

## Divine Temporalities of Recognition in Butler and Derrida

In Judith Butler's 2003 book *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler explores the many and varied problems which arise when one attempts to give an account of oneself, that is, to express the "I" of oneself to an external other who cannot hope to "understand" the "I," and whose very existence destroys the "I" of which I speak. There are enough problems with this giving of an account to fill a book<sup>1</sup> (or several), but in my exploration I will focus exclusively on the issue of temporality.

Temporality here refers to the set of problems which arise due to the temporal constraints of recognition<sup>2</sup> from the other, specifically the change in "I" occurring between the moment of sending out the "I" and the moment of receiving recognition. While Butler also points out other issues of temporality in regards to recognition, such as the pre-address issue of the self's situation within language<sup>3</sup> and systems and the ethical and moral implications thereof, this exploratory effort of reading Derrida into Butler will stick exclusively to the temporal problem of the sending and receiving. As previously mentioned, this effort will be but an exploratory one: I will attempt to fit Derrida's understanding of the always-already present recognition of self which stems from language itself (and the divine thereupon) into Butler's problem of temporality in order to solve the issue presented by the temporality of recognition, in a move akin to placing a piece from one puzzle into another which was cast from the same mold in order to create a third, novel picture. Such a move would effectively cut Butler's work in *Giving an Account of Oneself* off at the root; heading off the ethical construction which fundamentally begins with this problem of recognition. It is important to note that I do not

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<sup>1</sup> As Butler did, obviously.

<sup>2</sup> Replete with the influences of Hegel and Adorno—Adorno is read into this piece, Hegel is not (as much as any work of contemporary philosophy can not be implicitly about Hegel; in that endeavor I fail completely from before the start).

<sup>3</sup> See Derrida's lecture *How to Avoid Speaking* for elaboration at length.

intend to explore the resultant ethical system which could be extrapolated from this new understanding of the problem of temporality in recognition. Instead, this exercise will be limited in scope to the “simple” line of questioning which would follow from bringing the divinity of Derrida into Butler, interrogating that which comes before ethics for both philosophers.

Before starting in on the problem as stated in Butler, it is important to do the due diligence of tracing the intellectual heritage of the problem. I would identify the main cornerstone of Butler’s thought here to be Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and the dialectic of recognition posited within. Of course, Butler’s lineage in regards to recognition is not merely limited to Hegel himself (though he was the topic of her doctoral study), but instead expands to include Adorno and his critique of “identity thinking,” Lacan’s work on misrepresentation, Foucault and Nietzsche as a matter of course, Levinas on our specific issue (and many others), Laplanche (unfortunately), and even Derridean influences on response. I say all of this not just to complicate the conversation for the sake of it, but mostly as a guardrail against careless work on my own part. The problem of recognition in question has its roots in many thinkers, but Butler’s specific conception of it is distinct enough to warrant such a disclaimer.

Judith Butler’s particular articulation of the problem of recognition would, and again, does, take the entirety of a book to explore. Fortunately for this project, however, Butler’s discussion of the temporal aspect of the problem of recognition is written most succinctly:

“One might say, then, that I can never offer recognition in the Hegelian sense as a pure offering, since I am receiving it, at least potentially and structurally, in the moment and in the act of giving. We might ask, as Levinas surely has of the Hegelian position, what kind of gift this is that returns to me so quickly, that never really leaves my hands. Does recognition, as Hegel argues, consist in a reciprocal act whereby I recognize that the other is structured in the same

way I am? And do I recognize that the other also makes, or can make, this recognition of sameness?”<sup>4</sup>

This is the crux of Butler’s argument. In *Giving an Account of Oneself* Butler does not solve the problem of temporality, nor do they attempt to; the problem instead serves as a cornerstone for the ethical system that they establish in the rest of the book. This problem, that the sending of recognition and its subsequent return (either in speaking or the silence which is speaking after a call) necessarily occurs within the shared temporality of the sender and receiver is itself a problem; because this exchange<sup>5</sup> “is conditioned and mediated by language” there is an inescapable change of self that occurs between the time that the “I” is sent out and the time the “I” is returned. For Butler, the problem of this difference leads inescapably to the necessity of the ethical system they seek to build, one that successfully mediates and encourages the most productive recognition (that is, the sending and subsequent receiving) of self that can be brought about in our human constraints.

I believe Butler’s problematization of the temporality of recognition to be a mistake on two fronts: the first stemming from their reading of Levinas and construction of alterity in the face of the Hegelian dyad, and the second arising in Butler’s constructed ethics of recognition through language. Butler’s construction of alterity is interesting, in this context. Butler seems to accept the Hegelian<sup>6</sup> notion that there is “perhaps another encounter with alterity here that is irreducible to sameness” without much question of who the other here is, and then quickly<sup>7</sup> moves on to a discussion of “norms,” writing “the dyadic exchange refers to a set of norms that exceed the perspectives of those

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<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 27.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 28

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 28

<sup>7</sup> And I mean quickly! Merely a page between this jump.

engaged in the struggle for recognition.” I think that this quote perfectly encapsulates the leap that Butler makes which places the rest of their work on top of such shaky ground—for Levinas, who Butler has already referenced explicitly, asking the question of ‘which responses to recognition are the ethical ones’ that is central to Butler’s work is thoroughly impossible to fathom.<sup>8</sup> As Levinas writes<sup>9</sup> in *Diachrony and Representation*,

“Responsibility is anterior to all the logical deliberation summoned by reasoned decision. Deliberation would already be the reduction of the face of the Other to a representation, to the objectivity of the visible, to its compelling force, which belongs to the world. The anteriority of responsibility is not that of an a priori idea interpreted starting from reminiscence—that is, referred to perception and the glimpsed intemporal presence starting from the ideality of the idea or the eternity of a presence that does not pass, and whose duration of dia-chrony of time would only be a dissimulation, decrease, deformation, or privation, in finite human consciousness.”

The problem which Butler here encounters is that they are attempting to construct an ethical framework around an act which fundamentally cannot be captured in any such framework—any system which mediates the decisions of recognition commits the ultimate violence of reduction of the other, occurs in the present (the too-late of the always-already), and is futile to the extreme. Butler ignores this issue, and instead marches steadily to their construction, neglecting the foundation of “that to which I have thus been exposed and dedicated before being dedicated to myself.”<sup>10</sup>

However dubious the possibility of constructing ethics might be, the fact remains that Butler has constructed an ethics of temporal recognition, so it is necessary to take up this charge just as well, if

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<sup>8</sup> And if Butler thinks any differently, then I would question their reading of Levinas thoroughly.

<sup>9</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Diachrony and Representation in Time and The Other*. (Pennsylvania, Duquesne Univ. Press, 1987), 111.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

I am permitted a brief digression. On this construction of ethics, Butler writes<sup>11</sup> “There is a language<sup>12</sup> that frames the encounter, and embedded in that language is a set of norms concerning what will and will not constitute recognizability.” Butler has arrived at this<sup>13</sup> Foucauldian statement by way of their aforementioned particular understanding of alterity as that which occurs between self and other; with its occurrence imminent but its demands yet to come—it is this arrival at which I direct my second objection. I believe that Butler has committed an error in this order of operations; by placing the occurrence of the moment of recognition before the demand they have placed the entire weight of ethics upon the recognition not yet wrought. Butler’s preoccupation with the “regime of truth [that]...constrains what will and will not constitute the truth of...self”<sup>14</sup> has led them to neglect any framework for recognition and ethics which is not exclusively mediated through the social order, which is, in turn, made up of a recurring system of social references. This question of origin is one which goes largely unasked in *Giving an Account*, but is not as insignificant as it may seem. To problematize: Butler wishes to understand recognition and its ethical problems by analyzing the social framework of recognition—a framework which is entirely built upon the *différance* of recognition. I don’t believe that this can be done as Butler wishes.

However exciting it may be to attempt to deconstruct the entirety of *Giving an Account of Oneself*, I have neither the time nor the ability to do so here (if at all). Instead, turning again to the issue that is the moment of recognition while keeping Butler’s larger project in mind, it becomes clear that

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<sup>11</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 30

<sup>12</sup> I am, rather self-aggrandizingly, commending myself for not spiraling into Derridian digression on this point of language; but please know that it is taking a great deal of self-control.

<sup>13</sup> I refrained from inserting the word “disturbingly” here, so as not to make my bias against Foucault overly obvious. Nevertheless, I am sure that this bias has crept into the paper. My apologies.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

Butler has unfortunately ignored an issue which must not be ignored. As Butler is basing their entire ethic upon the social framework of recognition, which is established<sup>15</sup> upon the trace of proceeding recognitions, any misconceptions regarding the nature of the moment of recognition (even if Butler is not definitively discussing any originating moment, which I think they could) will echo through the entirety of their ethical system. As such, fixing this apparently minor issue is of critical importance in maintaining the integrity of the work that Butler moves on to.

It is this moment, both in my text and Butler's, when a specifically Derridean construction could potentially come to the rescue. In the moment of recognition, there is a gift, sent out and then returned—yet, as Butler writes, the gift does not return quickly enough to eliminate the problem that the “I” changes in the intermediate. This problem can be solved in one of two ways: either the temporal nature of the process of recognition must be changed, or the foundation of Butler's “ethical” framework must be situated elsewhere—as previously stated, I am focusing on the former. It is with this question in mind that I turn to Derrida.

Throughout most of his writings, Derrida takes a clear stance on recognition which contrasts sharply with Butler's; there is no separate “I” to be doing the sending and receiving, at least, not as Butler conceived of it. In fact, the problem I have pointed out as key to Butler's understanding of the temporality of recognition would have made very little sense to Derrida.<sup>16</sup> Sure, in spoken conversation there is an issue of the “giving” of an account, where by the time the other finishes responding to a story the “I” has sent out, that given “I” might have changed for that recognition to no longer apply.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 31

<sup>16</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death, Second Edition, & Literature in Secret*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

However, in the Derridean view, this exchange is not<sup>17</sup> happening on some neutral ground, and there is no event of speaking (of giving an account) before recognition has occurred. All recognition (which is mediated through language, for Derrida as for Butler, though Butler might eschew such careful categorization) is happening in a state<sup>18</sup> of “too late.” To quote from Derrida’s lecture titled “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials;” “There is no longer any question of not speaking. Language has started without us, in us and before us. This is what theology calls God, and it is necessary, it will have been necessary to speak.” We are operating within language (be in text, speech, or any other communication) when we attempt to recognize if not reconcile the other—language which precedes us, language that has already asked the question of us which elucidates our giving of an account; it is too late for anything else. It is this understanding, that there is no opening salvo and no non-elect<sup>19</sup> exchange that can provide a blank canvas for recognition of the other that must inform our understanding of the temporality of recognition in Butler’s text.

This understanding also carries with it a novel temporality of recognition. Recognition, even through conversation (a medium which could fairly be understood as operating within a strict temporal framework of statement and response, limited by the physical processing and production of human speech) is not a physical process that can be understood through typical temporalities, such as the temporality of conversation<sup>20</sup> with which Butler begins their discussion. When one person speaks, and another responds, that is not all there is to it. In a generous reading, this could be what Butler

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<sup>17</sup> Jacques Derrida, “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials.” (Lecture, Jerusalem, 1986). 73-142

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 99

<sup>19</sup> I say not in the Calvinist manner of speaking, but in mere gesture to the pre-determined nature of our response; for as Derrida teaches, we must respond be it in silence or in denial or (God forbid) affirmation.

<sup>20</sup> An originary term referring to Butler’s temporality of recognition which occurs in conversation.

refers to when they write<sup>21</sup> that “...it [recognition] can never elude the structural condition of implicit reciprocity.” However, due to their construction of the ethical system of recognition upon the complications provided by this temporality of conversation, I find it highly unlikely that Butler considered the full implications of this idea and then rejected their relevance all without so much as a nod towards these questions. Instead, Butler proceeds as if that which precedes recognition of the other is nothing more than culture and norms, which can be divined through sociological examination and ethical derivation. Instead, recognition as a process is not bound or limited by the medium of communication, as Derrida says,<sup>22</sup> “...this injunction commits (me), in a rigorously asymmetrical manner, even before I have been able to say *I*, to sign such a *provocation* in order to restore the symmetry.” Setting aside the potential discussion of symmetry<sup>23</sup> for the time being, there is still much to consider even focused exclusively on the temporal issue. In this novel temporality the window has shifted—recognition neither begins at a fixed point when the other begins to receive from the self, nor does it begin even at the moment where the self calls the other into the place;<sup>24</sup> recognition has started before either you or I were there to bear witness to its founding.

What then are we to make of the temporality of Butler’s sample exchange? How does this “gift that returns...so quickly?”<sup>25</sup> fit back into the discussion? There can no longer be an intrinsic period of waiting—even while the “I” waits for the return of the communicated account from the other, recognition has already occurred. Indeed, this replacement of Butler’s temporality with Derrida’s is

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<sup>21</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account*, 27.

<sup>22</sup> Derrida, “How to Avoid Speaking,” 99.

<sup>23</sup> Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 29.

<sup>24</sup> Not in the Derridean sense (I think...)

<sup>25</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account*, 27.

freeing for Butler's theory; now they are able to willingly embrace the "vector of temporalities" which make up the fabric of recognizability.<sup>26</sup> While it is unfortunately the case that this expanded temporality does not singlehandedly fix *every* problem of recognition (the "I" can still not account<sup>27</sup> fully for its own emergence) it at the very least provides Butler with more room to investigate their claims about the social norms of recognition. Even incorporating the divinity of the other,<sup>28</sup> as Butler flirts with when they dive deeper into Levinasian positions,<sup>29</sup> Butler still comes up short on questions relating to responsibility in the face of recognition and the temporal formation of the subject (where they turn most unfortunately to the psycho-analytic formations of Laplanche,<sup>30</sup> which I simply cannot abide by). It is perhaps most prudent, then, to turn back again to the ethical framework itself, and where it ought now be situated in light of the re-translation of the temporality of recognition after moving Derrida into Butler.

After this movement, there is no longer any pretension towards an ethical framework built off of recognition as manifested through the temporality of communication. Misunderstanding, mistranslation, and the failure of the "I" to give what it feels like a satisfactory account of itself or its beginning<sup>31</sup> can not prove a foundation for ethics. This does not, however, mean that an attempt at establishing an ethical formation of recognition is wholly worthless. Derrida's ethical framework is certainly one affirmative example—in combining the reality of our inability to *not* respond to the call

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>28</sup> Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 71.

<sup>29</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account.*, 96.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 100.

of the other<sup>32</sup> (which is recognition) with the ultimate ethics of the gift of giving oneself to death for the (divine) Other, Derrida builds an ethic of total responsibility<sup>33</sup> to every other by way of the aphorism *tout autre comme tout autre*, or every other as every other. By placing the divine Other in every other, every encounter with any other carries with it the same inability to refuse to speak, the same moral weight, and the same ethical responsibility which relies<sup>34</sup> on this “*prévenance* of the trace.” Perhaps not the easiest ethical construction, but one that Derrida finds suitable, though not unproblematic, if nothing else.

It seems unlikely that this turn to the divine would ever be mirrored in Butler’s philosophy, especially as it relates to the ethical dilemma presented by the recognition of the other. However, despite this improbability, some of the conclusions<sup>35</sup> which Butler reaches in *Giving an Account of Oneself* are nonetheless compatible, if not symmetrical, with some of Derrida’s own. Butler ends up sustaining, albeit reluctantly, the possibility of a pre-ontological relationship with the Other, the primacy of the “demand” to give an account, and the necessity for the “I” to not be reduced to another facet of social life.<sup>36</sup> None of these concerns are themselves irreconcilable with Derrida’s recognition of the Other as advanced in *The Gift of Death* and “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials;” rather, they compliment a practical understanding of the sociological impact of recognition of the other in every other. While it is challenging to parse this out of the seemingly endless myriad of

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<sup>32</sup> Derrida, “How to Avoid Speaking,” 99.

<sup>33</sup> Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 76.

<sup>34</sup> Derrida, “How to Avoid Speaking” 99.

<sup>35</sup> Conclusions might be a strong word here; *Giving an Account* is much more exploration than grand theory, but I believe the term is suitable enough for intelligibility.

<sup>36</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account*, 135.

distractions<sup>37</sup> within Butler's text, taking a careful look at the specific problem of the temporality of recognition allows an ultimately more effective reading of Butler through Derrida to emerge.

Butler ends their book<sup>38</sup> with the encouragement that "If we speak and try to give an account from this place [the "I"], we will not be irresponsible, or, if we are, we will surely be forgiven," which comes on the heels of the ethical command for "us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human." Whether this "risk" takes the form of a leap of faith or of the gift of death, there is no doubt as to our responsibility just as there is no question of our ultimate failure. Every recognition of one other belies the violence of non-recognition of a separate other, while every recognition of an other is always as incomplete as it is unjust. So perhaps we are all left to hope for forgiveness.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Namely, anytime Butler mentioned Laplanche.

<sup>38</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account*, 136.

<sup>39</sup> Where we shall come up with all this forgiveness, Butler does not say.