language by which it is known."[34] While language is not prior to our perception of materiality, both are seen to have an effect on each other. At the same time as language seeks to describe the external reality as we perceive it, the way we speak also shapes our external (and internal) realities.[35] For Butler's discussion of sex and gender the performative character of language is of utmost importance. With the term performativity she denotes the reiterative power of discourse, which produces the phenomena it regulates and constrains. She argues that we come to accept our body as sexed and as connected to a distinct gender identity through linguistic invocation. We thus come to understand the *significance* of certain bodily features by 'being called' a girl or a boy. The statement 'it's a girl' at the birth of a baby then is not only a description of a fact but a performative speech-act. Uttered repeatedly in various forms and situations, being identified as a girl would have the effect of *making* someone a girl, not by establishing a sexed body where there was no body before, but by giving social meaning and importance to a certain set of bodily features. Becoming a sexed body then requires the person's acceptance of the social and linguistic criteria that are related to the term 'girl' and at the same time accepting that

[34] Quoted in Thiem, 2008, p. 26

[35] This notion is also expressed by Austin's theory of speech-acts to which both Butler and Cavell refer. Speech acts, Austin claims, are categorically distinct from statements, because they are not simply true or false, but constitute an action. As Austin writes "if a person makes an utterance of this sort we should say that he is *doing* something rather than merely *saying* something."Austin, 1970, p. 235. See Hammer 2002, p. 149

these criteria refer to her. With the idea of performativity, then, Butler rejects the Cartesian notion that there is a material body prior to discourse. For her the borders of the body are constructs "shaped by political forces with strategic interests in keeping that body bounded and constituted by the markers of sex." This means that the borders of the body are shifting and constructed; a body with contours that are "clearly marked as the taken-for-granted ground or surface" is a construction itself.[36] To make this clear, the performative effect of 'being called a girl' is *not* that a body develops certain female attributes because someone said so. Butler does not argue that bodies, prior to speech would not 'have' visible genitalia. What is important in her argument is rather that a) which physical markers are decisive for the ways we understand our role in society is not a biological but a socially contingent distinction; and that b) rejecting these naming processes comes at a high social cost. Only by introducing the infant into a linguistic and social order where people are divided into two clearly distinguished groups do these bodily markers take on their whole significance. To become named in a socially significant way is necessary for us to become recognisable subjects.[37]

Instead of reducing materiality to language, then, Butler calls for the rethinking of the relation between language and matter in a way that echoes Jacques Derrida's thought on this issue. For him, the relation between language and matter can be understood in terms of radical contamination, where the possibility for a clear-cut ontological distinction between the two no longer exists. This means that the ontological understanding of words

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36 Butler, 1990, pp.164,165

37 Butler often refers to cases of intersexual people to show how difficult it is to live in societies, which are structured along a binary-gender system, if one cannot follow this division. Butler's view of the questionable biological ground of sexual distinction into two clearly defined groups has been given support by recent discussions regarding the way biological sex is defined (e.g. for Olympic sports) where at least three sometimes not congruent definitions of sex can be used (form of genitalia, DNA, and hormone levels). As Anne Fausting-Sterling argues "While male and female stand on the extreme ends of a biological continuum, there are many bodies [...] that evidently mix together anatomical components conventionally attributed to both males and females. The implications of my argument for a sexual continuum are profound. If nature really offers us more than two sexes, then it follows that our current notions of masculinity and femininity are cultural conceits." Fausto-Sterling, 2000

as immaterial, corresponding directly to a material world is called into question. As Butler states: “every effort to refer to materiality takes place through a signifying process which, in its phenomenology, is always already material.”[38]

The connection between language and materiality is also important if we wish to interrogate how both linguistic and social meaning is established. Similar to Cavell, Butler argues that changes in linguistic signification are created through processes of repetition which are inherent to the use of language. For Butler, however, what is at stake is not only that we can understand what someone means by a certain concept, but that an utterance has performative power. This power does not proceed primarily from the speaker's will or intention, but from convention.[39] If it is convention that gives power to the speech-act, it is repetition that establishes convention. In this formulation then the *effect* of an utterance neither lies in the person who utters it, nor in the utterance itself. Instead, the meaningfulness and performative power of a speech-act relies on conventionality, that is, on both the context in which it is uttered and the previous repetitions on which each utterance can draw. This argument, however, has important implications if we consider the *responsibility* speakers have for the effects of their speech-acts. Butler argues that the effects of our speech cannot be linked *exclusively* to the intentionality of the speaker - the speaker is not solely responsible for the effects of what she said. In her discussion of hate-speech Butler points out that hateful speech acts rely for their effectiveness on the societal climate in which they take place. Hurtful hate-speech would gain its power from its relation to social realities of discrimination and the fact that it echoes previous speech-acts. In the sexist slur we thus hear the chorus of misogynists who have spoken before, and recognise a social reality where people are

[38] Butler, 1993, p.68
[39] White, 2000, p.82

disadvantaged in a variety of social and economic respects based on an understanding of subjectivity that excludes those with body features recognised as female. This, however, should not be misunderstood as arguing that a speaker would not be responsible for the effects her speech-act has on the addressee. A speaker who shares my historical and cultural background *knows* about the societal structures that give her speech its effect and thus can intend the harm it causes (even though knowledge here does not have to take the form of conscious or explicit formulation of societal rules). Butler merely denies that the *power* of any utterance can be ascribed *solely* to the intention speaker. If I call someone a sunflower, because I really dislike this flower and mean to hurt the other person, my speech act might not have the power to hurt the other person, no matter what my intentions are.

Butler's discussion of the need for repetition reinforces Cavell's position that linguistic (and social) change is a gradual process. The notion that the meaning of concepts is established through repetition explains how signification can change over time. In the process of repetition an element of divergence is introduced. Butler here draws on Derrida's understanding of iterability where the process of a gradual shift in signification is a necessary moment in the functioning of language. The term iterability signifies that any word which can be said by one human being to another must, if it is at all comprehensible, be repeatable in a different context. Every iteration is, therefore, a reiteration, we cannot speak without repeating, but each repetition also introduces (or has the potential to introduce) difference. Despite their closeness, Butler's engagement with the concept of iterability suggests a more 'impersonal' understanding of change than Cavell argues for with his notion of the individual's personal contribution to language. For Butler, linguistic change is not so much due to wilful human practice but an unavoidable

effect of repetitions which take place at different points in time, in different environments or between different speakers. This also pertains to the concept of the subject itself. As Butler argues, "subjects are constituted through norms which, in their reiteration, produce and shift the terms through which subjects are recognized."[40] The notion of reiteration then allows for a flexible and reciprocal relationship between the individual and the norm, without ascribing the same level of agency, autonomy and creativity to the individual as Cavell at times seems to assume. While we become subjects by learning certain modes of behaviour and speech, that is, by entering social life, the norms that govern our common lives are reformulated in this process of repetition. In this reformulation, however, the individual agent is often not able to direct or foresee how norms will develop.

With the notion of reiteration a difference *in emphasis* in Cavell's and Butler's engagement with language as a communal practice comes to the fore.[41] In the deconstructive notion of speech-acts Butler adopts context is not only "the main factor in accounting for the performance of the performative," it also generates uncontrollable "semantic play and rupture."[42] Here it is not the singular agent, but our forms of speaking and living together that create change in ways that are often unforeseeable for the singular actor. By contrast, for Cavell, "although the context surely should not be forgotten … the absence of an originating, isolated ego cogito … does not imply the rejection altogether of some notion of intention or responsibility."[43] In Cavell's argumentation, giving up on the notion of intentionality in the performative aspect of speech-acts would amount to a refusal of the speaker to take the responsibility for the effects of her speech.

I would, however, not read Butler (or Derrida for that matter) as denying the importance

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40 Butler, 2009, p.3

41 Cavell brings this difference to the point when discussing Derrida's, in his view mistaken, reading of Austin. See Cavell 1994, p. 100 ff.

42 Hammer, 2002, p.162

43 Hammer, 2002, p.162

of intentionality, and the necessity to take responsibility, altogether. Butler admittedly gives more force to the role of context in terms of societal and linguistic structures. Arguing that language is part of a wider structure of social norms which are saturated with historically sedimented relations of power Butler pays more attention than Cavell to how the relative rigidity of linguistic and social norms can be experienced as oppressive for the individual. Linguistic and social structures restrict the forms of individuality and subjectivity we will be able to develop. The subject is formed (in language), and any subversion of the conditions of its emergence comes at a high cost to our possibility of existing as subjects.[44] Butler's position thus differs from Cavell's (to an extent or in emphasis) by giving greater centrality to the role of power in the constitution of meaning. While the Cavellian community of speakers appears as democratic, in so far as every speaker has the same power to alternate the meaning of words and seek acceptance from others, in Butler's position the inequalities of society are taken into account. Here speakers are not equally competent to influence the meaning of concepts. Instead, some have more power to speak in hegemonic ways than others. If we recognise the interrelation between ontological formulations, power, politics and speech a more conscious effort of critique becomes necessary to allow for directed normative change. This entails an analysis of how signification in language is related to the structure society takes and the position it affords to speakers. While acknowledging that it might be difficult for those who are not acceptable as public speakers to influence social discourse, Butler, however, does not deny the possibility to wilfully change the meaning of concepts, by analysing their function or wilfully reinterpreting their meaning.

In such movements of critique the structuralist legacy in Butler's understanding of

[44] In my understanding, Cavell is aware of these costs, however, he discusses this more in terms of moral perfectionism than in his engagement with language.

language comes to the fore. In structuralist linguistic theory concepts are defined not via the agreement of speakers, but by their relationship to and difference from other concepts. To understand the meaning of a term, we thus need to be aware of the position this term takes within a wider structure of signification. That is, the meaning of 'apple' is neither established solely in reference to actual apples shown to the language-learner, nor is the meaning established because we all agree to call this apple. Instead, the meaning of the term 'apple' also relies on its relationship to other terms such as 'fruit', 'pear', 'cherry', but also 'vegetable' or 'meat', and so on. This notion goes back to a structuralist understanding of language where in the "symbolic every sign invoke the totality of which it functions."[45] For Butler's notion of how meaning is established in language, Derrida's deconstructive reading of canonical texts which expands on structuralist theory is of particular importance. It reveals that concepts often appear in dichotomous pairs, where the meaning of one term can only be established by its opposite or by what it excludes (e.g. in his reading of Rousseau he points towards the relationship between 'nature/culture' and 'speech/writing'). In this relationship one of the concepts overshadows the other – the dominant concept then at first sight holds positive characteristics at the expense of the second, derivative concept. This stresses that defining a concept in definite terms is only possible through exclusion. In such a linguistic system, meaning is not solely attributable to communal practice but works through the establishment of relations of hierarchical difference (mind/body, male/female). It is this differentiation that provides the horizon and condition of the possibility of intelligibility.[46] A deconstructive reading, by paying attention to the 'blind spots' of a text subverts this logic of exclusion. In this way the dependency of the 'stronger' or 'original' of the two concepts on the 'secondary' concept is shown. It actually relies on the other for its definition. By showing their dependency and

[45] Butler, 2000, p. 41
[46] Thiem, 2008, p.27

the impossibility of clear demarcation between the two concepts, their hierarchical relation is undermined. What is at stake is thus not only to subvert the relationship between two terms, which appear to rely on a hierarchical differentiation. It is also important to call into question the clear demarcation of any linguistic concept. The problem is understood by both Arendt and Cavell as the difficulty of summarizing a multiplicity of unique beings under a universal term. The issue is not only that the linguistic concept of 'woman' has been defined in relation to 'man', but also that it tries to ascribe universal properties, a singular identity, or an unambiguous definition, to a multiplicity of living women, whose commonalities and differences could not be subsumed in such definite terms.

The question of how multifarious and unique ways of living relate to 'general' or 'universal' concepts and rules also drives Butler's analysis. Understanding the normative force of these concepts she asks if and how life that is not subsumable under a dominant universal can find social recognition. Providing a somewhat 'thicker' explication of how resignification can take place in the absence of the disengaged subject, Butler's combination of linguistic theory with social, political and historical analyses points out that norms are not always unambiguous. Because the concepts, terms and social rules are formed and developed over long temporal periods and in various cultural fields, their meaning at times overlap or contradict each other. Again, it might help to think here of the notion of gender-identities. What we understand by 'woman' does not rely on one single definition. Instead, what someone understands by 'woman' relies on her acquaintance with a multiplicity of discourses, from artistic, religious or historical formulations of femininity over the linguistic definition of 'woman' in relation to 'man', 'girl' and so on, to the demands of contemporary work- and family-life. The ruptures in these various

discourses, where they contradict or clash, allow for their 'mutation' and development. Such ruptures are thus the occasions in which critical thought can set in. In how we *use* these gaps or ambiguities Butler locates the individual's agency. She points to a sense of agency as struggle between the self and the norm, where the self formulates itself in reference to, but at a certain distance from, the norm. Butler explicates:

> The norm does not produce the subject as its necessary effect, nor is the subject fully free to disregard the norm that inaugurates its reflexivity … If there is an operation of agency or, indeed, freedom in this struggle, it takes place in the context of an enabling and limiting field of constraint. … This struggle with the unchosen conditions of one's life, a struggle—an agency—is also made possible, paradoxically, by the persistence of this primary condition of unfreedom.[47]

In the following section I wish to consider in more detail how Butler understands our "struggle with the unchosen conditions" of life where agency is related to unfreedom. By moving from a linguistic understanding of norms to one that concentrates on the social, historical and psychic dimensions of normativity I want to establish a more nuanced understanding of how we come into being as non-sovereign subjects. The non-sovereign self is neither free to disregard social norms nor is it 'identical' with them. In a manner that is largely absent in Cavell's linguistic discussion, Butler's approach stresses the 'violence' that is inherent in our relation to norms. Moreover, she brings to the fore the bodily and affective dimension of non-sovereign, relational human existence, which have so far remained in the background.

Embodied and affective being – Butler on genealogy and psychoanalysis

[47] Butler, 2005, p.19 As Butler makes clear in an earlier text, the formation of the subject always relies on an 'exclusionary matrix' which simultaneously produces "a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet 'subjects' but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject. The abject designates here precisely those 'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated." 1993, p. 3

By turning to Butler's engagement with Foucault on the one hand and psychoanalysis on the other, I wish to highlight how we are connected to society by bodily and affective bonds. Our bodily needs constitute us as social beings. Moreover, embodiment is related closely to the psychic development of the self. Instead of being merely a cognitive notion, selfhood is to a great extent constituted by emotional bonds. Turning to consider how social norms, embodiment and psychic needs are related, I argue that each of these dimensions of non-sovereign selfhood is related power. As a shared practice power structures both larger societal discourses and personal human relationships. The non-sovereign self thus appears as interwoven with mechanisms of power, which at the same time enable and restrict agency.

When she considers how we come to occupy the site of the subject Butler combines a deconstructive approach to language with a Foucaultian, genealogical account. Starting from the insight that language as such is not neutral, a genealogical approach attempts to dislodge certain concepts from their 'natural' place in our thinking by revealing their historical situatedness. The decisive result of genealogy then is to call into question the allegedly self-evident position of notions that are central to societal organisation. Genealogy shows that the modern concept of the subject interlaces a philosophical discourse with the politico-historical formation of the modern state and the role of the modern citizen (the subject-citizen).[48] This makes visible how mechanisms of power structure not only society but also our notions of embodiment and selfhood. Power is then understood as a combination of social, interpersonal, and private practices of regulation. Relating the notion of the subject as the self-governing, autonomous being to the notion

[48] It is important to understand two notions of the subject as interwoven. On the one hand the philosophical *subjectum* is the ground for knowledge and action, on the other hand the term of the *subjectus* refers to the subordinated – the subjects of the state. However, the movements in which the human becomes the ultimate subject of philosophy as Heidegger has pointed out, and the political-cultural shift in which the subject of the king becomes the citizen of the state are closely connected. See for a more thorough discussion Balibar, 2011

of the citizen of the modern state, Foucault shows how these concepts are closely interwoven with mechanisms of modern government, he calls governmentality. The term designates the structural entanglement between governmental control and techniques of self-government linked to our understanding of body and mind, morality, social responsibility and self-improvement. This entanglement, where the self takes increasing responsibility for 'governing itself' appears as the most important paradigm-shift constituting western modernity. The making of the modern subject in its bodily form then involves the development of techniques of self-control that take the place of direct force. Through the regulation of bodily activities relating for example to hygiene or sexuality, the bodies that make up the state are rendered more controllable, making the subject a reliable citizen who increases the economic productivity of the collective state-body.[49] The subject thus comes into being through its relations to power. In this understanding, power is no longer concentrated in one place, but is dispersed in all social relations and discourses of knowledge. Here being a subject is linked to an ongoing process of subjection, where the self learns to regulate its bodily activities.

Importantly, the very notion of the bifurcated self, split into body and mind, is formed by our relation to power as a disciplinary and creative activity. The process of subjection creates an understanding of the self that follows the division of reality into a material (the body, external objects) and an immaterial (ideas, mind, the transcendental) component. Power is then no longer a violent force working upon pre-existing bodies. Instead "the materiality of the body—indeed, materiality itself—is produced by and in direct relation to the investment of power."[50] Just as language not merely describes a pre-given, objective, external world, in the Focaultian account there cannot be "an independent

[49] Lorey, 2012, pp. 39, 43, 44
[50] Butler, 1997 a, p. 91

materiality, a static surface or site" on which power would then come to bear. Instead, as Butler states, "the body is that for which materialization and investiture are coextensive."[51] By coming to understand oneself as a body in relation to social norms we grasp ourselves as beings that are separate from each other and the external world. In the Foucaultian account the 'soul' or interiority of the subject is produced by internalising an outside demand. Societal disciplinary power, which is epitomised for example by the ways modern prisons are run by employing practices of regulation and control, forces us to "approximate an ideal, a norm of behaviour, a model of obedience." In this way "individuality is rendered coherent, totalized, made into the discursive and conceptual possession of the prison."[52] The normative ideal becomes the psychic identity of the subject, what Foucault calls 'soul'. Reflexivity is here understood as triggered by a demand from the outside – by governmental power. By understanding oneself as a being whose behaviour needs to be monitored the 'self' as such comes into existence. The 'self' emerges as the thing that is found lacking, and therefore has to be formed and educated. Importantly, in a reversal of the common sense understanding, it is here our 'inside' – our mind and emotions – that is unfree, because it consists of the internalised demand of the social norm. The body, on the other hand, emerges in our consciousness as that which is outside of the norm. It is the body that appears as 'free' of societal control and thus needs to be regimented. To be sure, however, this does not imply that the body exists prior to the soul. Instead both are only perceived as distinct entities *through* the reflective movement, where internalised societal rules are applied to the unruly body. The body only emerges as a site of interest, as 'my' body – a thing belonging to me that can be observed, through the internalisation of external rules. In other words, our whole awareness of our bodily existence is established because the soul, as the internalised function of external demands,

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[51] ibid
[52] ibid

seeks to act upon the body. However, as specifically Foucault's later writing makes clear, these workings of power should not be understood as processes of total domination. Instead, it is precisely through the creative aspect of power that the possibility for resistance is given and social rules are reformulated. Disciplinary power produces a certain sense of excitement where bodily desires and resistances are created by the very discourses that seek to control them.[53] Subjection then describes our "fundamental dependency on a discourse we never chose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency."[54] In this sense, "the subject emerges both as the *effect* of a prior power and as the *condition of possibility* for a radically conditioned form of agency."[55] It is precisely by noting that we do not choose the conditions of our emergence that an understanding of the fundamental role of power is expressed. While the subject then takes part in the (re)production of the conditions of governmentality, it is in this process that the very condition for agency and reiterative change is produced.[56]

To understand the becoming of subjects in terms of subjection reinforces the insight that our ability to command and grasp our bodies outside of social norms is limited. The close relation between concepts of embodiment and social norms points towards the insight that our very 'having a body' is a contingent, social notion. It is part of the wider formulation of the modern subject that the body emerges as an entity or 'thing' separate from the mind or 'soul'. To highlight that the body/mind division is not only a philosophical or linguistic but also a socio-political construct allows us to ask after the social functions of understanding the 'natural' body as subordinated to the 'rational' mind. Understanding body and mind, emotions, thought and the possibility of their expression in language as

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53 See Foucault, 1990
54 Butler, 1997 a, p. 2, p. 83
55 Ibid, p.14-5
56 Lorey, 2012, p. 52

closely connected and still not coextensive helps us to cast a critical view on notions of the self, where within a finite body an infinite mind or soul would reside. Moreover, to stress the connection between thinking, affect and the body also helps to understand more clearly how we are established as subjects in relation to a wider sociality, but still come into being as riven by contradictions, by our uniqueness and our critical view of those very conditions that seem to enable and limit our agency and possibilities for survival. In Butler's engagement with Foucault, however, the subject seems to come into focus in the first place as a result of subordination, where a turn towards or against the self inaugurates the subject at the same time that it threatens the subject.[57] Trying to establish how or why we would subordinate ourselves to norms that we perceive as violent and forbidding, Butler turns to Freudian notions of foreclosure and desire.[58] Engaging with psychoanalysis, then, Butler highlights how we come into being as subjects both at a certain distance from the social norm and nevertheless closely attached to it. This turn to

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[57] Butler, 1997 a, pp. 3, 10. See also Oliver, 2001 p. 61

[58] In *The Psychic Life of Power* Butler discusses the Freudian and Kleinian notions of mourning and melancholia in order to establish how we come into being as gendered subjects, who define themselves through the love to the opposite gender. Establishing one's gender identity she argues could be envisioned as a process of internalization of the lost object of love. This allows for an understanding of normative gender roles, where we do no longer copy gender norms straightforwardly. Instead, by being compelled to reject our love for the primary care-giver of the same gender prior to internalising the gender identity this person stands for as a lost love-object, we develop an ambivalent relationship to the norm. More concretely, because societal norms foreclose our love to the same gender, the girl's love to the mother, or the boy's love to his father needs to be denied. When the girl has to state that she never loved and thus never lost the mother, the process of mourning is blocked. As the loss of the loved object cannot be openly grieved, the lost object becomes internalised and is thus saved. What is internalised, however, is not only the idealised notion of the lost object, but also the aggression towards this object, which we had to give up, and which has often also hurt us in other ways. By internalising both idealisation and accusation the self is established as reflective or split. This ambivalence marks a difference to the Foucaultian notion of subjection discussed above. Guilt here is not created by the normative demand as such but by our ambivalent emotional attachment to the object. As Butler remarks in reference to Klein, if the Freudian notion of melancholia means that when we come into existence, we invariably have to vanquish the other, the other person appears as what we have already lost. It therefore becomes marked as an object for aggression. Guilt emerges, "not in consequence of internalizing an external prohibition, but as a way of preserving the object of love from one's own potentially obliterating violence. Guilt serves the function of preserving the object of love, and, hence, of preserving love itself." Guilt thus has the function to keep our desire to kill the loved object in check. Guilt emerges in the course of melancholia not only, as the Freudian view would have it, to keep the dead object alive, but to keep the living object from "death," where death means the death of love, including the occasions of separation and loss. See Butler, 1997 a, pp. 26-7, 68-9, 80. These notions will play a role in chapter four, in this chapter, however, I concentrate on Butler's more recent engagement with psychoanalysis, where she turns foremost to the work of Jean Laplanche

psychoanalysis is particularly important because it highlights the personal and affective dimension of relationality – a notion that will guide my understanding of non-sovereign moral and political agency in the later parts of the thesis.

When we turn to the psychic dimension of becoming a subject, this brings the role of our personal relationships to others to the fore. These establish the self as a desiring being. In her most recent works Butler particularly discusses the Laplanchian notion of desire as developing from the infants initial dependency on the overbearing adult. Turning to the role of infancy for the becoming of the subject, she stresses how bodily dependency and the development of subjectivity are closely interrelated. The new-born needs the caring adult for its bodily survival. This necessitates the establishment of a psychic or emotional bond to the adult. The infant has to attach to its primary care-giver. In this sense, there is no choice but to love the other. Importantly, however, the adult/other is temporally and logically prior to the infant. This insight of the priority of the other is important for Laplanche's project of decentring the importance of drives. In difference to Freud, Laplanche claims that biological, inherent drives do not play a role in the development of the infant's relationship to the primary care-giver. Instead, it is the other, in form of the overbearing and enigmatic adult, who first *addresses* the infant. The unconscious is developed as a response to this address, an address the infant cannot avoid, but which is inscrutable and overwhelming. As the infant is unable to understand what the other wants it represses these excess demands. This first act of repression, however, is a deed that precedes any doer. The infant does not yet 'possess' an 'I' that acts, as the 'I' can only be established through the act of repression. The 'I' that emerges as a consequence of this primary repression will always retain traces of the enigmatic foreignness the infant first encounters in the address of the other. If we argue that the other is always there - “in the

place of where the ego will be", life "is constituted through a fundamental interruption, is even *interrupted prior to the possibility of any continuity.*"[59] Desires are established as a consequence of the internalisation of the enigmatic desires of others. They "carry the residue of those originally external desires" and therefore remain to a certain extent enigmatic and foreign to our adult selves.[60] The unconscious does not belong to the self, but it constitutes the very core of 'who' one is, who the self desires and can become attached to. An enigmatic address establishes the subject and dispossesses us from the start. As Butler sums up Laplanche's position: "The other is, from the start too much for me, enigmatic, inscrutable. This 'too-much-ness' must be handled and contained for something called an 'I' to emerge in its separateness." We should, however, not misunderstand this as claiming that the unconscious is "a topos into which this 'to-much-ness' is deposited." Instead, the unconscious is "formed as a psychic requirement of survival and individuation, as a way of managing—and failing to manage—that excess and thus as the persistent and opaque life of that excess itself."[61] In this formulation then, the self comes into being in relation to personal desires and social demands that are embodied and personalised in the relationship to singular others. Given that the relationships between infants and adult care-givers can be riven by conflicting desires and emotions, the norms and desires the infant internalises are not clear-cut copies of social discourses. Moreover, we are often unable to know or formulate these internalised desires. Importantly this establishes the adult self as a self that is *unknown* to itself – we are therefore non-sovereign, unable to account for our very desires and actions.

The notion of the self Butler forwards in her discussion of Laplanchian psychoanalysis is non-sovereign not only because it can never fully know and thus account for its own past.

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59 Butler, 2005, p.52
60 Ibid, p.71
61 Ibid, p.54

Moreover, the self Butler proposes is also not a clearly bounded entity, and thus non-sovereign in the sense that it does not possess a sharply outlined bodily or psychic self. Instead, the boundaries between self and other remain permeable. As Butler argues our bodily and psychic desires and needs establish the self as expansive and ecstatic. Instead of stressing exclusively how the external world impinges upon, and in this way creates, the self, we should also consider how the self continually oversteps its own boundedness. This notion of the ec-static subject is already discussed in one of Butler's earliest writings, *Subjects of Desire*. There she argues that the key scene of Hegel's *Phenomenology* can be read as a narrative of a consciousness that is perpetually outside itself. As negativity is seen as 'essential to self-articulation', the ecstatic subject must "suffer its own loss of identity again and again in order to realize its fullest sense of self."[62] Butler holds on to this reading of Hegel in her later work, arguing for example in *Undoing Gender* that Hegel had adopted Spinoza's notion of the *conatus* – the principle of self-persistence. When Hegel claims that desire is always a desire for recognition, Butler reads this notion as an extension of the Spinozistic position. She argues that "to persist in one's own being is only possible on the conditions that we are engaged in receiving and offering recognition."[63] However, while we desire to be recognised as who we are - 'to persist in our own being' - what recognition offers us is not self-identity. The subject in the Hegelian scene of mutual recognition, Butler argues, never returns to itself free of the other it sought recognition from. In this sense, 'relationality', the connection between the self and the other, becomes constitutive of what the self is. Reading Hegel Butler thus argues for an ecstatic notion of the self, where the self from the start emerges as not-self-identical and differentiated, outside of itself. In the scene of recognition the self "is always at a temporal remove from its former appearance, it is transformed through its

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62 Butler, 1999, p.13
63 Butler, 2004 a, p. 31

encounter with alterity."[64] In this reading, "[t]o be a self is ... to be at a distance form who one is, not to enjoy the prerogative of self-identity (what Hegel calls self-certainty)."[65] What is at stake in persisting in one's own being we encounter in the scene of recognition, however, is not bodily but social existence. The self cannot be for itself, even our drive to live only exists by being fostered by our environment. This notion of ecstasis sets the stage for Butler's later writing on emotional attachment where she emphasises how grief and mourning transform us by bringing our non-sovereignty into view. We grasp how our relations influence who we are by the often surprising and deep way in which we are undone by loss. Grief thus displays the way our relation to others "interrupts the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control."[66] Butler highlights how we are "undone by each other" by experiences of love, desire and loss, where we come to understand ourselves as deeply relational beings. For her "[t]he term 'relationality' structures the rupture in the relation we seek to describe, a rupture that is constitutive of identity itself."[67] The notion of ecstasis thus shows how connectivity and separation are two inseparable aspects of selfhood, which are brought to the fore in our relationships to other individuals (and their loss). As Butler writes:

> [i]f I have a boundary at all, or if a boundary can be said to belong to me, it is only because I have become separated from others, and it is only on condition of this separation that I can relate to them at all. So the boundary is a function of the relation, a brokering of difference, a negotiation in which I am bound to you in my separateness. If I seek to preserve your life, it is not only because I seek to preserve my own, but because who "I" am is nothing without your life, and life itself has to be rethought as this complex, passionate, antagonistic, and necessary set of relations to others.[68]

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64 Ibid, p.148
65 ibid
66 Ibid, p.19
67 ibid
68 Ibid, p.44

In her discussion of psychoanalysis Butler thus reconsiders both natality and mortality as social conditions of human life. For her, natality marks the dependency, bodily vulnerability and sociality of human beings. The fact that we are born as vulnerable, 'premature' beings establish us as closely linked to others. The human being as a 'new beginning' is thus only possible within a social network. While in this discussion of natality the meaning of each individual birth is imbued with communal or social significance, Butler also argues against the 'individualistic' Heideggerian notion of mortality. With Laplanche she maintains that the awareness of the other's mortality always comes before our awareness of our own death. The primary experience of mortality is thus not the Heideggerian awareness of my solitary being-towards-death, but relates to loss and mourning. As Butler states: "[t]he other … comes first, and this means that there is no reference to one's own death that is not at once a reference to the death of the other."[69] As my discussion of ethics and non-sovereign political communities hopes to show understanding finitude and natality in terms of a social relation allows to draw out a political aspect of our embodied existence, which is subdued in both Arendt's and Cavell's accounts that highlight the role of the individual more strongly.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to clarify a notion of the non-sovereign self. As I have argued, this understanding of selfhood rests on the self's relationship to 'existential realities'. That we are finite beings, who cannot know themselves and others entirely is closely related to the 'existential fact' that we are born into a pre-existing social world, live by virtue of our relationships to others and, eventually, die. The differences between

[69] ibid, p.75

Butler's and Cavell's discussions of language have important implications for their broader notion of selfhood in relation to community. Cavell stresses the role of *interpersonal* agreement for the establishment of meaning. He does not dwell on the influences power-relations and history have on the speaker's capacity to use language in creative ways. Moreover, Cavell's understanding of the speaker as an always already autonomous person allows us to separate and distinguish ourselves from oppressive social relations. Thus, albeit Cavell understands that communities are not always completely just, he seems to imply that we are always able to separate our understanding of selfhood from the relations of power that structure society and language. The individual therefore retains the opportunity to distinguish herself by developing novel ways to use concepts, in a critical distance from the community of speakers. Such a notion would appear to downplay the way any understanding of selfhood is situated within history and cultural or linguistic communities. Seeing the self a separate entity which *engages* in dialogue thus allows for a more flexible relationship towards societal norms. Butler, by contrast, highlights the interwovenness of any understanding of self with language and social power-relations and bodily and psychic needs and desires. The subversion of norms is therefore potentially threatening for our social existence which relies on being recognisable as a subject. In other words, in Butler's account what we agree upon is neither arbitrary nor entirely up to our (collective) choosing. The emphasis here rests not on the *decisions* a group of subjects make, but on the structuration of the normative field itself. While the difference between Butler's and Cavell's positions can only be fully grasped when Cavell's understanding of the development of selfhood in relation to the individual's community is taken into account, we can take away from the discussion so far that social communities are not power-neutral spaces. The concepts we use are related to wider networks of signification, which are steeped in relations of power that structure any

society. The self cannot easily do away with the (often unacknowledged) historicity of linguistic and societal norms that demarcate what kind of subjects we become and how we learn to think and express ourselves.

While the Cavellian discussion of language centres on the question how meaning is established, reading him in conjunction with Butler brings to the fore a linguistic notion of the self that is established in 'conversation' with others. The self thus is a contingent and malleable entity. To expand on an understanding of selfhood as 'activity' I will consider a different understanding of natality. Here 'natality' is a concept that does not refer primarily to physical birth but to the human ability to start something new, and thus establish freedom and uniqueness. In the next chapter turning to Arendt's understanding of natality and political action introduces the notion of complete newness or revolutionary change, highlighting the unpredictability of political interaction and common life. Importantly, however, in Arendt's formulation our capacity to create something previously unthought of, something radically new, does *not* imply voluntarism. Just as with Butler's notion of the reiteration of linguistic and social norms, in Arendt's notion of action the wilful agent recedes to the background. Newness is a consequence of events within a plural political sphere, which are withdrawn from the intentions of the political actors themselves. This notion allows for an understanding of non-sovereignty where the finiteness of human control is not understood in terms of limitations to what we can do, but as an excess where what happens or is done is more or other than what we intend.

Chapter 2 - The acting, the thinking, and the moral self

Introduction

This chapter is concerned with exploring how the non-sovereign, relational and situated self could be understood as a moral and political agent. By turning to Arendt's and Cavell's understanding of the individual's relationship to the social world, I argue that unique selfhood is not given but needs to be developed through political and moral engagement with one's community. For the engaged self, non-sovereignty stands not in opposition to freedom and agency, but is their prerequisite. While the individual is a part of a plurality of unique beings, her independent character is maintained. By understanding selfhood not as a static entity, but rather as an ongoing activity, this chapter seeks to combine two possible notions of active self-formation. On the one hand, the self is formed through its (political) actions. How others see us depends on how we act in public, and because we cannot know how our actions will turn out, the external 'picture' of 'who' we are is malleable and outside of the agent's sovereign control. On the other hand, how we wish to act towards others and how we judge our actions depends on internal dialogue. By developing a 'conversational' notion of selfhood, I forward an understanding of the self that depends on critical reflexivity. Taken together these aspects of the 'flexible' self allow for an understanding of moral and political agency in terms of a 'perfectionist' development of the self, where an ongoing conversation between different aspects of the self and one's community is sought.

As I have argued in the previous chapter, any ontological notion of subjectivity is closely related to the political and social environment in which it develops. By turning to Arendt I emphasise that the critique of the modern subject is connected to the politico-social events of the 20th century. In difference to Butler's genealogical account, here the critique of the modern subject is initiated by the perception of a violent rift or trauma within in the seemingly teleological development of modernity. It is under the impression of the devastating political events of the 20th century that Arendt calls for a rearticulation of our understanding of conditioned and plural existence. She develops her notion of the non-sovereign but unique political actor to oppose the effects totalitarian rule and mass-society have on the human ability to act and think 'for oneself'. To counter the *gleichschaltung* of totalitarian rule, where the singularity of each human being is lost, Arendt proposes the reinvention of the public sphere. In Arendt's notion of the political each actor appears in her singularity. This necessitates a critique of social identity, which is no longer understood as the impetus for political action. Instead, it is action that creates the singular identity of each political actor. It is, however, also under the impression of the dwindling free public sphere that Arendt writes about the role of morality for political action. To safeguard the possibility for free moral thought from the oppressive external reality of totalitarianism and mass society Arendt introduces a clear separation between political action and moral thought.

While the division of spheres, separating thought from action, plays an important role in Arendt's conceptual framework, it is necessary to go beyond it to retain an understanding of *situated* selfhood, able of moral and political agency. Juxtaposing Arendt's discussion with Cavell's notion of the perfectionist self, I argue that incentives to act politically depend on the self's willingness to put itself into critical relation to its community.

Cavell's notion that meaning is established communally enables an understanding of the self as developing in constant critical conversation with one's community. However, for Cavell this conversation is also a conversation the self has to have with itself. By understanding selfhood not as an entity but as an 'internal' multiplicity or community, internal dialogue becomes an important aspect of the perfectionist development of the self. Discussing Cavell's and Arendt's understanding of the individual's relationship to her community sets the stage for the next chapter in which I forward a critical perspective on the notion of political sphere of equals.

The critique of the subject and the spheres of human existence

The most important point my short discussion of Arendt's notion of the political actor in this chapter raises is that, in the plural sphere of politics, a unique personality — 'who' one is — is not something that is given. Having a distinct, specific self is not essential to the human, and is thus also not a hidden property that needs to be discovered by introspection. Instead, identity is created by the unbounded consequences of actions. This means that people are neither 'born into' their identities, nor are they able to control what form exactly the self will take. Arendt forwards a notion of *political identity* where unique selfhood is developed through public interactions. Her understanding of the self provides a strong rebuttal of identity-politics, where 'what' someone is, that is, a person's social role as member of a distinct group (women, workers, etc.) would provide her with a collective political identity and thus guide her political actions. When stressing the importance of developing a unique self, Arendt decouples freedom from notions of autonomy and sovereignty. I understand the connection Arendt establishes between

plurality, uniqueness and non-sovereign freedom as the most important impetus her discussion of the political provides for my understanding of non-sovereign selfhood. To understand how Arendt connects unique identity with political action and freedom, however, it is important to take her motivation to formulate a theory of the political into account. This section thus shows how Arendt's notion of the political agent is based on her critique of modern mass society. Her critical view of social life in the 20th century leads Arendt to harken back to a 'Greek' notion of human existence as clearly distinguished into a public and a private sphere.

Arendt's discussion of the connection between human existence, the political, and freedom adds a further dimension to the critique of the modern subject offered above. She seeks to establish a critical perspective on political philosophy, because, in her view, philosophy was unable to react adequately the social and political realities of the 20th century. While it would go too far to argue that the tradition of western philosophy had a causal influence on the emergence of totalitarian regimes, Arendt maintains that western philosophical thought has proved at least unable to prevent the rise of totalitarianism.[1] In her mind, the notion of the modern, autonomous subject in its 'traditional' form failed to establish a lasting sense of the singularity of each human life. The 'grand theories' of the 19th and early 20th century, which were based on the notion of a universal subject, lack a sufficient acknowledgement of each life as irreplaceable and non-substitutable. If human

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In Arendt's view, the tradition of political philosophy starts with Plato's renunciation of the world of appearances and human action and ends with Karl Marx who, she argues, ultimately retains the Platonic hostility towards human affairs and particularity. In the Hegelian notion of history Marx adopted, the Platonic contempt for political action is preserved by bestowing importance and dignity not on the acts of individuals but 'upon mere time-sequence'. That the tradition of political philosophy culminated in the 19th century, however, does not mean for Arendt that its way of thinking has disappeared. On the contrary, instead of diminishing its power over our thinking, the “power of well-worn notions and categories becomes more tyrannical as the tradition loses its living force and as the memory of its beginning recedes; it may even reveal its full coercive force only after its end has come and men no longer even rebel against it.” It is the weight of dead tradition that lead to 'compulsory and formalistic' thinking in the 20th century. See Arendt 2006 c, p.65 and 2006 d, p. 25-6

existence is subsumed under a universal concept, each human being is only regarded as an example of the subject and thus becomes expendable. The notion of the subject is thus interwoven with forms of social and political organisation, where "we speak of all persons used by the system in terms of cogs and wheels that keep the administration running. Each cog, that is, each person, must be expendable without changing the system, an assumption underlying all bureaucracies, all civil services, and all functions properly speaking."[2] In this view of society individual actions become marginal. The outcome of this thinking is thus a notion of politics as a sphere of necessity where historical (or economic) laws are played out. If, however, historical developments are brought about by unstoppable, inhuman forces this also does away with individual responsibility.

If human beings are regarded as indistinguishable parts of a social mass, this has dramatic implications for the ways human relate to their environment. Living in a 'mass society', Arendt argues, humans would actually loose those abilities that can make human life special and unique. As she explains "[m]en are conditioned beings because everything they come into contact with turns immediately into a condition of their existence."[3] She agrees with Heidegger that there is no such thing as an unchangeable human essence, a core to be discovered. Arendt stresses that conditions can change so dramatically that capacities which were previously viewed as part of human nature disappear. This is even true for such 'existential realities' as language, plurality or natality (in the sense of the capacity to start something new). In her analysis of totalitarian regimes Arendt thus argues that totalitarianism ultimately aims at changing human existence as such. By extinguishing the human ability for spontaneous and free speech and action in public, totalitarianism robs people of their individuality and their ability to create a meaningful

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2 Arendt, 2003 b, p. 29
3 Arendt, 1998, p.9

existence. When Arendt claims that human existence doesn't have a stable core, she therefore does not argue that all modes of existing are equally valuable. Like for Heidegger and Cavell, for Arendt humanity seems to hold a promise in the form of an authentic understanding for existence that we, in difference to all other life-forms, could realise. It is this property totalitarianism sought to extinguish and that is increasingly in danger of disappearing in modern mass-society driven by consumerism. Arendt's discussion of the political sphere then seeks to establish what *meaningful* existence, as opposed to mere existence, entails. She argues that the particularity of human existence is brought to the fore by the condition of plurality and natality, two conditions that for her necessarily imply political organisation.[4] She defines the *being-with* of *Dasein* as *being together* within a community unified by a common, *political* interest in the world we share.[5] It is this orientation towards a common interest in something *external* to the self that in her mind allows for an authentic, specifically human form of existence and thus for the establishment of a unique identity. In caring for our common human world we free ourselves from the loneliness of being only-our-selves (nur-er-Selbst-Sein). In other words, even though Arendt shares Heidegger's differentiation between facticity and existentiality – between *having* to be there and *being able* to be there (Da-sein-*müssen* und Da-sein-*können)* – her notion of world as primarily a political with-world differs decidedly from Heidegger's notion where 'the light of the public darkens everything' (*Das Licht der Öffentlichkeit verdunkelt alles*).[6]

Arendt however doesn't completely reject Heidegger's negative appraisal of society. As her critique of mass-society shows, her thought instead relies on a sharp distinction

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4 For a close reading of the connection between Arendt's and Heidegger's thinking see for example Villa, 1996

5 For Arendt, it should be noted, 'world' is an artificial construct human beings create out of nature, by transforming nature through work. It is a humanly created, durable environment.

6 Knott, 2011, p.93

between inauthentic, social existence and an authentic, political one. Arendt's tripartite distinction between 'public', 'private' and 'social' is thus an essential aspect of her work. It animates her critical stance towards her contemporary social and political environment. I would thus reject some readings of Arendt which try to separate her notion of political action from her understanding of the public sphere, by transferring her concept of action into a 'social' context. However, while her 'spheric' concept marks what is distinct and incisive about Arendt's view of the human relationship to community, the strict categorical separation Arendt deploys also creates some of the persisting difficulties with her understanding of the relationship between political action and moral thought.[7] Before turning to Arendt's notion of morality, however, we first have to understand how she envisions an ideal political sphere, and what kind of self the existence of such a sphere would enable.

Arendt argues that one of the problems of current western societies is that activities and ways of thinking which are supposed to remain separate blend into each other. In order to show how a more authentic form of existence would look like she harkens back to the example of the public she finds in Greek antiquity. In this idealised, and somewhat mythical, 'Greek' model, human activities are separated into two clearly distinguishable spheres – the public and the private.[8] This separation rests on the assumption that human

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[7] My reading thus differs for example from the way Seyla Benhabib employs Arendt's understanding of action. By relating action to the concept of narrative identity, Benhabib moves the notion of action back into a 'social' setting. With the notion of 'narrative action' Benhabib conflates social and private communities with the political or public sphere, in order to overcome Arendt's restrictive conception of the political. Benhabib argues that if action is understood as narrative we see that it is a feature of every kind of human interaction and is thus not restricted to the public but prevalent in any kind of social and intimate setting. In place of a public sphere, where only disinterested, 'impersonal' public discussion takes place, Benhabib therefore sets the notion of a 'solidaristic community' where identities are sustained by listening to each other with respect. This communal respect allows us to develop and exercise our 'capacity for autonomous agency.' In my view this not only conflates the description of actual existing political conditions with a normative definition of community, but also disregards the role the distinction between political and social plays in Arendt's thought. I will return to 'narrative' readings of Arendt's notion of selfhood in the following chapter. See Benhabib, 2003, p.129 and 1999, p.349

[8] While she discusses this notion in *The Human Condition* with reference to the Ancient Greeks, I do not

beings, like any other form of animal life, have to tend to their bodily needs. To merely stay alive humans thus engage in the perpetual and 'circular' activity of labour. While 'privately' labouring in order to feed and clothe themselves, human beings are 'all the same' – examples of the biological human animal species, locked into an endless cycle of fulfilling our bodily needs.[9] That we are able to create a public or political sphere by separation ourselves from private or natural life is what in Arendt's understanding differentiates human existence from other animals. In public humans are able to distinguish themselves as unique beings, thus overcoming the 'sameness' of species-life. To do so, however, they have to break out of the realm of the private. By establishing lasting things the human activity of 'work' is distinguished from labour which only creates what is immediately consumed.[10] Through their work humans step out of the endless

take her as making a 'historical' argument. That Arendt develops a schematic theory of human existence is problematic, as we will see, when she later seeks to use these notions as a blueprint from which actual political events could be read. I understand Arendt's frequent avowal that the political sphere and political thinking and judgments need to be 'free' and her own strict application of categories that at times severely limits her understanding of actual political events as one of the major contradictions of Arendt's oeuvre.

9 Arendt, 1998, pp. 97 – 100, 135

10 In Arendt's account *homo faber*, the worker, violently divides himself from nature by using nature as the raw-material out of which she builds a durable world. The world of things created by the worker will outlast her thus connecting the worker to future generations, making the worker a part of humankind. Without this artificial, lasting "world" truly human activity and freedom is impossible. If one sees 'natural' human identity as in constant change, not holding within itself a kernel of unchanging essence, it needs an 'unnatural' effort to order human life. Thus, "their ever-changing nature notwithstanding" workers can retrieve their sameness, that is, their identity, by being related to the lasting product of their work. Only through the process of work becomes the notion of the subject, who is separated from the world as its object possible. As Arendt states "[o]nly we who have erected the objectivity of a world of our own from what nature gives us, who have built it into the environment of nature so that we are protected from her, can look upon nature as something "objective". (Arendt, 1998, p. 137) Homo faber is thus related to the modern, sovereign subject. The subject wrests from nature its own world that he builds after "an image that precedes fabrication and does not disappear with the finished product" (ibid, p. 141). However, the activity of production has, as only human activity, a clear beginning and end. (ibid, p.143) Thus it allows human being to understand time as linear and ordered into a clear narrative form. Like the story of a purposeful human existence, the production of a thing is led by an idea, has a clear start and a clear end, can be successful or fail, and, can be remembered after its end by the thing it produced. From working the metaphors of an ordered, linear and teleological history of mankind as well as the possibility for a purposeful individual life can be derived.
Arendt argues that the violence with which man transforms nature "is the most elemental experience of human strength" and thus provides "self-assurance and satisfaction". This gives *homo faber* the perception of sovereignty, of being "indeed a lord and master, not only because he is the master or has set himself up as the master of all nature but because he is master of himself and his doings ... Alone with his image of the future product, *homo faber* is free to produce, and again facing alone the work of his hands, he is free to destroy" (ibid, p.144). Here freedom is inseparable from sovereignty. Sovereign freedom is the wish to be one's own master, a subject whose decisions depend only on oneself, moved by reason and conscious purpose. See Markell, 2003, p.11

circle of growth and decay. As workers they build themselves a lasting artificial 'world'.[11] This human world is the common reference point and concern that drives political action. The human worker, who creates artefacts and art thus also builds a public world, which, like a stage, allows the singular human being to appear to others. By appearing to each other through speech and actions which are directed towards the shared 'artificial' world human beings are then able to distinguish themselves as unique beings.

The modern acceleration of labour and consumption, together with the introduction of private concerns (the 'housekeeping' of economics or question of social redistribution) into the sphere of politics, however, has led to the merging of the private and the public, destroying both. The 'social' then for Arendt signifies an unlucky amalgam of private and public. In the social we are again, 'all the same', united as indistinguishable consumers and producers caught in a never ending circle of labour and consumption. The social does not allow the individual to 'appear' to others in her uniqueness; here we are only cogs in the machine. Our social life thus appears as an unlucky return to nature, where we lose our 'artificial' human ability and remain within an undistinguishable 'animal' position. It is because their social roles as women, or workers are roles individuals would share with others like themselves, that these roles are unable to provide for the possibility to distinguish oneself as a unique personality, and thus truly human. What Arendt offers then is the notion of a community of unique human beings that relies not on shared social identities or economic interests but on the separateness of each actor.

In the idealized political sphere Arendt outlines each member appears as equal. This equality does not only ban any social concern for justice (as a particular interest in the rights of one specific group, i.e. women or workers) from the political realm, it also

[11] Ibid, 137, 141

allows it to each actor to be 'reborn', that is, to leave her 'private' personality behind. *By* acting in the public sphere we *create* an identity which previously has not existed. What comes to the fore here is a Nietzschean understanding of subjectivity, where the subject is seen as a 'grammatical effect'. 'Who' I am only comes into being through action itself. At least at some points in Arendt's writing, there is no 'doer' before the 'deed'.[12] In the Arendtian public sphere people come together united by a common cause, *external* to themselves. Political actors are supposed to discuss and act only on common or public matters.[13] Arendt here draws on the root of the word interest as *inter-est,"*which lies between people and therefore can relate and bind them together." In this notion the public sphere is compared to a table around which we sit in conversation. It separates us at the same time as it connects us by creating a necessary space between us.[14] Plurality is the decisive characteristic of the public sphere, which "has the twofold character of equality and distinction."[15] We have to be equal in order to be able to converse with each other, but if we were not distinct we would not actually have any need for action or speech. Arendt stresses that human distinctiveness is not the same as otherness "the curious quality of *alteritas* possessed by everything that is and therefore, in medieval philosophy, one of the four basic, universal characteristics of Being, transcending every particular quality." Otherness, in this sense, is "the sheer multiplicity of inorganic objects, whereas all organic life already shows variations and distinctions, even between specimens of the same species." However, only a human being can "express this distinction and distinguish himself." Thus, only the human "can communicate himself and not merely something." It is in the human being that "otherness, which he shares with everything that is, and distinctness, which he shares with everything alive, become uniqueness, and human

12 See Villa, 1996, p.81; Honig, 1993, p. 78

13 Critical voices have often argued that, taking away everything Arendt considers a social or private concern, it is not any more altogether clear what these common concerns should be. See for example Pitkin, 1981

14 Arendt, 1998, p. 182

15 Ibid, p.175

plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings."[16] Appearing to others in the public sphere as a distinct being, then is 'like a second birth', where we come into being as a new beginning. Only when the actor distinguishes herself, showing her uniqueness, does she realise the particularity of human existence.

Importantly, there is no essential human nature that compels us to become political actors. When we act, we do it freely. It is thus in the sphere of the political that the particular human ability to experience public, non-sovereign freedom comes to the fore. Freedom, however, is here not understood primarily as the actors free decision to enter the public realm. More importantly freedom is a distinctive feature of action itself. This is the case because political action is always an inter-action with other individuals. Any act takes place within a shared world of already existing human relations "with its innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions." In this plural world "action almost never achieves its purpose."[17] Instead, by interacting with others, the unforeseeable consequences of human action can bring about something that is indeed completely new and unplanned. It is this ability to create newness in which the human ability of natality shows itself for Arendt. This non-sovereignty means that even though our actions decide about our identities "nobody is the author or producer of his own life story." Action itself "'produces' stories with or without intention as naturally as fabrication produces tangible things." Every action is a new beginning and therefore can change how others regard us. Not will and intention but "action alone is real."[18] As Arendt writes "the stories, the results of action and speech, reveal an agent, but this agent is not an author or producer. Somebody began it and is its subject in the twofold sense of the word, namely, its actor and sufferer, but

16 Ibid, p.176
17 Arendt, 1998, p. 184
18 Ibid

nobody is its author."[19] Actions and speech thus create 'who' we are, our unique life-stories or identities, but this 'who' might not be what we had intended.

In Arendt's understanding then human existence is defined by the activities we engage in and which relate us to the external world. Arguing that some activities allow for a more 'authentic' or thorough engagement with the world by bringing out what is *specific* about human existence, Arendt highlights in particular the activity of political action and speech. This is not the case, however, because political action would be a 'better' activity as working, creating art, or thinking, but because it is this activity that particularly expresses the human conditions of plurality and natality. In difference to work, the activity of political action and speech reveals the finitude and non-sovereignty of human existence. However, while action is important for our experience of public freedom, Arendt states that thought remains the highest human activity. In her mind, the political sphere depends on spectators – those who do not engage in action but judge and think about what is shown on the political 'stage'. It is to her understanding of thought and judgment I thus turn in the next section in order to mitigate the impression that Arendt would understand human existence exclusively in terms of publicity. Moreover, however, it is when turning to the specific way Arendt understands the relationship between action on the one hand and judgment and thought on the other that my disagreement with her comes to the fore.

The thinking and the moral self

Even though political action is one principle way of experiencing what is particular or

[19] Ibid, p. 184

special about human existence for Arendt, we are *not only* non-sovereign actors. Importantly, she establishes a notion of selfhood that contains various facets, which appear to be at the same time mutually enabling and in tension with each other. As conditioned beings humans *are* not simply non-sovereign actors or (relatively) sovereign workers. How we relate to the external world depends on the specific conditions we encounter. That we are, in some spheres of life, able to establish a limited sense of sovereignty, however, does not imply that non-sovereignty is a deficient mode of engaging with the external world. Instead, it is the principle possibility for experiencing public freedom and happiness. The conditions under which such experiences are possible, however, appear as increasingly limited in Arendt's account of her contemporary conditions. By turning to the experience of the private, thinking self, she thus also seeks to establish the possibility for an 'authentic' form of human existence to survive when no free public sphere exists. That different activities allow for a variation in the experience of selfhood is an important insight for the notion of the self I wish to forward. I understand selfhood as a complex and contradictory amalgam of experiences of finiteness and our capacity for autonomous agency. While we are conditioned by a social world that is structured by an unequal distribution of power, we are at the same time able to develop a critical stance towards these conditions.

Arendt's understanding of the connection between different aspects of human existence, however, is limited by her conceptual framework. While it is necessary for her to understand the political self and the private self as clearly distinguishable, this makes it complicated to assess how strongly all aspects of the self are interwoven with the social world. In order to understand more clearly how different aspects of our lives could be fruitfully related to each other, it is instructive to contrast Arendt's notion of moral

selfhood with the perfectionist account Cavell offers. His thought shows that a strict separation of a moral concern for the self and the political responsibility for others is ultimately not feasible. If meaning is established in conversation, the thinking self needs to keep in critical dialogue with others. What unifies Arendt's and Cavell's approaches, however, is the assertion that morality should not be understood in terms of rule-following behaviour. That asserts that in order to develop a moral self we need to critically interrogate the moral conventions of the society we live in.

Arendt's endeavour to investigate the role of independent thought for political and moral judgment poses itself against the backdrop of totalitarian rule. In her understanding it was a deficient engagement with morality that allowed it to many people to play their part in the totalitarian governmental machine. She argues that most people understand morality in terms of a set of rules, which simply need to be applied to specific situations. This, however, is a deeply problematic notion, because individuals becomes unpractised in critically questioning the precise content of the rules themselves. Therefore, they would easily accept the replacement of one system of rules for another. If being moral is thus understood as coextensive with law-following behaviour, what is commonly taken as conscience – a *feeling* for what is right and wrong - fails them: "people *feel* guilty or feel innocent, but ... alas, these feelings are no reliable indications, are in fact no indication at all, of right and wrong ... these feelings indicate conformity and nonconformity, they don't indicate morality."[20] To rescue the ability of independent moral judgement as well as our understanding of unique individuality Arendt wants to rediscover the value of moral thought as a non-means-related practice. In this endeavour she seems riven between the wish to maintain a connection between political practice and moral judgement and the view that these activities are clearly separated from each other, as the former takes place

[20] Arendt, 2003 c, p.107

in public and the latter in private. This also explains why Arendt seems indecisive whether moral thinking is a sovereign activity or not. As we have seen, for her non-sovereignty is a decisive feature of the public sphere. The experience of sovereignty, however, can be retrieved when working or in fine arts, for example when drawing a picture, where the artist can envision and control the outcome of the endeavour. The question thus is if moral thinking is understood as part of an ethical self-fashioning comparable to a 'sovereign' creative activity, or if it is closer related to a concern for the public.

While Arendt seems indecisive about the exact roles the two related activities of thought and judgement take in her model of the division of spheres, I argue that it is precisely the uneasy middle-ground these activities have in her approach that reveals some of its weaknesses. On the one hand, thinking and judging needs to happen in safe distance from the political arena, because it needs privacy and circumspection. On the other hand, thinking retains the basic ontological conditions of human existence Arendt identifies with the political sphere. She stresses the continuous importance of natality and plurality for our ability to think. If properly done, thinking is characterised by natality – by being 'unbound', able to take new and unforeseeable directions. This is necessary if independent thought should be the precondition to judge political actions, which are also 'new' and therefore cannot be judged by pre-established categories. To judge the morality of politics it is necessary to engage in a kind of thinking that needs "no pillars and props, no standards and traditions to move freely without crutches over unfamiliar terrain."[21] In this

[21] Arendt quoted in Bernstein, 2000, p. 283. As Bernstein makes clear, this type of thinking cannot be equated with "such mental processes as deducing, inducing, and drawing conclusions whose logical rules of non-contradiction and inner consistency can be learned once and for all and then need only to be applied." ibid, p.279. Arendt does not rule out the importance of this kind of thinking. It provides a factual ground for judgement, but it is merely a precondition - not the activity we are concerned with in matters of moral or political judgements. Thus, in Bernstein's words, Arendt distinguishes thinking from knowing. Knowing is here understood as primarily concerned with finding a single, universal truth, while thinking is concerned with meaning. This differentiation obviously cannot be found in

way thinking appears as closely related to creative activities, where new ways of viewing the world are established in a similar way than a musician composes new tunes. Importantly, this not only sets thinking apart from mere 'know-how', but also from a more 'unworldly' (*weltfremd*) notion of contemplation.[22]

By linking it to plurality Arendt understands thought as internal dialogue. This emphasises the diversity and richness of an inner world where the self does not seek to establish calmness, univocity and stasis, but is engaged in an ongoing conversation. This notion builds on a Socratic understanding of thought, which seeks harmony between the multiple voices of the self. This harmony, however, is the harmony of ongoing debate, not of agreement that would put conversation, and thus thinking, to rest. Establishing an 'inner democracy' such an understanding of thought is comparable to a notion of the democratic political sphere as an arena of ongoing agonistic exchange. Just as the agonistic public sphere relies on the friendly relationship between members engaged in conversation regarding the principles of common life, the notion of the 'plural' thinking self relies on a friendly relationship between the different aspects of the self. While the self is seen as divided, this view of selfhood thus has to be distinguished from notions of the self as split between antagonistic and warring drives, desires and aspirations. Instead, our inner voices should be understood as differing, but rational, standpoints on the given topic of thought. Just like agonistic models of democracy do not work with a preconceived set of ideas of how exactly the political ought to develop, the identity of the thinking self remains versatile. At first sight the emphasis on natality and plurality seems to emphasise the continuity between the external and the internal - between political action and thought. Understanding thought in terms of an internal conversation that can

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Cavell in the same terms, given his linguistic critique of absolute knowledge

[22] For Arendt, acting and thinking are both activities that form part of the *vita activa* as opposed to the notion of *vita contemplativa*, that is the way of withdrawing from the world either in a religious or philosophical sense to be in the present of the eternal, universal or unchanging. In difference to that any activity of the *vita activa* will always be related to change or contingency

engender newness, however, also makes the public unnecessary and severs the thinking self from its environment.

The notion of a multiple self, which can engage in an internal dialogue, enables Arendt to rescue the possibility for newness in judgement and thought, even when the external conditions do not allow for a free exchange of opinions with others. By introducing the notion of *internal* plurality she thus returns to the possibility of a singular self, able to establish meaning in the absence of community. The different aspects of our multiple selves are able to represent to each other various view-points on a given issue and thus replace the actual engagement with real, living others.[23] Moreover, in our internal dialogues we can, by virtue of our imagination, have 'conversations' with interlocutors or exemplars that take us out of our specific time. For Arendt the examples we choose, no matter if they are taken from our acquaintance with contemporaries, from literature, historic or mythical figures, are, so to speak, the company we choose for our internal dialogues. In this sense, “our decision about right and wrong will depend upon our choice of company.” Given that the contemporary world appeared rather bleak to Arendt, a thinker who retreats into an internal cosmos of voices taken from other historical periods might be even better equipped to make moral judgments than someone who engages in conversation with her contemporaries. Arendt here re-appropriates the past in a 'time-less' fashion where human history is treated 'as sediments in layers of language and concepts' which are rediscovered in creative acts “just as a collector or as an artist might do.”[24] The inclusion of stories from the past in our internal dialogue allows us to free our thought from the temporal frame and settle thinking in a timeless “gap between past and future” in

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[23] This argumentation relies on Arendt's understanding of otherness, I will discuss in chapter two in more detail.

[24] Benhabib, 2003, p. x, p.87

which the "small hidden islands of freedom" are preserved.[25] This notion safeguards morality against being a purely social activity, based on convention, where the individual self is robbed of its innovative and critical agency. It risks, however, downplaying the importance of our relationship to our actual contemporaries and the way we are formed as subjects in relation to current social conditions.

The tendency to disregard the influence of social and political discourses on moral thought is exacerbated by Arendt's understanding of morality as primarily *concern with the self*. This also makes it necessary to uphold the distinction between private morality and public political action. If morality is a concerned with the self, it has to be excluded from the public sphere, where only shared concerns can be taken into consideration. Moral thinking and political action thus become mutually exclusive. When arguing that for moral philosophy "the ultimate standard for conduct toward others has always been the self" Arendt thus seems unwilling to interrogate how a concern with selfhood is related to contingent communal practices.[26] Moral thought, she argues, hinges on the experience of philosophers, that is, of people who feel it is essential to who they are to be by themselves, in the solitariness of thought. Philosophers, for Arendt, rely on an inner harmony that can only be maintained by acting consistently with one's conscience. Because the unboundedness of action in the public sphere makes such consistency impossible the thinker has to retreat from the public.[27] Thus, when Arendt argues that it is only because he cannot, and does not wish to, quieten his inner voices that Socrates can proclaim it would be better to suffer wrong than do wrong, she implies that *doing wrong* is an unavoidable possibility of public action. Even more, *doing nothing* appears as a morally acceptable option. With Socrates, Arendt contends that for the thinker self-

[25] Bernstein, 2000, p.279
[26] Arendt, 2003 c, p.101
[27] ibid

reliance and pride in one's own being is of essential (ethical) importance. For political action, however, harmony of the self could never be the standard for conduct. Such a private concern with oneself would inhibit action in a way unreconcilable with the condition for freedom. If we act politically we have to act for the good of the public, and this, in Arendt's view, might contradict our personal, moral believes. Arendt thus refers approvingly to Machiavelli, arguing that a good citizen and politician cannot be overly concerned with the purity of the soul.[28]

This argument is expanded in Arendt's discussion of Thoreau's essay on civil disobedience. Again she states that the 'voice of conscience' cannot ultimately guide political action. This is because conscience (a concept she uses synonymously with the internal dialogue of moral thought) is entirely negative. The rules of conscience "do not spell out certain principles for taking action; they lay down boundaries no act should transgress. They say: Don't do wrong, for then you will have to live together with a wrongdoer."[29] Arendt considers two options how such a negative understanding of morality could be connected to the political, but ultimately rejects both. First, she argues that if moral conduct should be binding for the political sphere, morality would need to be generalisable. If a moral guideline for common life would exist, we would have to assume "that man possesses the innate faculty of telling right from wrong," which is the same for everybody. This, however, is not the case. As she writes, "[w]hat I cannot live with may not bother another man's conscience." Second, however, *even if* we would allow for the possibility of some underlying negative moral rules every human being shares (and at some points in her writing Arendt argues for such a quasi-instinctive knowledge of what absolute evil would entail), arguing that conscience is necessary for politics we would also have to take for granted that we are indeed moral agents. This, however, is based on

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28 Arendt, 1972, p. 61
29 Ibid, p.63

the assumption “that man is interested in himself, for the obligation [to follow the voice of conscience] arises from this interest alone. And this kind of self-interest can hardly be taken for granted.”[30]

Curiously, while Arendt establishes that political action cannot be bound to moral thought, she also points out that, if we do things unthinkingly this can have horrific consequences. For Arendt, we do not think enough and this non-thinking allows us to suspend our awareness of political evil. She thus argues that evil is done by people who abstain from thinking. Then people only skid “over the surface of events … they permit themselves to be carried away without ever penetrating into whatever depth they may be capable of.”[31] This way of being 'unthinkingly' does not only condemn the individual to a meaningless, inauthentic existence, it also allows her to be “actually ready to do anything.”[32] For Arendt “the greatest evil perpetrated is the evil committed by nobodies, that is, by human beings who refuse to be persons.”[33]

Finally Arendt seems to argue that authenticity or the realisation of one's human potential is linked to taking responsibility. There are, however, two mutually excluding ways in which we could do so. To develop a political personality we have to take responsibility for the shared human world. This depends on the existence of an ideal public sphere in which we can appear to each other as equals. By contrast, private responsibility for one's own self is a stance each person can choose to take, even in the absence of the political. It appears, however, to come at the cost of being able to engage with one's (non-ideal) political and social environment. Such a separation of responsibilities and 'selves' (one private, one public) however, is hardly maintainable. It would make it impossible to

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30 Ibid, p.64-5
31 Arendt, 2003 c, p. 101
32 Ibid, p. 94
33 Ibid, p. 111

engage actively with a social world which usually will not take the form of the Arendtian public. Her thought thus seems to exclude a political concern with social justice, because this is a *pre-condition* for the Arendtian political sphere to exist. If the public sphere is not already just, the actor cannot strive for justness, because this would involve taking sides with the 'particular' interests of a social group. Writing about the question of morality under dictatorship Arendt at times argues that the only possible way to remain 'good' is by retreating into an inner exile. This means, however, that she does not understand political activity, which requires courage, as a necessary moral obligation. If, however, we wish to maintain with Adorno that there is no right life amidst the wrong, turning to Cavell can help to retrieve an emphasis on the thinking self as connected to society, even when, or especially when, one finds this society to be lacking in terms of justness.[34]

Cavell' reading of perfectionism brings to the fore that taking responsibility for oneself is linked to responsibility for one's community. In this respect his understanding of selfhood is in keeping with the notion of the non-sovereign self I endorse here. This self is defined by the acceptance of responsibility we have towards others by virtue of sharing the world with them. Taking responsibility requires us to become not only critical thinkers but also political agents. Importantly, as Cavell makes clear, this notion is not a necessary or *ontological* claim about human existence. He does make an ontological argument about being-in-the-world, as a being with a plurality of others and further shows how this condition is one in which knowledge about others and ourselves remains finite. These conditions, however, do not necessitate that we take responsibility for our lives with others. Assuming responsibility for oneself and others does not follow necessarily from our common existence. It is an ethical orientation that needs to be chosen. Doing so is closely related to an aspiration to get to know oneself and the way one stand towards

[34] Adorno, 1997, p. 43 "Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im Falschen", my own translation

others. Perfectionism thus expresses a standing occupation of moral life, a specific way of understanding and relating to one's self in its situatedness. A 'moral creature' is therefore one "that demands and recognizes the intelligibility of others to himself or herself, and of himself or herself to others."[35] This notion hinges on the insight that, as finite beings, we are unknown to ourselves. As Cavell writes: "when it comes to regions of the soul like … coldness covered with affectionateness, or loneliness covered with activity, or hatred covered with judiciousness, or obsessiveness covered by intellectuality … one's lack of knowledge about oneself may fully contrast with one's beliefs about oneself. … And here my relation to myself is expressed by saying that I do not know myself."[36] To acknowledge that one does not know oneself allows for the ethical injunction to make oneself intelligible. The perfectionist task is thus one where internal and external dialogue are interwoven. We relate to ourselves and to others as persons we cannot know everything about, but *want* to get to know. The precondition for morality then is to develop a 'standing' towards oneself and one's community, to engage in critical interrogation.[37] Engagement with the thought of others (both in conversation with one's community and as the internal dialogue with exemplars from history and literature Arendt refers to) enables the individual to discover how she stands towards these others and thus 'speak in her own voice'. This perfectionist position Cavell contrasts with the position of the conformist. As conformists individuals remain unaware of the limits of self-knowledge because they fail to interrogate themselves and their stance to society. Instead, they accept the norms and rules of society as their own and do not develop their ethical potential. Conformists are unconscious in the sense that they have forgotten or repressed their responsibility towards themselves and society. The conformist refuses to define herself. To define oneself would mean to engage in a critical act of estranging oneself

[35] Cavell, 1990, p. xxxi
[36] Cavell, 1999, p. 101
[37] Cavell, 2004, pp. 11, 49, 222

from prevailing opinion (as well as from oneself in so far as one represents this opinion). Failing to define and express their political selves conformists fall short of obtaining a political and ethical existence.[38]

To understand what Cavell means by defining oneself in relation to one's community it helps to harken back to his discussion of language. His account of how proficiency in language-games is established stresses the importance of creative difference as a part of 'using a concept correctly'. While we learn how to use a concept by listening to others using the concept in concrete instances we can only be said to have mastered understanding the depth of a concept when we are able to refer it to a new set of circumstances. This, however, means that speaking always runs the risk of not being understood by others. If the notion is projected on the political and ethical sphere, this becomes a question of defining for oneself what we understand by notions like justness or democracy. For Cavell, the wish to engage in such a conversation about justness arises "from a sense of disappointment or dissatisfaction with oneself, one's language, and one's relationships with others." This might be experienced as "a feeling of aversion toward myself and/or others, toward what I say about myself and what others say to, about and for me." I might feel that I have nothing (more) to say, or that I am unable to "find my feet" with others. In this way I might sense my life as "being in a crisis such that I cannot continue to choose it."[39] By addressing this sense of crisis in conversation with myself and the members of my community the meaning of concepts like morality or justness might be expanded beyond the way they are currently understood. We might find that we need a new definition of justness or democracy and that our community does not live up to this definition. Working on a better self could then involve confronting society with a

[38] Cavell, 2004, p.22; Hammer, 2006, p.170
[39] Flathman, 2006, p.103-4

notion of a better, shared future. When forwarding this vision of community, or democracy, or justness, I take the risk of being rebuked by my community, of finding that I cannot make myself understood and am not in community with others. The willingness to be 'responsible to oneself' and for one's utterances therefore also means to accept that one might find one's community with others questioned, that others could reject one's utterances. This ultimately could mean for the political actor that she has to rethink her (political) identity, if identity is defined in terms of membership. Moreover, it implies that the sensation of scepticism, as the inability to relate to the world, is a standing threat inherent to the perfectionist development of the self.

The idea of dissatisfaction with the current situation of the self and society introduces another temporal dimension into the concept of internal dialogue. While in the Arendtian version the use of exemplars from literature or history raises the thinking self out of her specific place in time, and thus allows for engaging with the past in a non-linear fashion, for Cavell moral thinking is closely connected to a notion of futurity. Here the inner conversation of thought takes place between an attained self and an imagined future self/future community. My momentary self, which is understood as the result of earlier developments, is confronted with an imagined possibility of a better future self. Importantly the 'ultimate' future self is never attainable. By changing the actual self, the imagined future self also develops, thus leaving the content of the future self (and society) open. This formulation stresses the openness of ethical judgement. Instead of referring to an *a priori* sense of good and evil against which the moral state of the self and society is measured, the measure for ethical assertions is deferred to the future, to be always re-imagined and ultimately unattainable (never fully there). Cavell develops this understanding of futurity to counter proceduralist notions of democracy. If decisions are

made according to pre-existing rules of what a just society would look like, or how justness can be measured, the unfathomable and surprising character of the future is denied. In his view, the possibility for unrestrained conversation is the precondition for justice. Cavell is thus critical of theories of justice, such as for example Rawls's and Habermas's, which would aim at putting conversation to rest by referring to predetermined standards of justness or processes of determination. It is, however, important to stress that the openness for future rearticulation and change not necessarily means that the attained self or current society is the weaker position in these conversations. There always might be good reasons not to change (oneself and society). Some current achievements and relationships that would be threatened by further change might turn out to be too big of a loss. The point for Cavell is that the conversation has to be carried on with others as well as within one's own self. There is thus an ongoing interplay between identity and difference (between oneself and one's political community and between different temporal versions of the self) out of which any understanding of individuality and political agency emerges. We are identical with and different from others, a difference that cannot be eclipsed and an identity that cannot be denied. But we are also identical and different to our own selves over time. Who I was yesterday is not the same as I am today, but I am also never completely different.

Cavell's formulation of perfectionism thus differs decisively from Arendt's understanding of moral thought. One reason for this is the close connection he establishes between the personal and the political, the private and the public. Unlike Arendt, Cavell stresses the interplay between external and internal plurality, which is necessary for the experience of exploring one's knowledge about oneself. In his thinking the public-private divide is not abandoned, however, by transcended. As Andrew Norris remarks, for Cavell the “public

is not, as in Arendt, the name of a realm, but rather that of a voice we use in conversing with one another. In this formulation, it is not only the personal that becomes political; Cavell also shows how the political is personal."[40] Cavell thus "traverses the public and private distinction without simply denying it." This allows him to "criticize his political culture from within, showing it to be lacking in its own terms, terms it uses without understanding."[41]

Despite this difference, however, the notion of inner dialogue implies a shared understanding of the unboundedness or potential 'universality' of the self that contrasts to some extent with the notion of finitude as a restriction to what human beings can become or could know. Like the Emersonian notion of the 'inner ocean' the thinking self, for both Arendt and Cavell appears as potentially infinite. When thinking we encounter an unacknowledged universality – while our *knowledge* about the self remains partial, enabling us to discover ever new facets or possibilities of the self. This infinitude could be understood as the unpredictability and boundlessness of thought – the 'eruptive creativity' of human beings.[42] Importantly, the unbounded imaginative potential of the human mind allows for the possibility of a 'universal' connection with other humans. This connectivity of human minds becomes visible when Cavell claims that we are only able to accept someone else's thought if this thought touches upon something already present (but unacknowledged) within ourselves. He cites Emerson who states that it is our own estranged voice that we recognize as someone else's genius.[43] The role of genius is then to free the minds of those who restrict themselves out of fear to break with established convention. A genius is therefore someone who is able to express what others might feel

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40 Norris, 2006 b, p.82
41 Ibid
42 Kateb, 2005, p.50
43 Cavell, 2004, p.19ff.

subconsciously but cannot acknowledge. When discussing Shakespeare Emerson remarks that Shakespeare's genius does not lie in his originality but precisely in the way his work speaks to each of us, producing an echo within us. For Emerson therefore, "the greatest genius is the most indebted man" representative in exhibiting the best qualities each member of the species possesses.[44] As Cavell argues, the genius Emerson speaks of "is never other than the otherness of genius in each of us, once called the *daimon.*"[45] Paradoxically then, uniqueness brings to the fore the potentiality of our connectedness, where this connection, however, will be expressed by each person in a singular way.

In the following two chapters I will return to this notion in both Arendt's and Cavell's thought to scrutinise in more detail what potential effects it has for their understanding of the self's ethical relationship to others. However, while I do not wish to reject the idea that there is an unbounded potential of human thought to come up with the new and unexpected, we need to remain mindful of the way our very language and thought is formed in relation to existing social and linguistic frameworks. Moreover, as we have seen at the close of chapter one, the finitude of human existence, which contrasts, or is in tension with, the notion of natality and unboundedness also has important bodily and psychic dimensions.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to interlink the notion of the non-sovereign self with political and moral agency. This highlights an engaged, but also critical and reflective relationship

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44 Cavell, 2005, pp.28-60, p.49
45 Ibid, p.50-1

between the self and its community. Arendt's analysis of the relation between forms of selfhood and totalitarian rule complements the philosophical and social critiques of the subject I have introduced in chapter one. Together the first two chapters aimed to show that 'having a self' is not an unchanging property of human beings. Instead, our understanding of what being a self entails develops within a social environment. Forwarding a notion of the self as situated and finite, I argue that coherence, identity and wholeness of the self should not be taken as the preconditions for agency and freedom. My aim is thus not only to highlight the particularity of each singular being, and assert their relationality, but also to argue that freedom and agency can be thought in non-sovereign terms. Even if we come into being conditioned by social, linguistic and political frameworks that are not of our choosing, our actions are *free* in the sense that their outcomes are unforeseeable. The notion of the non-sovereign self therefore does not deny our creative potential, but it restricts our ability to know and control the external world and other beings we encounter. Asserting the limits of sovereign control enables an understanding of temporality where linearity and determinacy are called into question. This rejects the notion of a necessary teleological development of history, a notion I will come back to in the next chapter. That the future is open and unknowable, however, is also a condition that affects every singular being. As the notion of the 'perfectionist self' implies, both the self and the social and political relations in which it appears need to remain open to reformulation. The relative fluidity of identity has important political implications, as it allows for a critique of 'identity politics'. Such a critical stance is not new; as Theodor Adorno already stated in his discussion of Hegel, identity "sympathises with authority in its very form, even before expressing any content: there is a moment of content to the form itself. The expression "as a …, I...", in which one can insert any orientation, from dialectical materialism to Protestantism, is symptomatic of that."[46]

[46] Adorno, 1993, p. 194

However, while my understanding of selfhood highlights the restrictiveness of certain formulations of group-belonging as identities, the political necessity of social identity formation should not be forgotten. As Denise Riley points out, an inability to define oneself in relation to a certain group-identity might be the case, because this specific subject-identity as a category is, "historically, poorly brought to voice." In cases such as, for example, earlier struggles for women's or gay rights, the issue was that "there's too much lack: an obliterating under-politicisation, productive of nothing but solitary misery." We have to ask therefore how a compromise would look like, where we would be able to develop shared political positions that enable solidarity, without becoming bound to totalising and lasting identifications with fixed identity categories. Such a formulation of political identity would have to withstand the "misplaced nostalgia for wholeness" which Riley detects in the "recent turn to collectivised personal identities." But it would also have to avoid falling into "a radical individualism to stand against all categorising" which, as Riley continues, "only a rabid ahistoricism" would attempt.[47] How community and (political) identity could be thought in a more open fashion is a question we will return to in chapter six. There I discuss Arendt's understanding of the political in more detail. In the formulation of political agency and community I forward, common identity would not follow from claims to a common past or future but from political activism in concrete situations and would thus remain open to change.

Asserting that political identities are not fixed, raises the question in how far the forms the self takes could be chosen. As I have argued, Cavell and Arendt at times seem close to a 'romantic' notion of selfhood, as an 'inner ocean' of potentiality. We might be finite in what we can *know*, but not in what we could *become*. This understanding of self is thus close to formulations we can find from Hegel over Emerson to Nietzsche and Sartre. To

[47] Riley, 2000, pp.5 - 8

say it in Hegel's terms: " *I* is this void, this receptacle for anything and everything, that for which everything is and which preserves everything within itself. Everyone is a whole world of representations, which are buried in the night of the *I*. Thus, *I* is the universal, in which abstraction is made from everything particular, but in which at the same time everything is present, though veiled."[48] The question would then be in how far we can access what is present in, but hidden from, us. The perfectionist formulation Cavell forwards at times seems close to suggesting that being a non-conformist entails a strong affirmation of freedom as self-realization – as 'becoming what you are' or "having the will to be responsible to oneself."[49] Such a reading would relate Cavell's notion of conformism to the Satrean view that the "human disposition … is to deny our possibilities [for indefinite change] for the sake of the comfort of a bounded and well-defined identity, as if we could be nothing but what we are, and as if we were destined to be only one thing forever."[50] To develop one's personality would then entail to overcome this (self-)confining tendency. This, however, not only seems to imply infinite possibility, but also a return to a sovereign ability to create the self. Taking the communal character of self-formation seriously, would set limits to sovereign creativity. As Butler argues, we require social recognition for our very survival, and this means that 'who' we can become is limited, to an extent, by societal norms. Importantly, Butler's Foucaultian exposition of power highlights the interrelation between power and knowledge. From this view-point, the perfectionist wish to know the self cannot be thought independent of social relations of power within which discourses of selfhood are situated. Ethical, perfectionist 'work on the self' would then have to entail a 'genealogical' critique of concepts such as the subject, society, knowledge or ethics. Moreover, understanding the self as an embodied, situated being also necessitates a heightened awareness of the psychic conditions under which the

[48] Hegel, 1991, p. 57
[49] Nietzsche quoted in David Owen, 2006, p. 140
[50] Kateb, 2005, p. 47

self comes into existence. That Butler stresses the limits of our ability for self-creation is therefore also shown when we compare her discussion of natality with Arendt's. For Arendt, the human condition of natality shows itself most purely when we become political actors, where our actions can set in motion new and unexpected developments. The political actor is 'reborn' in the sense that she leaves behind her social beginning and is able to act with only the public good in mind. In short, for Arendt natality signifies the possibility to set something new into motion. By contrast, for Butler natality, as the actual birth of the infant, reveals our primordial dependency and vulnerability. Because we are born 'prematurely' we can only survive by being introduced in a web of personal and social relationships the pre-exist the newborn self. Despite this difference in the weight they give to newness, Arendt also takes into account that the creative working and thinking self is limited by the plurality of existing together with others. For her, the very condition of acting in concert limits our ability to direct the outcomes of our actions and thus 'who' we can become. While both Arendt and Butler understand the role of natality and plurality as enabling a new beginning, this beginning takes place *in context.* Our social condition, then, can potentially restrict and alter the ways in which we relate to ourselves and others.

To assert that we are conditioned beings entails the possibility for a 'weak' philosophical anthropology to 'fold back' upon itself. When our forms of social life and our relationship to the external world are altered, this can entail that what we take as existential realities could dramatically change their meaning. The example of language can illustrate this. While language seems a fundamental condition of our lives together, Butler points out how what we can say is restricted by societal discourses of power and knowledge. Similarly, Arendt's engagement with totalitarianism points towards the possibility that our

very ability for speech is altered, if speech is taken to express something new about ourselves in the political arena.

Combining the post-foundationalist questioning of the 'ground' of political organisation with a weak ontological interrogation of the human subject my work thus takes to heart that, as Adriana Cavarero in reference to Giorgio Agamben points out, “every ontology is already a politics, and this is true for all of the philosophical tradition.” This implies that “[t]here is a structural connection between ontology (or, if you want, a certain way of reading, representing, defining the human condition) and politics (that is, a certain way of imagining, constructing, shaping the pertinent form of collectivity).”[51] Asking how ontological claims about what it means to be human are linked to current relations of power, therefore not only seeks to expose the violence that is involved in 'becoming a subject' and in failing to do so. Moreover, engaging critically with ontological presuppositions our social and political systems are based on allows for the question if and how a different definition of the subject might enable us to envision a less violent and more egalitarian social and political sphere.

Asking how a less violent, egalitarian political sphere could be imagined hinges on interrogating the connection between the notion of the non-sovereign self and concepts of otherness, distinctness or difference. In the past two chapters I have advanced a notion of the self as on the one hand embedded in its relationships to others and on the other hand a singular, autonomous being. From the assumption of singularity and uniqueness, however, the question arises if and how we do relate to other unique beings. The question is not only whether I can communicate what is unique or special about me, but also if I can communicate my understanding of the world, of external reality to another person. In the following two chapters I wish to unpack these issues and highlight their ethical

[51] Cavarero, 2012

importance. To show what problems arise from the tension between universality and difference as interlocked in the notion of the self, it might help to consider how extreme positions on these matters might look like. This means that we would either claim that each self is coextensive with the universal subject, *or* that every human being is entirely unique and singular, sharing nothing in common with others. It appears obvious that both positions foreclose the possibility for political or ethical relationships. If I imagine that, in my everyday life, I encounter another individual who appears to me as 'radically' different, how would I communicate with this individual? I could not suppose a shared frame of reference, or even that this being has a notion of communication similar to my own and that it sees a world that resembles, at least in some sense, mine. Could we then still say that I indeed really encounter or meet this individual? Or is my relation to her rather like it would be to an inanimate object? In any case, it seems clear that without a common world no political relationship would be possible. Affirming the universality of the human condition, on the other hand, enables us to imagine others as 'other selves' – essentially similar to ourselves and thus intrinsically relatable. In this formulation, however, we are again faced with a situation where a true *meeting*, an exchange or communication, appears to be ruled out. If we are indeed identical, we would not need to develop language as there would be nothing new to tell anyway. When I recognize in the other person an *alter ego*, this ultimately leads to the conclusion that the other person could only surprise me in the sense that I can say that I surprise myself. This, however, seems to make a democratic polity unnecessary. Each one of us would ultimately want and know the same – the need for communication, contestation and decision-making would thus not exist. Both of these notions are not often encountered in this extreme, however. It nevertheless makes sense to think about political and ethical theories as situated along a continuum where the positions of essential sameness and essential

difference mark the poles. As I will argue in the following, leftist, democratic political thought has often tended towards the 'sameness' pole, and this has created difficulties not only for our understanding of political contestation and plurality but also for the notion of ethics. Tending towards essential sameness might foster ethical theories that define responsibility to others in terms of empathy, understanding for one's own and the others' actions, or as linked to kinship and group-belonging. If ethics is related to notions of belonging and similarity, however, this makes it difficult to formulate an ethical position that emphasises responsibility towards others who are unknown or excluded from one's political community. One aim of this thesis will thus be to defend the role of difference or 'the Other' for a *democratic ethics*, that is, for an understanding of ethics that is closely linked to a radically democratic understanding of the political sphere.

Chapter 3 – The other as another self - or thinking in the place of everybody else

Introduction:

In this chapter I argue against a tendency in contemporary political thought I call the 'avoidance of otherness'. Theories showing this tendency would presuppose that all human beings are intrinsically similar and can thus know and relate to each other like they would relate to their own selves. While we might take different positions within society, these positions would not have a lasting influence on the structural sameness of human experience and relation to the world, therefore – when making political or moral judgements – we are in principle able to assume the other's view-point. I argue that Arendt's phenomenological understanding of reality and the notion of thought and judgement she derives from it is related to such a position. Criticising Arendt's own account as well as theories that draw on Arendt, this chapter thus makes an entirely 'negative' argument. Against the notions of recognition and representation of the other's view-point I discuss in this chapter, I wish to maintain that our relationship to others cannot be based on our knowledge of the other's position.

My argument starts out with explaining why some recent feminist thinkers have taken issue with the notion of 'the Other'. They criticise this notion because it implies an ontological inequality in the relationship between individuals. While their critique is not unfounded, I argue that their attempt to leave behind the notion of alterity altogether is

itself problematic.[1] This is particular the case with 'narrative recognition' approaches, which assume that an egalitarian relationship of recognition could be established between agents who recognise in each other the possessors of unique life-stories. They argue that by sharing our unique stories we could 'know' each other and thus relate to the another person like to an *alter ego*. This implies that while each of us 'has' an unrepeatable story, which makes us unique beings, we are structurally so similar to each other that we can understand and relate to the other's story. Criticising these theories, I reject the implied understanding that the self could be related in a coherent and seamless fashion. I thus reject the notion of a 'narrative self', because such a notion runs against the idea of the opaque and finite self I wish to forward. Moreover, I argue that some narrative recognition approaches misconstrue Arendt's concept of the self, on which they draw. Arendt holds a more sophisticated notion of temporality than narrative recognition theories would allow for. While a narrative recognition approach risks understanding time in a one-dimensional model of linear and cohesive narration (of one's life story), in my reading, Arendt forwards a multi-layered notion of time experience that highlights not cohesive narration but circularity, breaks and aporia. She denies any teleological theory of history, thus keeping the future open. This points towards the insight that knowledge must remain finite – an insight whose significance Arendt, however, fails to develop fully in her understanding of the self. Despite her critical stance towards the notion of cohesive identity Arendt maintains a problematic conception of the structural similarity of human agents. This allows her to hold a 'representative' view of the self's relationship others. Her approach hinges on the notion that human perception and language relate directly to objective external reality. This would make human experiences and view-points objective and communicable. Discussing how Arendt envisions the self's relationship to the

[1] See in particular Benhabib, 2003; Cavarero, 2000. Two writers I concentrate on in particular because they take recurrent recourse to Arendt's thought in their attempt to develop a narrative notion of selfhood

external world and other humans, I return in more detail to the issues raised in chapter two about the tension between the notions of the acting and the thinking self in Arendt's endeavour. In the activity of judgement we appear to transcend the plurality of the public world and return to a private mental space. There the structural similarity of human beings would allow us to 'represent' to ourselves the positions of others. With a quasi-transcendental move, Arendt appears to lift the thinking self out of the multitudinous, shared world, allowing for a clear perspective of the different positions within it. The thinking and judging self thus would be able to escape non-sovereignty into a sphere where clarity and knowledge are not only attainable but also communicable to others. Ultimately, Arendt's notion of the finite, acting self appears as incommensurable with the notion of representation, which relies on the ability to fully grasp or 'know' the external world. Arendt's work thus confronts us with an unresolved conflict where the subject appears finite in its relation to itself (which is unknowable) but potentially omniscient and thus sovereign in its mental representation of the external world and other human beings (who are knowable).

Between me and you – the critique of the notion of alterity

While relational accounts of the self have been well established in modern western thought, the debate about how to envision the relationships between individuals remains vivid. In this context, the related notions of recognition and of 'the Other' have been widely discussed. While the notion of 'the Other' is highly important for the understanding of ethics I wish to forward in the next chapter, it is necessary to consider why it is controversial. Voices critical of the discourse of otherness have pointed towards the role 'the Other' plays in Hegelian theories of recognition. Here recognition is described as a scene between a 'self' or 'subject' and an 'other' or 'object'. Instead of describing the meeting between two equal individuals, this subject-object relation establishes a hierarchical situation. In such theories, it is argued, relationality is thus marked by aggressive impulses and oppression. As Kelly Oliver points out in her critique of Judith Butler's discussion of recognition, Hegelian theory would understand the self as formed in a necessary relationship of dependency and subordination.[2] Moreover, Oliver is irked by the violent language thinkers like Levinas and Butler employ when describing the self-other relationship. To invoke violence as a necessary part of subject-formation would make it difficult to formulate a non-violent stance in one's political argumentation, as it becomes complicated to distinguish avoidable from necessary violence. Understanding dependency as the necessary condition

[2] Oliver, 2001, p.61. Butler, 1997 a, p.9. As Oliver reads it, the Hegelian notion of recognition requires the objectification of the other person. In the Hegelian situation, she argues, when one self-consciousness encounters another, the other appears first as an object like any other. “The lord and bondsman become certain of their own self-consciousness only by negating Life or the immediacy of being both in themselves and in the other. This is why they must risk their own life and also risk the life of the other. Life itself must be negated. Recognition requires abstracting from the immediacy of being/Life.” Oliver, 2001, p.95-6

of becoming a subject would ultimately make it difficult to envision a more egalitarian society. By understanding the other person in terms of an object, the subjectivity of others is dismissed. 'The Other' thus never appears as a concrete other person. In contemporary theory others would therefore too often appear either as “mute, impoverished, unavailable, still to come, almost worshipped (a la Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas)”, or as “invisible, unspoken, nonexistent, the underside of the subject (a la Foucault and Butler).” In all cases, however, the other would remain “an object for the subject.”[3] By understanding intersubjective relations in terms of hostility “the rhetoric of the other” would in itself deny “subjectivity to those othered within dominant culture.”[4] Thus, it is argued, while others are acknowledged in contemporary theory as a necessary presence for the subject, 'who' these others are seems to be of minor concern. Instead of relying on notions of a general 'Other' we should therefore engage with other people in the intimate form of the concrete 'you' to whom the 'I' is bound in conversations of mutual recognition and friendship. As we reciprocally appear to each other, we “do not lend substance to the anonymous face of an indistinct and universal alterity.” Seeing the other as a concrete 'you' calls for a new understanding or recognition that allows us to “think dialogic subjectivity as noncontestatory conversation.”[5] In other words, rejecting the notion of 'anonymous' alterity would allow us to develop an understanding of subjectivity as developing from the dialogue between equal participants (engaging in mutual and symmetrical movements of subjectivation). Such a dialogical relationality would entail an 'altruism of uniqueness', which assumes “neither sacrifice nor dedication, nor mortification, nor renunciation.”[6] The relationship between the self and another person is

[3] ibid, pp.5-6
[4] ibid
[5] Cavarero, 2000, p. 90
[6] For Cavarero alterity that “invades the self, rendering him nomadic and fragmented” or “lures the self more subtly with his embrace” is deeply problematic. She argues that the 'rhetoric of alterity' favoured by current philosophical discourse is intolerant of 'elementary givens of existence.' In her view “a large part of contemporary philosophy disdains the ontological status that binds the reality of the self to the (well, yes, empirical) material presence of some*one* other.” ibid

'ethical' in so far as it is nurturing for both participants. Thus, voices critical of the notion of otherness call for a rethinking of recognition in terms that establish our relationships to others as egalitarian and mindful of the uniqueness of each human being. One way such a mutually respective form of recognition could be envisioned is through a conversational setting where we listen to the stories another person has to tell about her life and offer our own unique life-stories to her. The pathway to recognition would therefore be (self-) narration. As Adriana Cavarero and Kelly Oliver agree, giving a narrative account of oneself serves as a technique that awards the listener the opportunity to recognise the narrator in her uniqueness. This dialogical relationship does not stress *otherness*, which would imply a limitation to communicability, but a sense of uniqueness or distinctness, provided by the specific order of events any contingent life-story offers. Understood in this way, uniqueness, in difference to otherness, is communicable and thus makes another person 'knowable' and relatable. Importantly, however, this notion also implies that we are, in principle knowable to ourselves. By offering a concrete and cohesive story of myself I become an accountable subject. As I will show, however, it is this possibility of 'giving an account of oneself' that re-establishes selfhood in terms of sovereign or masterful subjectivity.

While it is a necessary intervention in theories of recognition, the critique of the hierarchical relationship between the subject and the other is not as straightforward as it might first appear. In the conversational setting narrative theorists imagine participants appear to each other not only as equals, but also assume an *a priori* amiable stance towards each other. In encountering a 'you' I thus open myself to that person and expects her to do the same. It is only within such a framework that mutual recognition of uniqueness could take place. The status of this scene, however, is not altogether clear. We

might wonder whether it is supposed to describe the *actual* encounter the self has with other human beings, or whether it describes a normative model of an ideal encounter. If we take narrative recognition theorists to make a *descriptive argument* this would imply that in actual conversational settings we relate to each others as equals. Such a notion, however, would rely on an impoverished understanding of the structural influences of power on societal and linguistic norms that influence any conversational setting. Taking the influence of power on our social relationships seriously means that equality between speakers cannot just be assumed. Moreover, if the description of an equal scene of conversation between two friendly individuals is supposed to allow for inferences about wider notions of the subject's relationship to the other, this means that every interaction with others is reduced to the level of *personal* relationships. This, however, appears to be inattentive to the complexity of social interactions, where the actions of any singular agent might have consequences for 'anonymous' others the actor never encounters. Instead of only interacting with others in conversational settings we also 'interact' with others in impersonal ways, for example by buying a product produced in another country by people we never meet, or even by speaking a common language, which is formed by reiteration connecting us to a multiplicity of anonymous speakers. In these relationships 'the other' not only often stays anonymous, the relationship between subject (i.e. the buyer of a product, the speaker of a language) and the other is often marked by inequality. Arguing that 'faceless others' are often subordinated to a more powerful and visible agent or subject in intrinsically unequal economic, cultural and political relationships, seems indeed a rather accurate empirical description of complex contemporary social and economic realities. To state however, that we *do* on an everyday basis interact with 'anonymous' otherness, in the form of laws or economic relationships within a globalised world, does not invalidate a normative critique of the inequality of specific social

relations.[7]

If the notion of an equal relationship between the 'you' and the 'I' is thus not taken as descriptive but as normative, we would understand the establishment of equality as a task that has to take place *before* we could recognise the other in her uniqueness. That is, we *could* take narrative theorists to argue that in the social world people do *not* appear to each others as equals and therefore frequently fail to recognise the others' uniqueness. For example, by passing laws that would prevent migrants from entering a country a government could be understood as failing to recognise the uniqueness of each of this human beings, subsuming them under the category of 'non-citizens'. Creating a situation where migrants could speak as equals would then make it possible to recognise their specific reasons for travelling as well as their subjecthood, implying a personal but universal claim for protection. To make such a normative argument about the desirability of narrative recognition, however, is also open to critique. We might then ask about the status of a normative argument built upon an idealised notion of an equal and reciprocal relationship between two individuals. How does such an ideal scene of address inform our thinking about wider political relations? In other words, if an ethical notion of mutual recognition is formulated in terms of a concrete 'I' encountering a concrete 'you' – how can this unique situation be related to a wider political sphere where such concrete encounters are not all that is at issue. It seems that narrative theory does not address this question sufficiently. The question is not only whether political relations can be imagined to *resemble* intimate ones (e.g. where the political community is imagined as a family), but also whether the affective and normative framework ascribed to our relationships with

[7] I thus agree with Kelly Oliver's point, who, discussing Fanon, points out that if the subordinate object is caught in a process where emancipation is constructed as depending on the recognition of one's demands by a powerful subject it remains automatically caught up in a relationship of oppression. However, it seems to misconstrue political and economic realities to argue that the oppressed peoples could just unilaterally leave this unequal relationship. See Oliver, 2001, p. 26 ff.

singular individuals can be transferred to a more general, impersonal framework of relationships. Such transferences run into danger of uncritically asserting the 'personal' as the primary dimension of the 'political'. In these formulations then it is assumed that if we would get the personal 'right', that is, create equal and loving relationships to singular others, this would enable us to make positive changes within society as a whole when affective links are broadened to integrate those previously not acknowledged as concrete 'yous'. While there may be connections between different levels of interaction, the relations between them might turn out to be more complicated and less continuous than such interpersonal approaches suggest.[8] In short, when understanding mutual recognition in terms of two equal, affirmative individuals who engage with each other and in this way produce their subjectivity, we should wonder how this relationship is situated in relation to a wider social and linguistic reality where equality cannot be presupposed. Thus, narrative recognition, whether taken as a description of loving relationships between two concrete persons, or understood as a normative framework for political interactions is inattentive of the structuring influence of power on every social relationship. What is at stake in the further argument of this chapter, however, is not only how narrative recognition envisions the relationship between political agents, but also which understanding of selfhood such an approach to relationality entails. As I wish to argue, understanding the self in narrative terms risks returning to a 'sovereign' or 'omniscient' notion of the subject.

Ontological and normative notions of narrativity[9]

[8] I will return to the question how friendship and personal relationship could enter in our understanding of political agency in chapter five, but wish to highlight here that we need to keep in mind the tension such an understanding always entails between 'egalitarian' relationships and wider discourses of power within they take place

[9] I take the term 'narrativity' from Galen Strawson who argues that "[t]here is a widespread agreement that human beings typically see or live or experience their lives as a narrative or story," a notion he

A narrative reformulation of recognition not only tries to establish a more 'peaceful' relationship between the self and the other. It is also part of a wider array of narrative theories that aim to make fundamental statements about the structure of selfhood and its relationship to time-perception. Concepts of the narrative self seek to rescue the notion of a unified individual from the post-structuralist critique of the subject. The self should thus be understood neither as a mere part of a larger social identity, nor should it be seen as radically fragmented. Via narration, it is argued, the self could discover itself as unique, singular, and cohesive being. To avoid the post-structuralist position of the fragmented subject, however, theories of the narrative self over-emphasise the role of unity. The notion of unified selfhood, expressed and/or created through cohesive self-narration is particularly problematic when narratability of the self is awarded the status of an ontological fact. Here our very understanding of selfhood relies on the ability to give a cohesive account of oneself. Moreover, the possession of a cohesive identity is assumed to be a precondition for political and ethical agency. Thus, restrictions upon our ability to 'tell ourselves' need to be downplayed by narrative theorists. While our stories might indeed be "inflected by the master narratives of family structure and gender roles into which each individual is thrown," this would nonetheless leave room for unending variation in the telling of the self. As Seyla Benhabib writes, "just as the grammatical rules of a language, once acquired, do not exhaust our capacity to build an infinite

calls the 'psychological Narrativity thesis.' This is "a straightforwardly empirical, descriptive thesis about the way human beings actually experience their lives." He further argues that this thesis is often coupled with an 'ethical Narrativity thesis', that is the belief that "experiencing or conceiving one's life as a narrative is a good thing, a richly Narrative outlook is essential to a well-lived life, to true or full personhood." see Strawson, 2004, p.428. As I will show narrative recognition theories at times hold the former, but necessarily hold the latter theory to be true, albeit in a form slightly different to the ones discussed by Strawson. The terms 'narrativity' and 'narratability,' are then closely related, where Narrativity is Strawson's preferered term, while writers like Seyla Benhabib or Adriana Cavarero prefer the term narratability. However, I would suggest that these terms could be differentiated in so far as the narrativity thesis holds that we do experience ourselves in narrative form (constantly narrating ourselves) while narratability refers not necessarily to the actual experience of narrating oneself but to the notion that we understand ourselves as *in principle* narratable, even when we do not narrate our lives.

number of well-formed sentences in a language, so socialization and acculturation do not determine an individual's life story or his or her capacity to initiate new actions and new sentences in conversation."[10] Moreover, the question whether pre-existing social and linguistic structures do limit what kind of stories about the self we can tell (and live) is relegated to secondary importance. The question "is not what the story is about … but rather 'one's ability to keep telling a story about who one is that makes sense to oneself and to others' … The self is not defined by the content of the narrative but by its narratability."[11] In other words, it seems of minor concern if the actual self-fashioning of the self is restricted. Whether our stories are about how we freely chose which path to take in life or how we were restricted in our choices by societal circumstances seems unimportant as long as our lives can be told in a cohesive fashion. From this perspective, agency appears to be located less in what we *do* than in the ways we can talk or think about it. While we might be unable to actively subvert restrictive social forces, we can learn to tell ourselves in novel ways, which restructure our lived experience into a more meaningful narrative. As Maria Pia Lara suggests, such retelling would have the potential to become a reformative act in itself.[12]

That narratability is an essential trait of human selfhood seems ascertained by our everyday experience. As Adriana Cavarero writes "[e]very human being, without even wanting to know it, is aware of being a *narratable self* - immersed in the spontaneous auto-narration of memory."[13] This stress on narratability asserts that, even if we do not engage in self-narration, we are nevertheless aware of being, in principle, narratable. We

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10 Benhabib, 2002, p.15

11 Benhabib, 1999, p. 347

12 In Lara's view, political movements such as feminism can be re-conceptualised as narrative performances within the public sphere that derive "illocutionary force" from the transformation of gender narratives which re-evaluate common values and categories of gender relationships. Thus, narration becomes a creative form of agency by invoking notions of intention, self-expression and reflexivity. See Lara, 1998, p. 80. See also McNay, 2003, p. 6

13 Cavarero, 2000, p. 33

thus 'know' that there is a cohesive story that can be told about the self. At first sight, this claim to the self-evidence of necessary narratability, however, seems easy to dismiss by appealing to the experience of non-narratability. Indeed, claiming that the self is narratable neglects the role of dissonance between narrative frames or linguistic expressions available to the self and lived experience which might at times lie outside of the language available. Taking seriously the insight that language is closely related to the social world in which it is spoken, we would have to concede that there *aren't* innumerable ways in which we can tell ourselves within the discursive frameworks available to us. Any form of narration, in order to be intelligible, has to draw on the linguistic structures and expressions available. As we have seen, subverting or changing our language games, while not impossible, requires laborious and 'dangerous' processes of critique and self-formation. If we concede that language is structured by discourses of power and knowledge, we might at times find ourselves in situations where dissonances between narrative frameworks and lived experiences occur. To argue that narrativity has the status of an empirical fact thus downplays the importance of impediments to our ability to formulate and listen to life-stories. There are limits to what kinds of life-stories we can imagine, of what can be heard as a story, and not all lives might fit these frameworks.[14] In this sense there might be, on the one hand, life-stories we are unable to 'hear' and, on the other hand, experiences we cannot put into story-form, where language fails us. There are feelings and desires, traumatic experiences or perceived undercurrents in our social relationships for which we cannot find words, which are, as it were, unthinkable, but which nevertheless structure our very self-understanding. Stressing

[14] Judith Butler raises this point when she argues that in public discourses of 'dehumanization' not all deaths could be equally mourned in public. As she states “there is a limit to discourse that establishes the limits of human intelligibility. It is not just that a death is poorly marked, but that it is unmarkable. Such a death vanishes, not into explicit discourse, but in the ellipses by which public discourse proceeds.” Butler gives the genre of the obituary (remarking on the public mourning of those who died on 9/11 but also those who died without public acknowledgement in the war on terror), as an example “where lives are quickly tidied up and summarized, humanized, usually married, or on the way to be, heterosexual, happy, monogamous.” 2004 b, pp.34, 32

narratability and cohesiveness we might be tempted to overlook experiences of discontinuity between the forms of representation available to us and the personal, social and political realities we live in. For the singular individual the experience that she cannot tell a story within the political and cultural narratives available to her can trigger a sense of loss or confusion. As Butler explains, it is precisely when realizing that the ability for self-narration is limited that the need for social critique arises:

> … part of what I find so hard to narrate are the norms—social in character—that bring me into being. They are … the conditions of my speech, but I cannot fully thematize these conditions within the terms of my speech. I am interrupted by my own social origin, and so have to find a way to take stock of who I am in a way that makes clear that I am authored by what precedes and exceeds me, … if I posture as if I could reconstruct the norms by which my status as a subject is installed and maintained, then I refuse the very disorientation and interruption of my narrative that the social dimension of those norms imply. … I must be careful to understand the limits of what I can do … In this sense, I must become critical.[15]

The insight that we might indeed be unable to understand ourselves in a unified narrative fashion, however, is precisely where narrative theories of *recognition* set in. In difference to theories that maintain what Galen Strawson calls the 'psychological Narrativity thesis', that is the notion that we *do experience* our identity in terms of cohesive narratives, narrative recognition theory argues that we *should* experience ourselves in such term, but might not actually do so. They stress the necessity of reciprocity and conversation, where it is *via* the relationship to the other that we can find words for what our own normative or linguistic frameworks have prevented us from grasping. Narrative recognition theory not only acknowledges that some individuals might have difficulties experiencing themselves in a cohesive narrative form, but argues that it is precisely the impossibility of self-narration that makes the relationship to another person necessary. What is assumed is not so much that everyone 'possesses' a cohesive narration of themselves, but an *ontological desire* for such a form of narratability. Relationality is thus not based on the actual ability

[15] Butler, 2005, p. 82

to 'tell oneself' to another person, but on a frustrated *desire for* such narration. This presupposes that, even if one is unable to understand oneself in a cohesive fashion, one *knows* that such a cohesive identity is available. In this sense, theories of narrative recognition presuppose a *normative*, not a descriptive, notion of narrativity. Here, a sense of narratability and unity is seen as closely related to the self's well-being and the possibility for political agency. It is precisely the impediments on our ability to tell ourselves that make us call for the help of another person and thus make affective relationships necessary. In this vein, Kelly Oliver points out that certain traumatic experiences might shatter our very understanding of linearity and thus narratability. The trauma creates a rift in the unity of the self and its life cannot any more simply be put into an ongoing, linear story.[16] In telling the trauma in the presence of a loving witness the sense of disruption can be overcome, and a new unified notion of selfhood emerges.

In Adriana Cavarero's version the notion of interruption takes on a more fundamental or ontological role. It is the belatedness and fallibility of memory itself (the notion that we are born 'prematurely,' incapable of speech and thus remembrance) that establishes the need for another person. Here self-narration is always already incomplete because the self cannot recollect its own beginnings. In this respect Cavarero's position is close to Judith Butler's who maintains that the subject's story is always already incomplete because it cannot tell its own emergence. There is, however, a decisive difference between the two theorists. For Butler, we might be able to narrate the prehistory of the subject, but by giving this account we "become speculative philosophers or fiction writers." Moreover,

[16] As Oliver explains: "subordination, oppression, and subjectification undermine the very possibility of subjectivity. … Through the process of bearing witness to oppression and subordination, those othered can begin to repair damaged subjectivity by taking up a position as speaking subjects. What we learn from beginning with the subject position of those othered is that the speaking subject is a subject by virtue of address-ability and response-ability." Oliver, 2001, p. 7 Further Oliver argues " Our lives have meaning for us—we have a sense of ourselves—through the narratives that we prepare to tell others about our experience. Even if we do not tell our stories we live our experience through the stories that we construct in order to "tell ourselves" to another, a loved one ... the loving body is a speaking body. Without love we are nothing but walking corpses. Love is essential to the living body, and it is essential in bringing the living body to life in language through witnessing" ibid, p.220

this prehistory "has never stopped happening and, as such, is not a prehistory in any chronological sense. It is not done with, over, relegated to a past, which then becomes part of a causal or narrative reconstruction of the self. On the contrary, that prehistory interrupts the story I have to give of myself, makes every account of myself partial and failed."[17] For Butler therefore *any* account of the self will always remain fictional, at least to some extent. Even more, it is precisely this fictionality that allows for individual agency where, by retelling the past in a creative fashion, we can change (again to some extent, within normative boundaries) 'who' we are in the present. Cavarero, by contrast, appears to seek a way out of this partiality or fictionality of the self. For her, the human existent is 'unique and one', and this fact is only hidden from us by the fallibility of memory.[18] However, if we assert the unity of human beings and argue that this fact is just hidden from us, either by a traumatic experience that shatters our sense of wholeness or by a more fundamental notion of primordial lack, it is necessary for the self to recreate wholeness. The unified story of the self, then, would not be fictional, but an essential fact of human existence, a fact that is merely hidden from the self.

Narrating the other – Arendt and Cavarero on the notion of appearance

By arguing that the self is, in principle, unified Cavarero returns to a 'sovereign' notion of

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17 Butler, 2005, p. 78

18 As Cavarero puts it "from the beginning, uniqueness announces and promises to identity a unity that the self is not likely to renounce." Cavarero argues that the desire for unity is a primordial need of human beings, a need that had already been expressed in the modern notion of the subject. In modern concept of the subject, however, the desire for unity was "seduced by a universality that makes it into an abstract substance." Narrativity would allow us to rescue the notion of a unified (and thus in a certain sense sovereign) subject from the abstraction which is implied by the notion of universality. By separating the notion of a unified self from the notion of a universal subject, the concept of narrativity thus stresses the "one who lies in uniqueness."In this understanding, the unique existent appears as one with her birth and "presents herself indefinitely until her death, without her unity ever being a substance." Cavarero, 2000, pp. 37, 38

selfhood. Sovereignty could here be defined as a sense of wholeness that eclipses an understanding of the self as finite and vulnerable. In her version, however, such sovereignty is established by engaging in an amiable relationship with another person. Instead of a solipsistic subject she thus forwards a notion of unity that relies on relationality. Importantly, she makes this argument in reference to Arendt's discussion of the political actor. By generalising Arendt's account of appearance in the political sphere, Cavarero forwards her notion of the narrative structure of human life. While this is a highly selective reading of Arendt it still brings to fore some of the weaknesses of Arendt's own discussion of the self's relationship to others and external reality as such.

For Cavarero, it is 'the loss of unity', brought about by the inability to remember one's own beginnings, that "gets turned into the lack that feeds desire."[19] Here narrative friendship comes into play. If individuals perceive themselves as lacking, as desiring wholeness, they are compelled to turn towards the other person. The other here becomes more than an audience to the self. While in self-narration the attempt to create a unified self might invariably fail, it is by listening to stories about myself other people have to tell that I can recognise *who* I am. In other words, what I desire from the other is that she reinstates my wholeness by offering her perspective. It is in the eyes of the other that I appear as a unified being. In this formulation, the self does not only need the other to listen or 'bear witness' to the unspeakable, as Oliver would have it. Instead, by developing a 'narrative friendship' the self needs the other to help create a unified narrative of itself. Recognition is reformulated as the wish to hear one's own story from another's mouth. It is only by seeing one's image from the external perspective of another that the individual can understand herself as cohesive or 'one'. What individuals therefore seek in their relationships to concrete other persons, is less an audience than a story-teller - someone

[19] ibid

who tells them their biography and, by doing so, reveals to them the essential cohesiveness of their story. To illustrate this notion Cavarero refers to a true story reported in one of the most influential works of Italian feminism in the 1970s entitled *Non credere di avere dei diritti*. The two protagonists of the story, Emilia and Amalia, become friends when taking a writing-class for women that includes exercises in writing one's own life-story. Amalia has no troubles to eloquently express her life in narrative form and her stories allow it to Emilia to 'recognise' Amalia. She is deeply moved by Amalia's life-story, which Emilia sees as resembling her own in many respects. Emilia, however, while retelling the events of her life over and over, becomes increasingly distraught by her inability to conceive of her life in cohesive narrative form. Finally, Amalia, who by now is familiar with the singular events of Emilia's life, writes the story for her and by doing so presents Emilia with the gift of unified narration – of 'who' she is. As Cavarero concludes, what Emilia gets from Amalia is "the ontological affirmation to think that the 'I' exists". Paraphrasing Arendt, Cavarero maintains that "a life about which a story cannot be told risks remaining a mere empirical existence, or rather an intolerable sequence of events."[20]

The tale of reciprocal narration thus turns to Arendt in order to provide an ontological basis for the notion that another person can see 'who' I am more clearly than I could myself. While Arendt indeed aspires to provide an ontological justification for this claim, this is one of the most problematic aspects of her thought. As Cavarero rightly points out, at times Arendt asserts that reality, or better, the conditioned human perception of it, has a narrative character. Arendt states that reality "is different from, and more than, the totality of facts and events, which, anyhow, is unascertainable. Who says what is … always tells a story, and in this story the particular facts lose their contingency and acquire some

[20] Cavarero, 2000, p. 56

humanly comprehensible meaning." This stresses that "to the extent that the teller of factual truth is also a storyteller, he brings about the 'reconciliation with reality.'"[21] In this 'general' version of narrative theory it is not selfhood but reality itself that only becomes graspable in story-form. What creates the human world, and thus enables the existence of the political sphere, is a web of stories that describe human reality.

More to the point, Arendt also affirms that not the self, but *the others* grasp the reality, or identity, of the self. The unique person comes into existence by being *exposed* to the gaze of others, an exposure we deeply desire. In every encounter with others, we will appear to them in a way *hidden to ourselves*.[22] Arendt compares the unique self to the Greek myth of the *daimon*. The "*daimon* in Greek religion accompanies each man throughout his life, always looking over his shoulder from behind and thus visible only to those he encounters."[23] The *daimon* thus exemplifies that for Arendt, 'who' someone is ultimately relies on her appearance to others. (As we recall for Emerson and Cavell the *daimon* represents the genius or otherness in each of us, where we can see in the other our own rejected thoughts.) Importantly, this formulation of identity, of 'who' we are, does not rely on a notion of interiority. For Arendt, our emotions, intentions and desires are of little concern. She affirms a notion of the individual that is freed from "our inherited Cartesian-Rousseauian prejudices in favour of a 'true' self behind the appearances."[24] She almost ridicules the modern obsession with the 'soul' - a term that for her seems to signify our emotional life, our desires and feelings.[25] Like our inner organs, our emotions are basically the same in everybody and therefore cannot serve to distinguish us as unique individuals.[26]

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21 Arendt, 2006 b, p. 257
22 Arendt, 1978, p. 34
23 Arendt, 1998, p. 179-80
24 Villa, 2001, p. 297
25 Arendt, 1978, p. 31
26 Arendt's discussion here seems to show a certain disdain of any overt display of emotions in public life – the reference to inner organs, what might remind us of the expression 'spilling one's guts', hints not only to the necessarily hidden but also to the ugliness of what is inside us. What distinguishes us from

Arendt's stark disregard for our 'inner reality' is related to a more general understanding of the real as what *appears* to us. This notion, which seems somewhat at odds with her idea that reality is only graspable in story-form, is connected to her inattention to the sociality of language. This ultimately divides Arendt's discussion of the subject's relation to the world from Cavell's and Butler's formulations. For Arendt, it is a consequence of natality and mortality – that we 'appear from nowhere' and 'disappear into nowhere' that *Being and Appearing coincide*. Arendt states that "[t]he worldliness of living things means that there is no subject that is not also an object and appears as such to somebody else, who guarantees its 'objective' reality."[27] In this sense, it is by appearing as an object to another that the self becomes real. Moreover, things (and people) become *more* real when they are perceived from a variety of view-points. For Arendt, a singular human perspective is not enough to ascertain the nature of an object. It is thus only when we can perceive something in common and then discuss our various view-points of it that the true 'reality' of a given object or event comes to the fore. That is, each person's perspective adds a distinctive part towards the whole 'objective reality' of a thing or event. This notion hinges on the assumption that, while each person has a specific, unique position from which she perceives a given external object, the language in which she then describes the object is itself 'objective' or universal. The transparency and universality of the way we see and express external reality, thus makes it possible to 'piece together' our different perspectives on a given object to create a unified picture. This notion does not only retain a problematic concept of language as an objective 'mirror of nature', it also makes it impossible to develop an understanding of 'internal' or 'subjective' reality. It implies that we cannot assume a privileged knowledge of ourselves (that is that I know myself better

each other, and where beauty can be found, is only appearance to others, in the form of action and speech.

[27] Arendt, 1978, p. 19

than anyone else, know my 'true' intentions and feelings, hidden from others). Because reality is so closely linked to appearance, and I cannot 'appear' to myself as an object in the same way as I would appear to others, 'who' I really am remains hidden from myself. As my inner, emotional life only appears to myself it must remain strangely one-dimensional and thus less real.

Cavarero's version of narrative recognition seems to adopt rather uncritically Arendt's problematic position, which reinforces the ‘subject’ – ‘object’ split, writers like Cavell and Butler so succinctly criticise. Accepting Arendt's discussion of reality seems a surprising move, however, when we recall that narrative theory starts from a critique of the objectifying tendency entailed in the notion of otherness. Narrative theory sets out to counter the notion of a privileged 'subject' and a secondary 'object' in favour of a deeply connective and dyadic relationships between an 'I' and a 'you'. The Arendtian notion of reality, however, would require us to be able to perceive the other person as an object, separated from the self. If we were as close to the other as narrative recognition theory seems to wish for, if our relationship to the other is one based on desire, this seems to disallow for the objective (and objectifying) gaze Arendt imagines.

There is, however, another difficulty with interlacing the notion of narrative recognition with Arendt's account. While Arendt argues that others do appear to us 'objectively', she also introduces some restrictions to this notion. While for Cavarero our narrative relationship to others enable us to access their 'objective' views of ourselves, this is not a possibility Arendt allows for. In her mind, the *daimon,* as the immediate perception of what makes us identifiable and unique to others, must remain ineffable. Because human life is always in flux, other people cannot appear to us as objects for recognition during their life-time. This would rely on them 'standing still' like an inanimate object. While

Arendt indeed argues that our actions write stories that show 'who' we really are, the revelatory effect of action only crystallizes into story-form to the spectator who is temporally and spatially removed. Instead of understanding story-telling as something which requires intimate knowledge and a loving, reciprocal relationship to the one 'who' is told, for Arendt the story can only be told *after* the actor's death. Arendt stresses that the final shape of the actor's identity, the 'objective' truth about a person, cannot be established during the lifetime of the actor. Moreover, given the tension in Arendt's writing between the notion of reality as a 'fictional' account and 'objective' perception, it appears that the narrative of a coherent identity is necessarily a fabrication by the storyteller.[28] It is the storyteller who finally has the power to shape the identity of her characters, and will do so influenced by her own personality and position in the world. As Albrecht Wellmer rightly argues, if the "whole story can only be told after it is over" this would, given Arendt's critique of a teleological conception of history, imply that "the spectator's judgement is never final." Instead "it is always woven back into the unfolding web of human action and is waiting for those who will judge this judgement."[29] Cavarero is aware of the reservations Arendt has towards narrative recognition, but dismisses it as 'homage to the patriarchal tradition' in philosophy that values death over life.[30] She interprets Arendt's wish to leave the task of telling the story of a person to posterity as a reference to a heroic understanding of the actor who longs after death and subsequent immortalisation. This is, however, only partially true. Arendt is indeed not interested in awarding the actor the possibility to hear her own story, but this is because she does not think that the unity of the self is important. Cavarero is right that Arendt refers to Greek hero who invites death as the archetype of the narrated life. The point for

[28] These stories have an important function for the common political world they act as assembled in an artful and artificial way in order to produce a lasting artifice or impression of personality that plays an important role in establishing a common human world furnished with exemplary stories we can draw upon to help to guide our thinking and judging.

[29] Wellmer, 2001, p. 168

[30] Cavarero, 2000, p. 29

Arendt, however, is that having one's story told by a story-teller in the future provides the hero with a 'worldly' and thus *political* form of immortality. In this way, the exceptional story of the hero's life becomes one of the exemplary stories that furnish our thinking and judgement. However, not 'having' a unified live-story and thus a fixed identity while one is alive, should rather be interpreted as a homage to life than death. If death freezes who I can be, and what can happen in my story, thus making my true identity visible, being alive means that nothing is fixed, everything is still a perpetual becoming. Because my identity is in flux it does not lend itself to unified narration. Instead of a glorification of death, Arendt's refusal of providing a unified identity to the living is better understood as the wish to overcome restrictions on the individual's freedom to change and develop who she is in ways that allow for a continual reinterpretation of her past. Uniqueness is not bound to the possibility to narrate one's story in a cohesive manner but only to the unrepeatability of every life. In order to be unrepeatable, a life does not need to be told in a unified form.

From such an appeal for the instability of identity and the undecidability of past and future we can forward a more general critique of narrativity. Such a critique questions whether every person experiences herself in a cohesive narrative fashion, *or* would desire such a form of self-narration. To argue for a multifarious and flexible time-experience counters the normative claim that a good life must be tellable in cohesive narrative terms. To allow for a non-diachronic time experience we have to concede that there "are deeply non-Narrative people and there are good ways to live that are deeply non-Narrative."[31] Asserting that we either are naturally narrative, or that narrativity is a necessary precondition for a good life would then "close down important avenues of thought" and impoverish our grasp of ethical possibilities." Moreover, it would "needlessly and

[31] Strawson, 2004, p. 429

wrongly distress those who do not fit" the narrativity model and have "potentially destructive effects in psychotherapeutic contexts."[32] Narrativity theory wrongly assumes the structural similarity of human time-experience and notions of selfhood.[33] Just because *I* understand myself in narrative terms, or suffer from discontinuities and rifts in my own self-narration, I should not assume that others do so as well. We are not all alike; therefore, relationality should not be based on a call for one specific way of experiencing our being-in-time or the assumption that we could *know* which way others (should) experience their being-in-time. Furthermore, the notion of narrative recognition reintroduces a concept of sovereignty my approach is seeking to call into question. The notion of mutual or relational narratability asserts not only that we all experience our existence in time alike but also that we are able to communicate our experiences to others (that communicability is perfect and language 'a mirror of nature' – or in this case, a transparent conveyor of experience). Taken together these two assertions seem to amount to a claim of total knowability of ourselves and others. Our knowledge of others makes it possible to avoid the sense of vulnerability that communal life often entails. Moreover, we are not only saved from sharing the world with opaque and therefore potentially threatening others, the transparency of communication also makes it possible to avoid the ec-static movement of self-loss and alienation a relationship to unknown others could

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[32] One interesting variation Strawson mentions is the notion that the psychological or descriptive narrativity thesis is right, but the normative assumption false. He gives Sartre's novel *La nausea* as an example of such a view and quotes from it as follows "a man is always a teller of stories, he lives surrounded by his own stories and those of other people, he sees everything that happens to him in terms of these stories and he tries to live his life as if he were recounting it". As Strawson argues, "Sartre sees the narrative, story-telling impulse as a defect, regrettable … He thinks human Narrativity is essentially a matter of bad faith, of radical (and typically irremediable) inauthenticity, rather than as something essential for authenticity. "ibid, p. 435

[33] As Strawson remarks "I also suspect that those who are drawn to write on the subject of 'narrativity' tend to have strongly Diachronic and Narrative outlooks or personalities, and generalize from their own case with that special, fabulously misplaced confidence that people feel when, considering elements of their own experience that are existentially fundamental for them, they take it that they must also be fundamental for everyone else". And he adds in a footnote that he takes this tendency to generalize from one's own experience to the experience of others to be the "greatest single source of unhappiness in human intercourse." ibid, p. 439 and p. 439 fn. 25

entail.[34] In this way, the claim to narrative recognition reintroduces the notion of the sovereign subject, albeit in 'relational' form. In this formulation it is not the self-sufficiency of the subject, but the *knowledge* of our mutual past and present that provides a sense of sovereignty. Experiencing myself as definable in my relationship to a caring and known other allows for a sense of transparency and control, and therefore sovereignty. Moreover, if human beings could 'know' the past and present, this would make the future, at least to an extent, foreseeable and thus controllable. As we have seen, this notion is deeply problematic, if we wish to retain an Arendtian concept of political freedom.

We thus have to be clear that, while Arendt's understanding is built upon the notion of narration, her critique of modernity introduces a strongly episodic, non-diachronic understanding of time, which is more in keeping with the non-sovereign understanding of the self I am forwarding. This is expressed in her notion of history and in her discussion of judgement and the political actor, where she decisively denies the subject any control over the future. In Arendt's discussion of history, she dismisses diachronic or 'coherent-narrative' time because of the events of the 20th century. She understands totalitarian rule and the holocaust as traumatic events, which brought about an irreversible disruption of the unilineal flow of western history and tradition. Totalitarianism means the final break with tradition, a rupture in time that calls any prior understanding of history as teleological into question. As Arendt writes, “[t]otalitarian domination as an established fact, which in its unprecedentedness cannot be comprehended through the usual categories of political thought, and whose 'crimes' cannot be judged by traditional moral standards or punished within the legal framework of our civilization, has broken the continuity of Western history.” As the continuity of the past cannot be re-established we

[34] Markell, 2003, p.12

are left with "a *fragmented* past, which has lost its certainty of evaluation."[35] To deal with this fragmentation Arendt forwards an understanding of history where meaning resides in the event itself. She makes clear that this "does not exclude either causality or the context in which something occurs," but finds causality and context within the "light provided by the event itself, illuminating a specific segment of human affairs." In this way she wishes to counter teleological notions of history prevalent in the 19th century. Contrary to the modern view of history there is no independent existence of causality and meaning "of which the event would be only the more or less accidental though adequate expression."[36] This emphasis on the event, on singular stories written by the actions of extraordinary people, enables to Arendt to develop a methodological approach suitable to deal with the loss of tradition. She engages in 'exercises of thought' where the single events of human history can be excavated from the depths of time, without claiming that history would follow a pre-written story-line. By retrieving fragments and single stories the chain of narrative continuity is broken and chronology, 'the natural structure of narrative', is shattered. If one takes Arendt's account of history as translatable to our personal experience of time, this recalls Butler's notion of the opaque becoming of the self. It is thus possible to read the notion of 'fragmented history' in a 'personal' sense, where it is the self who is unable to talk about herself in a coherent manner. As Butler remarks: "[m]y account of myself is partial, haunted by that for which I can devise no definitive story. I cannot explain exactly why I have emerged in this way, and my efforts at narrative reconstruction are always undergoing revision. There is that in me and of me for which I can give no account."[37] While Cavarero ascribes this inability to 'tell oneself' to the belatedness of memory, and Oliver to violent traumas of oppression, as we will see in the next chapter, this notion is more fruitfully understood as an interruption that follows from

35 Arendt, 1978, p. 212
36 Arendt, 2006 c, p.64
37 Butler, 2005, p. 40

our relationship to the other. This not only calls for a rethinking of the notion of trauma, but also for the question whether we should indeed aim to recover a unity which is always already lost and thus appears only in its fictionality.

Butler concedes to narrative theorists that the self at times might feel a need to recount its own beginnings, but she maintains that this recounting will always have a fictional character. For Arendt, on the other hand, there is no need for self-narration. When she explains the importance of the event for the political actor, disconnection with the past is not shrouded in the taste of melancholy as it is in Butler's account where foreclosure and loss establish the self as unknowable to itself. At least for the political actor the question of her own emergence does not seem to pose itself. For Arendt, action is closely linked to the ontological condition of natality, because it initiates something completely new and unforeseeable. As political actors we are 'reborn', our past is therefore of no interest. If we decide to appear in the public sphere, who we were before, or what we do in other spheres of our lives, is of no importance. Therefore, someone who experiences herself in the ways that Strawson describes as episodic seems uniquely able to fulfil Arendt's expectations of the ideal political actor. As episodic person: "one has little or no sense that the self that one is was there in the (further) past and will be there in the future, although one is perfectly well aware that one has long-term continuity considered as a whole human being."[38] Albeit this might not necessarily be the case, Strawson argues that episodic persons might be more 'in the present', a character trait that arguably might help to be able to leave aside one's group-specific interests when engaging in politics. For example, if I do not define myself in relation to a history of growing up in a working-class background, this would help me to become the 'disinterested' actor Arendt conjures instead of forwarding the 'particularistic' interests of 'my' class.

[38] Strawson, 2004, p. 430

While Cavarero is thus right that reading Arendt allows us to understand reality not only in a 'narrative' fashion, but also to understand the self in terms of appearance to others, she differs decisively from Arendt in relating natality to (a desire for) unity.[39] It is this notion of unity as a normative or ethical value I wish to reject by highlighting that natality, while establishing the self as a vulnerable embodied being, allows for a sense of newness that is closely connected to the unboundedness of action. In this sense we do not appear as unique and one, but as vulnerable beings who, with the help of others can act in surprising ways which enable the appearance of unique events.

Towards an 'representational' view of others

Turning to Arendt and Strawson serves as a helpful corrective to the narrativity model by establishing that time-experience does not necessary follow a universal standard. Arendt's discussion of reality, however, still entails a problematic claim about the self's relationship to others. If an object can only appear in its reality when it has been perceived from a variety of different view-points, it would seem that the self relies on the exchange with others if it wants to ascertain the reality of a given object. While this would imply that reality can only be established within a communal setting, this is not the position Arendt takes in her discussion of thinking and judgement. As we have seen in the previous chapter, her understanding of thought as a private activity removes the thinking self from the plural public sphere. Arguing that the *way* one perceives the external world is objective and universal, and difference is only created by one's specific view-point,

[39] While I did not have the space to consider this aspect of Cavarero's thought in the course of this chapter, her argument about the unity of the self is based on a discussion of natality that stresses the relationship between mother and child. See Cavarero, 2000, p. 38; 2008, p.134

makes it possible for Arendt to maintain that the thinker could *represent* to herself the position of another person. For Arendt, the thinking self can create a multi-perspective image of a given event or object without actually engaging with other people and their opinions directly. In this way, Arendt's thought ultimately avoids the encounter with otherness.

Arendt's understanding of thought relies strongly on her reading of Kant's *Critique of Judgment.*[40] Referring to Kant she distinguishes reasoning, which deals with universals and has to follow the rules of non-contradiction, from political thinking or judgement. If we think about the political world, our thinking has to represent the plurality and contingency of the realm of action - one is thus concerned with representing a variety of opinions. Arendt interprets Kant as closely related to Socrates, by reading the latter in a way that brings him close to the sophists. She interprets the notion of *doxa* or opinion as a form of truth. Different opinions can still be equally true, because they represent different perspectives on the same matter. Arendt argues that "the world opens up differently to every man, according to his position in it." She refers to Socrates to argue that "there are, or should be, as many different *logoi* as there are men, and that all these *logoi* together form the human world."[41] The *doxa* of each citizen is "a potential truth waiting to be unfolded" and not, as in the Platonic tradition (that for her represents the origins of political philosophy) "a falsehood or a distortion of reality."[42] The ability to bring together these different opinions within one's own mind in order to develop a more thorough view of reality Arendt, following Kant, calls 'enlarged mentality,' (*erweiterte Denkungsart*) - a way of thinking 'in the place of everybody else'. This 'enlarged mentality' is enabled by

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[40] However it should be noted that Arendt's appropration of Kant is some respect is decisively un-Kantian see on this point for example Beiner, 2001

[41] Arendt quoted in Dolan, 2000, p. 264-5

[42] Ibid, p. 265

our imaginative capacity. It is this idea of imaginative thinking in the place of the other that ultimately allows Arendt to avoid the question of alterity. For Arendt, the validity of the judgements reaches as far as the number of different positions one is able to take into consideration. Judgement is thus concerned with leaving one's own particular viewpoint behind – of broadening one's mental horizon, as it were. As Arendt makes clear, political thought is in its nature *representative*. To form an opinion I consider "a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent; that is, I *represent* them."[43] Judging a particular instance depends "upon my representing to myself something which I *do not perceive*."[44] In representing the position of others, the thinker is able to overcome her own biased or 'idiosyncratic' personal opinions. We should be clear, however, that representing the position of the other has nothing to do with adopting the *actual* opinion of other persons. Nor has it to do with trying to *feel* what the other would feel. Instead of taking a hermeneutic approach Arendt argues that the thinker tries to imagine how *she* would see the issue from the perspective of the other. She would thus be and think in her own identity where actually she is not. "The more people's standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place" Arendt writes "the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion."[45] In this way judgement ascends from particularities "to some impartial generality." In this 'general' view, the issue in question is 'forced' into the open. It shows "itself from all sides, in every possible perspective, until it is *flooded and made transparent* by the full light of human comprehension."[46]

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43 Arendt, 2006 b, p.237 my emphasis
44 Arendt, 2003 c, p.140
45 Arendt, 2006 b, p. 237
46 Ibid, p.238, my emphasis

Importantly, her understanding of representative thought avoids to address the differences in human forms of life. Arendt's notion of judgement often stresses the objectiveness of the human viewpoint of the world untainted by differences of time, space or culture. As we have seen, the thinking self can step out of its specific position. Rejecting relativistic positions, as for example presented in the radical historicism prevalent in early 20th century thought which would claim that "the present might have little if anything in common with the past" and thus cannot be understood, Arendt argues that we will be still moved by the same poems as people hundreds of years ago, because of the essential sameness of our emotions.[47] The structural similarity of human interiority means that albeit the thinker is not trying to *feel* like the other person when she puts herself in the other's position she could still assume that their feelings would be in fact similar. I could thus make a reasonable assumption about 'how it is to be you', without appealing to the notion of emphatic projection. While Arendt acknowledges that each political judgement will be coloured by a certain subjectivity, stemming from the persons specific viewpoint upon the world, the objective character of the world and the structural sameness of our inner lives still allows for the relative generality of judgement.

The separation of thought and action enables Arendt to safeguard objectivity and establishes the thinker as disengaged from the world and the other persons within it. For Arendt an objective view of the world is only possible, if the thinker and judge does not get attached to the actor but retains an attitude of 'disinterested joy' (*uninteresiertes Wohlgefallen)* towards the public realm. If we are deeply involved at a personal level, irrational emotional attachment might make it impossible to see the issue 'from all sides'. While political judgement is one important avenue (apart from acting politically) to establish a connection with one's community and escape the isolation of the private,

[47] See Bevir, Harigs, Rushing, 2007, p. 3; Arendt, 1978, p. 35-6

Arendt praises an attitude of detachedness, far removed from the loving, emphatic scene of recognition theorists like Cavarero imagine. While stressing plurality, Arendt seems to avoid connectivity or relationality in a stronger sense. Like her notion of political action, her notion of judgement seems to foreground a decisively non-emphatic way of perceiving others.

Moreover, the assertion that it is enough to *represent* to myself the way *I would* see the issue, if I were in the place of someone else allows Arendt to develop an understanding of pluralistic thinking that can do without public discussion, without interaction, and without the *actual* opinion of others.[48] No further understanding of 'otherness' or difference is needed. It is not her goal to *understand* the other, or sympathise with the other's position. Even less does she wish to argue for a position where the other is for some reason unknowable or where the *otherness* of another person is acknowledged. Arendt's understanding of representation implies that I can indeed assume the position of *any* other person, no matter how different our histories, social or cultural backgrounds may be.

The notion that perception relies on the spectator's removal from the object, however, creates problems for Arendt's understanding of judgement. Apart from the possibility to call on exemplars regardless of time and space, substituting the imagined other for the 'real' other person is important for Arendt because it creates a necessary distance to the object of judgement. In the course of action we are too entangled within the non-sovereign realm of the public, therefore actors cannot oversee the consequences of what they are doing. However, this emphasis on detachedness and removal opens Arendt up to the criticism of elitism. The problem of elitism show itself for example in this example

[48] It has to be noted, however, that Arendt seems to develop two variations of her notion of judgement and that in a version I do not discuss here, that she forwards specifically in 'The Crisis in Culture' and 'Truth and Politics' where Arendt writes about judgement as a faculty that enables political actors to decide what courses of action to undertake in the public realm. Here she seems to take the view that personal judgement needs the discussion with others. See Passarin d'Entreves 2000, p. 253

Arendt offers for the importance of removal or spectatorship for judgement:

> suppose I look at a specific slum dwelling and I perceive in this particular building the general notion which it does not exhibit directly, the notion of poverty and misery. I arrive at this notion by representing to myself how I would feel if I had to live there, that is, I try to think in the place of the slum-dweller. The judgment I shall come up with will by no means necessarily be the same as that of the inhabitants whom time and hopelessness may have dulled to the outrage of their condition, but it will become an outstanding example for my further judging of these matters.[49]

Arendt uses the specific example of a slum-dwelling to consider the general notion of poverty. What is at stake in using an example, however, is not finding out about the actual opinions or stories of the unique inhabitants of the slum-dwelling. The feelings, notions and stories of these people, who are involved in their own lives as actors, would be tainted by 'the unreality of subjectivity' as they lack the necessary objective distance from their own situation. We thus run into a general problem with Arendt's understanding of judgement. To quote Judith Butler: "[w]e judge a world we refuse to know, and our judgement becomes one means of refusing to know that world."[50] For Arendt, as soon as someone is actively involved, the ability to represent the whole story is lost. Therefore, judgement for Arendt is necessarily judgement of others. This, however, keeps the other person at bay. By judging another person on the one hand a distance between the judge and the object of judgment is established. On the other hand,Arendt still assumes that judgement is possible because the other person is not truly 'other' or different from the judging self. It is here, however, that a contradiction comes to the fore, because, despite our 'similarity' we are not all able to assume a 'disinterested' position. In her separation of the judge from the object of judgement, therefore, a form of elitism or 'social bias' resonates. While she arrives at this view from a different direction, this indeed puts Arendt firmly within tradition of thought Oliver criticises in reference to Hegelian recognition approaches, where the dominant subject talks over the heads of objectified

[49] Arendt, 2003 c, p. 140
[50] Butler, 2009, p. 156

others who are deprived of a voice. As Arendt states

> in order to become aware of appearances we first must be free to establish a certain distance between ourselves and the object, and the more important the sheer appearance of a thing is, the more distance it requires for its proper appreciation. This distance cannot arise unless we are in *a position to forget ourselves*, the cares and interests and urges of our lives, so that we will not seize what we admire but let it be as it is, in its appearance. This attitude of disinterested joy (to use the Kantian term, *uninteressiertes Wohlegefallen*) can be experienced only *after the needs of the living organism have been provided for*, so that, released from life's necessity, men may be free for the world.[51]

In other words, what Arendt argues for here, and forcefully expands upon in *On Revolution*, is her notion that extreme poverty and suppression make it impossible to take part in the political sphere, or judge political matters objectively. The notion that individuals need a level of economic affluence in order 'to see the world' also seems to play a role in Arendt's rather positive appraisal of the predominately white student movement and her simultaneous rather aversive stance to the black student and civil rights movement.[52] At times it almost seems as if Arendt would want to suggest that a certain level of prosperity *and a 'classical' western education* is necessary in order to arrive at a general or 'universal' position, all human beings should share. In this sense the 'universal' sphere of thought relies on a removal from the particularity of action *and* social context. The social context of a western academic, however, does not appear to be distorting on one's judgement. In Arendt's discussion sometimes seems as if the personal

[51] Arendt, 1972, p. 207 my emphasis

[52] Moreover, as argued above, my judgment is only as good as the exemplars I can draw on – and it seems that in Arendt's view 'good' exemplars are mainly provided by a 'classical' western education. Unfortunately this has the effect that Arendt appears at times unable to fully grasp the position of African Americans in the early 1960s, who deprived of an equal access to education and economically disadvantaged often fail to live up to Arendt's standard of the disinterested political actor. For example in the essay "On Violence" she thus states that 'serious violence' only entered the scene of student protests with the appearance of the 'Negro movement': "Negro students, the majority of them admitted without academic qualification, regarded and organized themselves as an interest group, the representatives of the black community. Their interest was to lower academic standards. … it seems that the academic establishment, in its curious tendency to yield more to Negro demands, even if they are clearly silly and outrageous, than to the disinterested and usually highly moral claims of the white rebels" ibid, p. 120-1. And she adds in appendix viii "Even more frightening is the all too likely prospect that, in about five to ten years, this "education" in Swahili (a 19th century kind of no-language spoken by Arab ivory and slave caravans, a hybrid mixture of a Bantu dialect with an enormous vocabulary of Arab borrowings; see the Encyclopaedia Britannica 1961) African literature, and other nonexistent subjects will be interpreted as another trap of the white man to prevent Negroes from acquiring an adequate education" ibid, p. 191-192

histories and social positions of those with the right educational and economic background *are* universal, in so far as these histories seem not to have a lasting distorting effect on external reality. Moreover, as Arendt assumes the equality of 'rational' beings, the power relations between the one judging and those judged do not need to be further considered. By exercising their mental activities individuals assume a quasi-Archimedean position, from which the realm of appearances can be overseen. This position overlooks that sociality precedes and enables thinking.[53] We only become capable of the silent internal dialogue of thought, because we already engage in dialogues with others. If we understand our ability for speech and thought to follow from the address of the other, this implies that the reflective move of ethical thought necessarily takes place in a social setting. As Butler argues:

> [o]nly as someone brought into language through others do I become someone who can respond to their call, and who can interiorize that dialogic encounter as part of my own thinking, at which point sociality becomes an animating trace in any and all thinking any one of us might do. Thus the dialogue that I am is not finally separable from the plurality that makes me possible. Although the dialogue that I am is not fully reducible to that plurality, there is a necessary overlap, or chiasmus, between the two spheres.[54]

We might thus ask of Arendt why for her the social formation of thinking seems to stop at the question of education, where one path seems to further the ability to assume a 'quasi-universal' position while the other, like her discussion of the African American student movement shows, would make us hopelessly biased. Further, we might inquire whether the solitariness the thinking self assumes is not also a social relation. It is particularly this second question the next chapter will turn to.

Conclusion

[53] Butler, 2012, p. 173
[54] Butler, 2012, p. 173

This chapter has discussed two versions of 'the avoidance of otherness'. Both versions allow for a return to a sovereign, omniscient notion of selfhood by downplaying our vulnerability to others we are unable to know. Starting from a critique of Hegelian theories of recognition, which depend on a hierarchical relationship between the self and the other, narrative reformulations of recognition reject the notion of alterity altogether. They favour models that establish a sphere of equality between a concrete 'I' and a concrete 'you'. Similarly, Arendt's representational view relies on the notion of structural equality of perception that allows us to assume the other's viewpoint. These notions share a problematic understanding of reality as 'universal' appearance, unbiased by sociality or historicity. To claim that perception is objective presupposes concepts of transparency of language reminiscent of early modern notions of subjectivity. Moreover, individuals are not only supposedly able to see others more clearly or 'objectively' than they can see themselves, they could also relate this 'truth' or 'objective reality' about the other via language. Language is thus understood, not only as a mirror of nature – corresponding directly to an objective external reality – but also as a 'mirror of the soul' or the mind.

While both notions combine an understanding of the uniqueness of the individual with claims for an underlying universality they also differ in important respects. The narrative recognition approach is based on the self's affective relationship to a particular other person. Through strengthening the role of friendship and solidarity this notion thus seeks to overcome the pervasive influence of structural inequality on agents in the public and private sphere. From the narrative recognition approach we can thus take the important insight that a politics of affinity and friendship might help to alleviate the destructive personal consequences of unequal power-relations. Narrative recognition theories

highlight that personal experience is an important aspect of political agency. Narrativity theories have thus helped to create a more diverse understanding of identity and the social and political sphere that goes beyond a simplified notion of class or gender based structuration. By contrast, Arendt's understanding of seeing the world from another's perspective is problematic, because it tends to overlook the influence of ingrained power-relations on our ability to perceive reality. It tends, moreover, to make the concrete other person superfluous, in precisely the way narrative theorists and, at times Arendt herself, argue that the philosophical tradition and the notion of the universal and sovereign subject does. In stark contrast to Butler's (and Cavarero's) understanding of natality that stresses our relational character, Arendt equates natality with a creative force that establishes the singularity of the self. While we do indeed draw on 'exemplars' for our thought, there is no deep connection established between the creative thinking self and the exemplary voices it engages with. It is the polyphony of the self that allows for a general understanding of a particular matter. Relying on an internal world, however, makes it possible for the thinker to leave the external sphere of non-sovereignty and appearance behind. With the notion of representative thought or enlarged mentality Arendt thus runs the danger of reducing ethical thinking and political judgement to the solipsistic experience of a subject which is removed from the world. However, I would not outrightly dismiss Arendt's understanding of the thinking self. Her invocation of natality and thus infinity of the self, while not unproblematic, reminds us of the indecidability of the future and the creative potential of human agents. The relational aspect of thinking is, however, downplayed when the 'internal ocean' stands in for the encounter with actual other people. To sum up, despite the stress Arendt puts on the fact of plurality, her inadequate apprehension of relationality allows her political and moral thought to remain firmly subject-centred. The 'other' appears for Arendt mainly as a necessary, but rather

faceless, audience or as an external, exemplary reference point for the inner dialogue of the thinking I. While theorists like Cavarero and Oliver seek to understand the self as deeply relational, this does not prevent them to coming similarly close to a sovereign notion of the subject by overstating the revelatory effect of affection. Through our relationship to others, we can re-establish a sense of unified selfhood and thus become capacious human beings, who seem relatively unbound by limitations to knowledge and/or socio-linguistic norms.

Both positions circumvent the question how we deal with others, ethically and politically, who we do not or cannot know, to whom we do not relate via reciprocal recognition. In other words, while Cavarero's and Oliver's unease with notions of impersonal 'Otherness' is understandable, I maintain that the notion of absolute alterity remains necessary, because to reduce the relationship to others into one between an 'I' and a personally known 'you,' does not seem to offer a satisfactory model for our political and ethical thinking in a multifarious social world. By aspiring to retain a notion of unified selfhood, the self uses the other to become a 'whole' thus ultimately denying its otherness. As we will see in the next chapter, however, this ultimately leads the self back towards sceptic position.

Chapter 4 - Otherness and ethical responsibility

Introduction

This chapter forwards the notion that our relationships are not limited by what we can know about each other. As writers critical of narrative recognition theories point out, our knowledge of others is fallible and finite. This, however, does not diminish our ability to relate and assume responsibility for them. To the contrary, accepting the finitude of knowledge and communicability allows for a deeper appreciation of responsibility towards others in our ethical thinking – a responsibility that is, in a sense, groundless and infinite. With this assertion, I aim to establish an approach to ethics that is not concerned with instituting or justifying a set of normative rules which would guide our decision-making processes. Instead, this chapter asks about the *ethicality* of morality itself.[1] I argue that a non-sovereign, finite notion of the self necessitates a reformulation of our understanding of ethical responsibility. While concepts of the sovereign subject entail the understanding that the subject is accountable for its actions and their consequences, the notion of non-sovereignty undermines the possibility for such a 'causal' model of ethics. Ethical responsibility is then redefined as following from the relational character of the self, and is not bound to any specific acts or decisions of this self. Understanding ethics in

[1] See Raffoul, 2010, pp. 1-5

terms of responsibility *for others*, then, is based on a notion of the subject as *constituted by* its *relationship* to the other. Stressing the role of relationality, I aim to forward a way of decentring the self, which does not, in a reverse positioning, puts 'the Other' in a primary position. I argue that both the subject and the other can only appear as distinct positions because of their *relation* to each other. There is no other without a self – and *vice versa*. This notion might make it possible to develop an ontology that goes beyond the subject/object distinction and serves as a ground for an ethics of mutual responsibility.

My argument rests on the assertion that a notion of the self as non-sovereign and relational needs to retain the idea of irreducible alterity. I show that, if read in a certain way, the concept of 'the Other' not only refers to something 'mute, impoverished, unavailable, still to come,' but also to our everyday encounters with concrete other persons. This, however, does not imply that alterity could be reduced to the notion of a concrete 'you.' It is within our encounters with the 'otherness' of a concrete other person that we are pointed towards a more fundamental hidden aspect of life, a 'transcendental' or universal notion of otherness. In this way, the abstract notion of 'the Other' does not conceal the concrete other person, but finds in her its particular expression. I make this argument initially by contrasting Cavell's discussion of other-mind-scepticism with the Levinasian notion of the other. I argue that Cavell enables us to understand that the alterity of the other person cannot be overcome in the ways imagined by narrative theorists. Cavell, however, ultimately holds on to a notion of autonomy that delimits the constitutive role of otherness. He thus retains a subject-centred understanding of ethical responsibility. As a supplement to Cavell's I turn to Butler's reading of Levinas, which goes a long way in decentring the subject by pointing towards its relational character. It

helps, however, to complement her reading with a 'spatial' notion of the self's encounter with the other by drawing on Derrida's engagement with Levinas. This mitigates the violent terms of the Levinasian narrative Butler forwards. Instead of arguing that the subject comes into existence by being 'persecuted' or 'held hostage' by the other, my account understands both self and other to come into existence through a movement of mutual welcoming. The notion of being 'open' to the other, or welcoming another within the space of the self, rephrases the self's relationship to the world. Welcoming the other we also assert that the world does not 'belong' to the self. Openness to the other highlights that, while the encounter of the other can be traumatic, this should not be understood solely in the negative terms commentators like Oliver have taken it. A trauma is everything that unsettles the self's drive to consolidation and sovereignty, and such an unsettling can also be a happy event. This chapter will thus forward a notion of relationality that is based on ungrounded trust or openness towards the other, where the boundaries of the self can be left unguarded. Ultimately, as I will show in chapter six, this 'ethical' notion has important implications for our understanding of the political.

Other-mind-scepticism and the ordinariness of failing acknowledgement

To grasp the pervasiveness of the question of the other for human experience Cavell's long-standing engagement with this theme is illuminating. Instead of treating it as a purely philosophical question, he shows how the problem of other minds forms an intersection between culture and philosophy. His writing highlights how deeply we can be unsettled by encountering, and doubting, other persons - our friends, lovers and fellow

citizens. Cavell discusses such encounters by drawing on a wide variety of sources, from Shakespeare's plays, to Hollywood movies, to the philosophical canon, and, in particular, ordinary language philosophy. This breadth of material demonstrates the intensity of our preoccupation with the question of how to relate to another person. Engaging with this theme as one of the fault-lines of culture, philosophy, and every-day experience Cavell highlights how the problem of otherness disrupts or problematises our understanding of self, language, society, and ultimately the very fabric of reality. The previous chapter has engaged with notions of ethical and political thinking that proclaim an, in my view, unfounded optimism in the transparency of language and the communicability of experiences relating both to our private internal and shared external realities. For Cavell, by contrast, it is precisely when we come into contact with others that the finitude of knowledge and understanding most sharply come into focus. He maintains that communication can not only potentially fail, but that indeed the failure to grasp and communicate 'fully' is a defining feature of the human condition. As we have seen in chapter one, communication is mired by our inability to control not only what the other understands or acknowledges, but also by an unwanted 'excess' where what we say always reveals more than what we intend.

The relationship to the other is approached by Cavell via the sceptical question whether the other person's mind resembles my own. His aim, as argued before, is not to refute scepticism (that is, to argue that doubting the existence of external objects or other minds is fallacious). On the contrary, he takes the wish to repudiate of doubt, the 'craving for generality', as the flip-side of scepticism, caught up within the same philosophical obsession as scepticism itself. While 'external-world scepticism', however, threatens our

very possibility to live in the world, scepticism of other minds seems, in a certain sense, unavoidable.[2] The fact that I cannot know the other's mind "is too trivial almost to mention." That "what is inside the other is not transparent to me" is "no news," suggests "that the problem of the other is not discovered the way the problem of knowledge of objects is discovered."[3] Other-mind-scepticism is thus set up as inherently different from scepticism regarding external objects. While Cavell accepts the sceptic notion that "there seems to be no particular reason why I should be entitled to know with certainty that the mind-body association in my case can be legitimately projected onto the other" and remarks in *The Claim of Reason* that "skepticism with respect to other minds cannot be skeptical enough," he does so by pointing out the seeming banality of this insight.[4] What is at stake then is the individual's *reaction* to the sceptical mood.

Put simply, there are two principle ways to react to the other's address in the absence of the best case of knowledge: we can deny the other person or acknowledge her. This claim is best fleshed out by returning to Cavell's discussion of Wittgensteinian criteria. While in chapter one I argued that criteria establish 'what kind of object anything is,' what is at stake here is the difference between criteria referring to objects and those referring to psychological concepts. The difference between criteria for internal states and criteria for external objects is shown on the example of pain. In this argument certain types of behaviour such as wincing, screaming, or saying one is in pain, are identified as *criteria*

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2 As Espen Hammer remarks Cavell argues in *The Claim of Reason* that it is "far from clear that the [external world] skeptic, though capable of constructing a best case for knowledge (one that generalizes), ever manages to enter a definite claim on which to focus his attack. To live one's skepticism with respect to the external world would be tantamount to psychosis: what the skeptic opens our eyes to is that *this* is the best, that our everyday life with objects, though not immune to the possibility of failure, is all we shall ever have." Hammer, 2002, p.143.

3 Stanley Cavell, 2005 b, p. 149-150

4 Cavell, 1999, p.241; quoted in Hent de Vries, 2007, p. 77

for pain. However, as we recall, Cavell understands criteria as settling questions of identity rather than existence. Therefore, if someone shows pain-behaviour this does not prove the existence of pain. Showing pain-behaviour in order to express pain only proves that we have a common understanding of how pain looks like.[5] You have to understand what counts as pain (know the criteria) in order to fake it.[6] That we see a person cry does not exclude the possibility that she is not actually in pain, but, for example, acting or making a point. She might even be a robot, programmed to react to an outer stimulus in a way that I would interpret as pain-behaviour.[7] Reacting towards the expression of pain with sceptical doubt ('she might just act', or – in the terms of various science fiction stories - 'she might be a robot pretending to be human'), however, means that we have not fully grasped the concept of pain or other 'psychological' concepts.[8] As Cavell points out

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5 There is always also the possibility that what I *take* as pain-behaviour, is someone calling her hamster, or clearing her throat, see Cavell 1999, p.43

6 Cavell, 1999, p.44-5

7 Cavell also uses his discussion of pain-criteria to argue that we don't know ourselves. This assertion hinges on the notion that what differentiates the criteria for pain from criteria for an external object is that they are necessarily expressive. In more orthodox readings of Wittgenstein this argument only applies to the pain of others. While I can only see whether someone else is in pain when this is outwardly expressed, it seems non-sensical to state something like 'I know I am in pain'. Whether I'm in pain or not is something I cannot fail to know. Cavell disagrees with this notion and makes the point that the expression 'I know that I am in pain' might "be perfectly meaningful in response to an analyst who has uncovered my attempts to suppress or deny that truth about myself." (Hammer, 2002, p.66) As I have argued in chapter one, psychological repression might lead to a situation where we cannot be said to 'know' ourselves. As we have seen, Cavell states: "when it comes to regions of the soul like … coldness covered with affectionateness, or loneliness covered with activity, or hatred covered with judiciousness, or obsessiveness covered by intellectuality … one's lack of knowledge about oneself may fully contrast with one's beliefs about oneself. … And here my relation to myself is expressed by saying that I do not know myself" (Cavell, 1999, p.101) In this formulation, the unknowability of the self is expressed as a sense of relating to oneself like to another person. When developing a reflective stance towards our own self that we might discover that (against our own assumption) we do not know ourselves. If we remain unaware of the limits of self-knowledge, however, this might lead us to live a life of conformism, unaware of our own ethical potential and unwilling to take responsibility for ourselves and our community. For Cavell, the task of philosophy, as of psychoanalysis and art, is thus to heighten our self-knowledge by confronting the limits of our ability to know the self. While complete self-awareness must remain an illusion, a denial of finitude, it is the process of reflectivity that allows us to develop subjectivity

8 That something might turn out not to be 'human,' that we could create something human-like assuming and faking the human and in this way casting doubt on our humanity is indeed a recurrent theme of the science-fiction genre, as for example in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* by Philip K. Dick the novel on which *Blade Runner* was based. Maybe the prevalence of this story line could be taken as the cultural expression of a contemporary form of scepticism fed by a feeling of unreality regarding technological progress and destruction.

in the early essay 'Knowing and Acknowledging', “in the domain of psychological concepts, knowing takes the form of acknowledging—part of knowing that another is in pain is knowing that the other's pain demands a *response* from me.”[9] What my perception of the other's pain calls for is *not* an intellectual inquiry, but action. The concept of acknowledgment thus links the perception of the other's behaviour not only to an interpretation ('this sound is an expression of pain') but also to the insight that this behaviour is a form of address which is supposed to elicit a response.

The concept of acknowledgement then makes it possible for Cavell to argue that questions about our ethical responsiveness arise from the address of the other. The difference between 'knowing' and 'acknowledging' lies in the acceptance of responsibility. When we understand our relationships to others in terms of knowledge, this does not involve any normative claim. While “failing to know” if the other was really in pain is simply an absence from which no responsibility for myself follows (“I simply wasn't aware”), “failing to acknowledge” is always linked to a denial of my responsibility for the other. I have to justify to *myself* why I did or did not respond. By claiming that my relationship to another person is primarily one of knowledge I thus try to avoid ethical responsibility for her. Failing to respond to the other's address (her showing pain) is thus not just an absence of certitude (“I couldn't know if she *really* was in pain”), but “the presence of something, a confusion, an indifference, a callousness, an exhaustion, a coldness.”[10] Acknowledgement means that I leave my disengaged stance and actively relate to the other person. By understanding the other's behaviour as an address I recognize myself as an ethical subject. Rather than considering the other as an object about which I can (or can fail to) gain knowledge, acknowledging the other's pain

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[9] Quoted in Mulhall, 1994, p.110

[10] Stanley Cavell, 1976, p. 264

involves “emphatic projection.” This identification with the other singles *me* out, “it exposes me to the specific history of my relation to the other.”[11] Acknowledgement thus personalises my relationship to the specific other who addresses me. This highlights the affective dimension of assuming ethical responsibility.

Importantly, who is singled out in this scenario is not the other person, but myself. In contrast to the narrative recognition approaches discussed in the previous chapter, the relationship between the singular 'I' and the singular 'you' is not based on my knowledge of the other. It is not her unique story that makes me respond to her address. Instead, *I* am singled out, and have to take responsibility for *my* response to the other. This claim has important political implications in so far as in a complex and perpetually changing social world, my reaction to the needs of others could not be based on prior knowledge of them. Responding to another person who I do not know requires trust, which, as I will argue in more detail in chapter six, is therefore an important political affect. Moreover, we should ask under what circumstances we become unwilling to acknowledge the other as making a political demand. When engaging with public discourse on claims to social justice we have to consider why the demands of certain groups or individuals take priority over others. A critical political position would thus require asking what underlying fear or lack would make us react to an address, to the need for protection, food or shelter, with sceptical doubt about the sincerity or even humanity of the claimants. One point I wish to bring to the fore is the ethical and political need to develop a reflective or critical stance towards myself and the way I perceive others. What, I have to ask, makes it possible for me to understand myself as addressed by another? Before turning to the political

[11] Hammer, 2002, p. 63

implications of these questions in more detail, however, we first need to formulate a clearer understanding of the relation between ethical responsibility and otherness.

Autonomy and the finite other

Cavell's perfectionist moral thought, like the Arendtian notion of the thinking self, is part of a tradition of moral philosophy where ethics is defined as a reflexive turn towards the self. Two ways of assuming ethical responsibility come into play here: first, the individual becomes an ethical subject by assuming responsibility for her actions, by understanding her actions as the *cause* of another person's suffering. Second, ethical responsibility, in the perfectionist sense, implies that the individual takes responsibility for *who* she is and could become. In this formulation 'work on the self' as a creative engagement with the self takes priory. This notion of developing the self is not necessarily or exclusively directed towards the individual's engagement with others. The perfectionist creates a notion of a better self, a notion that should express itself in her future actions. Both formulations (which are not exclusive of each other), however, remain dependent on the notion of a relatively autonomous self.[12] Cavell, despite giving room to the importance of acknowledging the other, retains this self-directed character of moral thought. What seems at stake in the critical interrogation of the self's reaction to the other is whether it isolates *the self* or diminishes its ability to develop as an ethical agent. Other persons appear to be of importance only in so far as they are able to redirect the subject's self-

[12] Stephen K. White describes this notion, as 'capacious agency.' This form of agency he finds is bound to a non-theistic liberal tradition, where the agent “finds through reflection only herself as a being who can in fact reflect upon herself and her choices; that is, who has the power, or capacity, to frame and revise her plan of life.” Our universal capacity for reason then “allows you to comprehend that you have the power to direct your life.” White, 2009, p.56

understanding. This stress on the self is an expression of the status autonomy and freedom have in Cavell's thinking. Even though he criticises the notion of the sovereign subject as an epistemological figure, Cavell is anxious to retain the notion of the free, autonomous individual at the centre of his philosophy. He seeks to remain firmly within the philosophical tradition as he defines it. For Cavell, "philosophy begins with, say, in the Socratic ambition, and may at any time encounter, an aspiration toward the therapeutic, a sense of itself as guiding the soul, or self, from self-imprisonment toward the light or the instinct of freedom."[13] Philosophy itself then starts with a concern for the self—a concern, however, that in Cavell's rearticulation is able to unfold itself in its engagement with others.

Separating his understanding of freedom and autonomy from the notion of epistemic knowledge is a move that divides Cavell from Butler, who appears to suggest that autonomy and freedom are decisively restricted by our inability to 'know' the nature and extent of our entanglement in the social field. While Cavell's formulation of the reflexive moral self leaves room for the role of the other person and sociality, we need to ask, nevertheless, whether the centrality of the autonomous self restricts his understanding of the role of otherness. This would make it necessary to go beyond Cavell in order to develop a notion of ethics that allows to decentre the self, giving more room to relationality as constitutive of ethical subjectivity.

In Cavell's approach autonomy, or the ability to freely decide how to react to the other, appears as a decisive feature of the self's encounters with others, *if* these encounters should provide the individual with an opportunity for ethical self-reflection. The

[13] Cavell, 1994, p. 4

individual does not automatically feel that she should acknowledge the other; acknowledgement is a stance she has to *choose* towards another person (and herself).[14] While this presupposes a freely choosing subject, this subject cannot *know* about the consequences of its choices. Autonomy, however, is not completely decoupled from the notion of knowledge (of the self *and* the other). Instead, autonomy appears as the task of *getting to know* oneself and the other; a task which remains the perpetual impetus for autonomous self-fashioning, precisely *because* it cannot come to an end. In this sense, the autonomy is not a property of the self, but an ongoing project. Only if there is always something new to discover about the self and others can the individual make truly free choices, because freedom, as we have seen in Arendt, presupposes that the individual cannot foretell the outcome of its actions. In the absence of the 'best case of knowledge', the encounter with the other becomes an opportunity for the individual to recognize something about herself, to see in how far she is an *ethical* subject, but also how ethics could be defined differently in the future. Linking responsibility to autonomy and freedom means that the individual's responsibility is *infinite*, because the consequences of one's actions are unforeseeable. I cannot know how the other will react to what I say and do, and even though I thus might not *intend* or *will* the consequences of my actions, of what I say or do to the other, I remain responsible for these actions.[15] It is precisely the unpredictability of the other's response to me that allows for perfectionist self-development. My reaction to the other's address, and her response to my reaction, might call my previously assumed identity into question. Seeing another version of myself in the

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[14] Norval, 2007, p. 171

[15] Cavell thus claims for the ethical encounter with others what Arendt claims for the political sphere. I will come back to this point in chapter six, where I discuss it in terms of Arendt's notion of forgiveness in the political sphere. As Arendt argues "[w]ithout being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover" Arendt, 1998, p. 237

eyes of my interlocutor, I thus interrogate myself as a moral agent.

This argumentation accepts a Kantian understanding of freedom as "essentially a matter of self-determination, of being bounded exclusively by laws that the individual has rationally imposed upon itself."[16] Cavell, however, departs from Kant when he asserts that the self's heteronomous character comes to the fore in its relationship to others. He thus argues that "in marriage or friendship, the acknowledgment of the other entails the discovery of my own denial, and hence of the possibility of a more authentic positioning of myself, a regaining of voice, in that and other relationships."[17] While the other is thus the *occasion* to develop one's moral disposition, morality still remains a concern of the autonomous but always imperfect self with itself. To Cavell "the problem is to *recognize* myself as denying another, to understand that I carry chaos in myself."[18] For Cavell "the human being is free even in its complete state of conformity and indifference to the other: although responsible for its own being, a person (the skeptic) may not exercise, or live up to, his freedom; as a comfortable replacement for the burden of responsibility he may simply yield to the temptation to sublime language; and yet there is no escape from freedom except on the pains of one's own unknownness and unintelligibility."[19] By holding on to the primacy of the free subject, Cavell refuses to consider a more constitutive notion of relationality. This presupposes, however, that a (certain kind of) subject exists *before* its encounter of the other. While the consequences of denying the other are tragic, they *can* leave the subject intact. A person's failure to 'connect' to the other, to truly encounter her, might constitute a form denial of the self's relational

16 Hammer, 2002, p. 146
17 ibid
18 Cavell, 2005 b, p.151
19 Hammer, 2002, p. 147

character and thus call into question the quality of her personhood, but it does not necessarily undermine the possibility for the self to exist. Cavell does not wish to advance an argument about the way the other *constitutes* the subject, or is *prior* to our being-in-time. Instead, in his discussion two 'time-less' persons, that is, already constituted subjects, meet and engage with each other – or fail to do so. The encounter with another person might be transforming, but it does not 'create' a self that did not exist before. By leaving the other in a secondary position, as an occasion for the self's reflective encounter with itself, Cavell seems at risk of falling back onto a position which Adorno calls 'moral narcissism', where morality is reduced to the demand of being true to oneself, and to be true is understood as the notion of being identical with oneself.[20]

To safe himself from moral solipsism where engagement with the other only serves the development of the self, Cavell has to maintain that all forms of perfectionist work on the self take place within society, within a shared 'form of life'. Moreover, perfectionism appears as the possibility of a *privileged* 'everyday'.[21] While Butler and Arendt turn to moral thought to find answers to pressing political problems, Cavell's ethical perfectionism is located within a relatively privileged framework where the self has the

[20] For a short discussion of this notion see Butler, 2005, p. 108

[21] There is, however, a peculiar aspect to Cavell's invocation of the every-day. The scenarios he offers often have a dreamlike and bizarre quality, highlighting the uncanny in our mundane experiences; the shakiness of what we need to assume as the stable ground of our social relationships. What strikes me in Cavell's examples of the every-day is that they are precisely *not* every-day. It might take reflection on our daily practise of conversing with others to dissipate the extraordinariness of Cavell's examples, to see their relevance to the way we view the world. In other words, Cavell's style precludes a too easy or seamless translation of his thinking to concrete situations in one's own daily encounters or indeed for our political judgment. An engagement with Cavell's work heightens our awareness for our ethical responsibility in the everyday thus not by making concrete suggestions on how we should behave towards each other, but by creating in the reader a certain sensibility towards one's engagement with others, a willingness to suspend judgment. Albeit I do not have the space here, it would be important to investigate the role of mental illness in Cavell's work and follow up on the suggestion Cavell makes about the therapeutic character of philosophy and its relation to psychoanalysis. In this context we might ask whether how his 'every-day' examples treat experiences of extraordinary mind-states and of the boundaries between the normal and the insane.

leisure to concern itself with self-development. Cavell is concerned with the everyday encounter of otherness within those individuals with whom the subject shares a *community*. They *assume* that they share a *form of life* – in the sense that they speak a common language and share certain assumptions or values.[22] The most cases of encountering otherness Cavell discusses take place within intimate and affective relationships (marriage, family, friendship). The encounter with the irreducible alterity of another person is then the unexpected insight that this community and intimacy is limited, that one's assumptions about the loved other are fallible. The importance of a previously assumed intimacy or community becomes clear if we turn to the examples Cavell offers us to consider. In one instance he talks about following a friend's invitation to tea. Albeit they might have met for tea many times before, with nothing unusual happening, in Cavell's mind

> [n]othing insures that after a thousand instances of receiving me to tea you will not the next time lay out the toy tea set that belongs to your child's doll, and proceed to pour. Suppose I decide that I cannot reason with you. I have choices beyond breaking with you or reporting you. I have said that when my spade is turned, this means that I cannot go straight ahead, but that I can, for example, await a different response (see CHU p. 72), where awaiting is an active stance, one in which I try to make what I do, let's say, interesting to the other. I might humor you, or show you my trustworthiness, by sipping from the toy cup, or I might serve tea to my doll, or I might knock over the cup and throw myself into a tantrum. I *need* not know where this will end.[23]

As this example shows, there is no certainty which form human interactions will take. Acknowledgement involves openness to the unexpectedness of the (beloved) other. Put differently, acknowledgment, as the suspension not only of doubt, but also of judgement, allows the self to hold on to a notion of community, in light of its insurmountable separateness. What individuals learn in their engagement with others is not only where

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22 I will complicate this account of community in Cavell in the next chapter

23 Cavell, 2005 b, p. 136

they might differ, where mutual understanding ends, they also learn how far they are able to cope with this difference, to accommodate otherness. While I might be willing to accommodate the rather unusual behaviour of my friend (because I do not wish to break the bond of friendship), there are, however, situations where I am unable to accommodate difference. As Cavell continues: "if you deny that I have eaten all of an apple because I have left the core and the seeds, I can perhaps accommodate to this, that is, I can perhaps grant what you mean and in future (unless I myself change to your way of thinking) remind myself to avoid around you the topic of eating apples … But if one day you deny that I played all of a Brahms violin sonata in my recital because I played only the violin part, I may well not find myself willing to judge things so as to accommodate you." For Cavell, these examples point out that "we don't have to talk to everyone about everything, but that there seem to be some things we do have to talk to someone about if we are to talk to her or him about anything, as, for example, what we know or believe and what we see and hear."[24] This situation, however, where one is unable to further assume community with another person, for Cavell neither marks the end of community nor reason *as such*. That individuals find out that they do not *see* the world the same way, or understand a concept the same way – and that they can give no reason for the way they see and understand – does not imply that "there is no fact."[25] As Cavell argues "I

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[24] ibid, p. 137

[25] This highlights an important difference between Cavell's and Kripke's reading of Wittgenstein. Discussing Kripke Cavell notes, while "'there is no reason' we act and agree in language as we do, as there is no reason we walk as we do, as opposed, for example, to walking 'in place' periodically, or reversing direction after we have taken a given number of (what we call) steps or paces in a given direction. If I find someone who walks […] in this way, I may well have some sort of eerie feeling, not however because I find this experience to generalize (so that the idea of walking, or the entire idea of purposeful conduct vanishes), but because I am faced with the alien, or the singular." What for Cavell ends with the encounter of the singular is not the existence of community or the possibility to speak meaningfully of walking (there are still others who, I presume share my way of walking), but the possibility for explication. While for Kripke "the entire idea of meaning vanishes into thin air", for Cavell at this point the only thing that vanishes is the need for further conversation (on this particular topic) See ibid, p.135

recognize that the other must find her own way out of her isolation, as I must. And while words are in such a moment pointless, they have not vanished. They can seem solider than ever."[26] While individuals find themselves always already in community with others, the social nature of human existence, and of language and meaning in particular, does not preclude the pervasive possibility of isolation and loneliness. The point is that we need to *find a way out of isolation* again and again, thus reaffirming our connection to others and the world.

As Cavell's discussion makes clear, the other person cannot be imagined as an *alter ego*. Importantly, however, it is also not an 'absolute' other, entirely alien to the self. As I have argued before, even posing the question of the other in terms of such a binary opposition is part of the refusal to get involved with the other, to break out of separation and take on the responsibilities this entails. If we only allow for two ways of answering 'the question of the other', both answers excuse us from the risky task of trying to 'get to know' the other, that is, of engaging with an interlocutor in ways that might yield surprising insights about both of us. If we indeed we are 'all the same on the inside,' as Arendt claims, there really would be no reason to engage with others on an emotional level, because there is *nothing further for us to know*. Cavell, however, also rejects a notion of absolute otherness, an extreme sceptical position might presuppose. If another person was *absolute* other, we couldn't know anything about her. In this case, we claim that, even though the body of others appear in some way similar to our own, their minds are not. This would preclude the possibility for communication. In Cavell's exposition of the self's relationship to others, then, the need to develop empathy and establish an affective bond

[26] Ibid, p.136

is stressed. In the following, however, it will become important to critically examine how the denial of absolute otherness might lead Cavell to hold on to the centrality of the subject as the centre of ethical thought.

That Cavell must refuse the notion of absolute otherness is obvious when we consider his discussion of the relationship between body, mind and psyche. When Cavell points out the banality of other-mind-scepticism, he continues by asking "[w]ho doesn't know that what I go on in knowing others is their outward behaviour—or is it their conduct, or the subtler movements of the body, especially the face, and, as documentary filmmakers insist upon, the hands?"[27] That our relationship to the other has a bodily dimension is asserted in Cavell's discussion of Shakespeare's plays. As he points out, the annihilation of the other is "epitomized in what happens to the other's body, as when Othello's imagination turns Desdemona into alabaster, and when Leontes' faith or credulousness, turns Hermione back into flesh." Therefore Cavell calls scepticism the "denial or annihilation of the other."[28] It is the insight that humans share the condition of embodiment that can help avoid this annihilation. Cavell refuses to accept the sceptic notion that the body is like a veil that hides the mind, keeping it out of perceptual reach. In his view of the human, body and mind – the inner and the outer – are not separated by any kind of metaphysical abyss. Instead, body and mind are not separate entities in any clear sense, which establishes the body as a field of psychological significance.[29] That we perceive *the other's body* means that we do perceive *the other.* In *The Claim of Reason* he writes "the human figure, to be grasped, must be read. To know another mind is to interpret a physiognomy, and … this is not a matter of 'mere knowing.'... The human

[27] Ibid, p. 149-150
[28] Cavell, 2005 b, p. 150
[29] Cavell, 1999, p. 400

body is the best picture of the human soul—not, I feel like adding, because it represents the soul but because it expresses it." For Cavell "[t]he body is the field of expression of the soul."[30] That the body is *not* a mirror of the soul implies the need for interpretation. While humans are able to 'read' something about the other, if they are attentive to what her body expresses, this is not a claim to knowledge but again a form of (fallible) communication (I hear you say you are in pain, but I can also *see* someone's pain in her facial expression or in the way her hands shield her body). In a sense, however, individuals *can* see more of the other than the sceptic wishes to allow for. What really comes between people is not in the first place their inability to know, but the refusal to take responsibility for their response towards the other. Cavell thus argues that, "[t]he truth here is that we *are* separate, but not necessarily *separated* (*by* something)."[31] Cavell wants us to be responsible for making ourselves understood and thus also for the possibility of failure of understanding inherent in the fact that the other person is in fact 'other.' The acknowledgement of separation as a *limitation* to knowledge is intrinsic to the acceptance of the limitedness of the human condition. What is required, Cavell argues, "in accounting for our sense of relation, or loss or relation, to the other, in place of the best case of knowledge, is the best case of acknowledgement. … It is such a thought that motivates the observation, or surmise, that 'skepticism with respect to the others is not skepticism but tragedy.'"[32]

Understanding the self as separated from the other, but able to communicate with her, Cavell forwards the insight that the individual's relationship to another person is not based on knowledge. The wish for sovereignty or control then appears as a denial of the infinite

30 ibid, p. 356
31 Ibid, p. 369
32 Cavell, 2005 b, p.150

ethical responsibility that follows from the inability to know how the other will be affected by the self's actions. In this sense ethical responsibility not only remains, but becomes weightier in the absence of sovereignty. Autonomy, and the notion of freedom as a possibility to act, then, is not connected to control and knowledge, but rather results from the acceptance of responsibility for the self. Even though Cavell thus disagrees with thinkers like Oliver and Cavarero about the 'knowability' of others, his exposition of otherness remains in keeping with their demands to avoid the notion of an 'infinite' other, which they fear would eclipse the concrete other person. The *infinity* of responsibility for Cavell is not directed towards an understanding of an *infinite other.* The other, so far, has been understood purely in terms of another person, who is a finite, opaque and embodied being, just as the self. What is left out in Cavell's account, however, is how the positions of the other and the self emerge as separated from each other. He starts from the point of view of a fully constituted subject. The role of otherness for the formation of the subject thus appears limited. The other person Cavell encounters is *another* subject; there is no otherness in a more constitutive sense. It remains one's free choice how to react to the presence of irreducible alterity in the other person. This notion of freedom is decoupled from control, as it recognises that human decisions might have unforeseeable consequences. It disallows, however, for a previous impingement of the other on the self. Put differently, while the other places a demand upon the self, this demand does not dictate the self's decision. By understanding the other as *only* another person with the same status as the self, the *responsibility for* this other person, and the self's dependency on her, remain limited. To put it in more Levinasian terms, for Cavell there is a notion of irreducible otherness, but this otherness is encountered *within totality* – what is refused is a 'transcendental' notion of 'the Other'. To show how we can come from Cavell's notion of

the other mind, to a Levinasian infinite Other, we might want to consider Cavell's own discussion of Levinas and where he locates his similarities and distances with the Levinasian position. While both argue that the self is *infinitely answerable* to the other, Cavell disagrees with the status of *the other as infinite* Levinas proposes.[33] In the following, I wish to unpack this Levinasian claim, and show how a reading of Levinas's notion of the other, as Butler proposes it, might enable a fuller notion of relationality and a *political* ethics of responsibility.

Beyond the finite other

So far ethical agency has been formulated in terms of a critical stance I take towards *my* reaction to others. While I do understand this as an important feature linking ethical and political discourse, this notion presupposes a subject-centred position. One aim of this chapter, however, is to discuss whether an ethical stance could be forwarded that entails a decentring of the subject. The reorientation of ethical responsibility I wish to undertake in this chapter, then, is one of *directedness*. I wish to move from a notion of ethics as accounting for the self and its actions towards a notion of responsibility for the other,

[33] Cavell's reading of Levinas's notion of the infinite turns on their respective reading of a passage of Descartes's Third Meditation, where Descartes attempts to prove the existence of God, because I as a finite being, could not come up with the idea of the infinite. Cavell expresses his uncertainty that he understands the necessity for "Levinas's insistence that it is infinite responsibility for this other that is revealed when the infinite is put in me." The notion of God, of the Infinite, is 'put into me,' as Levinas expresses it, by God. While this opens me up to the realm of the Other, at the same time it establishes this relationship as inherently unequal. Cavell remarks on the 'striking coincidence' that both he and Levinas take recourse to the same passage from Descartes's Third Meditation to remark upon the role of God in establishing "for myself the existence, or relation to the existence, of the finite other." However, he further remarks that they derive at "something like an opposite conclusion". Instead of finding in Descartes's proof 'the opening to the finite other', Cavell argues that Descartes passes by the other as "men similar to myself". Moreover, Cavell is generally critical of the religious language involved in Levinas's argument. See Cavell, 2005 b, pp. 144-6

which is, in a sense, *prior* to the self. In other words, I want to argue that *before* I can account for my reaction towards another person, the *primacy* of the other for the existence of an ethical subject needs to be established.

Engaging with the notion of otherness on a more abstract level enables us to rethink the concept of the non-sovereign subject in a fundamental way. Putting the other in a central position, this section returns to the question of how the self *comes into being* in its relationship to the other. This implies that the self cannot be thought before, or apart from, the other. While in chapter one I have forwarded this notion in terms of embodiment and psychic development, I now explore a further dimension of the self's relationship to the other by drawing on Butler's engagement with Levinasian ethics. Butler, however, reads Levinas with the intention of 'socialising' his account. This helps to make his notion of otherness more graspable, but goes to some extent against my intention to show that 'the other' signifies something beyond the idiosyncrasy of another person. While referring to Butler, therefore, my discussion of the other will not follow her interpretation all the way. Before returning to the social or political relevance of the Levinasian other, I wish to emphasise the importance of an 'impersonal' understanding of alterity. This brings into focus how a Levinasian understanding of otherness requires a turn away from the self in our understanding of responsibility, which Cavell is not willing to take. With such a turn it becomes possible to understand ethics in terms other than the accountability of the subject for its deeds. Ethics can then be understood as a responsibility to subject takes of the other, regardless of their previous histories.

In the Levinasian formulation the concern of ethical thought is not primarily with the subject's *reaction* to the other. Instead, he is interested in asking how such a scene

becomes regarded as posing an ethical problem. Levinas thus questions the ethicality of moral reasoning and undertakes a meta-ethical discussion of the conditions of possibility in which ethical problems can arise. For him responsibility is grounded in a general *debt* towards the other that is prior to any action of the self, or even to the possibility of selfhood as such. When responsibility is understood as following from a debt that is not *caused* by any specific or willed activity of the self, the ethical relationship to the other is no longer one of the self's choosing. To understand the encounter with another person as an occasion that reveals a fundamental ethical responsibility that is prior to any possibility for choice, it helps to consider what Levinas means when he speaks of the *face.* For Levinas, ethical responsibility is discovered when the subject encounters the 'face' of the other. Surprisingly, the face does not depict the singularity of another person with specific, unique features. Instead what the face reveals is a universal, infinite alterity. While in a personal, intimate relationship I might consider the colour of my lover's eyes, the exact shape of my friend's nose, or be able to appreciate a casual acquaintance's specific, unique mimicry, in the anonymous face of the unknown other the universality of vulnerability is revealed. The infiniteness of the other is shown in this shared, fundamental vulnerability all singular faces expose. As Levinas writes, the face "is the other before death, looking through and exposing death." What one sees in the face is not a specific other person but the general demand of any person "not to let him die alone, as if to do so were to become an accomplice in his death. Thus the face says to me: you shall not kill."[34] The encounter of the face is therefore understood as an imposition. In contrast to Cavell's scene of encountering a unique other person who addresses me, this encounter is a non-interpretative moment. Any particular other person could reveal to the self a

[34] Levinas, 1986, p. 23 see also Butler, 2004 b, pp. 131-132

universal 'face' that signifies its existential vulnerability and suffering, which does not depend on any historical or textual precedent.[35] In this sense, the notion of 'the face' signifies an ethical demand that is independent not only of *who* the other is, but also of who I am and in what relationship I stand to the other.

As Butler emphasises, Levinas's understanding of the ethical relationship to the other implies a demand that is linked to the possibility of life as such. The subjects ethical relationship to others is based not only on the fact that humans cannot survive on their own. The self, Levinas asserts, "cannot find meaning within its own being-in-the-world."[36] Meaningful existence thus depends on the other. The subject is constituted by the other, who is the possibility for perceiving the external world, for the existence of space and time. The self becomes a self only *by* the address of the other. That the other is *before* the self, not in a spatial or temporal, but a logical sense, elevates the other above the self, making the demand of the other unavoidable for the self. For Levinas, there is no "evasion of this responsibility." As he states, it is "[t]he fact of not evading the burden imposed by the suffering of others" that "defines the self." There is no self to *take on* responsibility; the self (*moi*) appears as the subject that "has promised itself that it will carry the whole responsibility of the world."[37] This understanding of selfhood is prior to history, or even temporality as such. We are not obligated by specific "historical circumstances or specific historical forms of suffering." History and politics strike Levinas as "arbitrary, unjustified, even absurd."[38] Responsibility is a condition that is

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35 See Butler, 2012, p.10 -11. Butler is critical of this notion of non-historical or non-cultural revelation of the face. She insists that any form of ethical demand relies on translation, and this translation alters what is conveyed. I will come back to this notion later on

36 Levinas, 1986, p. 23 see also Butler, 2004 b, pp. 131-132

37 Levinas, 1990, p. 89. See also discussing this notion in terms of the messianic Butler, 2012, p. 41

38 Butler, 2012, p.42

prior to the contingency of the specific historical or political situation. Levinas position is thus 'pre-ontological': it describes the *condition of possibility* for the being of a self that is situated in time and space. Entering the ontological is therefore coextensive with establishing the possibility for ethical thought. While the subject comes into existence by becoming aware of its environment as *other* to itself, this awareness, for Levinas, entails a responsibility it takes for the other. In this sense Levinas's account of the address of the other is at the same time the condition of possibility for ontology (as a notion of what there is in time and space) and ethics.

It is here that the hierarchical relationship between other and self thinkers like Cavarero and Oliver criticise comes into play. While ethics cannot be reduced to the insight that the self *needs* the other to exist, the notion of debt plays an important role. It is presupposed that the self owes its existence to the other, and, moreover, lives at the other's expense. This puts the self into a position where its very existence needs justification. As Levinas writes

> [i]n the relation to the face I am exposed as an usurper of the place of the other. The celebrated "right to existence" that Spinoza called the *conatus essendi* and defined as the basic principle of all intelligibility is challenged by the relation to the face. Accordingly, my duty to respond to the other suspends my natural right to self-survival, *le droit vitale*. … To expose myself to the vulnerability of the face is to put my ontological right to existence into question. In ethics, the other's right to exist has primacy over my own.[39]

Even though he does not thematise this in his direct engagement with Levinas, Cavell also approaches the notion of existential debt. Discussing Thoreau he writes about the perception that the very "assertion of the will to live in the world," which requires 'feeding' oneself (both in a metaphorical and a literal sense) is "without certain

[39] Levinas, 1986, pp. 23-4

justification."[40] As he states "there are debts in living, conditions of existence, … that are uncountable."[41] However, this is one decisive juncture where the difference between Levinasian and perfectionist ethics comes to the fore. For Cavell the ethical responsibility that arises from existential debt, from living at the expense of other beings, requires the self to become reflexive. The self suffers from the realisation that debts of living are insupportable only in so far as "they are unnecessary."[42] The question "in which an adventurous life may well be spent in search, or experiment, is to replace false by true necessaries, or means, to what one truly finds good (a quest as ancient as Plato's *Republic*), perhaps promising to allow the cloaking of the wound of existing to become superfluous."[43] Such a reconciliation with existence, the healing of the wound (that we feel is being cut by our infinite responsibility and debt) seems impossible for Levinas. This impossibility derives from the heightened, or primary, status of the other. There could thus be no true need of the self that is above the need of the other. Cavell, like Cavarero and Oliver, thus questions the notion of inequality in the relation between self and other. He concedes that in "an extreme situation I may put the other's life (not just her or his wishes or needs) ahead of mine, answerable to or for them without limit" but asks critically why "the existence of the finite other" should not be "sufficient to create the reality of such claims upon me."[44]

To explain why the demand of the other might indeed go *beyond* the particular other, we have to consider in more detail how a notion of alterity could be abstracted from the needs of the concrete other person. It is this level of abstraction that Cavell seems to find

40 Cavell, 2008, p.117
41 ibid
42 ibid
43 ibid
44 Cavell, 2005 b, p. 144

most problematic. Cavell's anxiety regarding Levinas's formulation of infinite otherness, however, might be caused, at least partly, by a difference in terminology or approach rather than content. One reason why Cavell is critical of the Levinasian claim that in the face-to-face with the other person the subject encounters *infinite* otherness are the religious overtones of this claim, which Cavell finds himself unable to accept. It is possible, however, to discuss Levinas's notion of the infinite as an 'internal' critique of the philosophical tradition that is intertwined with the Judeo-Christian tradition, but not dependent on the acceptance of God. This would bring Levinas's preoccupation more in line with Cavell's own approach. In such an interpretation, the notion of infinite otherness would point towards a reflexive critique of the philosophical tradition.[45] By referring to the Infinite and the unthinkability of God, Levinas criticises a mode or tendency of thinking that would reduce the other to the same—this "movement of human thought" that aims to "domesticate everything and incorporate it into its own venue – concepts, principles and theories." Western philosophy is thus identified with a movement that aims "to exclude the transcendent," to "encompass every other in the same." As Michael Morgan explains, "the same is the self, mind, thought, and reason … in one sense or another, everything outside of the self becomes the same as the self or spirit. The other is everything different or other than the same. Western philosophy's primary impulse is imperialist, to reduce the other to the same, to think everything."[46] The notion of infinity counters this impulse by expressing the irreducibility of otherness. To grasp the other as *other* we cannot reduce it to an in principle understandable object. The notion of the infinite is decisively different from ideas or mental representations of objects. When

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[45] I understand thinkers such as Wittgenstein and Cavell to engage in such a critical move as well as Derrida and Levinas – and following them Judith Butler. Moreover, at least in her reading of Platonic political philosophy I understand Arendt as making related points.

[46] Morgan, 2011, p. 89

'thinking an object' the self, grasping it, incorporates it into itself, and transforms it by doing so from something 'other' to itself into something which is 'same' with the self. This is not possible with the idea of the infinite - "[t]he alterity of the infinite is not cancelled, is not extinguished in the thought that thinks it."[47] The notion of the infinite thus constitutes a relationship between the self and absolute alterity, "without this exteriority being able to be integrated into the same."[48] For Levinas this notion, importantly, cannot be grasped by the standard terminology of everyday language. Humans speak of the Infinite, or refer to religious revelations of God, as metaphors that might come close to the 'experience' of irreducible otherness, an outside that cannot turn inwards, an 'apprehension' that lies beyond what they can think, let alone express.[49] 'The Other' refers to what cannot be explained or put into language.

This is not an argument about the finitude of individuals' specific cognitive abilities, but rather a point about the structure of knowledge, perception and expression as such. Any form of knowledge is always established against what is excluded from knowledge.[50] Whatever someone thinks or says necessarily excludes something. It relies on an outside – an ungraspable trace or remainder. In this sense, every thought (as a picture or representation of the world) occludes something from view. The Other can be understood as a term for this necessary outside. The Other is what misses from the customary way of viewing the world. This stresses that even if we change what is customary, occlusion necessarily remains. We are unable to 'represent' or grasp the infinite complexity of the

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47 Levinas quoted by Morgan, 2011, p.92

48 Levinas quoted ibid

49 It is precisely the thought that by putting something in everyday language, we reduce it to the already known, to our habitual framework that accounts for Levinas's often difficult terminology. As Judith Butler remarks in a different context, calling into question ordinary language allows for the analysis "of occlusions or concealments that take place when we take ordinary language to be a true indicator of reality as it is and as it must be." Butler, 2007, p.10

50 This should recall the discussion of finitude in chapter one, where the influence of Heidegger's understanding of knowledge against the horizon of mortality has been mentioned

world fully. While it might be possible to learn something about whatever is excluded in any particular situation (about *this* particular other person facing me), exclusion is a necessary feature of perception and formulation. There always will be an excluded other because without exclusion we could not 'picture' the world or express ourselves. We would get lost in infinite detail, regress and correction.[51] If Levinas is understood in these terms, however, there appears to be no major disagreement between Cavell and Levinas. For both the self's grasp of the world remains limited. The self is thus non-sovereign. In their understanding of the consequences for the notion of ethics which arise from this insight, however, Cavell and Levinas differ decisively.

The importance of the Infinite is then not the acceptance of God, but the notion that thought which thinks more than it could signals an asymmetry that testifies to "the breakup of consciousness," a "devastation of thought," or "trauma of awakening." The ethical demand thus becomes linked to what lies beyond or before cognition or thought. In the Levinasian notion, the infinite is endowed with a power that de-structures the subject's relationship to the finite other. The self encounters in the other person 'universal alterity', which calls the sovereignty of the 'I', its capability as a thinking, rational being, into question. The discussion of the infinitude of otherness gives 'height' to the notion of the other, removes the other from the grasp of the self, and leaves the self *without choice*. While this appears close to Cavell's understanding of the finitude of the cognitive powers of human beings, it differs from Cavell's approach by highlighting that the self comes into

[51] I see this argument as close to Wittgenstein's notion of the necessity of 'pictures' for the working of language. In *On Certainty* Wittgenstein employs "*the picture* of the earth as a ball floating free in space" to argue that "[t]he picture of the earth as a ball is a *good* picture, it proves itself everywhere, it is also a simple picture—in short, we work with it without ever doubting it." Wittgenstein. 1969.§§146-47. The problem with such pictures is therefore that we get captivated by them, forgetting that they are pictures, necessarily only models of a more complex reality.

being as *powerless* in the face of a *powerful other*. Here the difference between Levinas and Cavell comes to the fore: while for Cavell the acceptance of acknowledgment is not based on epistemological knowledge, it is also not before or beyond cognition as such. For Cavell the notion that power is limited also applies to the other person the self encounters. Cavell talks about a *specific* relationship between two equally finite persons, and therefore links the extent of responsibility to the nature of this relationship. By contrast, Levinas's discussion, in a sense, is situated *before* the Cavellian scene of acknowledgement. It understands itself as the condition of possibility for such an encounter. Moreover, Levinas argues that this *before*, the pre-ontological, *sounds through* in our encounter of a concrete other person. He calls for the universality of responsibility, where the structure of otherness as such puts the self under an obligation. The term 'God' could thus be taken to signify a sense of compulsion, authority of force involved in every human social encounter. As Morgan explains "the origin of the authority or force is not the face itself; it is not this particular person in all her uniqueness." In the face of the other person there is "the residue or a 'trace' of an absolute power; the face is not wholly weakness or need." Therefore, "the face of the other person always addresses us and makes its claim upon us. It never is without this normative force, and without it the face is nothing but the need that pleads and demands to be satisfied."[52] In this sense, the address of the other is an imposition upon the subject that denies its freedom. The self cannot choose to be alone in the world; it cannot choose to live in a way where others are not necessarily involved its very existence. As Morgan argues, "[m]y thinking about the world and understanding it is … like my inhabiting and enjoying what nature provides me, interrupted. Something outside or prior to my thinking confronts me: it is the demand

[52] Morgan, 2011, p. 156

and need of another person, of each and every other person." Therefore, "I am responsible before I am an observer or explainer or interpreter; I am, in a sense, a moral agent before I am a cognitive one."[53]

At first sight this argument about prior responsibility seems to deny individual freedom and agency, but this is not entirely the case at closer inspection. It marks, however, an understanding of freedom that differs from Cavell's. Following Mill, Cavell understands freedom as the *freedom to* want or desire, or better, to find out what one *really* desires and needs.[54] Freedom is thus the freedom from conformism, from an unexamined sociality, where desires are defined by what is conventional. Such an understanding of freedom is surely not commensurable with the Levinasian position. This, however, does not mean that freedom as such is denied. Instead, the awareness of shared vulnerability makes an understanding of freedom *as ethical decision* possible. In a sense the self is indeed not free to decide whether it would like to encounter the other, because there is, strictly speaking, no 'I' before this encounter. This 'pre-ontological' argument, however, becomes interwoven with an *ontological* and *empirical* one. *Within* a temporal, spatial setting the individual does understand the singular other person as *dependent upon her* and vulnerable. It is *then* that the individual becomes an agent, becomes capable of making a choice. That the self understands the vulnerability of another as presenting it with a choice, paradoxically, follows from the *inequality* and unfreedom of the originary position where the 'I' has no choice. The self has come into being as persecuted by the Other. The self, as Butler insists "is outraged by that Other." In this sense the demand not to kill the Other is "imposed upon me violently," against my will – or, better, before a

[53] Morgan, 2011, p. 40
[54] See Marrati, 2009, p. 86; Cavell, 2004, p.182

willing 'I' exists. The face then is 'accusatory' "in a grammatical sense: it takes me as its object regardless of my will. It is this foreclosure of freedom and will."[55] As Levinas phrases it "persecution is the precise moment the subject is reached or touched without the mediation of the Logos."[56] If the self is understood to come into being in such a situation of inequality and unfreedom, this marks any 'later' relationship to specific other persons as ambiguous. *Because* the Other is overbearing, powerful and imposing upon the self, the self's relationship to concrete other persons is marked by tension. The demand for responsibility and aggression, as a revolt against the overbearing Other, are present simultaneously. Realising that the other person is vulnerable, that the particular other can die, might therefore lead to a heightening of the self's violent impulse.[57] The other person confronts the self with a choice: either to let her live (which in some circumstances might mean to get actively involved in keeping the other person alive) or to murder her. As Morgan explains: "[w]hen the other person faces me, before I choose to use or dominate the other person, I must respond to her being a person by allowing her to live or not. She comes ... into my venue, not for me to do something with; she comes with a need to share the world with me. First she needs my acceptance and risks my rejection."[58] In this sense then, ethical agency, the freedom to decide how to react to the other person, *presupposes* the unfreedom of the hierarchical relationship between self and other – because the 'I' come into being as persecuted by the other, it could wish for the destruction of this other. Paradoxically, while a person could choose to kill a *concrete other person*, the 'I' cannot deny *the Other*. In the temptation or capacity to kill the other person already lies "an

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55 Butler, 2012, p.59, Butler ibid quoting Levinas

56 Levinas, 1998, p.116-7 quoted in Butler 2012, p.229 ftn.4 Butler points out that the translation mistakenly renders *sans* as "with"

57 Butler, 2009, p. 2

58 Morgan, 2011, p. 63

acceptance of the other, an acknowledgment of her facing me, needing me, risking me."[59,60] The subject might be free to the destroy the other person, but this act does not lead it out of the fundamental situation. When the self destroys the other person it does not incorporate her otherness. It is "at the very moment when my power to kill realizes itself, [that] the other (autrui) has escaped me."[61] As Butler puts it: "although the body can be killed, the face is not killed along with the body." While Levinas "does not say the face is eternal and that is why it cannot be extinguished […] the face carries an interdiction against killing that cannot but bind the one who encounters that face and becomes subject to the interdiction the face conveys." If we defy the interdiction we thus lose "sight of the face," we deny not only otherness but also the condition of non-sovereignty.[62] Thus, a paradoxical situation is expressed where, while we cannot escape the existential condition of the other's demand that is expressed in the face, we are indeed *free* to kill or deny concrete other persons. In this sense we are faced with an ethical choice, which means we are *free* to act however we want. Choosing violence against the other, however, similarly like choosing conformism for Cavell, only marks our possibility to choose 'falsity', to choose, in a sense, an inauthentic existence. If I choose to destroy the other person, I do so by asserting a sovereignty or power, which ultimately must always remain an illusion.[63]

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59 Morgan p.64

60 At first this seems to mark a difference between the Cavellian notion of the acknowledgement and Levinas's notion of responsibility: for Cavell I would have the possibility to deny the other without actively *denying her.* I just do not understand myself as addressed by her – in a sense it seems he allows for the possibility to *ignore* otherness, by ignoring the scene of address as such. In the Levinasian formulation *ignoring* the other is expressed in much more violent terms, as the destruction of the concrete other person. However, when we consider the examples Cavell gives for ignoring the other's address we realize that they *do* indicate a violence done to the other. If I think a hurt person might be a robot and thus refuse help, I harm the other by omission.

61 Morgan quoting Levinas p.64

62 Butler, 2012, p.54

63 Butler, 2012, p.55, As Butler argues, the interdiction against killing "is a question of what 'can' be done and so a question of capacity or power."

The interconnection of a pre-ontological scene with the scene of our everyday encounter of particular others thus presents us with a paradox. While on the one hand it is claimed that “we are without power to turn away from this face,” on an empirical level we all know “that people turn away from faces all the time.” In this understanding, the paradox of power marks the transition from ethics to politics. Politics is presented here by Butler primarily in terms of the assumption of sovereignty. We would thus “assert a power where there is no power and so nullify the claim that we cannot turn away, that responding to the face is prior to choice, drawing upon a power that is not properly our own.”[64] If one takes the address of the other as the *a priory* of social interaction, then turning towards an (illusory) notion of power or sovereignty when denying the other's demand, appears as a step away from relationality. Politics is then where the relational bond between the self and the other is broken. In Butler's discussion this happens to put the subject in a sovereign position. For her, denying the other's demand means to “take a certain power in the face of a demand to stay with a lack of power; this is another way of claiming that the political supplants the ethical.”[65] We cannot avoid the domain of the political, or power, however, because in the social world, the dyadic relationship between the self and the other is necessarily interrupted by the demand of the 'third'. With the concept of 'the third' Levinas denotes that, in any empirical social setting, we are always faced with a multiplicity of concrete demands, which are often mutually exclusive. 'The third' thus denotes that there is always more than one 'other'. The political then marks the necessary introduction of an “order of calculability, of distributive justice, of laws that are passed by the majority.” The “domain of the political” is here defined as “a formalizable set of

[64] ibid
[65] ibid

rules."[66] In the political sphere Butler describes in reference to Levinas a sovereign assumes the power to decide between competing demands. As I will start to argue in the remainder of this chapter, and return to in more detail in chapter six, this is not the only way possible to consider the relationship between the ethical and the political or between the self, the other, and the third. In other words, while Butler, in her reading of Levinas, equates formalised rules, or law, with power and the political, the political and the ethical could also be thought together differently. Then, by virtue of the ethical injunction, the political would appear as a sphere of freedom that remains open and unforeseeable.

My argument so far is that a fuller understanding of otherness rests on the conjunction of different levels of signification. While it is important to retain a notion of the other that is firmly grounded in our everyday experiences of encountering other people, these encounters can remind us, in certain instances, not only of the irreducible separateness of another person, but also of the boundaries of cognition itself. The position I argue for is differentiated from the accounts in the previous chapter not only because I claim that the viewpoint of another person ultimately remains inaccessible to me. Defining the Other as the outside of language and cognition points towards a notion of otherness as transcendental, beyond our ability to experience and know – the Other as the unthinkable or unimaginable. In Butler's reading of Levinas, however, this notion seems to entail a language of violence. This leads her to argue that from a Levinasian point of view politics is the attempt to regulate the distribution of violence via the formulation of law. It is such an understanding of the political sphere thinkers like Cavarero and Oliver disagree with because it would limit our ability to imagine a more just and egalitarian social

[66] ibid

relationships. If the relationship between the other and the self is marked by an originary violence how, they ask, could we think a notion of the political that strives for non-violent, nurturing relationships. While I do not agree with the solution Cavarero and Oliver suggest, their objections are indeed important for the reconsideration of the idea of the political I want to pursue. Even though the relationship between politics and ethics needs to take inequality into account, the political cannot be defined exclusively as a realm of rule-following behaviour that is structured by hierarchical relations of power. Instead, the role of affective personal relationships for the possibility of free and creative subversive action needs to be taken into account. This means that the transition from the ethical to the political should not be conceptualised as a one-way process. The ethical relationship between self and other should not be abandoned in order to establish the possibility of political order. Our relationships to others are not either ethical or political. In order to approach an understanding of the ethical and political as mutually enabling and restricting, however, it is necessary to reformulate the Levinasian notion of the relationship between self and other.

Isolation and the 'violent' other

By decentring the subject an understanding of ethics becomes possible, where the other comes first. The subject comes into being only by the address of the other. There is, however, a problem with the relation between self and other as I have presented it so far: If the other is defined in terms of exteriority, this maintains the Cartesian notion of the isolated subject. Even though the positions of subject and object are reversed – the 'I' is

passive, while to other acts upon it – this reversal keeps both positions intact as isolated, monadic beings. While the exterior other impinges on the self, and persecutes the self with its demands, it remains entirely separated from the self. Even though the subject needs the other to come into existence, claiming that the other is an exterior entity risks to constitute the self as clearly bordered, lonely, and isolated. We do not need to understand the relationship between self and other in such a way, however. To stress that the self is constituted by the other also allows for a more thorough notion of connectivity that ultimately calls the dichotomy between self and other into question.

Butler's discussion of Levinas, which is informed not only by her engagement with psychoanalysis but also draws on a Hegelian understanding of recognition, goes a long way in overcoming this isolated subject-position. As we have seen in the first chapter, Butler discusses the formation of the subject in both 'socio-historical' and 'psychological' terms. In these accounts the subject comes into being through a double movement, where the other's opaque desires and social norms are internalized while at the same time the self overflows its own boundedness. In her reading of Levinas Butler thus argues that the fact that the other constitutes the self means that "I am, from within, riven by this ethical demand that is at once and indissolubly 'over there' and 'in here' as a constitutive condition of myself." For Butler the other "is already me, not assimilated as a 'part' of me, but inassimilable as that which interrupts my own continuity and makes impossible an 'autonomous' self at some distance for an 'autonomous' other."[67] The responsibility for the other is thus coextensive with the self. As Butler explains, the "responsibility for the other constitutes the ek-static structure of the self, the fact that I am called outside myself, and

[67] Butler, 2012, p.38

that this relation to an alterity defines me essentially."[68] That the self emerges as 'other' to itself, for Butler, however, is linked closely with the conditions of embodiment and sociality, where the body is born into an already existing net of social relations on which it depends for its very survival.

Butler's discussion, therefore, centres on the 'personal temporality' of the emergence of the self. Here the self encounters the other primarily within an already constituted sociality – 'the other' is, on the one hand, social norms the self internalises, and, on the other hand, those other persons the self has affective, intimate relationships with. To go beyond an understanding of otherness as encountered within a pre-established community, it is necessary to go beyond Butler's account. To do so, I turn to a spatial, 'non-psychological' narrative of the relationship between self and other. The spatial discussion of otherness I propose helps to frame the relationship between the subject and the other in terms where the other appears as strange and foreign to the self. Emphasising the notion of the other as stranger lays a foundation for my later reconsideration of the political, which aims to go beyond the reiteration of already existing social and political institutions. This enables me to formulate a form of the political based on the ethical demand for hospitality. By considering the relation between self and other through spatial metaphors I avoid - to a certain extent - the constitutive role of violence we find in Butler's and Levinas's accounts of subject formation, thus addressing the concerns Oliver and Cavarero have voiced against the 'discourse of otherness.'

To offer a non-violent formulation we could reimage the scene of the other's address in

[68] Butler, 2012, p.41

terms of welcoming or hospitality.[69] If the self comes into being by welcoming the other, we avoid phrasing the scene of address in terms of an imposition and persecution. We should remind ourselves that the Levinasian notion that the other *comes first* is not a 'temporal' argument as such (albeit it is not a spatial one, either). That the scene of address is pre-ontological makes it possible to understand address and response as simultaneous —that is, not in terms of an overbearing other who is there 'before' the self. Moreover, the interwovenness of the ontological and the pre-ontological also signifies the moment of address and response as, in a certain sense, ongoing, or an interruption of temporal linearity. The 'I' receives or welcomes the other at the same time as it is addressed by the other – it comes into existence (and remains as 'coming into existence') as an 'I' through this very act of invitation. Address, response and constitution of the subject cannot be thought as temporally distinct, separate phases. Instead of understanding the other's demand as an imposition, and thus a violence done to a passive self, to understand the self and other as interrelated position who need each other for their very existence makes the scene of encounter one of reciprocity. In this understanding, the self comes into being by simultaneously occupying the site of the other and welcoming the other into its space. By mutually overstepping their boundaries, the positions of self and other are established as depending on their relationality. We do not start from a pre-given substantial identity that would constitute the basis for a capacity to welcome, but the welcome of the other, hospitality itself, comes to define and constitute the subject. The subject *is* this openness to the other.

To put the scene of encounter in terms of welcoming, however, opens up a question

[69] I draw here specifically on Derrida's reading of Levinas in *Adieu à Emmanuel Lévinas.* See Derrida, 1997

regarding the inhabitation of space (of the subject). We might object that the notion of 'welcoming' presupposes a 'sovereign' subject that inhabits a 'place of its own' that belongs to the subject and from which it originates. Only when the subject possesses such a space, could it welcome the other into it. Importantly, this is not the case. The space of the self – one's home – is only constituted *by* the act of welcoming and thus through an act of dispossession. The notion of *originary* dispossession implies that there is no 'home,' no space where the self is before the arrival of the other. To establish a self then could be understood as the transformation of an originary dispossession into a possession – we become subjects by claiming 'our place in the world'. This claim, paradoxically, relies on the understanding that we share the world with others. We claim a space as our own by offering to share it with someone else. Possession could therefore never be simple or complete – we can be always called upon to justify our claims to possession (of enjoyment of the world, of a home, of food) in relation to others who have similar claims. This understanding of welcoming as what constitutes the self calls into dispute that we have a 'right' to a 'home' in the world – to something that belongs to me more than to any other person. There is thus no 'home' but only places we pass through, where we welcome the other and through this very act of welcoming make a claim to being there.

That it is impossible to ground our enjoyment of the world in a claim to originary belonging is important if we understand the welcome of the other as the welcome of an infinite. Here we encounter another possible meaning of the 'infinite' in Levinas: the subject welcomes or receives the other beyond its own finite capacities of welcoming. While nothing is said about 'who' the other is, to understand the other as beyond the capacity of the subject's welcome points not only to the notion of welcoming a notion of

God that is beyond understanding, but also to the multitude of others who live in this world with us and who lay claim to our hospitality (that is, to share the world with us). With the idea of welcoming we can thus rephrase the critique of sovereignty in spatial terms. The notion of welcoming the other over and beyond my capacity for welcoming, and more importantly, *before* I exist as a subject which can claim the world as mine (thus can call a place my home to which I am exclusively entitled) calls for a notion of otherness as expropriation. There is no space in the world I can lay claim to – that was already my possession before the arrival of the other. If we understand the 'I' as constituted by welcoming the other this establishes every place as always already shared, thus fundamentally calling into question the notion of spatial sovereignty or – if we put this discussion in political terms – nationhood. Part of what is being denied here is the thought that there could be something like a pure identity that *then* comes to be affected by difference, non-presence or the other. This also means that any empirical claim of belonging, of a home-land or private property, cannot be based on a metaphysical assertion or an ontological ground. I therefore wish to claim that understanding the *response* to the other in terms of welcoming, where the self or the same is only constituted through opening its border to the other, taking the other into one's space, allows for a critique of the notion of the political in terms of clearly delineated communities. I follow up on the political implications of this notion in more detail in chapter six.

At the most general level, the discussion of the relationship between self and other so far has been primarily aimed at undermining the binary opposition between subject and object that informs the western philosophical tradition. Instead of a concept that is

established within “the two great genres of Being, the Same and the Other,” the non-sovereign self can only be thought in terms of connectivity, where otherness is always already in the place of the self.[70] However, that we understand the other as always already implicated in the self does not diminish the experience and the surprise of otherness for the self: “To experience the other as other suggests an experience of interruption, for the 'as other' gestures towards a singularity that exceeds, and so interrupts, the calculations and strategies of my present possibilities. In the experience of the other as other 'something incalculable comes on the scene'.”[71] Selfhood is thus best understood in terms of a movement towards consolidation or 'sovereignty' or self-identity, which is continuously interrupted or put into question by the other. We find ourselves exposed to the encounter of otherness within ourselves (the experience of being surprised by one's own reaction, of not understanding one's own desires), as well as the traumatic encounter with the other person. While the term 'trauma' expresses an unsettling experience or disruption of identity, this is not necessarily 'violent' in terms of harmfulness or pain. Even though Butler concentrates on the experience of grief and mourning as moments in which the self realizes the depth of her connection to the other, she concedes one reason why we realize that we are 'undone by each other' when we grief is that this is 'already the case with desire.'[72] When we encounter the love of or for another, this, as Derrida argues, constitutes a 'happy' trauma: “[w]hen love arrives . . . one is exposed.”[73] Love is a traumatic experience, because, as Iris Murdoch puts it, with the arrival of love “the centre of significance is suddenly ripped out of the self” and one “is shocked into an awareness of an entirely separate reality.”[74] The term trauma does not only refer to the particular

[70] See Raffoul, 1998 a, 1998 b
[71] Derrida quoted in Gormley, 2012, p. 39
[72] Butler, 2004 b, p. 23
[73] Derrida, 2004, p. 60
[74] Iris Murdoch quoted by Gormley, 2012, p. 388

violent contents of an event, but names the very experience of being exposed to the other, the experience of non-identity and interruption. When we encounter the other, we are exposed, and this exposure, reveals our vulnerability to a disturbance beyond our control. In Butler's words we are "not only constituted by our relations but also dispossessed by them."[75] The relationship to the other understood in terms of a willingness to 'open' oneself to the other, thus necessitates the ability to trust and risk this encounter.

When forging a connection between philosophical, psychological and political notions of welcoming the other, however, critical voices abound. It is argued that a politics of welcoming would make decisive judgement, which is necessary to assume definite political positions, impossible. The need to assume a definite political stance is indeed an issue that preoccupied Levinas. If the political comes into being when we realise that the relationship between the singular self and the singular other takes place within a social world, this defines the political sphere as the arena where we try to negotiate between competing demands. As Levinas argues: "there is always a third party in the world: he or she is also my other, my neighbor. Hence, it is important to me to know which of the two takes precedence. … Must not human beings, who are incompatible, be compared? … Here is the birth of the theoretical; here is the birth of the concern for justice, which is the basis of the theoretical."[76] Properly asked, the question of the political is then how we could 'choose' between others, if we understand all others to make demands upon us which carry an infinite weight.

While in this formulation, the role of theory would be to deliberate over which demand should take precedence, the notion of openness to the other seems to foreclose the

[75] Butler, 2004 b, p. 24
[76] Levinas quoted in Morgan, 2011, p.109

possibility for such a decision. 'Openness' seems to imply that there is no way of establishing a hierarchy of demands. If we understand the self as indiscriminately 'open' towards the other this "suggests a passive stance of openness that remains vulnerable to charges of being open to *any* other."[77] In this formulation, the notion of openness appears like an inability to make value judgments, thus sliding towards a form of ethical nihilism. As Richard Wolin worries, we would then be open to such 'others' as "neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and other racists."[78] However, this concern with indiscriminate openness towards the demand of the other could be mitigated when we recall the philosophical starting point of the notion of otherness. The disposition towards the other where otherness cannot be denied, wants to avoid a way of thinking that would reduce the other to the same. Thus, the ethical disposition called for is an openness to perpetual becoming or change that arises from the recurring disruption of identity or sameness. This would then exclude an openness to political positions which aim to exclude otherness, establish absolute sovereignty and thus ossify the political realm. We return therefore to a position close to what was identified with Arendt's and Cavell's stance to the political sphere in chapter two. As Derrida remarks in a phrase that resonates with Arendt's critical discussion of totalitarianism: "The coming of the event is what cannot and should not be prevented; it is another name for the future itself. This does not mean that it is good—good in itself—for everything and anything to arrive; it is not that one should give up trying to prevent certain things from coming to pass . . . But one should only ever oppose events that one thinks will block the future or that bring death with them: events that would put an end to the possibility of the event."[79] An 'open' understanding of ethics and

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77 Gormley, 2012, p.401

78 Quoted in Gormley, 2012, p.401

79 Quoted ibid, p.404. My claim is therefore that in their final political aspiration, at least implicitly, there is a connection between Arendt's and Cavell's thinking, which would see themselves as thinking critically within the moment of modernity and thinkers like Levinas and Derrida, which some have

politics must diminish its own openness in so far as it would undermine the possibility for its own position. Thus, while an ontology of openness does not presuppose a certain moral or political stance, it still *favours* or enables certain positions over others. In my reading then, the notion of responsibility to the other that is expressed in terms of openness finally does not only oppose racist or totalitarian thinking, where sameness and homogeneity is violently construed, but finally also calls into the question the possibility of any closed political or ethical community.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have sought to establish the political and ethical importance of investigating the notion of otherness. As Stanley Cavell argues, the role of philosophy in political life is to make "an appeal not to our powers of judgment and an articulation of common ground (as in Kant's understanding of the claim to perceive beauty, a power of articulation also essential, I trust, to political reformation) but before that of our capacity for suffering or passiveness in the face of renewed exposure to the existence of others."[80] Discussing the notion of otherness, I have circled around the perpetual question of whether the split between subject and object, self and other, has to be retained or overcome. Finally, what is proposed is a position that seems to call for both – while I maintain that the other is 'irreducible', I understand the subject as constituted by its openness to it. This openness is expressed in the notion that there is no original subject

argued belong to a 'post-modern' school of thought. This would call a simple differentiation between the modern and the 'post'-modern into question.

[80] Cavell, 2006, p. 290

position. This, moreover, questions the possibility of maintaining boundaries. With the notion of 'trauma' the self is understood as ecstatic – as reaching beyond itself in moments of grief *and* joy. However, while we are overstepping our boundedness, we also remain concerned with establishing it. And rightly so. Even though the core argument of this chapter is that there is no primary position of the self, and that autonomy needs to be called into question, we need to remember that as precarious bodies the right to bodily self-determination remains an important political goal. Therefore, while the experience of sovereignty or wholeness will always be interrupted, I do acknowledge the necessity of a drive towards them. The wish to consolidate an identity, to define a clearly bounded and embodied 'who', appears as an ongoing preoccupation of the self and of the political subject. It is of utmost political and ethical importance, however, to realise that this endeavour will always be thwarted. The trauma of the other that interrupts my 'wholeness' and questions my identity is the decisive moment for ethical and political thinking. Moreover, while identity is not lasting, politics requires us to make decisions, thus assuming specific, exclusionary positions. The important insight from the notion of openness, however, is that any form of political decision must remain open to future rearticulation. While we establish communities through the decisions we make, these communities must remain transitive. Even though my discussion thus throws the binary opposition of self and other into question, it does not overcome the notion of the separateness of the self. It is in this sense that the Levinasian notion of the self as constituted by the other does not make the Cavellian discussion of scepticism superfluous, but sets its stage. What Cavell calls our attention to is the insight that it is precisely the precariousness of the self's sovereignty that might make us unwilling to respond to others. In the always already thwarted endeavour to establish a sovereign

position, we become unwilling to acknowledge the other. How far our understanding of acknowledgement should go, that is, who (or what) could be considered as a specific other who poses an ethical question for the self is what I will turn to in the next chapter.

Chapter 5 – Responsibility beyond the human?

Introduction

In this chapter I ask what significance anthropocentrism has for the relationship between notions of community and ethical responsibility. This interrogation is based the critique of community as the space within which ethical encounters with others take place. Theories which imagine the encounter other persons primarily within an egalitarian political community overlook the role of foreignness and irreducible alterity for our understanding of ethics. This is also the case with Cavell, when he theorises otherness against a background of shared linguistic, cultural or emotional ties. My critique, however, does not dismiss the importance of community for our understanding of responsibility altogether. As the notion of welcoming the other implies, community can also be understood as *constituted by* an ethical demand. Here community does not follow from similarity, equality or affinity, but is understood as an ethical and political relation established between beings which remain unequal, separate and foreign to each other. How wide the boundaries of an 'ethical community' could be drawn, however, remains to be determined.

The notion of a community of human beings, of universal humanity, has been prevalent in modern political and moral thought and in particular in discourses of human rights. Speaking of 'us' humans asserts a connection, an underlying communality that transcends cultural, linguistic, political, economic or sexual divisions. This helps to avoid a

problematic ethical position where we feel responsible only to those we feel closely related to. The notion of shared humanity enables us to forward a more universal or cosmopolitan politics and ethics where rights, protecting the dignity and physical integrity of human lives, are not bound to exclusionary terms, as for example citizenship. As we have seen, however, to find clear definitions of concepts such as 'humanity' is not uncontroversial. This chapter therefore asks whether it is possible to connect the definition of humanity with an understanding of ethical responsibility. I call into question that the ability to assume responsibility for others could mark our membership in the community of human beings. Posing the question how ethics is related to the notion of a community of the human, I thus follow up on Bonnie Honig's suggestion that weak ontological projects (such as White's and Butler's) could be understood as a return to humanism.[1] While I argue that our thinking about ethics and the political indeed has to start from the view-points of particular human beings, I disagree with the notion that this implies a universal human subject with distinct ethical faculties. Even if we can and do say certain things about our distinctly human experiences and their ethical content, we cannot presuppose a 'moral' essence of the human. While discourses which attempt to ground ethics on notions of universal human nature have been central to modern thought, we might - in the light of the critique of the subject - ask whether such notions do not inadvertently cement the logic of exclusion they have sought to overcome. Critically examining the notions of humanity or humaneness I ask whether ethical responsibility could be formulated better by moving to a wider understanding of 'precarious life'. I argue that the status of the human and its relation to wider notions of life and embodied being needs to be interrogated. Decentring the human could thus help to develop an ethical position that is mindful of how human life is embedded in the world. This would make it

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[1] See Honig, 2010

possible to give more weight to human dependency on other forms of life and non-living materials which influence human modes of being.

I start my argument by reconsidering Cavell's claim that the encounter of otherness takes place against the background of an always already assumed communality. His discussion of the Wittgensteinian notion of 'forms of life' highlights that our specific, contingent linguistic or cultural communities are integrated within a wider 'ontological' notion of a 'natural' community of human beings. The 'natural' would here mark those specific biological markers and abilities that distinguish human beings from other forms of life. While contingent languages and cultures can be understood as existing beside each other on a horizontal plane, the 'natural' human community is distinguished from other 'lower' or 'higher' forms of life on a 'vertical' axis. To combine the 'cultural' with the 'natural' reading takes us some way towards a more universal notion of community. However, I warn against relying too heavily on a 'natural' conception of human community, as some interpreters of Wittgenstein do. Such a reading invites a moralistic position, if morality is defined as a 'natural' or 'instinctive' or spontaneous reaction proper to the human form of life.[2] Against such a position I argue that Cavell's perfectionism understands ethical failing, existential debt, or the 'inhuman' as intrinsic to the condition of human existence. Accepting oneself as part of the human community then necessitates that we confront the limits of our ability to live up to an ethical demand. Turning to Butler's ethics of precarious life, however, I problematise the notion of a human community to which we are bound by assuming ethical responsibility. To understand all life as sharing an ontological position of precariousness or vulnerability highlight the possibility to accept responsibility beyond the boundaries of one's community. To understand any ontology of

[2] Following Jane Bennett's and Michael Shapiro's definition "moralism will be used to refer to a style of speaking, writing, and thinking that is too confident about its judgments and thus too punitive in its orientation to others." See Jane Bennett and Michael Shapiro, 2002, p.4

life as closely interwoven with political and social practices shows the ethical importance of calling the boundaries of concepts of 'natural' communities into question. This ethical complication of the notion of community sets the stage for my rearticulation of the notion of political community in the final chapter of my thesis.

The separateness of human community

This section investigates the ethical implications of the assertion of human community. Taking up Cavell's notion of ethics as a stance the self develops to itself as a member of a community, I ask whether community should be understood exclusively in a 'social' sense. This 'social' reading is called into question by Cavell's discussion of language as a decisive trait, or 'existential reality', of the human condition. He draws out the connection between language and forms of thinking, acting and feeling which appear specific not only to individual cultures, but to human existence as a whole. Cavell's engagement with Wittgenstein allows us to apprehend language as an expression of human sociality which is at the same time culturally specific *and* universal to human existence. In this sense, language is an expression of the 'natural' or ontological sociality of human lives. The contingency and specificity of human language-games, however, counteracts an exclusively 'naturalist' reading of Wittgenstein. Limiting naturalism is important because such a position would invite an argument for an inherent moral capacity of human beings, which is seen as closely related to the functioning of language. In such an argumentative framework, care and responsibility for others could be understood as what defines human existence. Such an understanding, however, fosters a moralistic stance, where 'humanity' becomes an ethical property 'empirical' human beings can fail to possess.

For Cavell the ethical question posed by the address of the other appears to be located firmly within a presupposed sense of community. Individuals believe that they are in community with another person, because they assume that they share 'meaning' by understanding concepts in the same way. This presumed community might *then* be called into question by the encounter of irreducible otherness. The ethical decision for the self is how to react to this difference. It remains to define more precisely, however, what *form* of community Cavell takes as the basis of these encounters. At first sight, his attraction to ordinary language philosophy suggests an understanding of communities as clearly delineated cultural entities. Ordinary language philosophy's appeal to what *we* say seems to presuppose a conception of community in terms of native speakers of a common language – a notion that is quite exclusive. Taken into a social or political direction the 'we' of ordinary language philosophy appears to refer to a relatively 'closed' cultural (and political) group.[3] This sentiment echoes in many discussions of Wittgenstein's concept of 'form of life'.[4] Wittgenstein is thus presented as a relativist and conservative thinker who emphasises the social nature of human language and conduct.[5] This *horizontal* interpretation takes the expression of *forms of life* to refer to linguistic or cultural groups, which are not only clearly bordered but also relatively stable and unchanging. Human

[3] The procedures of ordinary language philosophy examine, as Austin phrased it, "*what we should say when,* and so why and what we should mean by it." The 'we' referred to here, Cavell makes clear, is the native speaker of the given language, in his case the native English speaker. As Cavell remarks, ordinary language philosophy would have relatively little to say about 'quantum leaps' or 'mass society,' but would clarify the nature of cultural phenomena like morality. As we will see below, it is of great importance that Cavell here defines morality as a cultural and not a 'natural' phenomenon. See Cavell, 1976 and Hammer, 2002, p. 4-7

[4] There are several references to 'form of life' in the *Philosophical Investigations*, amply discussed in the literature: "It is easy to imagine a language consisting only of order and reports in battle. … And to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life." (§19); "Here the term "language-game" is meant to bring into prominence the fact that *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life". (§23); "'So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?'--It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life" (§241); "Can only those hope who can talk? Only those who have mastered the use of a language. That is to say the phenomena of hope are modes of this complicated form of life."(p.144); "What has to be accepted, the given, is—so one could say—*forms of life*"(p.226), Wittgenstein, 1953

[5] Cavell, 1989, p. 41

communities would then appear as separated by their respective, non-commensurable language games. Language as the cultural production of shared meaning, it is argued, binds individuals to discrete cultural groups, which cannot communicate with each other. Cavell agrees with this argument *in so far* as he argues that the notion of language as such always has to express itself in the specific – in the speaking of *a* language. Language cannot be understood in the abstract, it needs to take contingent cultural forms. As Cavell writes "culture as a whole is the work of our life of language … it is language's manifestation or picture or externalization. … To imagine a language means to imagine a modified form of talking life."[6] Just as it is impossible to explain language without reference to *a specific* language, what it means to be human cannot be grasped as an abstraction – there is no 'unmodified' form of 'talking' life, or human existence. Humans can only understand their condition as it is expressed within the contingent examples of lived lives and used languages.

The question remains, however, whether the notion of 'forms of life' forecloses cross-cultural communication. A relativistic reading of Wittgenstein would imply that because meaning is established within a closed community one is unable to judge the 'rightness' of concepts that derive from another form of life.[7] If agreement in the language 'we' use is what unifies a form of life and establishes meaning, this would preclude 'cross-cultural'

6 ibid, p.48

7 As Cavell explains, this social reading of Wittgenstein makes him sound too conventionalist "as if when Wittgenstein says that human beings 'agree in the language they use' he imagines that we have between us some kind of contract or an implicitly or explicitly agreed upon set of rules (which someone else might imagine we lack)." ibid, p.41
This social reading has important consequences for the discussion of scepticism Cavell's oeuvre focuses on. The Wittgenstein quote 'What has to be accepted, the given, is – so one could say – forms of life' (*Investigations,* p. 226) is often understood "as proposing a refutation of skepticism with respect to the existence of other minds. Taken in its social direction this would mean that the very existence of, say the sacrament of marriage, or of the history of private property, or of the ceremony of shaking hands, or I guess ultimately the existence of language, constitutes proof of the existence of others. This is not in itself exactly wrong. It may be taken as a vision, classically expressed, of the social as natural to the human. But […] it begs the skeptical question. Because if what we 'accept' as human beings 'turn out to be' automata or aliens, then can't we take it that automata or aliens marry and own private property and shake hands and possess language? You may reply that once it turns out who these things are we (who?) will no longer fully say that they (or no longer let them?) marry, own shake, speak. Perhaps not, but then this shows that from the fact of their exhibiting or "participating in" social forms it does not follow that they are human." Ibid, p. 42.

communication.[8] What *we* mean when we talk about concepts such as 'democracy' or 'justice' would then only make sense *within our own* cultural or political community. Following this line of argument, Cavell seems to limit the applicability of his thought on politics to the relatively confined language-games of western, liberal democratic nation-states in which 'good enough justice' allegedly prevails.[9]

This relativism, however, is not how I understand Cavell's position. As we have discussed in the previous chapter with regard to the individual, our separateness from others does not necessarily imply isolation. The same seems to hold for the notion of forms of life. While one cultural form of life might differ from another, they are not separated by an abyss. Cavell stresses the possibility for connectivity when he changes the emphasis from a *horizontal* interpretation of '*forms* of life' to a *vertical* notion of 'forms of *life.*' By stressing 'life' over 'form', Cavell offers a *vertical* or *natural* reading of the phrase. This points to the 'twin preoccupation' of the *Philosophical Investigations*, which is obscured by the horizontal reading.[10] At issue here are less historically or culturally contingent forms of sociality, but human life itself.[11] The interrelation between body, mind and emotions establishes a specific *human* form of life, distinguished from other 'higher' or 'lower' forms of existence. As we have seen in the previous chapter, it is because of the

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8 In this interpretation Wittgenstein is read as emphasizing the "social nature of human language and conduct, as if Wittgenstein's mission is to rebuke philosophy for concentrating too much on isolated individuals, or for emphasizing the inner at the expense of the outer" Wittgenstein's mission would be to free philosophical thinking from an excessive concentration on the solipsistic thinking subject. ibid, p.41

9 See Mulhall, 1994, pp.70-1

10 Cavell calls 'the natural' a hidden preoccupation of the *Philosophical Investigations.* See Cavell, 1989, p.41. Cavell here enumerates phrases in the *Philosophical Investigations* such as "natural reactions" (§185), or that of "fictious natural history" (p.230), or that of "the common behaviour of mankind" (§206).

11 As Cavell argues: "about forms of life having to be accepted, being the given, its biological direction – emphasizing not *forms* of life, but forms of *life* ... The criteria of pain, say do not apply to what does not exhibit a form of life, so not to the realm of the inorganic … and there is no criterion for what does exhibit a form of life. This interpretation is part of my argument that criteria do not and are not meant to assure the existence of, for example, states of consciousness, that they do not provide refutations of skepticism." ibid, p.42

specific way in which human bodies resemble each other (in their movements and mimicry) that we can relate to others. We can therefore engage in "empathic projection" even though the other's mind remains hidden from view. What Cavell assumes with the notion of a pre-existing community is thus not only a shared language or culture, or a sense of emotional proximity, but the shared bodily, mental and psychic conditions of human existence.

On Cavell's understanding, language is the prime *expression* of human separateness from animals on the one side, and from the divine, on the other side – a separation that is established through the particularity of the human connection of body and mind. It is this position between the divine 'above' and non-human animals 'below' that makes for the *verticality* of forms of *life.* The "specific strength and scale of the human body and of the human senses and of the human voice" allow humans to develop language as a form of *meaningful* behaviour.[12] Language does not straightforwardly refer to human mind or reason, nor is it simply a system of signs. Instead, it is linked to the depth of emotion, to sounds that express pain and pleasure, to the specificity of the human voice and body, but also to cultural differences, phonetic developments, to poetry, to the possibility for singing and screaming. As every human practice, language remains bound by the finiteness of mind and embodiment and the contingency of cultures. While language, however, is an expression of the finitude of the human condition, at the same time it also expresses the human desire for transcendence. It is by exploring the boundaries of language and thought that human beings try to conceive a divinity which will always lie beyond their grasp.[13] We remain, moreover, unable to convey meaning straightforwardly – language, like any other form of human behaviour, needs to be *understood* by others. This

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[12] Ibid p.42

[13] It would be an interesting further question for the study of Cavell's oeuvre that he works with the notion of divinity without negative comment when he discusses texts of Emerson and Thoreau, but is irritated by the notion of the divine in Levinas.

requires *interpretation*, which can always fail. It is the search for, and expression of, meaning in their conduct that marks everything humans do and suffer 'as specific to them'. The fallibility of understanding, and the need for interpretation makes human life 'complicated'. It is thus set apart from 'simpler' forms of existence, both animal and divine (which, as we have seen, for Cavell primarily appears to exist in the human aspiration for transcendence). The specific intertwining or unity of the 'social' and the 'natural' or the 'mental' and the 'physical,' then establishes that 'human conduct is to be read' (a notion, that, for Cavell, associates Wittgenstein with Freud, but also Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche). As Cavell states "hoping or promising or calculating or smiling or waving hello or strolling or running in place or being naked or torturing" are "patterns in the weave of our life, modifications of the life of us talkers, that are specific and confined to us, to the human life form."[14] In this interpretation, the community within which the encounter between the 'I' and the 'you' takes place is not so much as a specific cultural or political group, but the community of humans.

We need to remind ourselves, however, that Cavell does not abandon the horizontal or social reading of forms of life in favour of the vertical, natural one. Instead, the vertical notion serves as a corrective to the horizontal reading that would suggest a strong form of cultural relativism, where the possibility for meaningful encounters between different language-games is denied. Human community is thus one that entails a multitude of different forms of expression, which will still be able to communicate with each other by referring to 'universal' commonalities of embodied human existence. In this sense, the combination of a social and a natural reading ensures that contingency and plurality remain the foremost traits of the universal community of human beings.

Stressing the role of contingency of cultural forms of life and their relation to an

[14] Cavell, 1989, p.48

underlying natural form of human conduct relieves Wittgenstein of the charge of political conservatism.[15] When Wittgenstein asks us to accept or suffer the human form of life, we are not asked to accept a *certain* historical formation of social living, but our 'natural' position as social beings. “In being asked to accept this, or suffer it, as given for ourselves,” Cavell argues “we are not asked to accept, let us say, private property, but separateness; not a particular of power, but the fact that I am a man, therefore of *this* (range or scale of) command, for understanding, for wish, for will, for teaching, for suffering.” As Cavell makes clear, however, acceptance is not a straightforward or simple task. This is the case, because we cannot define the essence of the human: “The precise range or scale” of our abilities “is not knowable a priori, any more than the precise range or scale of a word is to be known a priori.” While, of course we “can *fix* the range,” this is a possibility likened to imprisonment - and, as Cavell points out “not all senses of confinement are knowable a priori.”[16] Freedom is thus the avoidance of confinement, of the fixing of what it means to be human (what we could wish for or establish as our true needs). It leaves open the possibility that in future human nature could be defined differently. Importantly for the argument of this chapter, this implies that any definition of concepts such as 'life' and of 'the human' must remain blurry. While Cavell refers to language, to *specifically* human ways of moving and perceiving, of being companions or seeking separation, finally the essence of the human, the definite boundaries of human community, cannot be defined. What 'we' *understand* as the human will remain a contestable notion; an ever shifting term. Instead of committing ourselves to a clearly delineated community of human beings, then, thinking about the 'human form of life' as marked by contingent practices allows us to interrogate how distinctions between the human and the non-human are made, while at the same acknowledging their ethical and

[15] On the notion that Wittgenstein's writing implies conservatism see for example Cerbone, 2003, p.50; Pleasants, 1999, p.1

[16] Ibid, p.44

political productivity.

While Cavell is careful to interlace a 'social' and a 'natural' reading of the expression 'form of life', it is also possible to understand Wittgenstein as forwarding a form of minimal naturalism. In such a reading, the shared 'instincts' of the human species would take precedence over specificities of cultures and the 'developed' skills of language and rational thought. Such an interpretation, however, would fix what it means to be human in a way Cavell seeks to avoid. Moreover, concentrating exclusively on the notion of the 'natural' enables a problematic argument about the *moral nature* of human beings. That the concept of the human is closely linked to morality is already expressed in modern linguistic usage, where terms like 'humanity' *(Humanität)* or 'humane' come to take on a moral significance.[17] The human, it seems, harbours a particular promise that could realise itself in our ethical behaviour towards others. However, if humanity is defined in terms of specific moral behaviour the human remains an 'attainable category'. This implies that we can fail to be human in a 'full' or 'ethical' sense. Individuals are then no longer free to adopt or reject a particular ethical aspiration or striving. Instead, a determinable ethical standard would be inherent to *all true* human beings. We would thus only become human when we are recognisable as moral subjects.

Drawing on the work of Bob Plant, I will here offer a brief sketch of such a possible interpretation of Wittgenstein. This reading is one example for the prevalent but problematic notion in moral thought that humans are bound to each other through the shared 'possession' of moral capabilities. If only those are human who we share a certain notion of morality, the Wittgensteinian request to accept the given could be taken as the

[17] The term 'Humanität' we might recall has played a decisive role in Herderian humanist philosophy where it is defined as the aspiration of dignity, but also the expression of the character of our species.

request to acknowledge ethical responsibility as given for human existence. Those who deny their ethical responsibility towards other human beings would then be regarded as denying their very humanity. This interpretation, however, suggests an internal stratification of human existence where, by living up to (certain notion of) ethical aspirations, some beings become *more* human(e) than others – and some fail to be recognisable as moral agents so completely that they have to be excluded from human community. While such arguments are often forwarded in terms of the human capacity for reason, and thus moral thought, a 'naturalist' reading of Wittgenstein argues that our responsibility towards others is prior to cognition. At first sight this line of argument appears to be closely related to the Levinasian notion of responsibility. It differs decisively from Levinas, however, by making responsibility a function of an ontological property of the human species, an *instinctive or spontaneous* reaction. Such a claim for the instinctive goodness of human beings makes those who we consider to act or think 'morally wrong' appear as in-human or monstrous.[18] The morally wrong cannot be reached by reason and language, because their failure is *before* language. There is then no choice than to exclude them from the community of moral (and thus human) beings.

Making such an argument in reference to Wittgenstein rests on a reading of the notion of pain-criteria that differs decisively from Cavell's. As we recall, for Cavell it is possible to ignore the pain of another person by doubting her humanity. In Plant's reading such a possibility does not exist, because both the recognition of another human being and of pain behaviour are immediate. Building on the notion of 'natural' shared human behaviour

[18] As Plant argues while "positing a 'common humanity' necessarily entails the possibility of excluding individuals from that category, […] this is not *inherently* unjust. … in extreme cases where reason and justification have been *thoroughly* 'exhausted' (Wittgenstein 1958:§217) is not merely excusable but the only appropriate response to claim that someone has 'lost their humanity' – albeit temporarily. The neo-fascist who tours Auschwitz to laugh at the photographs of mass graves, or to entertain a fried by climbing into the incineration ovens (in short, the man who persistently indulges in an utterly 'malicious joy at the misfortune of others' (Schopenhauer 1995: 135)), can indeed be said to have 'lost their humanity' in this sense. His failing is not epistemic; he has neither merely nor primarily made an error of judgement. Rather, his moral reactions and priorities have become so skewed that he no longer understands what it means to make such judgements in the first place." Plant, 2005, p.94-5

he maintains that we can overcome cultural differences by referring to the 'common behaviour of mankind'. Moreover, Plant argues that we are immediately able to distinguish the human from the non-human. Our reaction to the human appears as deeply rooted in our 'natural history'.[19] Plant combines his reading of Wittgenstein with the Levinasian notion of the face to argue that the meaningful presence of another human is immediate. The human form is 'primordially significant' – "so much so that it determines the limits of what or who the concepts 'pain', 'consciousness' and 'soul' can be meaningfully attributed to."[20] Quoting Wittgenstein Plant asserts that when we look into the face of another we see a "particular shade of consciousness" whose meaning "is there as clearly as in your own breast."[21] In contrast to Cavell, Plant argues that our response to the other does *not* rely on a process of interpretation or 'reading' the other's expression. Instead, it is an instantaneous, instinctive reaction. As Plant states, again in reference to Wittgenstein, "it is a primitive reaction to tend, to treat, the part that hurts when someone else is in pain; and not merely when oneself is." In this argumentation the meaning of language, in particular in relation to expressions of pain, is not established in social context, but is bound to primordial human nature, to an ontological fact. Not sociality or the capacity to create meaning, but our *instinct* to care for other human beings constitutes the basis for human language-games. Taking responsibility for others, caring for them when they are hurt, "is *pre-linguistic*." For Plant 'our' human "language-game is based *on it.*" The expression of pain and the caring reaction to it "is the prototype of a way of thinking and not the result of thought."[22] In this line of argument, the community of human beings is established as a moral community of care.[23] This claim to the pre-

[19] Plant, 2005, p.82
[20] Bob Plant, 2005, p. 86
[21] Plant, 2005, p.83 see also Wittgenstein, 1953 §220
[22] Plant, 2005, p.86, Wittgenstein, 1990 §540-2. As Wittgenstein argues "Being sure that someone is in pain, doubting whether he is, and so on, are so many natural, instinctive, kinds of behaviour towards other human beings, and our language is merely an auxiliary to, and further extension of, this relation. Our language-game is an extension of primitive behaviour." ibid, §545
[23] Plant here quotes Peter Winch, who argues that "'there could not be a human society which was not

linguistic understanding of pain, and our immediate relation to the other seeks to establish that sceptical doubt is a secondary, cognitive approach, that is inessential to our primary or natural relationship to others.[24] Against the Cavellian notion where ethics is linked to our conscious examination of the sceptical impulse, the naturalist reading of Wittgenstein implies that we cannot choose to be moral. Instead, moral problems 'force themselves on you'. Equating the *perception* of pain with responsiveness to it, Plant argues, "[w]hat constitutes suffering is not primarily an epistemic or hypothetical matter; it is central to the natural life of human beings. The other's suffering commands us to help, his misery 'calls for action: his wounds must be tended'."[25] Immorality, defined as a failing of empathy and caring for other human beings, is linked to psychological illness or trauma, where we somehow become alienated from true nature. This, however, would make it possible for a human being to fail not only to make a certain value judgement but to be *emotionally* incapable of making such judgements. Such an *unnatural* human being would then be able to act in ways that revoke her 'humanity'. This individual, as Plant remarks referring to Cavell, "might be said to 'not live in our world' or to be 'inhuman'."[26] As reason is secondary to moral instinct, when moral instinct fails, reason also comes to an end. It appears that it would be impossible to reason with a person who does not 'feel'

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also, in some sense, a moral community.' Moral problems 'force themselves on you' insofar as they emerge from the 'common life between men and do not presuppose any particular forms of activity in which men engage together.' Expanding on this quote Plant argues that "suffering is not primarily an epistemic or hypothetical matter, it is central to the natural life of human beings. The other's suffering commands us to help … for it is part of the grammar of others suffering that one is thereby placed under obligation." ibid, pp.88-9

[24] Making this point, Plant quotes Wittgenstein who states "The game doesn't begin with doubting whether someone has a toothache, because that doesn't – as it were – fit the game's biological function in our life. In its most primitive from it is a reaction to somebody's cries and gestures, a reaction of sympathy or something of the sort. We comfort him, try to help him" Plant, 2005, p.87, Wittgenstein, 1993, p.381

[25] Plant, 2005, p. 89 Understanding language as an 'auxiliary to', an 'extension,' 'refinement' or 'replacement' of our primitive reactions to tend and treat the hurt other person Plant argues that our moral deliberations about "*when, how* and to *whom* we should attend … is grounded upon pre-linguistic natural or 'primitive' reactions toward others."While Plant does not wish to "contest the obvious anthropological fact that the manner in which different cultures organize and implement their moral values may vary" he still argues that "the depth of such cultural diversity is not … unfathomable, but necessarily circumscribed both by pre-linguistic behaviours and fundamental physiological-biological facts concerning the inherent vulnerability of mortal, embodied beings." Plant, 2005, p.87.

[26] ibid, p.95

instinctively that she should care for another human who is in pain.[27]

While I take him to ultimately reject this line of argumentation, in *The Claim of Reason* Cavell momentarily seems close to agreeing with the notion that some forms of behaviour would make a person inhuman. His argument, however, is not linked to the notion of an *instinct* to care and to pity, but connects humanity to the 'cognitive' ability to take part in a rational language-game on which moral sentiments are based. When discussing the question whether moral philosophy could provide arguments for statements such as "It is wrong to torture children," - arguments strong enough to convince anybody, even Hitler - Cavell remarks that morality is not meant to check the conduct of monsters.[28] Those who not already share 'our' 'moral language,' Cavell suggests, will not be persuaded by even the most rigorous moral argument. Problematically, however, this also suggests that those who do not share one's moral language cannot be considered part of the human community. The reference to moral language shows that for Cavell what is at issue is not a *missing* instinct or a *failing* of the capacity to grasp universal reason, but the inability to take part in a contingent language-game. Paradoxically, this failing, as we have seen, is an inherent possibility of human involvement in language. Exhibiting inhumanity or monstrousness is then a standing possibility of human communal existence. Importantly, linking morality to culture and language implies that any form of moral conduct and rule is contingent – a failing to be moral is thus not necessarily a failing to be 'essentially' human, but to conform to 'our', equally contingent, formulation of the human.

In his later discussion of perfectionism, however, Cavell appears to move to an

[27] Ibid. p.88

[28] As Cavell sums up this discussing "when, in response to my expressing doubt that there are moral truths for whose certainty moral theory should undertake to provide proofs, philosophers more than once have proposed 'It is wrong to torture children' as a certain truth to which moral theory has the responsibility of providing an argument, and at least one philosopher added: an argument strong enough to convince Hitler." Stanley Cavell, 2008, p.102

understanding of morality that is not bound so closely to a shared creation of reason, but to personal, incommunicable experience. Instead of seeing morality simply in terms of reason, which is part of a socially established language-game, he points towards a deeply personal ethical experience. That individuals disagree about a certain moral position is thus not necessarily a function of a difference in moral vocabulary, but follows from the incommunicability and uniqueness of moral emotions and experiences. Writing on the ethics of the human relationship to non-human animals Cavell acknowledges that what some of us experience as unbearable, 'inhuman' cruelty (as for example factory farming and slaughtering of 'use'-animals) leaves others untouched. Here Cavell discusses a lecture given by the fictional character Elizabeth Costello, main protagonist of J.M. Coetzee's novel by the same title.[29] Costello experiences the way modern humans treat animals as products for consumption as personally painful.[30] How 'we' humans treat animals, falls back on her, wounds her, and ultimately alienates Costello from human community. For Cavell, however, this is an experience which cannot be assumed to be self-evident, rational, or universal. While for a vegetarian, who believes the slaughtering of animals to be cruel, a person who eats meat might appear monstrous, Cavell warns against “the dangers of allowing oneself to judge another to exhibit monstrousness.” The “danger of such a judgment” would be “that others might take it into their heads to judge

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29 Stanley Cavell, 2008; Cora Diamond, 2008; John M. Coetzee, 2003

30 In the novel, Costello gives a lecture in which she expresses her horror about the way we treat animals in order to produce food. She repeatedly compares this to the holocaust. Her argument is particularly interesting in the context of this chapter, because what she is repelled by is not only the slaughtering itself, but our willed ignorance or 'forgetting'. “It is not because they waged an expansionist war, and lost it, that Germans of a particular generation are still regarded as standing a little outside humanity, as having to do or be something special before they can be readmitted to the human fold. They lost their humanity in our eyes, because of a certain willed ignorance on their part.” While “ignorance may have been a useful survival mechanism” this “is an excuse which, with admirable moral rigour, we refuse to accept.” She draws a plain comparison between the death-camps of the Nazis and 'drug-testing laboratories, factory farms, abattoirs'. Those facilities “are all around us … only we do not, in a sense, know about them.” In the view of the fictional character Costello we are thus “surrounded by an enterprise of degradation, cruelty and killing which rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of, indeed dwarfs it, in that ours is an enterprise without end, self-regenerating, bringing rabbits, rats, poultry, live-stock ceaselessly into the world for the purpose of killing them.” John M. Coetzee, 2003, pp. 64, 65

me to be a monster, without argument."[31] The problem then would be that he could not explain himself in a way that would exculpate him from the charge on inhumanity.

Against both the naturalist position, where ethical behaviour is linked to a universal human instinct, and the notion that ethics follows from rational thought, and is thus equally universally accessible, I thus appeal for an understanding of morality as closely related to ungroundable emotional experiences. Understanding responsibility as an ethical experience, a notion closely related to revelation, shows that individual moral standards cannot be assumed to be universally valid. What I *feel* to be unbearable might be something which others, even if we share a common ethical vocabulary, are hardly touched by. Moral experience, the demand to take responsibility, is not solely a function of rationally judging the rightness of a given situation. I can, theoretically, agree with my friend's position that factory-farming of animals is cruel, but still eat meat produced in this way. I do not suffer from this incongruity because I do not *feel* deeply about my cognitive insight. Agreement 'in the language we speak' is thus not enough for reaching agreement on how to *act* as an ethical being.

In my view, asserting that the judgement of the moral failings of others is itself morally problematic implies that we cannot refuse community with, and thus responsibility for, those who do not share our moral sentiments in every respect. This does not mean that one cannot judge the behaviour of others altogether. However, when doing so one has to be aware that any standard of judgment cannot assume the status of a universal fact. Judging the behaviour of others has to be interwoven with a critical reflection on both, my own behaviour and the way I arrive at my moral standards. As sociality and thus community is *given* and thus has to be *accepted*, responsibility for one's community

[31] Cavell, 2008, p. 102

cannot be easily renounced. Even though we might be appalled by someone's deeds, to declare this person inhuman implies an unacceptable denial of our own responsibility for our communities. Denying community keeps us from critically interrogating ourselves, from questioning our own involvement in practices we might find wrong. Denying that there is anything we share with those who we consider 'monstrous' then, could be understood as a defence reaction, where we are afraid to cast a critical eye on our own moral stance. Absolving oneself from these others might be part of justifying our own refusal to speak out against the norms of society we find morally lacking. After all, how could we hope to oppose monsters? Moreover, abrogating the humanity of some human beings opens the door to deny them human rights. If some people were indeed monsters we seem to have the right to treat them ourselves in an inhumane way. The issue here is whether it makes sense "to speak of seeing others or ourselves *as* human (as opposed to what?). If it does then it makes sense to suppose that we may *fail* to see ourselves and others so" a condition Cavell calls 'soul-blindness'.[32]

Instead of judging another person to be monstrous, accepting my own humanity might entail that I "discover monstrousness in myself."[33] To discover inhumanity or monstrousness within myself then marks the involvement in the specific forms of violence I encounter in my society *and* the awareness of the inevitable 'inhumanity' of the human condition. The experience of human life as bound to both social and existential debt can entail a feeling of embarrassment or disappointment with being human. Discussing Emerson's essay "Fate" Cavell points to the ways a critical stance towards one specific, contingent 'form of life' is entangled with the problem of accepting the human

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[32] ibid, p.93 Cavell adds that he wonders "whether there is a comparable blindness we may suffer with respect to non-human animals."

[33] ibid, p.102 And Cavell asks what Thoreau is "seeing when he declares, 'I never know a worse man than myself'."

form of life. While on the one hand Emerson expresses “a specific experience of embarrassment and disappointment directed to one's culture as a whole (hence to oneself as compromised in the culture),” on the other hand this also points towards the 'natural' relationship of the human to the world.[34] Being human then involves a sense of responsibility or even shame for the cruelty that appears as an essential part of existence. Emerson calls humanity the 'expensive race' – a race living at the expense of 'other races' and repeatedly invokes the slaughter-house. Emerson's text establishes a connection between the ways the human race lives at the expense of non-human animals (eating them) and the way white Americans lived at the expense of their slaves, conjuring a “perception, or vision, that slavery is a form of cannibalism.”[35] This discussion implies that while human might hope to diminish certain culturally specific practices of cruelty, it remains impossible to create a situation where they live without violence. The unease with being human then seems to be caused by an understanding that one can never assume an ethical position beyond reproach, that in face of the address of the other the individual is unable to say she has done enough. This notion is also expressed in the human relationship to language, which denies the possibility of full communication, of 'explaining' oneself to the other. As Cavell argues: “To speak—the obvious signature expression of the human life form—is to be victimized by what there is to say, or to fail to say.”[36] In a sense then, discovering one's 'real needs' might not so much justify human existence as making it acceptable – where acceptance does not imply complacency, but an avowal that perfection lies beyond the reach of the human. The acceptability of the human

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[34] Stanley Cavell, 1989, p.69

[35] Stanley Cavell, 2008, p.116. As I have remarked in the previous chapter, Cavell also discusses Thoreau's perception that “his very existence, the assertion of the will to live in the world by feeding himself” is “without certain justification—there are debts in living, conditions of existence, … that are uncountable. What makes them insupportable is the degree to which they are unnecessary. Then the question in which an adventurous life may well be spent in search, or experiment, is to replace false by true necessaries, or means, to what one truly finds good (a quest as ancient as Plato's *Republic*)” ibid, p.117

[36] Stanley Cavell, 2008, p.115

condition then appears as closely linked to a continuing critical confrontation with one's current form of life. This entails not only asking how we relate to each other within our communities, or what kind of responsibility we take for our communities, but also interrogating what responsibility we take for those lives which are excluded from current formulations of 'social' and 'natural' communities.

What comes into play here is the question how *far* ethical emphatic projection reaches or how definite the borders of a moral community could be drawn. While for Plant and Levinas the boundaries of responsibility seem to be given by the borders of what we can recognise as a human form or face, Cavell appears willing to complicate this notion.[37] However, commencing the discussion of an ethical community from the position of linguistic philosophy (and assuming that language is proper only to the human), Cavell ultimately retains an anthropocentric perspective. His notion of the 'human form of life', stipulates that all other animals share a 'simpler' form of life and are thus, in a certain sense at least, excluded from ethical consideration. We might ask whether Cavell's argument implicitly implies that, from a human perspective, the human form of life appears as more valuable than other forms of life. As Judith Butler argues "if one assumes that the distinctively human life is valuable—or most valuable—or is the only way to think the problem of value," there is always "a risk of anthropocentrism." To confront this risk "it is necessary to ask both the question of life and the question of the

[37] When Plant argues that "there is something primordially significant about the human forms" he thus continues by stating "[t]hat people campaign for the rights of non-human animals and the unborn fetus is not unintelligible, even to those who passionately disagree. It is not as though such individuals were to campaign for the rights of carpers or iron filings -which clearly would raise questions concerning what such 'rights' could possibly amount to." (Plant, 2005, p.86). The argument that ethics is linked to the possibility to possess rights and that this possibility is further linked to a certain likeness to the human, however, is not entirely convincing. It appears to exclude a concern for the human relationship to the non-human world from being a legitimate and 'ethical' concern. This limits the possibility to develop an environmental ethics that departs from an anthropocentric position. As we will see, Derrida asks whether the Levinasian face could not also, or even better, be the face of a non-human animal, but asserts that for Levinas himself "the animal has neither face nor even skin in the sense Levinas has taught us to give to those words. There is … no attention ever seriously given to the animal gaze, no more than to the difference among animals" Derrida, 2008, p.107

human, and not to let them fully collapse into one another."[38] In the following two sections I wish to consider these two questions. I argue that both the 'human' and 'life' are not clearly bordered categories. Moreover, by reminding ourselves that all forms of life are interrelated and rely on the external world for their survival it becomes possible to develop a broad notion of responsibility that is not directed exclusively to human beings, but is able to take into account a concern for all forms of life and their natural habitats.

Precarious Life

By turning to Butler's discussion of precarious life I wish to highlight that any notion of who belongs to the community of human beings is socially contingent. Moreover, our interest in defining what is human is politically motivated. To mitigate the exclusionary logic of defining the human, it is necessary to divide ethical responsibility from the notion of community. The more 'universal' notion of precarious life thus moves from an understanding of ethics as closely related to the notion of the human subject towards a more open understanding of responsibility that encompasses all living beings. This move, however, does not leave behind the problem of contingent definition. What life is, when it begins and ends, or how 'valuable' particular forms of living are, are questions intrinsically connected to the moral and political organisation of a society. I show that moving from the notion of the human to the question of what counts as life remains within a socially or historically contingent sphere of definition that carries political significance. However by critically interrogation of the possibility of such definitions we also formulate a political position. By asking what political function the distinction between human and non-human life has, we are able to forward an ethical sensitivity to

[38] Butler, 2004 a, p.17

those lives which are considered as less valuable. Decentring the human to a certain extent could thus help to develop a sensitivity for the human integration within its environment, where we realise our dependency on other forms of life and non-living materials. To be more aware of the complicated interconnections between human and non-human existences and our limited understanding of such processes makes it possible to appreciate how an anthropocentric view of the world, taking the human being as the agent and subject working on the objects of 'mindless' things and animals, might have unforeseeable consequences for our humanness and our very survival.

Bodily vulnerability and dependency can serve as the starting-point for an ethics of communality which is not restricted to the recognition of a human face or figure. Here the precariousness of *all* living beings is highlighted. Precariousness is a term that marks the socio-ontological dimension of embodied lives, a condition that humans share with all other forms of life. It is thus a universal condition; a condition, moreover, that marks our lives as shared with others. As vulnerable beings we depend on others, which brings to the fore the impossibility of a completely autonomous existence. Precariousness, however, does not make us equal. While it is a condition we share, the *ways* in which we are exposed to precariousness differ.[39] If precariousness brings into focus our interdependence, this, arguably links us not only to other human beings but also to other animals, plants, and our natural environment as a whole. An ethics of precariousness thus seeks to overstep the boundaries of communities or 'forms of life', while remaining

[39] As Isabell Lorey argues precariousness is neither an unchangeable way of being nor an existential sameness, but the multiple insecure constitution of bodies, which are always socially contingent. As shared, that is, at the same time separating and relating, precariousness signifies a relational difference. Lorey uses the German word *teilen* which translates as both 'to share' and ' to separate'. The condition of precariousness is then a condition we all share, but which also separates us from each other, because we are all precarious in specific ways. Lorey also stresses that precariousness implies the fundamental role of reproductive work and care, a notion that links precariousness to notions of labour, an aspect I will come back to in the next chapter. That precariousness highlights care in terms of 'Sorge', however, also connects this notion with a Heideggerian understanding of existence. See Lorey, 2012, p. 33-4

mindful of their importance for our ethical and political predispositions. This enables us to understand all living beings as connected by their shared vulnerability and by the fact that we all rely on others, who we might never know, for our very survival.[40]

If we understand the role of precariousness for ethical thinking primarily in terms of dependency and a wish for survival or *conatus*, however, ethical thought could remain enclosed within a subject-centred logic. This logic stresses that responsibility for the other's life follows from the insight that the subject is not free to destroy the other, because it would be implicated in this destruction.[41] In this formulation the concern for the survival of the self still comes first. Moreover, if responsibility arises from an affective relationship towards the other, this prioritises a specific personal bond – a notion that excludes the 'unknown' other. If the existence of the self depends on others, this implies that the self is concerned mainly for the well-being and survival of those people, animals and 'things' that are closely connected, or valuable, to it. While I would thus have an ethical responsibility towards my parents, friends and lovers, or care for the well-being of my region or town, I might hardly be moved by the plight of a refugee who is denied the right to stay in my country.

That Butler stresses psychic dependency, then, appears to be one of the crucial difficulties with her understanding of moral philosophy. When she combines her reading of Levinas

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[40] As Judith Butler phrases it: "If my fate is not originally or finally separable from yours, then the "we" is traversed by a relationality that we cannot easily argue against; or, rather, we can argue against it, but we would be denying something fundamental about the social conditions of our very formation." 2004 b, p.22-3

[41] This, in Butler's reading, is Melanie Klein's position. Klein argues that we develop moral responses in reaction to questions of survivability. Our feelings of guilt are not, as commonly assumed, an expression of our 'truly human' ability for self-reflection, but instead find their origin in the much more 'animal' fear of death. Our wish to preserve our own lives would thus take into account the relational character of life. What guilt is then supposed to keep in check is our equally 'animal' wish to destroy the other/object to whom one is bound. "If Klein is right" Butler writes, "I probably don't care very much about the other person as such; they do not come into focus for me as another, separate from me, who "deserves" to live and whose life depends on my ability to check my own destructiveness" and she follows that "indeed it would seem that guilt does not index a moral relation to the other, but an unbridled desire for self-preservation". Butler, 2009, p.45,46

with her engagement with Laplanchian psychoanalysis, this results in a notion of the other as in the first place a person who is close to the self. The other, for her, appears to be foremost someone the self has an intimate, emotional (which does not necessarily mean affectionate) relationship with – the first care-giver of the infant and, later in life, close friends, lovers or family-members. Those relationships have the power to unravel the self in ecstatic movements of love, desire, anger, grief, and mourning in which the self comes to understand itself as overwhelmed and undone by the other. It remains unclear, however, how we get from understanding the self as constituted by a specific other, encountered in intimate psychic life, to an acknowledgement of responsibility towards others who are foreign to us. The question is then, how we would, from Butler's position, explain an assumption of responsibility for those we have no affective relationship with. In other words, how do we get from the personal to the political realm – from the 'me' and 'you' to the 'third'? While a 'psychoanalytic' position might help us understand the ethical weight of our relationship with those others our understanding of selfhood is bound up with, it seems, similarly to the position of narrative recognition theorists, unable to address the problem of indifference towards others who remain nameless for us.

Butler seeks to circumvent this difficulty by turning to a more universal ethics of loss and mourning. Here the insight that each of us experiences the death of a loved person as unravelling and existential serves to establish a notion of universal connectivity. We could recognise in others, even others we know nothing personal about, people who will mourn their loved ones, and thus a community based on, to use Cavell's term, 'emphatic projection' could be imagined. In this sense, Butler argues, bonds of solidarity with those affected by the wars waged in 'our' names could be formed. To understand war deaths not in anonymous terms, but in terms of personal tragedies, makes it possible to relate to

those affected globally by violent assertions of state-sovereignty. Those faceless others lost in the wars waged by western powers in the name of self-defence, could then be understood as lives mourned by their relatives and friends in the same way as citizens of western states would mourn their loved ones lost to violence.[42] The experience of loss here becomes the possibility to create ties that bridge over regional, cultural and historical distances. As Butler states: "it is possible to appeal to a 'we,' for all of us have some notion of what it is to have lost somebody. Loss has made a tenuous 'we' of us all."[43] Turning to the role of mourning as constitutive of non-sovereign selfhood highlights the interrelation between politics and ethics. While it might be taken as an ontological fact that all life is finite, the ways in which beings die and in which they suffer are often determined by political matters. The existential notion of precariousness is thus connected to the political concept of precarity.[44] While precariousness is understood as the socio-ontological dimension of embodied life, a condition that is proper to all forms of life, precarity connotes the political and social stratification of vulnerability, uncertainty and threat. Precarity demarcates the effects of political, social and juridical systems that structure the ways in which we are affected by conditions of precariousness. In other words, precarity is a term that calls attention to the ways the universal or ontological

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[42] This argument, however, is not unproblematic. Butler does not actually discuss too closely whether and in how far the mourning and grief of others would resemble our own. What is more important for her argument is the notion that, in order to appreciate life, all lives lost must be eligible for public mourning. We should, however, bear in mind Bonnie Honig's critique of what she calls 'mortalist humanism'. Honig acknowledges that Butler is right in directing our attention towards the ways in which "contemporary democracies' tendency to suppress or instrumentalize grief on behalf of national aims." She maintains, however, that focusing on the universality of grief is problematic because mortality and grieving are "always also wrapped up in—inseparable from—their meaning, which varies (as Butler [and White] concedes)". Honig thus calls for a deconstruction of the binary of death and burial in which death appears as a univocal natural and universal fact and burial or grief as the socially variable, in a similar way as Butler in her earlier work had deconstructed the relationship between gender and sex. Moreover, as Honig argues, basing a 'return to humanism' on shared mortality and grief overlooks the "equally important resources of feast and finitude, appetite and hunger, abundance and lack, festival and lamentation." As Honig stresses we "may all be mortals (with varying attitudes toward and experiences of death) but we are also, as Arendt insists along with Nietzsche, natals as well; and a focus on natality—which is no less minimal than mortality, ontologically speaking—may generate new commonalities while orienting humanism differently than mortality does." See Honig, 2010, p. 8

[43] Butler, 2004 b, p. 20

[44] Butler, 2009, p. 3

condition of precariousness is distributed unequally by governmental mechanisms and 'framing' where some lives are to be sheltered from 'existential' dangers such as illness, hunger or violence, while others are exposed to conditions of heightened vulnerability. When turning to precarity we thus talk about establishing political and cultural hierarchies of our being-with, where some lives are 'othered' or excluded from community and thus become to bear a greater burden of precarity.[45] Shared precariousness as a 'relational difference' is not independent of social and political relations.

For humans, levels of precarity often depend on differences in power, wealth, gender, sexual identity, and other political, cultural or economic factors. Moreover, public perception of vulnerability and mortality, but also discourses on the value of certain forms of life, play a decisive role in the political distribution of precarity. It is in this respect that it is not only important that some are more prone to suffer and die a premature death than others, but also that only some deaths will be publicly acknowledged and mourned.[46] If we understand that the life of an unknown other will be mourned by someone when it is lost, we can relate this to our own experience of mourning. Seeing that a lost life is mourned publicly drives home the similarity of this loss to our own.

This argumentation, however, touches on a crucial difficulty. If the experience of responsibility can be derived from the insight that a lost life will be mourned by someone, it becomes easy to disregard lives from whom we believe that they do not have personal relationships similar to our own. It is from this perspective that Butler interrogates how death and mourning are presented in public discourse.

To explore why some deaths are not mournable in public discourse Butler returns to the Levinasian notion of the face and counterposes it to the way certain 'others' are

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45 Lorey, 2012, p. 25
46 Butler, 2009, p.15

represented in western media. She rightly argues that Levinas's 'face' is not simply or exclusively a human face but a symbol for what is human, or what demands respect in the human. It communicates 'what is precarious, what is injurable'. The possibility of being recognized as human, as having rights, including the right to live depends on the prior possibility of being intelligible as human by the dominant culture. Butler argues that "there are 'subjects' who are not quite recognizable as subjects, and there are 'lives' that are not quite—or, indeed, are never—recognized as lives."[47] In Butler's account, the media plays an important part in our willingness to wage war, when "media representations of the faces of the 'enemy' efface what is most human about the 'face' for Levinas."[48] Butler is thus concerned with the implications of 'dominant forms of representations' that help to veil the precariousness of (some forms of) life. She calls us to question how appearance in public life is regimented and explore the "limits of a publicly acknowledged field of appearance." Because certain others remain 'faceless' or are presented as the 'faces' of evil in public discourse, we are able to "become senseless before those lives we have eradicated and whose grievability is indefinitely postponed."[49] Therefore, "certain faces must be admitted into public view, must be seen and heard for some keener sense of the value of life, all life, to take hold."[50] For Butler, mourning is not the goal of politics, but the capacity to mourn enables us to oppose political violence. To decide the question which deaths can be mourned publicly is thus, in Butler's view, an important site of political power. She argues that public mourning and the denial of

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47 Butler, 2004 b, p.4

48 Butler, 2004 b, p.xvii

49 Butler, 2004 b, p. xvii As Butler argues, "[t]he media's evacuation of the human through the image has to be understood … in terms of the broader problem that normative schemes of intelligibility establish what will and will not be human, what will be livable life, what will be a grievable death. These normative schemes operate not only by producing an ideal of the human that differentiate among those who are more and less human. Sometimes they produces images of the less than human, in the guise of the human, to show how the less than human disguises itself, and threatens to deceive those of us who might think we recognize another human there, in that face. But sometimes these normative schemes work precisely through providing no image, no name, no narrative, so that there never was a life, and there never was a death." Butler, 2004 b, p.146

50 Butler, 2004 b, p. xvii

mourning have played a decisive performative role in the ideological narratives of U.S. foreign and domestic policies. These policies seek to rescue an exclusively defined population from a perceived threat of unknown or vaguely knowable others with whom conversation seems impossible.

This argument shows the importance of being able to offer a socially intelligible story or image of one's life for being eligible for a 'mournable' death. Returning to the problem of recognition, Butler replaces the notion of the subject with the category of 'precarious life' in an attempt to develop a more inclusive political language, a language that questions the right of an exclusively defined population to claim their sovereignty. She thus seeks to move from the psychological argument about the way subject-formation depends on particular others towards a universal 'bodily' ontology where survival depends on wider 'impersonal' relations of cooperation and care. The step away from individual psychology allows us to move beyond the notion of the human subject, in a way more radical than Butler herself intends.

The boundaries of life and the question of acknowledgement

If we argue not in terms of the possibility to become a subject but in terms of the vulnerability of precarious life, we turn towards the question how to navigate the borders and the 'outside' of human community. The political aspect of a discourse of precarious life begins with questions of definition. How we understand 'life' is a politically saturated

matter, because the boundaries and applicability of this concept are contingent. This should be an obvious point to make, when we only shortly consider how definitions of life and questions about our involvement with life have changed in the past centuries. Recent scientific discoveries have repeatedly clashed with religious or cultural notions about life, triggering political discussions for example about reproductive rights, life-prolonging procedures or cloning.[51] These discussions are informed by wider political, cultural and economic discourses and therefore cannot be decided through reference to any clear-cut (scientific) definition of life or its intrinsic value. Any 'bodily ontology' we take recourse to in order to ground our thinking about rights to life, dignity, and flourishing has to recognise that our 'fundamental structures of being' are never distinct from social and political organization.[52] "To be a body," Butler states "is to be exposed to social crafting and form, and that is what makes the ontology of the body a social ontology."[53] The issue of abortion exemplifies the ways various definitions of life, its precariousness and value, overlap and clash. To clarify the ethical significance of 'precarious life' as an ontological figure further, it might help to look more closely at Butler's brief discussion of this issue. As she acknowledges, her appeal for an ethics of precariousness could be interpreted as clashing with women's rights to bodily self-determination. To argue for a heightened sensitivity for lives which are not recognised as lives, and which are not mourned when lost, is open to appropriation by certain 'vitalist' positions, as for example forwarded by 'pro life' movements. "One could easily see," Butler points out, "how those who take so-called 'pro-life' positions might seize upon such a view to argue that the fetus is precisely this life that remains ungrieved and should

[51] As Butler states: The "being" of life is itself constituted through selective means; as a result, we cannot refer to this "being" outside of the operations of power, and we must make more precise the specific mechanisms of power through which life is produced. Obviously, this insight has consequences for thinking about "life" in cellular biology and the neurosciences, since certain ways of framing life inform those scientific practices as well as debates about the beginning and the end of life in discussions of reproductive freedom and euthanasia." Butler, 2009, p.2

[52] ibid, p.2

[53] ibid p.3

be griefable, or that it is a life that is not recognized as life according to those who favor the right to abortion."[54] Trying to establish what counts as life and what not, however, is not the appropriate way to tackle this question. To lead the discussion in such a way would assume that everything recognised as 'precarious life' necessarily has to be protected. This is a misunderstanding. To acknowledge precariousness does not, in itself, involve any substantial ethical claim that would justify the protection of life. How we come to understand one life-form as more worthy of protection than another is a process that does not draw on existential difference, but on cultural and political discourses. It is an undeniable fact that a vast domain of life is not subject to human regulation. Moreover, life as such could not exist without necessary processes of degeneration and destruction. Thus, the notion of a right to life "is the function of an omnipotence fantasy of anthropocentrism."[55]

While it is important to clarify that a sensitivity to the precariousness of life does not entail a demand for a universal right to life, this argument does not address the concerns of many 'pro-life' activists.[56] They would not argue that *all* precarious life has to be protected but that there is something special about *unborn human* life. Moreover, it would indeed be possible to protect this unborn life, not against natural causes of death or decay, but against wilful human intervention. What is at issue here, for anti-abortion-activists, is not what counts as precarious life, but when human life starts. This way of thought is countered by Butler's argument that life as such is precisely what we share with other

54 ibid, p.16

55 Ibid, p.18

56 I introduce this example mainly to highlight Butler's argument that there are no ontological grounds to argue for or against the protection of a certain kind of life, but rather only for looking critically at the frameworks used to consider categories of life. This argument is thus used to distinguish her discourse from the 'pro-life' discourse, a discourse that, as Butler omits to mention, most of the time would argue in a different vein because of its often fundamentalist Christian ontology. Here what matters in not personhood but a God-given soul, and this soul is allegedly given to the foetus at the moment of conception.

animals. It is the category of being alive that establishes the human as an animal species. We have to accept that life is not a property distinctive to the human, but instead exactly what we share with other life-forms - "there is no firm way to distinguish in absolute terms the *bios* of the animal from the *bios* of the human animal."[57] What appears to make human life special then is not that it *lives*, but its form of sociality, a sociality the foetus is not yet part of in a stricter sense. To understand Butler's argument in this way, however, brings her close to a discourse of 'personhood', a notion she clearly opposes. Tackling the question of abortion by taking recourse to the notion of personhood, one could argue that only a person can be a subject of rights. The foetus as a non- or pre-person could thus not be entitled to rights, including the right to protection against harm and destruction. In other words, only if a being become recognisable as person, could it be counted as members of the human community proper. Butler flatly denies that the conception of personhood is a good way to discuss the issue of abortion-rights. Such an ontological project stands in contradiction to her own, because it "relies on an account of biological individuation."[58] If we hold on to a notion of necessary relationality, where the self ecstatically oversteps its own boundaries and recognises the other as the core of her own interiority, the notion of individuation, however, loses its power. An ontology of individualism would thus fail to take into account the constitutive character of relationality. As Butler writes, "[t]here is no life without the conditions of life that variably sustain life, and those conditions are pervasively social, establishing not the discrete ontology of the person, but rather the interdependency of persons, involving reproducible and sustaining social relations, and relations to the environment and to non-human forms of life."[59] For Butler "[t]he question is not whether a given being is living or not, nor whether the being in question has the status of a 'person'; it is, rather whether the

[57] Ibid, p.19
[58] Ibid, p.19
[59] Ibid, p.19

social conditions of persistence and flourishing are given." This latter question would allow us to "avoid the anthropocentric and liberal individualist presumptions that have derailed such discussions."[60] Understanding life as precarious means to apprehend life as reliant on social and political conditions, instead of a "postulated internal drive to live." Any drive, even a drive to live, needs to be supported by 'what is outside itself'. Therefore, our obligation is not to "life itself," but "to the conditions that make life possible." As Butler argues, "there can be no sustained life without those sustaining conditions." To establish such conditions is "both our political responsibility and the matter of our most vexed ethical decisions."[61] The ethical and political question, then, is less who should decide (and on what grounds) which life is to be protected. Instead, we should be asking more fundamentally about the point at which such decisions emerge as relevant, appropriate or obligatory acts. In this sense the question of abortion-rights can only be considered within a wider context of how the female body and its ability for reproduction has become a matter of public and moral interest. A critical stance is necessary for political decision-making, one that acknowledges the political genealogy or the framing of such discussions.

Butler's positions leaves us with a politicised understanding of life as interdependent. This not necessarily calls for the protection of life under all circumstances. Moreover, the boundaries where human life begins and ends are always somewhat in flux. In the way it is framed by pro-life activists, the question of abortion revolves around the question whether a foetus is a member of the human community, and thus would have an intrinsic right to live. If we consider that there is no preferential right to live for *any* form of

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60 Ibid, p.20
61 Ibid, pp. 21, 23

precarious life, this would deny the notion of a privileged community of human beings. The question where human life begins would therefore become less pressing. Instead, we could focus on understanding the 'precarious life' of a foetus as one which is closely related to the embodied existence and bodily autonomy of a specific pregnant woman. The question is then why or how the bodies of women become a public and moral concern. Butler's discussion of mourning, however, also poses the question of a moral community in regard to non-human animals. Focusing on unacknowledged and unmourned death then also points to those lives human beings usually do not see fit to mourn, as for example animals we use for industrial food production, or lives lost in the destruction of wide landscapes for the extraction of resources. For non-human animals, plants and the ecosystem more generally, their *usefulness* to human interest, their appearance in our perception and practices, have decisive influences on possibilities for survival. This reveals the breadth of anthropocentrism for ethical thought. If we focus on the notion of loss, this means that we are more willing to take responsibility for the survival of animals, plants (or landscapes) which hold a certain meaning or value for human beings. This is for example the case, if arguments for vegetarianism and the rights of animals are based on the way these animals are perceived as 'companions' to humans or when we argue for the conservation of natural habitats by pointing out their value to humans as either a place of recreation or cultural heritage.[62] An ethics of mourning thus seems to remain limited to human interests or to the human ability to imagine meaningful bonds with non-human life. The value of life would then still be measured in terms of the subject's attention and emotional attachment. We have to ask, however, if life indeed would become more expendable if nobody grieves its loss. Concentrating on vulnerability instead of mourning might allow us to mitigate this anthropocentric position. While we might not feel personal loss when certain animal species become extinct or wilderness-

[62] On the idea of companionship and eating animals see Stanley Cavell 2008, p.103-5

areas disappear, understanding the earth as a complex, interdependent and vulnerable system of which we form but a part might redirect our awareness towards issues of responsibility where the question is more whether human beings have the right to intervene and alter in a drastic way their natural environment. Taking into account my previous discussion of existential debt and 'true needs' we might thus call into question the human claim to sovereignty and mastership over the 'natural' world. What is called for then is an ethical position that decentres the human.

In the same breath as introducing the question of abortion, Butler contends that her argument could also be seen as underpinning animal-rights claims. The animal could be regarded as a life that is not recognised as life by prevalent anthropocentric norms.[63] While this issue, however, is of no further importance for Butler's discussion, following up on her remark provides insight into consequences of re-figuring the human community as non-sovereign, in the sense that it depends on other forms of life and cannot clearly define its own boundaries. Considering the human relationship to non-human animals it becomes possible to scrutinise the delineation of human community from another angle. Instead of questioning 'internally' whether human beings 'live up' to their humanity, the concept of the human is called into question by interrogating its special status among animal life. Moreover, if we understand the definitions of 'life,' 'the human,' and 'the animal' as historically contingent, the dichotomous human – animal distinction becomes problematic. We can then ask what it means for the community of humans, and its ethical standing, to reconsider the flexibility of its boundaries to the animal 'other'.

As thinkers like Derrida point out, subject-centred philosophy has allowed us to hold on

[63] Ibid, p.16

to an anthropocentric world-view, where other lives are measured relatively to their connection and usefulness to the human. Much of western philosophical thought has relied on a dichotomous relationship between the concepts of 'the human' and 'the animal'. Using both terms in the singular sets up the human subject as a sovereign entity opposed to an undistinguishable non-human Other. 'The animal' as "a name [men] have given themselves the right and the authority to give to the living other," then seems to refer to a featureless mass.[64] By avoiding the singularity of individual animals, and overlooking the stark differences between non-human animal species, the animal becomes a substitutable object to the human subject. It remains anonymous, without a face or a discernible voice. Their object status veils their status as precarious lives, similar to our own. Furthermore, modern philosophy's understanding of the animal has framed the discourses of scientific discovery, which in turn played an important role in moulding the current relationship between the human and the animal.[65] Humans have shown considerable disregard for the survival of animals not deemed useful to them. The sources of animals' livelihood and well-being have been regarded as raw-material, up for the taking in the quest of human progress. Moreover, the natural sciences have allowed for an increasing objectification of the use-animal. Traditional forms of animal treatment "have been turned upside down by the joint developments of zoological, ethological, biological and genetic forms of *knowledge*, which remain inseparable from *techniques* of intervention *into* their object, from the transformation of the actual object, and from the milieu and world of their object, namely, the living animal."[66] As Derrida stresses in his lectures on the human relationship to animals, humans not only kill animals on a massive scale, but also over-produce and alter animals with the help of hormones, genetic cross-breeding and cloning.

64 Jacques Derrida, 2008, p.23

65 While I here concentrate mainly on the 'negative' effect of scientific discourse on the relationship to the animal, it should also be noted that current calls for animal rights are also often linked to scientific discoveries in biology, where previous assumptions about the mental, linguistic and moral capabilities of animals are called into question. See for example Clay, de Waal, 2013

66 Ibid, p.25

He points out the “unprecedented proportions of this subjection of the animal.”[67] The fantasy of mastery leads the autonomous subject to destroy, control and alter lives deemed less valuable than its own. The logocentric view we have encountered in Cavell, and which according to Derrida is prevalent in the history of western philosophy, might make it easier to deem non-human life less worthy of protection, and, at the same time, to allow us to play out any possibility of manipulation of objects our rational minds are able to come up with.

Derrida's discussion of the human mistreatment of animals receives specific poignancy from his reference to genocide, drawing a direct comparison between the mass-killings of humans and the mass-killings of animals for food-consumption. He states that we organize “on a global scale the forgetting or misunderstanding of this violence.”[68] These remarks link his lectures to Cavell's discussion of *Elizabeth Costello* where Costello accuses us (importantly she does not exclude herself – she questions the humanity of all of us humans), the 'confidants' of cruelty to animals, of monstrosity. Later, she herself is accused of monstrousness for equating the killing of human beings in the holocaust with the killing of cattle.[69] We are confronted here with the question whether we could or should, in our ethical thinking, transcend the dichotomous division between the human and the animal.[70] The comparison of animal death to human death (we could argue against

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67 Ibid

68 Ibid

69 The fictional character Abraham Stern writes to Costello “The Jews died like cattle, therefore cattle die like Jews, you say. That is a trick with words which I will not accept. You misunderstand the nature of likenesses; I would even say you misunderstand wilfully, to the point of blasphemy. Man is made in the likeness of God but God does not have the likeness of man. If Jews were treated like cattle, it does not follow that cattle are treated like Jews. The inversion insults the memory of the dead. It also trades on the horrors of the camps in a cheap way.” Coetzee, 2003, p. 94

70 This question has important implications for our ethical thinking as a whole. As Cavell points out “the case of breeding animals for the manufacturing of food,” not only elicits an “extremity of responses ranging from horror to indifference.” In difference to other difficult questions such as the death penalty, the legitimacy of war, torture of prisoners, euthanasia or abortion, the question of killing animals on a large scale is an issue “that touches the immediate and perhaps invisible choices of most of the members of a society every day.” It is thus the prevalence or 'every-dayness' of the question, and the possibility to make relatively easy 'life-style' choices in response to it that make it particularly

animal cruelty without doing so), fundamentally challenges the human position in the world.

Unlike Cavell for whom the question of the animal other ultimately plays a secondary role - as a companion the human, Derrida engages more deeply with the question whether an animal could be 'the Other' who accuses us and to whom we are endlessly responsible. For Derrida, the animal-other appears as the *absolute* other. It is distinguished from Levinas's other, which in Derrida's reading, always remains the fraternal other of another human being. As Derrida argues: "[i]f I am responsible for the other … isn't the animal more other still, more radically other, if I might put it that way, than the other in whom I recognize my brother, than the other in whom I identify my fellow or my neighbor?"[71] Such suggestions, however, are met with decisive resistance from some theorists, because they imply that all animals could appear as potentially making an ethical demand upon us – a notion that would decentre the importance of human well-being vice versa that of other species. Maintaining the hierarchy between human and non-human life is of great ethical importance, it is argued, because otherwise we might undermine the absolute value of human life.[72] As Stephen K. White sees it, if we understand ourselves as equally responsible to any form of life we would be presented with hardly palatable scenarios, where a decision must be made between the good of people and the good of animals (or

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interesting. See Stanley Cavell, 2008, p.93

[71] By pointing out that animals, for example his cat, look at him, Derrida draws attention to the view-point of the other, making the animal-other appear in her singularity. For Levinas, Derrida continues, "the animal has no face, he does not have the naked face that looks at me to the extent of my forgetting the color of its eyes. The word *nudity*, which is used so frequently, which is so indispensable for Levinas in describing the face, skin and vulnerability of the other or of my relation to the other, of my responsibility for the other when I say "here I am," never concerns nudity in its sexual difference and never appears within the field of my relation to the animal." Jacques Derrida, 2008, p.107

[72] Stephen K. White for example argues for an ethical position built on an awareness of common mortality. This position distinguishes the human from the animal by giving weight to the notion of awareness/consciousness of mortality and dignity. Other animals might be mortal but they are not aware of it in the way human beings are. Therefore, there is a specific dignity to human life. For White human dignity is synonymous with our capacity for linguistic expression and reasoning that justifies the preference given to human life above all other life-forms. It is the "capacity for disclosure and articulation that best constitutes what human dignity amounts to, and thus that to which we owe justice" see Stephen K. White, 2000, p.131

even plants and habitats). At the moment of decision-making we are left without a tool to gauge which form of precarious life should be preferred. White proposes the following scenario: He asks us to imagine a country "where one group faces the prospect of genocide at the hands of its enemy; and imagine as well that the associated fighting between the two sides threatens the habitat of a given species of bird to such a degree that it may go extinct." Could we seriously, White asks, forward an ethical stance that would be "indifferent as to how he would rank the priority of courses of action that would save, respectively, that group of people or that nonhuman species."[73] As this example shows, what seems ultimately at stake is not only whether animal *life* should be valued as highly as human (alleged) *well-being*, as in the question of manufacturing animal-meat. Giving more weight to the interest of the animal in the case of agriculture appears as a slippery slope, leading to a position where we become unable to judge whether we should prefer to safe an animal's life or the life of a human being. While there would be something to be said about the connection to reality of White's hypothetical example, it might be more important here to think about what he wants ethical judgment to do. White seems to call for a substantive moral rule that human life is *always* and in *all circumstances* to be put above the lives of non-human animals. To draw on the notion of precariousness for an ethical stance, however, calls into question the very possibility of arriving at any *a priori* moral prescriptions. Combining an ontological with an ethical argument about the precariousness of life only intends to redirect our view, so that each particular case of ethical and political decision-making can be considered in a more open manner. This openness would allow us to rethink the priority of the human, without *necessarily* denying it. If we understand ethical decision-making as a cultural, social and political practice and further concede that in western culture the primacy of human life over

[73] Stephen K. White, 2009, p.50, White uses this example in order to argue against William Connolly's notion of presencing, however, I believe his argument could be equally directed against Derrida's notion of the animal as other to whom we are responsible.

animal life is deeply engrained, opening our ethical stance towards other forms of precarious life only entails a complication of our default position.

What comes back into play here, for me, is the problem of infinite responsibility. Infinite responsibility implies not only that I feel infinitely responsible to a singular 'you', but that there is always a third party, disrupting the ethical relationship between to 'I' and the 'you'. As there is always 'another other' taking responsibility seriously means that we will have to choose between competing ethical demands. Thus, even though Levinasian ethics would at the outset seem to obligate us to preserve the life of *any* other, upon closer inspection of both Levinas's own understanding and Derrida's interpretation, limitations to this obligation are necessarily made. They accept that, on an affective level, we could not *feel* the same kind of obligation to every other. We simply *are* more attached to some people, animals and things for cultural, religious and personal-psychological reasons. Why we feel responsible, or why we are addressed by certain issues more strongly as by others might be a complicated mixture of cultural background, religious beliefs and psychological aspects that in the end must remain opaque to us. The ethical demand is thus not prior to the social, but is framed by it.[74] The *experience* of responsibility is therefore not universal.

That ethical experience is personal and moral judgements should thus be unique, however, is not a draw-back, but a necessary limitation to infinite responsibility. Being equally responsible to everyone would end up making us irresponsible. If we feel the demand of every life equally strong we would become paralysed, unable to decide. What is called for, however, is a critical view on our own emotional responses to ethical questions. Why, we must ask ourselves, are we less moved by the plight of some others? Who do we overlook and what reasons can we give for doing so? While this means that

[74] Judith Butler, 2012, p.39

any decision has to be interrogated carefully there will often be a point where reasons run out and we must go on without them. While we cross into the sphere of politics when we leave the ethical scene of address between the 'I' and the 'you' to consider the third, the ethical demand remains necessary to disrupt the sphere of the political. Because no notion of justice, no formalisable law, can take recourse to absolute grounds or do justice to everyone, the political has to remain as open as possible to future renegotiation, to the claims of a third party (obviously, in the case of life and death no such future renegotiation is possible). In this sense, the ethical scene of address engages an idea of anarchy, a disruption of established law by an an-archic demand.[75] It is this political question of responsibility towards the other and its possibility to disrupt not only established law, but also the formation of political community to which I will turn in the next chapter.

Conclusion

This chapter claims that the community of the human needs to remain, in a certain sense, indeterminable in order to be workable as a 'universal' ethical category. The human is a historically contingent concept, which is rearticulated when those previously excluded from it, such as women or people of colour, become included. While “norms of recognition by which the 'human' is constituted … encode operations of power,” these operations enable an ongoing contest “over the future of the 'human'.” For Butler, “power emerges in language in a restrictive way or, indeed, in other modes of articulation as that

[75] See Butler on Benjamin's and Levinas's notion of the anarchic, Judith Butler, 2012, p.67-8

which tries to stop the articulation as it nevertheless moves forward."[76] While this 'move forward' seeks to make 'the human' a 'universal' category by overcoming exclusions, understanding ethical responsibility and rights exclusively in relation to the human remains caught up within a logic of anthropocentrism. Even though there is something specific in being human, a specific form of precarious life – the boundaries between human forms of life and other forms of life are not clear-cut. By allowing us to be troubled by the vagueness of some distinctions, a certain political and ethical sensitivity for the fact that they are open to revision might be developed. This stance allows us to decentre the human to a certain extent and thus be more mindful to the ways in which we are embedded in the world. Our dependency on other forms of life and non-living materials influences deeply the human mode of being. By being more aware of the complicated interconnections between human and non-human lives and our limited understanding of such processes we might understand that the anthropocentric view of the world, taking the human being as the agent and subject working on the objects of 'mindless' things and animals, might have unforeseeable consequences for our humanness and the survival of all living beings.

It should not be overlooked, however, that a normative stance does not follow *necessarily* from this ontological argument – that we understand life as precarious and interconnected does not mean that we accept our responsibility for the lives of others. Quite the contrary, understanding lives as vulnerable and ourselves as both precarious *and* powerful agents can also heighten our wish for destruction. The decisions we make between taking responsibility for others, being 'blind' to them, or actively hurting other lives is finally where human agency and freedom is located. How these processes influence our understanding of political agency and community will be the topic of the next chapter. In the final chapter I thus ask whether political agency is necessarily 'action in concert' and

[76] Butler, 2004 a, p.13

what the notion of non-sovereignty and bodily vulnerability means for our understanding of political communities beyond the institutions of the nation-state.

Chapter 6 – Re-imagining the political

Introduction

This final chapter investigates how *political* community and agency could be thought from the perspective of non-sovereignty. If we understand humans as non-sovereign, relational and singular beings, this *can* inspire a normative argument about the more fluid forms political communities could take. On this logic, the political sphere could be reimagined as a network of councils, where all members can appear equally as political actors. Such a structure highlights the plurality of political communities and the possibility of fluctuating membership. While there might be moments when the individual develops an intense bond with one community and is fully committed to its political practices and goals this does not preclude a parallel membership in another community, or that commitments might shift in the future. This necessitates the openness or permeability of political communities. Such a view constitutes a theoretical and practical alternative to established forms of political membership and organisation within the institutional boundaries of liberal nation-states, where the possibility to become a political actor is bound to relatively stable categories such as citizenship.

By returning to the question of the political I thus aim to bring to the fore the political relevance of formulations of the non-sovereign self and concepts of relational ethics. While 'weak' philosophical anthropologies seek to ground political and ethical thought,

they highlight at the same time their own contingency and situatedness. The specific 'weak ontological' formulation of selfhood I have advanced, in addition, maintains that relationality and singularity are not understood as contradictory, but as intertwined in a productive tension. I argue that even though we are in a necessary relation to others, *a relation can only exist between separate entities*. This tension between connectivity and boundlessness on the one hand and separateness and autonomous agency on the other informs the relation in which the singular actor stands towards her political community. Moreover, my argument that we can at the same time remain separate and connected helps to analyse how members of a community relate to those currently excluded.

Drawing on Arendt and Butler, I suggest a possible way to reimagine the notion of the political, and situate this understanding within current debates about political difference and post-foundationalism. 'The political' is a concept that is distinguished from institutionalized politics. Turning to Arendt's discussion of revolutionary political practice helps me to develop an understanding of the political that calls into question the clearly bordered understanding of political communities. This allows for a more productive critique of the nation-state system, whose relevance I wish to exemplify by discussing the question of migrants' rights for current political activism. Highlighting the interwovenness of each singular being within current forms of society and government, I argue for an understanding of critique and political resistance which does not necessarily aim to overthrow or abolish the state but to problematise the complicated relationship between forms of government, societal norms, economic relationships, and forms of selfhood. Arendt's critique of mass society takes into account how individuals are conditioned by the social and economic organisation of society. However, her 'spheric' understanding of human existence still provides for the possibility of a clean break with

the social and a political 'new beginning', a notion that is clearly denied by Butler's understanding of sociality. Moreover, Butler's nuanced understanding of the psychic dimension of political relationships provides the necessary compliment to Arendt's 'disinterested' understanding of the political sphere. Turning to Butler and affectivity then makes it possible to critically renegotiate the harsh distinction between the political, the social and the ethical Arendt insists upon. I will outline a notion of democratic political action as practices of resistance, critique and civil disobedience. To examine these practices as constituting forms of political communities, however, raises the question, how such 'open' communities are held together. I argue that actors are not necessarily bound to each other by pre-existing shared political or cultural identities (which would *then* motivate political agency). Instead, certain *political affects* that initiate and maintain our wish to become politically active at the same time constitute a community and the formation of tentatively shared political identities. These affects are dispositions, principles and emotions that motivate and guide political action and bind us to others in specifically political ways without masking the differences between community members. This chapter then asks about the cohesiveness, permeability and durability of political communities, but also about our motivation to act politically.

The political and the possibility of communities in the absence of foundations

Even though there is no necessary connection between 'weak ontological' notions of selfhood and any particular form of political organisation, I argue that acknowledging the contingency of the self can be closely related to a fuller appreciation of democratic practices. The symbolic arrangement of democracy is founded on the institutional

recognition of the impossibility of finding a final justification or ground for the way a society is organised politically. This lines up well with ontological notions of the self that assert the contingency of identity. While no society or political regime is actually built upon firm foundations (at least if we dismiss doctrines of divine rights or the necessity of history), only democracy inherently accepts and recognises this condition. This acceptance, in return, furthers a democratic ethics of self-estrangement, where we are not forced to self-identity.[1] The link between contingency and democracy has been expressed cogently in recent discussion about the notion of the political. For the purpose of my overall argument in this chapter I concentrate on an 'Arendtian' or agonistic notion of the political.[2] Such a model stresses an understanding of an egalitarian political community that is not concerned with establishing hegemonic ideological notions.[3] While Arendt herself has not separated different versions of the notion of the political which have developed in her oeuvre, for the sake of clarity I will here distinguish between two strands of defining the political in her work.

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1 Marchart, 2010, p.30

2 While Arendt is an important reference point for these debates, she did not develop a systematic differentiation between the concept of the political and 'politics'. To approach Arendt from the perspective of debates on the 'political difference' might therefore create terminological confusion. What I understand as 'the political' in Arendt's texts, she at times calls 'the political' or 'public sphere', but also 'politics' or the 'polis'. In the following discussion, however, 'politics' might best be understood as the form of political organisation that corresponds to the Arendtian concept of the social sphere. It would then designate a bureaucratic system, concerned primarily with tasks of 'housekeeping' or policing within a mass-society. Here, the freedom of the political is lost. It would nevertheless be misleading to use the Arendtian 'social' and the post-foundational 'politics' as interchangeable terms. The social for Arendt expresses a sphere marked by the perpetual processes of labour and the collapse of the private – public distinction. It is a sphere of inauthenticity or decline. As we will see below, however, this Arendtian understanding of the social needs to be reformulated in order to fit current societal structures. Moreover, this thoroughly negative connotation of the social in Arendt makes it impossible to highlight the constitutive aspect of sociality that is expressed in Butler's and Cavell's approaches. I thus prefer to use the term 'politics' as this makes it possible to understand 'social' in a way that catches the constituting and normative role sociality plays for the notion of the non-sovereign self. Apart from the problem of naming, we also have to be aware that the notion of 'the political' or the public sphere is not static in Arendt's endeavour. As I wish to show, there are at least two related, but nevertheless distinct, ways in which Arendt imagines the political sphere. While in the first instance, she stresses the role of the political as a regulative ideal, which cannot be brought into practice, in the second instance she seeks to develop a notion of the political by examining concrete examples of revolutionary actions in modern Europe.

3 For a fuller discussion of the various definitions of the political and political difference (*Politische Differenz)* see for example Marchart 2010, p.35

In current discussion, the notion of 'the political' is distinguished from 'politics' in a way that corresponds to the Heideggerian distinction between the ontological and the ontic. 'The political' would then denote the 'essence' of political action, its ground, or nature (while, of course, keeping in mind the contingency of these terms). By contrast, 'politics' is the everyday manifestation of political practices in existing states. The ontic level is thus concerned with the various practices of politics in a conventional sense, that is, for example, with party politics, elections or the passing of a particular law – in short, with the ways a particular society is organised politically. This distinction, however, ascribes to the political the role of a transcendental ground for political thinking and action. Here the presumed contingency of this ground is in danger of receding into the background. The political appears as the pure or exceptional, an idea on which concrete political interventions and institutions are based, even though they can never embody it fully.[4] Differently put, the ontic could never become congruent with the ontological. It must remain a part or variation, the difference cannot be collapsed. In this interpretation, the political is restricted to the role of a constitutive dynamic or a normative ideal against which the current state of political institutions is measured and must always come up lacking. Generally then, politics would fail to embody its underlying political nature or reason of existence. This definition echoes the Arendtian discussion of the Greek *polis*, which she presents at times as the unrecoverable model of an idealised sphere of freedom. Importantly, in Arendt's formulation, freedom - the deeper meaning or essence of the political - can only appear if the necessities of administration, economical decision-making or 'housekeeping,' which mark the business of actual politics, are excluded from the political sphere.[5] Moreover, the political sphere is self-grounding and can thus not find

4 See for example Andreas Hetzel, 2010, p.237
5 See also Thomas Bedorf, 2010, p.16-7

a reason for existence in anything outside itself. The experience of freedom only appears from the in-between - the space between the singular political agents who come together to act in concert. While the political allows for a reappreciation of action as a free activity unbound be pre-established political identities, this also means that nothing *outside* of the sphere of political action can play a role for the actor. While the notion of freedom as constitutive for the political brings the Arendtian notion close to Derrida's concept of 'democracy to come' or Cavell's understanding of a perfectionist community, it differs from the latter two in an important respect. For Cavell and Derrida the content of the political remains open and capable of ongoing re-articulation. The meaning of democracy, and the question of how a more just society would look like, cannot be defined *a priory.* In Arendt's formulation, however, the open or free character of the political is limited. Her reference to an idealised and somewhat mystical example of the Greek *polis* offers a concrete definition of the 'perfect' political. While her notion of the *polis* as an example of the political sphere does not define what the political is by a set of rules, it still limits how a future, just political sphere could be imagined. While using the Greek *polis* as the exemplary ideal of the political community avoids a teleological notion of history, we might argue that it introduces an equally problematic nostalgia for an always already lost heroic past. The reference to a historic ideal, which cannot be relived under current conditions, leaves us in a state of fallenness and protrudes an air of irrevocable decline. Actual nowadays politics appear removed from authentic human existence, strangely 'essence-less,' and hopeless.

It is only when turning to a slightly differing concept of the political as a *modern* event, which Arendt offers in her writings after *The Human Condition*, that we can understand the political as an actual possibility of societal organisation. In her discussion of modern

examples of the political, Arendt maintains that freedom is the ultimate goal of political action. While in the prior formulation, however, the Greeks were concerned with the problems of founding a *durable* public sphere, which would be congruent with a (city-)state, she now develops a more fleeting, but also more flexible, understanding of the *experience* of the political. In modern nation-states, Arendt seems to imply, stability and political freedom have proven to be incommensurable in the long run. The experience of freedom nevertheless survives in the form of singular *events*. These events appear like unexpected 'islands' in the stream of time. The history of political thought tells us nothing about these events of freedom, Arendt argues. Because there is no tradition one could build on, public freedom is experienced in the unexpected emergence of new political communities, which, decisively for my further argument, are not congruent with (nation-)states. That the political sphere is separable from the state is one reason why the need for durability and the founding of a political tradition can recede into the background. In a world where nation-states are still the dominant form of political organisation, the experience of the political instead comes to pass in acts of open and clandestine rebellion. Political freedom is discovered, surprisingly, despite and in opposition to oppressive state institutions. Turning to the political as a modern revolutionary practice, however, Arendt retains to some extent the static notion of the idealised notion of a self-grounding political sphere. Before we can consider how her notion of political practice is incisive for current forms of political communities, it is thus necessary to address the problems this creates.

For Arendt, the 20th century has offered moments of political freedom mainly in times of political crisis, where the order of institutionalised politics was disrupted, and an opening appeared in which unexpected political acts could take place. She thus speaks of the

French Resistance during World War II as a prime example of the unexpected and unplanned nature of the appearance of the political. There are several remarkable claims Arendt makes regarding the Resistance, which exemplify the originality but also some of the problems with her approach to the political. For Arendt, it is of utter importance that the members of the Resistance neither *expected* what would happen, nor, prior to the collapse of the French government, had a 'conscious *inclination*' to become political actors. Instead, they were "sucked into politics as though with the force of a vacuum."[6] In the short time during the war, however, they experienced that what they "originally had thought to be a 'burden'" turned out to be a *revelation*. As members of the Resistance, they knew *who* they were, and they experienced 'the world of reality'. After the war they were thrown back into the 'sad opaqueness' of private life or 'normal' politics where 'the empty strife' between the conflicting ideologies, which had lain dormant between the members of the Resistance, resurfaced.[7] Importantly, in her endeavour to maintain the independence of the public sphere, Arendt tries to downplay the role of the common enemy in unifying resistance fighters and other revolutionaries. While a Schmittian, or for that matter a Freudian, approach to the political would highlight the shared antagonism towards the other that unifies a group of people, Arendt seeks to understand the emergence of community as something which does not rely on a reference to its outside. Instead, unity is inherent to the experience of the political; it emerges from the creation of a common world through action. For Arendt, this exceptional, unexpected experience of shared political identity is brought about by *apparition of freedom* itself. Freedom showed itself when "without knowing or even noticing it," they had created a "public space between themselves."[8] What is remarkable in her account (and we might doubt that it necessarily mirrors the experiences and intentions of all members of the French

6 Hannah Arendt, 1961, p.3
7 Ibid, p.4
8 Ibid, p.4

Resistance), is that the public sphere and its organisation appears as something that *comes to us* almost without our impetus, as if by natural force. With the self- and world-disclosing capacities of action in public we are thus reminded of Arendt's insistence on the connection between authentic existence and political freedom. The political, as the actual or true form of human existence, then appears like a force that resurfaces when conditions are favourable - independent of individual agency. It therefore appears as if humans would just follow a 'natural' disposition to act politically, if the opportunity presents itself. In a circular argument, individuals bind themselves together in a political community *because* of the binding property of this community itself. To come into existence, the political thus relies on something which only appears within itself. While the self-creating and self-perpetuating quality of the public sphere might be hard to grasp, it fulfils important functions for Arendt's thought. It enables her to rescue revolutionary practice from the ideologically saturated party politics of the 20th century. By denying the importance of the social environment for the motivation to become a political actor, the open-ended character of the political sphere, the possibility of a new beginning, is saved. Moreover, the political community itself creates equality between the actors, who, as if stunned by the experience of public freedom, forget about their private, social and ideological differences. While the critique of identity-politics this entails is important for the purpose of this chapter, arguing that we could just leave our personal history behind remains problematic. However, Arendt's formulation makes it possible to understand political communities not in the forms of unified, homogeneous entities (the nation-state, or 'the working-class') but as a network of unique people, who by acting together create spaces between them in which freedom can appear. Importantly, political action is here not understood as a movement striving for consolidation but an interruption of the established order enabling change or continual development.

Arendt's assertion that the political "appears abruptly, unexpectedly, and disappears again, under different mysterious conditions, as though it were a fata morgana", however, seems to harbour similar problems as the Marxist idea of the historical inevitability of revolution she explicitly rejects. In both notions the intentions of individual political actors in bringing about and maintaining the moment of the political under concrete historical conditions are downplayed. If the sphere of freedom has to appear unexpectedly, we might ask about the importance of individual motivations, inclinations and actions under the conditions of 'normal' politics.[9] In contrast to the Marxist tradition, where one can at least aid along the unavoidable development of history, here the individual is left with a situation where she cannot even wait for the eventually inevitable appearance of the revolutionary situation. Arendt stresses that the experience of revolutionary political freedom is lost for humanity's shared memory or political thinking because it has not been inscribed in 'our' (western) tradition. On the one hand this is the condition of possibility for the spontaneity and newness of the political event, and thus the freedom of the political. On the other hand, however, it creates a feeling of unreality, where, left in the sphere of bureaucratic party politics and mass-society, people cannot imagine the possibility of something 'more'. Even the participants of the political sphere could hardly recall their extraordinary experience – a notion that diminishes the possibility of hope for the future and our ability to develop every-day forms of resistance and critique. It seems that we could neither draw on the experiences of others nor actively bring about conditions favourable for the appearance of public freedom. As Arendt notes herself, the tragedy is not that "the small hidden islands of freedom ... were doomed," but that "there was no mind to inherit and to question, to think about and to remember" and tell the story

[9] Arendt, 1961, p.5

of freedom.[10] Arendt's implicit allusion to that acting politically is the 'ontological truth' and thus 'natural' to the human reminds us of the problematic view that the individual could only live up to her true human potential when she acts as member of the political sphere. In their inauthentic, social condition, however, humans seem unable to even imagine, let alone create, political freedom. Arendt thus appears stuck in the picture of fallenness, where the extraordinary moment of authenticity seems to be removed even from our political imagination. Moreover, Arendt's story of the French Resistance appears strangely 'worldless' removed from its historical background. Because she ascribes so much space to the independence of the political sphere and its self-grounding character, its contingency upon the concrete historical situation, both in the wider political and the more narrow personal sense, is overlooked. Of course, the French Resistance was founded as a reaction to an *external* enemy, and, equally obviously, the personal histories and convictions of each member must have played a role in their motivation to join the Resistance in spite of overwhelming danger. Downplaying these *external* motivational forces by banning them into the realms of the un-political, however, makes it hard to understand practices of critique as necessary for the creation of political agency. The decisive shortcoming of both, the 'Greek' and the 'revolutionary' models of the political Arendt offers is thus that they remain removed from social and historical context. She has neither much to say about how we move from an unfree 'social' or 'private' towards a 'free' political sphere, nor does she explain convincingly how equality between political actors just 'appears'. This makes her inattentive to ongoing psychological and social structures of inequality that members of 'revolutionary' social movements need to confront. Despite these shortcomings, however, the examples of the revolutionary public Arendt discusses offer a more inclusive model than institutionalised representative democratic regimes, where a distinction between political elites and relatively passive citizens is made.

[10] Ibid, p.6

Arendt's insistence on participatory political action enables us to go beyond her own exposition and question existing exclusions from, and power relations within, current forms of representative democratic regimes. Instead of waiting for the political to appear, we can take Arendt's discussion of council-democracies as an inspiration that informs current forms of political organisations, which aim to offer an alternative to established forms of institutionalised politics. For Arendt the 'spontaneous' form of organisation of the political sphere is exemplified by *Räte* or councils. This form of direct or radical democracy, again, in her mind, is not handed down to us by any tradition, but develops spontaneously out of revolutionary action.[11] Arendt maintains that councils emerged in almost every revolution or revolutionary movement.[12] She highlights not only the spontaneity or 'naturalness' of their founding, but also their striving for a direct, far-reaching and uninhibited participation of individuals in public life.[13] Moreover, councils are defined by their connection to a certain oppressed social class (a curious concession on Arendt's part, who is so careful to separate the political from economic or social considerations).[14] The decisive advantage she sees in the council system is that it allows the circumvention of party-politics, and thus seems to neutralize ideologically driven factionalism.[15] Councils are a more egalitarian form of democratic organisation, because

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[11] Again we might have reason to doubt the historical accuracy of Arendt's assertion in this point. There indeed seems to exist a history of thought and practice that builds on the prior experiences of council-republics and other non-state forms of direct government. These serve current political movements as examples upon which new forms of direct democratic decision-making have been based and further developed. Arendt might be right, however, that the experience of the councils has been largely overlooked by mainstream politics and political theory.

[12] Arendt maintains that since 1789 in every revolution spontaneous councils emerged, without any of the participants knowing that such councils had existed previously. She names Paris in 1870, and 1871, Russia during the spontaneous and not party-led strikes in 1905 and during the first apprising during World War I, and during the February revolution of 1917, as well as Germany in 1918-9 and Hungary in 1956 as examples. See Arendt, 1963, pp.264-276

[13] *möglichst unmittelbaren, weitgehenden und unbeschränkten Teilnahme des Einzelnen am öffentlichen Leben* (Arendt quoting in ftn 80,p.324 from Anweiler Oskar "Die Rate in der ungarischen Revolution in "Osteuropa" Bd.8, 1958).

[14] Arendt, 1965, p.338 (I am referring to the German version of *On Revolution*, which in some respects differs from the earlier English publication)

[15] Ibid, p.339

they are not based on a chasm between party-experts and ordinary people or even ordinary party-members. The inclinations and abilities of singular citizens to act and to judge for themselves can find their expression in the councils.[16] Arendt offers the uprising in Hungary in 1956 as an example for the way people who associated socially on an everyday basis, like neighbours, students, artists or co-workers spontaneously organised into political communities by founding councils. While this characterisation lends itself to comparison with forms of organisation we find within the so-called 'new social movements' which have developed since the late 1960s, there remains a decisive difference: for Arendt, councils are revolutionary also in so far as they have an inherent drive to replace the existing state apparatus.[17] This is not necessarily the case of 'new social movements' who often do not aim to take over state-power, but strive for the recognition of 'minority' rights. Arendt remarks how surprisingly short time it took for the Hungarian 'neighbourhood' councils to build, 'as if by natural inclination,' higher organs that coordinated their actions, and allowed for the formation of regional- and provincial organisations and state-wide systems of representation and organisation.[18] In Arendt's mind they did so without discussing on a theoretical level how a large-scale republican state could be established. Moreover, again she maintains that their strife towards state-building also happened in absence of the unifying pressure of a common external enemy.[19] For her the history of councils is unified by the spontaneous will to found a new

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16 Ibid, p.340 she quotes from Paul Frohlich, *Rosa Luxemburg,* 1949

17 A particular salient example might be the feminist consciousness raising groups Adriana Cavarero refers to. While these groups are based on egalitarian principles, the members do not share a homogenous identity based on their gender - they are not 'the same.' Instead they learn from each others' experiences and provide each other with constructive feedback – a clearer view of oneself. Cavarero envisions a public sphere in the Arendtian sense, where each actor appears as equal but distinct, driven by a shared interest in a common political goal. In consciousness rising groups what is sought is "to deconstruct a point of view on the world, which claims to be neutral, but in reality conforms largely to masculine desires and needs … to learn to narrate themselves as women means in fact to legitimate for themselves a definition which is outside the gaze of the other" Cavarero, 2000, p.60

18 Ibid, p.343

19 As already remarked above I find this, and with it the clear distinction between a 'Schmittian' and 'Arendtian' notion of the political highly dubious for political practice. In my view, Arendt mainly insists on the absence of the enemy in order to maintain the ideal of a free public sphere. She thus

political body, a new type of republican state based on 'council-republics' in a way that the central power would not usurp the particular, original and constitutive power of the constituting parts. This aspiration, however, has so far always failed.[20] Nevertheless, for Arendt the councils remain the first and only actual revolutionary hope for the European peoples, and, as she adds, maybe in future for the entire world-population. As a new form of political organisation, councils would allow everyone to take part in current public affairs, even under the aversive conditions of mass-society.

By returning to the notion that any form of political organisation would inherently strive towards consolidation and state-building I believe that Arendt covers over some of the most incisive insights about the political her discussion offers. However, while this inherent drive to take over state-functions is not on the forefront of the forms of political community I wish to forward, we might still appreciate the Arendtian move to imagine a wider network of alternative political organisations that circumvent established state- and party-hierarchies. Even though she is not attentive enough to the way our social and psychological positions continue to structure our behaviours as political actors, it is important that Arendt allows us to understand that political communities are created not by pre-established social identities but by acting in concert. Here each member of the political sphere is at the same time equal, in her ability to take part in political action, and distinct, in the way that she shows herself as a unique personality. This understanding of the political as the cooperation of unique beings allows for the possibility of creative change, a change that can be taken as a recurrent attempt to disrupt the order of institutionalised politics. Before returning to the notion of the political in terms of current

disregards the more complicated historical situations within which councils emerged. As she herself has conceded councils were usually part of a public uprising, that necessarily directed *against something* and were, as in the case of Hungary, also quickly suppressed by this shared external enemy. To argue that their forms of organisation were not in any way influenced by this 'enemy' thus appears highly doubtful.

[20] Ibid, p.341

political activism, however, I wish to show how Arendt's discussion helps us to criticise the exclusionary tendencies inherent in the concept of 'politics' (in difference to 'the political') even in democratically organised nation-states.

The critique of the nation-state and the role of migration

Even if nation-states would predominantly take the form of representative democracies, they are a necessarily exclusionary form of political organisation. As we have seen, representative forms of democratic governments necessarily restrict the participation of ordinary citizens in the everyday political process. Moreover, nation-states rely on the category of citizenship, which is as such exclusionary, because rights to enter or stay in state-territories and take part in public political life are bound to conditions such as place of birth or parentage. In the following, I wish to show how Arendt's reflections on the nation-state can help illuminate the history of this second form of exclusion. This serves as a backdrop to discuss the situation of contemporary migrants, within and at the borders of western liberal nation-states. In this context, Arendt's notion of the political enables us to imagine an alternative to established politics, which assumes responsibility for those excluded from current western concepts of citizenship.

Arendt's discussion of statelessness, human rights and the refugee problem in the first half of the 20th century prefigures in many ways current critiques of the state. She argues that the nation-state as a form of political community necessarily produces an 'outside' in the form of others, who live within the state-territory without being citizens. Non-citizens are vulnerable to being expelled from, or denied access to state-territory. Those who are

denied citizenship are left without protection.[21] For Arendt, the refusal of responsibility for refugees and minorities by the European nation-states prior to World War II was the inevitable consequence of the conflation of nationalism and statehood. This produced a stateless population, which was acutely vulnerable to exploitation and violence. Moreover, Arendt's analysis establishes an intrinsic link between the genealogy of the modern nation-state, imperialism, the sudden increase in stateless populations after World War I, and the rise of fascism.[22] Arendt stresses that the rule of law, which applies to all people equally, increasingly became subordinated to the will of the nation, which restricted the rights of those regarded as 'non-national' others. In addition, the stateless population became a problem which needed to be managed and controlled via the extension and refinement of bio-political techniques of government.[23] In the course of these processes, those deprived of citizenship lost their status as fully human. Once they were deprived of citizens' rights, they remained rightless - “the scum of the earth.” This picture of their inhumanness, conversely served as a justification for policies of denationalisation.[24]

Today, the problem of inner-European statelessness Arendt discusses in the 1950s has largely been replaced by discourses of 'illegal' migration, as a movement from economically less developed or politically unstable world regions into the economic centres of western liberal states. Her critique of the ways nation-states distinguish

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21 For a more detailed discussion see for example Butler, 2012, pp. 141 -149

22 From the perspective of today, we might add that colonial expansion set in motion social and political processes which still, in the course of post-colonial wars and persisting economic hardship, influence patterns of migration from former colonies towards Europe.

23 Obviously Arendt did not employ the term 'bio-politics' which was coined by Foucault several years after her writing. What she describes, however, presupposes the extension of statistical acquisition and census of populations which produces a form of knowledge that allows the 'manipulation,' and 'purification' of the nation. The term bio-politics also highlights the connection between population control and notions of productivity, which have played an important role in discourses of migration control and the 'nationalisation' of populations (see for example Michel Foucault, 2008, 2009).

24 Butler, 2012, p.143-4, Arendt, 1966, p.267

between citizens and non-citizens and the implications of this distinction, however, remains often surprisingly relevant. The connection between capitalist expansion and the nation-state which Arendt discusses in the history of imperialism continues to be an important point of orientation. Moreover, the inter-war doctrine, "that only nationals could be citizens, only people of the same national origin could enjoy the full protection of legal institutions" and that "persons of different nationality needed some law of exception until or unless they were completely assimilated and divorced from their origin," still echoes in current legal and social discourses of belonging, nationality and citizenship.[25] The notion of national sovereignty remains the founding figure of immigration law, where a system of rights and exclusions is linked to a complicated scale of legal regulations which structure the space between the state-less and the citizen. It still remains the largely unchallenged prerogative of states (or, as in the case of the EU, of supra-state and private organisations that answers to the common interest of a conglomeration of nation-states with a common economic interest), to control their borders and to restrict immigration in the name of maintaining sovereignty over their territories.[26] Moreover, the internment camp Arendt denounces, has indeed remained "the routine solution for the problem of domicile of the 'displaced persons.'" since World War II. [27]

[25] Arendt, 1966, p.275, in the case of Europe questions of national belonging and citizenship have developed in the light of the work-migration programmes of the 1950s to 1970s, but also the 'asylum crises' since the 1990s and the process of EU-expansion. See for example Karakayali, 2008

[26] Borders have never been completely controllable, and states will also in future not be able to control completely the movement of migrants. What might be new, however, is a double-standard, where EU states aim to defend their territorial sovereignty by expanding border controls and regulation beyond their actual state-territory through a system of 'third-countries' and the control of the Mediterranean Sea by the Frontex border agency and the incorporation of private transport companies in the mechanisms of migration control. (See for example Hess and Kasparek, 2010.) However, we might note, that the European nation-state as a construct has always relied on imperial relationships to other countries that have included the expansion of its economic influence, but also of its territory beyond 'national' borders, in order to secure a notion of sovereignty of the 'core' country.

[27] Arendt, 1966, p.279, about the relevance of the camp for current policies of migration within the EU see for example Pieper, 2010 pp. 219-228
Arendt states that even "the terminology has deteriorated." In her argumentation, the term "stateless" had "at least acknowledged the fact that these persons had lost the protection of their government and required international agreements for safeguarding their legal status." By contrast, the "post-war term 'displaced persons' was invented during the war for the express purpose of liquidating statelessness

To call for a right to migration and for the protection of migrants' political and social rights, then, fundamentally challenges the equation of home, belonging, sovereignty and nation. An ethics of unconditional hospitality, like we discussed in chapter four, cannot be thought within the boundaries of current political discourses, as Derrida rightly pointed out. If we take hospitality seriously as a political concept, this disputes the discourse of limited hospitality and exclusion the current international state-system presupposes. An ethics that calls the ontological grounding of belonging and sovereignty into question therefore needs to entail a critical stance towards the notion of the nation-state. Such a position highlights the contingency of the constitution of the state and its external borders. If we take into account the historical and ontological difficulties we encounter in discourses of 'home' and 'belonging', we cannot maintain a unilateral prerogative to control access to territory and citizenship by setting standards of territorial, biological or economic prerequisites. In short, to take an ethics of responsibility towards others as linked to a political demand entails the need to question the sovereignty of the nation-

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once and for all by ignoring its existence." As Arendt points out "[n]onrecognition of statelessness always means repatriation, i.e., deportation to a country of origin, which either refuses to recognize the prospective repatriate as a citizen, or, on the contrary, urgently wants him back for punishment."Arendt, 1966, p.279. We might add that current debates routinely speak of 'illegal immigration' which further assumes the necessity of repatriation. In particular, we should be wary of a rhetoric that seeks to delineate so called legitimate asylum seekers (who turn out to be virtually none, in particular as it would not be possible for most to enter the EU legally) from so called illegitimate economic migrants. As Serhart Karakayali shows in his empirical study on 'illegal' migration in Germany, the reasons for migration could never be fit neatly into the categories states have offered (Karakayali, 2008, p.16). A No Borders network manifesto notes: "People move for many different reasons. Many of the causes of global migration can be traced back to the West's imperial and capitalist ventures: western-manufactured weapons and armed conflicts, wars of aggression in pursuit of oil and other natural resources, repressive regimes backed by Western governments, climate change and land grabs, and so on. But this is not the whole story. We shouldn't overemphasise the role of western powers and fall into the trap of seeing people who migrate as helpless victims. People have always travelled in search of better living conditions, or simply to pursue their dreams and desires." (http://noborders.org.uk/node/47) To appeal to a general notion of freedom of movement recognises the problematic conception of ownership and belonging I have noted in chapter four. What we should recognise in discourses about the undeserving 'economic' migrant is a non-reflective notion of entitlement to the riches of the world. A prosperity that, we might add, is based on the inproportional distribution of economic and political power, which has its roots in the history of European colonial expansion.

state.[28] Indeed, a politics that does not make references to unconditional hospitality loses its reference to justice, because it would be unable to take the other into account.[29] Establishing a connection between ethical injunction and political demand draws a parallel between the notion of the non-sovereign self and the notion of the non-sovereign political community. Just as the non-sovereign self recognises its constitutive relationship to the other, where an ethical injunction is formulated, such a community would recognise that it is overlapping with other communities. This de-constitutes or deconstructs the assumed homogeneity or boundedness of the nation-state. Instead, its intrinsic permeability is highlighted, where political demands of those outside of the political community need to be heard.

While the notion of responsibility for the other calls for a critique of the sovereign nation-state, there is, however, another side to this argument. As Arendt noted, the 20th century has shown that so far the state, as the focus point of a modern notion of codified law, has remained the only feasible guarantor for the protection of human rights.[30] For Arendt, the power of totalitarian denationalisation could not be countered by a doctrine of human rights, which turned out to be unenforceable in the absence of the state. She thus finds most international accords that uphold the rights of refugees and the general protection of human rights to be useless. Because the state gives preference to citizenship-rights against the more general notion of human rights of non-citizens, the only available route to security remains citizenship. An ambivalent position towards the state thus comes to the fore. On the one hand we have to acknowledge that the notion of state-sovereignty as such produces exclusions. On the other hand the state remains the only power to which

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[28] see e.g. Derrida, 2002, p. 100

[29] See Derrida, 2005

[30] See here also Arendt, 1972 – in the essay on civil disobedience Arendt argues not only that law is the necessary durable structure of society, whose stability enables change within its parameters, but also that the idea of law is territorially bound

we can currently address our demands for inclusion. Only within a system of states do we have a developed system of codified rights. The state remains the only entity one could address, which is contractually bound to uphold those rights by executive force. Thus the formulation of demands in terms of rights presupposes a state-system. Demands for migrants' rights - and a general right to autonomous migration – then questions the claim to territorial and legal sovereignty of nation-states, or supranational organisations such as the EU, while at the same time calling upon these entities to honour their roles of guarantors of minimal human rights provisions. This highlights the paradox status the liberal state inhabits. On the international level, it plays the role of a protector of human rights against powers that traverse or are external to its territory. At the same time it inhabits the role of self-interested sovereign, who, in the name of its exclusively defined population, necessarily limits its commitment to non-members. Therefore, any demand addressed to the state to protect migrants must acknowledge that the state inherently limits its responsibility towards non-citizens. This makes a three-tiered strategy necessary. The first two tiers formulate demands towards the state to honour its international obligations and humanitarian commitments. First, the state is asked to fulfil its humanitarian obligations, such as granting the right to asylum and refuge, second, the state is called upon to open easier paths to full citizenship for those non-citizens who live permanently in its territory. The third tier, however, maintains the critical position towards the figure of state-sovereignty. To translate this tension back into the framework introduced at the beginning of the chapter, while the first two tiers address the level of politics (that is the level of existing institutions), the third constitutes a necessary meta-critique on the level of the political (where the ontological position of the sovereign state is called into question). It would be unproductive to concentrate exclusively on the level of the political, maintaining that the only thing that could be done to alleviate the situation

of migrants under current conditions is the abolishment of the nation-state system. At the same time, an approach that concentrates only on the level of influencing state-politics and forwarding a discourse of legal obligations would remain restricted and unable to formulate the underlying and irresolvable tension that marks the relationship between a call for the autonomy of migration within the existing state-system. The connection of both levels of analysis makes it possible to call for political activism that does not endorse the state, but understands the role of the state as an important arbiter to whom demands for rights of refugees need to be addressed. In this way, the state is rendered problematic and new connections between institutionalised politics and autonomous political practice can be established.

Since Arendt wrote on statelessness, however, the global economic and political situation has changed. To account for these changes it is helpful to draw on debates around the notion of precarity, introduced in the previous chapter. In a form that departs decisively from Arendt's understanding of the social, the idea of 'precarity' highlights the interrelation between forms of government, systems of economy and labour, and the formation of subjectivity. Moreover, the notion of precarity allows us to establish how questions of migrant's rights might be intewoven with wider socio-political developments and political activism.

The state, precarity and civil disobedience

The problematisation of the state can be expanded fruitfully by referring to debates on precarity and governmentality. My reading of Butler in the previous chapter has introduced a connection between ethics and political analysis by concentrating on the

connection between precariousness and precarity. I turn now to Isabell Lorey's work which builds on this distinction and integrates an economic dimension. By reconsidering the role of precarity for our understanding of political community I thus seek to complicate Arendt's separation of the political sphere from social or economic issues. Instead of arguing that political freedom can only exist in the absence of the social, I argue that it is *from* an analysis of social issues that a new appreciation of political action and freedom could be developed. Turning to Lorey's Foucaultian discussion of governmentality, I expand upon the Arendtian critique of modernity, where the social is understood as the encroachment of economic concerns into all aspects of life. At the same time, however, this analysis goes beyond Arendt by showing how the interconnection of economic and political logics does not lead to a hegemonic 'social' that would paralyse political action. Instead, it is at the fault-lines of counteracting tendencies of social, political and economic discourses that new forms of free political action can be developed.

Lorey offers a genealogical perspective that highlights how closely notions of precarity and *securisation* are connected to the history and theory of the state. By introducing securisation, which designates the governmental technique of perpetually producing new measures of security, as the counterpart to precarity, the role of the state as protector of its population is highlighted. In their own terms, both the Hobbesian Leviathan and the modern welfare-state are defined by this purpose. The Hobbesian sovereign secures the citizen against the destruction of property and life by dangerous others we encounter in the state of nature. In the 20th century, the *social* or welfare-state, in addition, has aimed to protect its citizens against those insecurities inherent in the capitalist economic system and in the very precariousness of embodied human existence.[31] That is, the state protects

[31] the German term *Sozialstaat* connotes a stronger and more caring function as the English translation

not only against foreign attacks and criminals, but also weaves a safety-net for the unemployed, and those too sick, too young or too old to support themselves economically. Discourses of danger and securisation, however, should not be understood as aimed towards an eventual absolute freedom from precarity. Instead, the perception of the state as source of security relies on the ongoing production of new forms of insecurity and endangerment. In this process notions of 'others' are cultivated, where the other either appears as a potential threat (the criminal, the terrorist) and/or as the one who needs to remain excluded from systems of care and protection (the anti-social freeloader, the economic migrant). The promise of security thus entails the fear of the dangerous and precarious other. This discourse, moreover, protrudes a disciplinary power, where we seek to avoid becoming 'othered' ourselves by fulfilling social norms. Fear of precarisation and the perceived need for protection thus become important aspects of the subjection of citizens, where a bond between the individual, the state, and society is established.[32]

The interplay between processes of securisation and precarisation provide at the same time a justification for the necessary incompleteness of sovereignty *and* the rationale for the ongoing efforts to establish sovereignty. By adding an economic or labour-related aspect to the notion of precarity Lorey highlights how state, society, culture, the economic sector and practices of self-formation are interwoven. In this cohesive framework methods of governmentality can no longer be understood purely in terms of laws and their enforcement by state-organs.[33] Instead, as Arendt noted, the modern start relies on developing a large-scale bureaucratic apparatus. Moreover, as Foucault's understanding of

welfare-state allows for – a difference that in practice is mirrored by the different dimensions of welfare provisions and understandings of relationship between citizens and state in Anglo-American and the Western and Northern European states

32 Lorey, 2012, p.24

33 A concentration on the economic or labour aspect of precarity has been prevalent in the German-speaking discussion on the move towards neo-liberalism and post-fordism in the past decades (*das Prekäre* und *das Prekariat – a term that reminds us of the Proletariat, the Marxist workers)*.

the intersection of knowledge and power makes clear, governmentality relies on the production of knowledge about the population's behaviour, where new discourses of health, hygiene and sexuality become part of a 'societal' style of government. This production of knowledge, however, also entailed creating various notions of social threat or otherness. The increasing economic security of parts of the population in the history of the western welfare-state has relied not only on the unpaid work of women in the private realm, but also on the precarisation of those who have dropped out of the compromise between capital and labour. Historically, these were not only the 'abnormal' and poor within the western nation-states; the system was also built on an extreme exploitation of labour and resources of colonial territories.[34] Therefore governmentality is linked closely to normative frameworks that structure our understanding of gender, sexuality and ethnicity. Economic stratification is an important aspect of a governmental dynamics, where precariousness is controlled and stratified by framing categories of dangerous, undeserving, and foreign others. The formation of the nation-state as welfare-state is thus linked closely to a definition of the subject as part of a homogeneous population where exclusions are established along racial, ethnic, class, and gender lines. It is in this context that we can understand the migrant as one form of socially produced threat the state and society at the same time depend upon as they undertake to avert it.

This notion of precarity, however, has been redefined to some extent by debates about neo-liberal forms of governing and working. Lorey describes neo-liberalism as a form of governmentality that includes the subject in increasingly dynamic processes of precarisation and securisation. With the 'withering-away' of the welfare function of the state precarity has reached the 'core' population. As the activists of the Fressanito network define it, precarity refers “to living and working conditions without any guarantees.” In

[34] Ibid, p. 54

the context of labour precarity thus includes “all possible shapes of unsure, not guaranteed, flexible exploitation: from illegalized, seasonal and temporary employment to homework, flex- and temp-work to subcontractors, freelancers or so called self employed persons.”[35] While previously forms of precarious employment have been restricted largely to the global south or the 'fringes' of western societies, today the delineation from the precarious other becomes increasingly complicated. In a changing, 'post-fordist' world of work, precarity re-emerges as a part of 'normal' labour relations. While the precarity of the marginalised retains its threatening potential, precarisation increasingly becomes a mechanism of heightened control within the social mainstream. This shows itself for example in the pervasive fear within a relatively privileged and well-educated work-force of developed western countries to become redundant – a fear that produces an incentive for increased 'self-government' or 'self-exploitation'. The demands of an insecure and flexible labour-market here appear as potential forces of de-politicisation, where the growing preoccupation with self-marketing and discourses of self-responsibility cover over common political interests of labourers.[36] The growth of economic precarity, however, also transforms the role of the nation-state. Where the role of the state as provider of welfare and social provisions is increasingly minimised, it redefines itself by concentrating on discourses of security that involve its military and police functions. In this context, disciplinary techniques of control and surveillance increase in importance.[37]

While the discourse of precarity stresses how a feeling of insecurity spreads towards the centre of relatively wealthy western states, we should, however, not succumb to the

[35] Fressanito-network, 2005

[36] Lorey, 2012, p.85. Precarity, Lorey argues, is thus linked to intensified forms of governmentality, where the self seeks to secure its position within an increasingly more demanding work environment that requires the integration of private networks and social skills into the labour market. The risk and exposure which Arendt identified with the sphere of the political, here becomes part of the field of labour, where discourses of engaged workers, in particular in the service industry and 'creative' occupations, demand of the individual to present herself in all her aspects, as a 'personality'.

[37] Ibid, p.86

temptation of evoking a new time of generalised or equally shared risks. Even though we can in a certain sense speak of a 'democratisation' of precarity, those previously 'othered' are often still more vulnerable to new processes of precarisation, as we can easily see when considering the situation of undocumented migrants and asylum-seekers. The heightened perception of insecurity, both on an economic and geopolitical level, has increased the demand to secure national borders in the name of the security of the 'native' population. The accompanying 'criminalisation' of migrants and ethnically and culturally laden discourses on terrorism, further redefine those who appear as visibly 'other' as potential security threats. Even though borders can never be closed completely, new measures of border-control further restrict the autonomy of migration with the effect that the act of migrating for many becomes increasingly perilous and often deadly. Moreover, not only are precarious labour-conditions still a strong push factors for migration, when migrants reach economically stronger countries they are still disproportionally affected by the precarisation of labour.[38] Migrants and refugees thus not only suffer from often precarious residence permissions where "the residence status determines the access to the labour market or to medical care." They are also affected by a system of labour where "wage level and working conditions are connected with a distribution of tasks, which is determined by gender and ethnic roles."[39]

To understand economy, social practices, forms of government and forms of selfhood as interacting in complex ways allows for a critique of the Arendtian conceptual tripartite, where the clear-cut distinction of the private and the public is dissolved into an amorphous social. Such a critique would also call into question Arendt's over stringent separation between spheres of necessity and spheres of freedom. In difference to Lorey,

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38 Ibid p.92, In the precarisation of work then ethnic and gender roles are still interwoven in ways where female migrants do the 'traditional female care jobs' which remain insecure and badly paid.

39 Frassanito-network, 2005

for Arendt it is the sphere of the political that is marked by precariousness, because in a plural world we lack control. In the privacy of work and thought, on the other hand, a limited sense of sovereignty and thus a feeling of security remains possible. Insecurity in the form of non-sovereignty or boundlessness – the 'abyss of freedom' – thus has a positive connotation, as long as it would remain part of the political. The social is thus not understood as a heightening of precariousness, but, to the opposite, as the spread of regimentation and rule-following behaviour into previously 'free' realms. The social comes into being when the insecure and therefore free political is invaded by repetitive activity and the concerns with planning and 'housekeeping' that previously marked the private. The logic of necessity that takes over the political and thus extinguishes the possibility for freedom. In the 'post-fordist' version of precarity, therefore, the Arendtian notion of morphing of spheres is turned on its head. Here our private lives and the work world, which were previously under the control of the sovereign subject, are invaded by the 'freedom' of action and performance. In this sense, the realm of work increasingly shows characteristics previously reserved to the performative actions of political actors and artists (who for Arendt inhabit a quasi-political role).[40] This is due to the increasing demand to find creative solutions, or 'think outside the box', but also the unpredictability of today's capitalist world. Linking the Arendtian notion of the 'abyss of freedom' to Lorey's understanding of precarious work, makes it possible to understand precarity not only a threat but also a possibility to step out of the rigidity of former social and work

[40] Just like in Arendt's original position, however, the reversal also at first appears to be threatening and associated with a loss of authenticity. Work in the growing service and knowledge sectors indeed establishes an increasing need for communication, affective connectivity, the integration of work and friendship within social networks, and other forms of 'self-performantive' activities which include the personality of the worker in a more comprehensive way in the working process. These forms of publicity, however, remain 'worldless'. The virtuous self-revelation thinkers like Lorey or Paolo Virno identify with contemporary post-fordist forms of labour, are not directed towards the common but towards the 'private' interest of the perpetuation of the labour-process and thus with creating a tentative security. However, by creating a need for more flexibility and a perception of groundlessness the conditions of neo-liberal labour enable the rejection or 'exodus' from current conditions, where new forms of economic and political organisation are sought. See Lorey p.2012, p.107-110

relations. That labour is more flexible and society becomes less cohesive allows it to some people to create spaces of freedom, where communities based on an apprehension of shared precariousness can appear. In these spaces shared experiences of precarity can help create new networks of care, where the collective takes on some of the previous state-functions. When individuals are increasingly alienated from the given political and economic structures an impetus for the formation of new forms of community and the resignification of political action may be provided. In this way, the transgression of spheres and the interconnection of activities become redefined as chances for unexpected forms of political organisation to appear. Moreover, the emphasis on insecurity and securisation as an ongoing and accelerating process, demands of political activists to envision less static and durable forms of political communities and organisations. The creation of flexible political communities makes it possible to react to an increasingly fast-paced social world as well as changing forms of governmental control. Precarity could therefore be resignified as a chance for the political within the social. Instead of imagining the realm of the political and the private to morph into an undistinguishable but 'solid' or homogeneous social sphere, where the possibility for freedom is lost, we could understand the current condition as an intersection of spheres, built upon the connection between precarity and freedom.[41]

Heightened levels of precarity necessitate new forms of political action that circumvent established forms of organisation. This is particularly salient for understanding the political and social networks of solidarity with migrants, who live in situations of

[41] Arendt noted that the capacity for action, to create something new that we cannot control, can leave the political realm. This, she argued, is deeply problematic. “Modern natural science and technology, which no longer observe or take material from or imitate processes of nature but seem actually to act into it, seem … to have carried irreversibility and human unpredictability into the natural realm, where no remedy can be found to undo what has been done. … Nothing seems more manifest in these attempts than the greatness of human power, whose source lies in the capacity to act, and which without action's inherent remedies inevitably begins to overpower and destroy not man himself but the conditions under which life was given to him.” Arendt, 1998, p.238

heightened precarity.[42] As members of the 'No Borders network' describe it in an online-manifesto, political action becomes reinscribed as the attempt “to create strong networks to support free movement across Europe's borders.” They aim to establish an “infrastructure of a growing movement of resistance: contacts, information, resources, meeting points, public drop-ins, safe houses, and so on” which would help to provide at least a minimum level of security to those who live with precarity, while at the same time recognising migration as a social force within an increasingly flexible and unpredictable social and political world.[43] The political sphere becomes reimagined as “a pool of formal and informal connections, a web of solidarity, working on both public and clandestine levels.” Their approach to political action highlights that precariousness is a condition that is shared by activists and migrants. They acknowledge, however, that precarity is politically and socially stratified. They stress that growing precarity of both the activists and migrants gives new importance to the DIY approach that has developed in the anarchist subculture of the past decades. Here forms of organisation such as “social centres, activist kitchens, independent media, housing and workers’ co-operatives,” or “secure communication networks” become important resources for migrants and activist. The provision of basic services to those excluded thus becomes a political act of resistance. As the manifesto states “as the safety blanket of European welfare systems is pulled away, more and more of us will have to find new ways to do things ourselves. All our know-how on the streets, at the barricades, in practical support and mobility, will become precious. The point is to make our skills and resources part of wider movements of resistance.”[44] What is highlighted in particular is the importance of social and personal networks as an answer to precarity and exclusion. As they explain “[p]eople manage to

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42 See for example the No-Borders network: http://noborders.org.uk/node/47, http://www.noborder.org/about.php (accessed on the 13.04.2013)

43 http://noborders.org.uk/node/47

44 ibid

move, live, and evade state control because they are part of communities and networks. Migration happens because of millions of connections between millions of people. Our No Borders networks are one small part of this. Yet, as a movement, we can play an active role in bringing such connections together across national and cultural boundaries."[45] In this way No Borders activists imagine their network as organised in similar terms as the 'underground railroads' that helped runaway slaves in the 19th century in the U.S. and were part of the Resistance against the Nazi-regime in the 20th century. They argue that, just as the outcomes of these movements where unforeseeable, activists today cannot foresee which processes and developments their activities will set into motion, and which future forms of political spheres they might thus help to create. Moreover, in an Arendtian vein, they maintain that political action cannot be motivated by 'identity' or 'life-style' choices, a danger they see within the European anarchist scene in which they have their roots. They stress the need for No Borders "to be an open and diverse movement. Many different people, with and without papers, have contributions to make. To make this a reality we have to tackle the borders within our movement too. We need to constantly address different forms of privilege, whether based on people's legal status, language, education, gender, race, class, or simply people's other commitments and abilities to face different levels of risk."[46] While preconceived identity and social position thus cannot be the incentive for political activism, they maintain, contra the Arendtian notion of the political sphere, that social differences between actors do not disappear in political relationships. Instead, an egalitarian political practice can only develop when the differences between political actors are taken seriously and become the focus of ongoing and critical interrogation.

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45 ibid
46 ibid

The notion of the political I wish to forward by drawing on this example, is thus closely linked to practices of civil disobedience, resistance and critique. Civil disobedience is the attempt to take direct political influence by circumventing institutionalised forms of decision-making. This should not be dismissed too rashly as political blackmail of a minority which tries to assert their political agenda against the will of the majority. Moreover, it is not sufficient to understand civil disobedience as the apolitical expression of individual moral conviction or conscience (as Arendt seems to suggest), or as an attempt to reinstate rights and possibilities of participation, which the state ought to guarantee but has strayed from. Instead, the genuine meaning of this collective practice of contestation can be regarded as an attempt for radical democratisation, where a more intensive and extensive form of democratic self-determination is sought. Practices of disobedience would then seek to initiate or reinvigorate processes of public political contestation and discussion.[47] The fleeting nature of the political Arendt notes, is here not understood necessarily as a defect. It allows us to take seriously the importance of social movements, resistance, and critique, which are not based on relatively permanent institutions, but on fluid forms of organisation, on networks of small groups and individuals, which come together for moments of direct action. Such forms of organisation enable a non-ideological thinking about the political, where practices and positions remain open to constant critique and renegotiation. Moreover, the aim of political action cannot only be to overthrow unjust regimes. 'Spontaneous' or flexible forms of political organisation are also necessary for the survival of open spaces for democratic thinking and action within the framework of institutionalised democratic regimes. The notion of the political and its differentiation from politics thus plays a dual role. On the one hand it expresses the necessity for practices of dissent that take place *within* an established democratic regime. On the other hand it thematises how such

[47] Celikates, 2010, pp. 281-291

practices could be grounded within a more far-reaching critique of the nation-state that aims to develop new forms of political and social communities. 'Actual' political action then would aim at carving out moments of contingent freedom - the art of not being governed quite so much or in quite this way. This is of particular importance if we acknowledge the interrelation between forms of modern government and self-government, that is, the ways in which we come to understand and form ourselves as individuals in relation to discourses of power – an insight that calls into question the possibility for a complete disentanglement from the state or society. In contrast to Arendt's assumptions of the independence of the political sphere, it is impossible to establish a clear distinction between public, private and social spheres, but also between activities such as work, thought, and action. We can thus not simply divide ourselves, who we are, our personal relationships, what and how we work and think, from the forms of government and society in which we live. This makes a clear separation from the state, or a complete and clean revolutionary break, illusory. As discussions of contemporary forms of western neo-liberal government and working conditions show an 'exodus' from neo-liberal forms of governmentality must start with a critical view of how we are interwoven with specific relations of power, or willingness to govern ourselves.[48]

A correlative of this reconfigured notion of the political is a renewed formulation of

[48] Lorey, 2012, p.130. Lorey argues for an understanding of exodus from the neo-liberal gouvernmentality that would result from the refusal of capitalisable self-regulation and the development of another form of self-formation, which in this refusal tests out new forms of living (*im Ungehorsam neue Lebensweisen erprobt*). She makes clear however that such a refusal does not free ourselves from our interwovenness in neo-liberal systems (*kein Befreiungsschlag von allen bisheringen neoliberalen Verstrickungen*), but only the beginning of ongoing struggles about how to be governed and govern oneself.
This understanding builds on a Foucaultian notion of the relationship between subject and state, where a positive, activating form of governing is highlighted that is directed not against the individual but tries to integrate the individual within forms of power. Instead of working with punishment or exclusions, such forms of governmentality would instead aim to render the life of the singular human being and the population as a whole more productive and economic, thus creating an internalised pressure within individuals to correspond to socially diffused norms of productivity See Bernd Kasparek, Sabine Hess, 2010, p.18

political identities. Following Arendt, we cannot understand our membership within political communities as dependent on cultural, national or social identities. Instead of understanding one's political subject position as 'given' by one's citizenship, religious believes or gender, the flexibility and precarity of social relations means that we can rearticulate our political positions in a more open fashion. While I do not agree with Arendt's suggestion that we could leave behind 'what' we are when we become political actors, she is right in so far as there is no *necessary* political position following from our societal roles as 'women' or 'workers' or 'people of colour'. This poses the question how the singular individual is motivated to become a political agent, and how we come to assume a *specific* responsibility to some particular others. Moreover, even if communities need not to be imagined in the form of durable states, the question arises how the necessary level of cohesion is established in a political realm that is understood as taking a flexible, net-work like form. In other words, we might ask how a community is kept together, if it is bound neither by contract nor by a notion of shared identity. What keeps at bay the centrifugal powers that we have to acknowledge if we understand the political sphere as agonal, that is, as one where disagreement cannot be overcome? Turning to Arendt in search of an answer leaves little to go on. The ungroundedness of the political Arendt insists upon exacerbates the problem of explaining the motivation for political action and the processes which allow for cohesion.[49] While the notion of precarity has already undermined this Arendtian separation of spheres, in the next section I address in more detail how the motivation for political action could be thought that draws on the connection between the social, the psychic, and the political.

[49] As she discusses for example in “Truth and Politics” the political has to be free of considerations of power and ethics. While any ethical consideration would endanger the political to become grounded in something outside itself, power-relations have to be left outside the political sphere as they make political action impossible. Distinguishing the political from all other spheres in such terms, is therefore not only problematic because it presupposes the possible disengagement of the political actor from her previous life, it also makes it hard to justify the motivation of political actors. See also Marchart, 2010, p.44

From political ethos to a reappraisal of political emotionality

The understanding of political communities I forward is based not only on the assumption that the political and ethics are closely related, but also that both are linked to affectivity. The role of affect in the constitution of political and ethical agency is often denied by theories which maintain that the political sphere needs to be autonomous from personal concerns.[50] As we have seen, this is the case with Arendt, who argues that the personal concern with morality is as such apolitical. Moreover, in her agonal notion of the political sphere strong antagonistic feelings are inadmissible. Arendt is generally wary of passionate emotions within the political field. If an affective dimension towards the political sphere is recognised, these 'affections' are marked by disinterested coolness. For Arendt the 'emotions' proper to the political might be provisionally identified as foremost an interest in the external, shared world and, second, a diffuse longing for authentic human existence. Any affective attachment the political seems to provide is not directed towards other political actors, but towards the self's being-in-the-world.[51] This leaves little space for warmth or passionate emotional attachment *between* political actors.[52] Love, an

[50] In Schmittian versions communities are indeed bound together by their shared antagonism. Moreover, Lacanian thinkers such as Slavoy Zizek point out the psychic content of antagonistic group formations. See for example Zizek, 1993, pp. 210 -216

[51] The possible tension between a preoccupation with the world, which presupposes a disinterestedness in one's personal affairs, and the wish to develop an authentic self is not sufficiently addressed by Arendt. In the Arendtian formulation, paradoxically, the formation of a distinct individuality presupposes an indifference towards the self, the wish to live an authentic life appears thus as one which cannot as such *motivate* a person to step into the political sphere but is 'accidentally' discovered by the political actor. Paradoxically, however, authenticity is also a strong motivational force to act politically, as Arendt shows in her discussion of the Greek heroes who, by showing their authentic self, become immortal through their actions.
Moreover, Arendt's understanding of the self's directedness towards the world, and not towards others, seems to open her position to the same criticism Nancy levelled against Heidegger, when stating that Heidegger did not follow up on the notion of 'being-with'. For Arendt as well our 'being-in-the-world' seems to take precedence over our 'being-with-others'.

[52] For Arendt love is not political, because “everything that appears in public” must be “seen and heard by everybody” and therefore have “the widest possible publicity”. In Arendt's definition, however, love is a narrowly construed relationship between *one man and one woman [sic]* who, by the force of their

overpowering emotion when directed towards a singular other, is permissible only in the form of dispassionate interest in the shared world. We might wonder, however, how a political realm that remains devoid of personal passions would provide the necessary appeal to motivate the social or private self to become a political actor, despite the risks appearing in public entails. To approach this question I first consider more closely how Arendt understands the 'dispassionate' emotions proper to the political sphere. In the absence of love, Arendt forwards a notion of political friendship and I argue that this concept has indeed an important place in explaining how an already constituted political sphere can survive the avowal of its ungroundedness. The concept of friendship makes it possible to understand the roles forgiving and promising play for our ability to act politically. Moreover, the capacity to promise and forgive presupposes trust, as a thicker understanding of what binds members of the political sphere to each other. Finally, however, these emotional capacities, in my view, can only come into existence, if a stronger affective motivation for acting politically is already in place.

In the Arendtian framework the appropriate sentiment towards other persons in the political realm would be *respect*, a concept closely related to Aristotelian *philia politike*. This political friendship is “without intimacy and without closeness; it is a regard for the

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passion for each other, destroy the in-between necessary for political relationships. Love, she argues “by reason of its passion, destroys the in-between which relates us to and separates us from others.” While Arendt ascribes to love an “unequalled power of self-revelation and an unequalled clarity of vision for the disclosure of *who,*” a core function of acting in the public sphere, the disclosure of lovers remains unworldly (Arendt, 1998, p.242).
We might argue against Arendt, however, that any private relationship indeed has social, cultural and political significance that exceeds the personal dyad. Our relationships only appear as unworldly if we do not consider the role of discourses that enable or restrict love, desire and passion, the ways in which we are together and the ways in which these bonds are recognised socially and politically. We might therefore not only question the 'private' nature of the relationship between two people (the historical and cultural contingency of which is already shown in Arendt's heterosexist formulation) but also consider how personal relationships create an emotion surplus that can be directed beyond the private towards a political articulation to enable certain forms of relationships which are denied recognition. Making this argument, however, we have to note that the politicisation of our personal relationships for Arendt destroys the political, and that therefore, in this respect, an Arendtian understanding of political action is abandoned.

person from the distance which the space of the world puts between us."[53] Even though political friendship appears as a rather 'thin' concept, it is of utmost importance for the possibility of political action. Respect not only allows for a continuing rational debate despite differing opinions, it also enables *forgiving* and *promising*, two capacities which, in my mind, are less cognitive than emotional. Without these capacities, however, its boundless character would make political action unbearable. To ensure commitments in the absence of binding contracts and rules, promising provides a minimum of safety. The unforeseeable character of the public, however, must allow for the possibility that promises will be broken. If we agree with the position I have ascribed to Cavell in chapter four, we remain responsible even for those consequences of our actions that we have neither intended nor foreseen. In this case, the unintended ramifications of a single act might prove to be a paralysing weight. To consider how we should treat the responsibility of the political actor Arendt distinguishes therefore between intended and unintended consequences. She differentiates between morally evil acts and 'trespassing'. Trespassing, as an unintended negative consequence of our political acts, or the necessity to rescind from a promise due to unforeseeable circumstances, is unavoidable. To retain the possibility for further action in concert, trespassing thus calls for forgiveness. As Arendt states, "[o]nly through this constant mutual release from what they do can men remain free agents, only by constant willingness to change their minds and start again can they be trusted with so great a power as that to begin something new."[54] When she accepts the

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53 Hannah Arendt, 1998 [1958], p. 243.Therefore, Arendt continues, we should regard "the modern loss of respect" as a "symptom of the increasing depersonalization of public and social life."

54 Hannah Arendt, 1998 [1958], p.240. Arendt distinguishes trespassing which is frequent from crime, which in her mind is seldom and from the even rarer "radical evil." While the former two can either be forgiven or punished (and only that which could be punished could be forgiven), confronted with radical evil we can do neither. Radical evil thus marks the transcendence of the realm of human affairs and 'the potentialities of human power.' Paradoxically, Arendt seems to demand, here and later in the closing pages of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, to punish with death that which is not punishable, by quoting Jesus that it "were better for him [the evil-doer] that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea."p.241, see for a discussion on death penalty in the *Eichmann* text Judith Butler,2012, p.158-167

role of promising and forgiving as a form of moral code, Arendt comes close to acknowledging a public, relational ethics "entirely based on the presence of others," as distinguished from a purely internal Platonic notion of morality as a relationship the self has with itself, on which her strict separation of the moral and the political is based.[55]

Respect, however, appears as a rather thin basis for the capacities of forgiving and promising. We might argue that these capacities depend on an emotional bond that respect, as an 'distant' relationship might not be able to provide. A somewhat 'thicker' concept can be established if we understand these capacities to rely on trust. This is a disposition towards others which relates the specific relationships of political actors to our 'pre-political' emotional ties. As a political emotion trust serves to distinguish relationships between political actors from relationship in the sphere of institutionalised or contractual politics or economics. Trust is closely related to and enabling of the political, because it shares its ungrounded character. In contrast, in the sphere of economics and politics of the nation-state our relationships to others rely on contracts. Contractual partners do not actually need to trust each other. Instead of trusting the other, they count on the efficacy of the threat of repercussions by the sovereign. In such relationships agents thus do not believe each other to keep their promises, because they are trust-worthy, but because if they would not, they could be sued and the legal system would see to their punishment. Within the sovereign state, the relationship between fellow citizens therefore relies on our common 'trust' in the sovereign, which, in turn, depends on subjection and violence. If, by contrast, political trust is considered ungroundable, this therefore rejects the Hobbesian discourse of the state.[56] *Really* trusting another person is only possible when trust can be broken without repercussion. Trust is offered directly and

[55] Arendt, 1998 [1958] p. 238
[56] Hetzel, 2010, p. 249

without safeguard. Ungrounded and unconditional trust highlights our inability to *know* the other and the necessity to go on in our relationships without knowing.[57] We need to be willing to engage with another person even though we cannot be sure where this will lead us. The finitude of our knowledge of others and the vulnerability of our own position thus become the underlying conditions of the political sphere. If common grounds of identity are shifting in contemporary societies, trust establishes the possibility of communities which are not based on sameness. If we believe, moreover, without grounds, that our differences will not result in a deadly antagonism but can be translated into ongoing agonistic debate, difference becomes a chance and not a danger for communal action.[58]

So far, trust has been formulated as an exclusively political affect. This begs the question, however, how we become able to trust others in the political sphere. The political formulation of ungrounded trust then misses an account of its emergence. As we have seen above, this is a decisive weakness of the Arendtian approach, where the motivation for acting politically comes only from *within* the already established political sphere. This leaves individuals in a rather passive position, where they can only wait for the political to suddenly, unexpectedly appear. To provide for an autonomous ability of individuals to bring about the moment of the political we have to supplement the Arendtian framework in a twofold manner. First, as the previous chapters have shown, a relational ethical demand is closely connected to a pervasive critique of the social/politics, which in turn enables the formulation of new political imaginaries. If the moral 'work on the self' is understood as one that necessitates a conversational contestation of social norms, this would, under certain conditions, necessitate political action. Ethics is here reformulated in a way that rejects the separation of the political and the moral Arendt insists upon. If the

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[57] ibid, p. 246
[58] See for a discussion of Luhmann on this topic ibid, p. 248

ethical relationship the self has to itself, moreover, is understood as based on a prior unwilled ethical relationship the self has to the other, an even stronger link between ethics and political action can be established. The political appears when we have to decide to take responsibility for a specific other. Second, to appeal to a constitutive relationship the self has to the other, allows us to understand the political notion of trust as evolving from these primary relationships. Trust is not primarily a political affect, but is constitutive of our very unwilled dependency on others that enables our bodily survival. As Butler argues, the infant has no choice but to trust the other, even though it cannot have any cognitive reason to do so.[59] Trust, but also its (at times unwilled and unplanned) betrayal are necessary components of the complicated bonds that connect us to our relatives, friends and lovers. That these relationships are not only personal, but also constituted within wider fields of social and political signification, ultimately makes it impossible to maintain a strict separation of spheres. As the notion of trust exemplifies, the 'ecstatic' aspect of emotions where the self realises itself as non-sovereign and bound to the other, can transcend the private and thus become political. This, however, should not be understood as a permanent collapse of the private into the political, but as moments where one conditions and necessitates the other. It is precisely the emotionally laden character of private relationships that gives impetus to overcome isolation and fear and seek to establish new political spheres against all odds.

Of importance here is the connection between political engagement with the world and the ecstatic structure of the self. As we recall, for Butler “Hegel has given us an ek-static notion of the self, one which is, of necessity, outside itself, not-self-identical, differentiated from the start. .. Its ontology is precisely to be divided and spanned in

[59] See also Hetzel, 2010, p. 246

irrecoverable ways."[60] In the need to establish an autonomous, sovereign self, we often fail to acknowledge this fundamental condition of our being. The traumatic experiences of love, passion, and loss, however, might return us to a heightened awareness of our ecstatic condition, and, at times, enable its political articulation. If we grasp that "our very ability to persist," is "dependent on what is outside of us, on a broader sociality, and this dependency is the basis of our endurance and survivability" we might understand certain connections and losses not only as personal trauma but as linked to broader political and social structures.[61] In these terms, the way we are bound to others, undone by these relationships and implicated "in lives that are not our own" might enable us to develop solidary forms of political activism.[62] Solidarity does not presuppose that we understand others as other selves. Instead, it builds on a sense of the self as established within movements where separation from the other is repeatedly breached and re-established. If to be ecstatic means "to be transported beyond oneself by a passion, but also to be beside oneself with rage or grief" we might be able to establish an understanding of political communities, of a tentative 'we' that is based on shared forms of emotional attachments. From these relationships political communities can be wrought, in which we do speak for others, but do not collapse the distinction between others and ourselves. To pronounce a 'we' will thus remain problematic, pointing to the interrelation of ecstatic connectivity and insurmountable difference. As Butler states "I think that if I can still speak to a 'we', and include myself within its terms, I am speaking to those of us who are living in certain ways beside ourselves, whether it is in sexual passion, or emotional grief, or political rage. In a sense, the predicament is to understand what kind of community is composed of those who are beside themselves."[63]

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60 Butler, 2004 a, p.148
61 Butler, 2004 b, p.32
62 ibid, p.25
63 Butler, 2004 b, p.20

In this formulation of community love, passion, and caring, but also mourning, grief, and anger transcend their private character and become the incentives for political action. Importantly, this highlights the connection between embodiment, affectivity, and political agency, a notion that is passed over in the Arendtian framework. Political agency is not bound to a single community but to a number of affective bonds and the insight of a more abstractly shared bodily ontology. While on the one hand personal ties enhance the density of political communities that grow out of personal friendship and shared experiences, on the other hand the notion of a shared bodily ontology allows to extend political connections of solidarity to those who we do not know personally and who can be perceived as threatening. Political agency is then not dependent on the persistence of one specific political sphere, or tied to membership in a specific community. Instead, it is linked to taking responsibility for how our forms of living and political organisation influence others. In this sense Butler seeks to forward a possibility to react to 'recent global violence' in a way that would not trigger circles of revenge and further violence but build on the experience of shared loss. As we have seen, the recognition of the grievability of life enables connections beyond restrictive notions of community based on shared identity or history.

Finally, however, an ontology of precarious, relational beings does not allow for an ultimate grounding of political agency. Our political or ethical engagement should thus neither be misunderstood in terms of a personal quest to establish a more authentic existence, nor in terms of a mere drive for self-preservation. In the Arendtian formulation, we ultimately gain from our disinterested love for the common world a more authentic form of selfhood. Butler, on the other hand, at times seems caught up in a similar position

she criticises in Klein's work, where the incentive for taking our responsibility towards the vulnerable other seriously is to create a safer world for the self. Ending this chapter not with an assertion but with a question, I thus wish to ask whether the ungroundedness of decisions, of the moment where I decide to act politically for *this* specific other, can be thought. Could we indeed imagine a political and ethical stance where responsibility for the human or the non-human animal other, or for the environment, take priority over the position of the self?

Conclusion – The political as the ungrounded sphere of ethics, embodiment and affectivity

In my understanding, the political and the ethical can only be grasped fully if they are understood as intimately connected. This does not imply the dissolution of their separateness, but a rearticulation of our understanding of both concepts. The approach I argue Cavell shares with Derrida and Butler would understand the ethical relationship as one that is structured by undecidability. Politics, then, is the necessary codification of decisions that enable the existence of rights and lasting institutions. The ethical demand is the occasion where institutionalised politics and the sphere of rights are disrupted in the name of justice. Diametrically opposed, Arendt would imagine the role of morality as one where the self is concerned with setting itself a moral code. Such a framework of rules could not be allowed to enter the political sphere because it would necessarily restrict the freedom of political action. What I propose is then to combine the Arendtian political with a 'deconstructive' and 'perfectionist' understanding of ethics. By combining the ungroundedness of the ethical decision with a notion of the ungrounded political, I thus

seek to create a parallel between the ethical and the political. In this way, it becomes possible to translate the ethical demand into the necessity to develop new forms of open political communities and action. Ethical and political agency become necessary where we have to leave behind legal codes and sedimented normative rules and go on, as Arendt called it, 'without banisters'. What I set aside here, however, is the role of codified law as a durable structure within which the moment of interruption can come to pass. The tension between institutionalised politics and legal structures on the one hand and political change on the other, which animates in particular the Arendtian discussion, is an area my thesis has not concentrated on, but whose ample discussion in the literature I hope to engage with in my future research.[64] Nevertheless, even when we omit the role of codified laws and institutionalised politics for now, we are not left with free-floating agents lost in series of ungrounded decisions. Instead, as the notion of precarity reminds us, both the ethical and the political are embedded within a wider field of societal norms that constitute the acting and deciding subject. From the perspective of governmentality and precarity then, the ambivalence in the relationship between the formation of the subject and the ungrounded political and ethical comes into focus. This allows us to reimagine the role of the political as a space where the forms of government within our current society, the subjects it produces and the others it excludes, can be critically interrogated. From this perspective we can call the essentialist tendencies in Arendt's concept of the political into question. For Arendt the political is the possibility for human beings to realise their potential. The political is then what “invests human existence with a sense of the real.”[65] In the version of political community my reading of Cavell and Butler aimed to bring to the fore, the political is rather understood as a process of negotiation, which leaves open how membership, and the human as such, is defined. The political is

[64] See e.g. Schaap, 2011; Menke, 2007, Ranciere, 2004
[65] Schaap, 2011, pp. 38-9

then a constant renegotiation of one's own stance towards others, where the very definitions of membership, justice, and democracy are at issue. The role of political communities which come into being because of an acknowledgement of the ethical demand of the other would then be to produce the necessary 'free space' from which a critical view upon the ways we are interwoven with current social practices can be considered. This highlights an unsolvable paradox between the recognition that we are embedded in wider social norms and the wish to find moments of unencumbered agency and autonomous self-formation. While we are bound within society, this bondage is neither complete nor without its paradoxes. It is thus in moments of transformation or contradiction where moments for free political and ethical agency appear. In difference to contractarian theories of political community, we should thus understand community as appearing precisely in those moments where contractual obligations would end, fall into contradiction or become nullified. The community of the political is better understood in terms of an obligation or responsibility one carries together.[66] While our emotional attachments play a decisive role in providing possible relationships from which the political can develop, affections do not provide an alternative *ground* for the political. If we consider the unknowability of our emotional attachments and the ungroundedness of trust or love, we have to understand that any political agency flowing from such sources remains without firm foundations. But this necessary ungroundedness is not disempowering. As Butler states, "[t]hat my agency is riven with paradox does not mean it is impossible. It means only that paradox is the condition of its possibility."[67]

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66 See here also the notion of *communitas* which Roberto Esposito has forwarded. See Bedorf, 2012, p.32

67 Butler, 2004 a, p. 3

Concluding remarks

With the critique of the subject and the questioning of identity a discussion between social activists and political theorists has been put into motion. While for many activists the role of unified social identities that could motivate common action has been paramount, the theoretical critique of ontology and identity seemed to undermine the density of such shared denominators. In particular in feminist theory the question has been raised how political agency and common political goals should be formulated, if the category of 'women' as a unified identity was called into question. I understand the notion of weak ontology and the re-appreciation of the political as an attempt to find solutions to this question. From the position of the unique individual, who is nevertheless closely integrated into and formed by its social environment, we can start to understand a form of political organisation that is not bound to previously established national, cultural, political or 'biological' entities and identities. In this sense then, a possibility for political organisations is forwarded whose goal is not to establish hegemony or take over state-power. Instead, new forms of political activism and theoretical discussion seek to foster our ability to create a more plural and diverse civil society, which is responsive towards the demands of those currently excluded from political representation. In this vein, a politics of radical democracy would aim to avoid hierarchical structures that entail moments of exclusion. In such forms of organisation, as Alexandros Kiopkiolis states: "[t]he common does not arise from the subordination of differences to an overarching particularity. It is rooted in interaction and collaboration among the singular constituents themselves. Participation and collective decision-making take the place of less-than-fully-

accountable representatives and leaders."[1] Organising political movements in the form of networks acknowledges the need to address exclusions and hierarchical structures, which occur with any form of political organisation. Communities thus need to remain permeable and open to new challenges, where the ongoing critical endeavour of creating a more inclusive and egalitarian form of organisation does not cause their collapse. In such an understanding of the political "[t]he ongoing creation of spaces, singularities and relationships displaces antagonism as the glue that holds community together."[2]

I hope that my thesis has aided the formulation of such a notion of political communities, by providing an ontological notion of selfhood that establishes the human as a non-sovereign, relational agent. This understanding of the self helps to highlight that moral and political thought are closely intertwined. I thus criticise Arendt's notion of morality as a preoccupation with the harmony of the self, which relies on a separation of the moral and the political. Instead, I follow the approaches Cavell and Butler propose. For Cavell, work on the self is connected to taking responsibility for others the self finds itself in community with. While Butler's Levinasian and psychoanalytic argument that the self is constituted through the address of the other establishes responsibility as a fundamental, even 'pre-ontological' position, this does not render Cavell's question of how to react to the unexpected otherness of a singular human being obsolete. Even if we understand ourselves as constituted by our relationship to the other, acknowledging the other remains a stance we have to continually work on and re-establish.

This highlights that to 'have' a self relies on the integration of two opposing currents. While on the one hand we are deeply connected to others and overstep our own boundaries in relationships of love and passion (but also anger and grief), on the other

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1 Kiopkiolis, 2011, p. 696

2 Ibid, see also Hardt and Negri, 2005, pp. 87, 208–11, 217–18, 340, pp. 225–6 and Critchley, 2007, p.102-147

hand, we can only understand ourselves as 'self' - as singular entities - if we achieve a sense of separation and autonomy. The necessary process of separation, however, will tempt us to deny the other in order to establish and safeguard the self's sovereignty. As Cavell describes this in his discussion of other-mind-scepticism, it is when we assert our separateness that we start doubting the similarity of others, and thus become threatened by existential loneliness. The stance of responsiveness Cavell identifies with Emersonian perfectionism is therefore one that we need to repeatedly seek and renew.

By asserting both separateness and connectivity the self appears as a creation, which is continually reformulated. This creative and aesthetic aspect of selfhood is one area of thought my thesis has gestured towards but did not have the space to address sufficiently. Both Butler and Arendt assert, in their respective ways, that our perceptions of reality and selfhood are, at least to some extent, 'fictional' constructs. If we understand selfhood as an always ongoing process of aesthetic formation, however, we might ask how we can conciliate the insight that our account of the self is fictional with the necessity to 'have' a self. The question is whether we could at the same time understand ourselves as agents, and accept that 'who' we are is a construction, where we retrospectively order memories into a unified and causal narrative. To answer this question in a more adequate fashion than my short discussion of narrative theories has allowed for would entail further research, however. Doing so, it would also be important to engage more critically with the connection between continental philosophy and psychoanalytic theories. While I have noted how important psychoanalysis is for Butler's notion of selfhood I could not adequately address the difficulties that follow from her account. While psychoanalysis had an important influence on contemporary debates about the 'ontological turn' this relationship has not been the subject of critical investigation. Psychoanalytic thought has

enabled theorists like Butler to hold on to universal conceptions of the human that appear to avoid the problems connected to earlier philosophical notions of the subject. Importantly, psychoanalytic theories understand human being as at the same time constituted by internal lack and an ecstatic overflowing of its boundedness. The singular being is thus not understood as a sovereign whole, but in its affective relationship to others. This allows it to integrate a more differentiated account of affectivity into our understanding of political agency. However, an uncritical adoption of psychoanalysis by political theory risks inheriting problematic aspects of its ontology. More specifically, in my future research, I would like to investigate whether political theory has adopted an ahistorical understanding of self-formation, where a universal theory of individual psychic development is assumed as relatively stable over space and time.

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