Review of Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005.

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Judith Butler's Amsterdam lectures from 2002, published in this volume, seek to produce what she calls an "account of oneself." This account is not merely a self-serving exercise, a means of coming to an awareness of one's self through, say, the writing of letters. Instead, the subject is not *the ground of* ethics but *a problem for* ethics—since all of these discussions concerning the self, ego, first person and so on actually concern the subject. For all her creative engagement with Foucault (Adorno also appears in the lectures), here she goes beyond him, arguing that every account takes the form of an address, directed not merely to some one, but to you in particular. Ethics is therefore a thoroughly relational activity: "the scene of address, what we might call the rhetorical condition for responsibility, means that while I am engaging in a reflexive activity, thinking about and reconstructing myself, I am also speaking to you and thus elaborating a relation to an other in language as I go" (p. 50). Ethics arises not in the account itself, whether it suffices or not, but in the dialogue. Are both parties to this duality sustained by the interaction? Are they altered in the process, hopefully coming to a greater understanding of one another in the act of addressing each other?

Within the perimeters set by the discourse of ethics, this position is already a step beyond Foucault. But the key to Butler's argument is that the accounts given are of necessity limited, lacking, and broken, containing incoherencies and remaining incomplete—her creative reworking of the poststructuralist argument that the subject is divided, ungrounded, and incoherent. This opacity and indeed apparent failure is where ethics really begins. If my account is limited and incoherent, if the way I give an account is not quite the way I would like it, then that should lead me to patience for an interlocutor caught in the same bind. Patience, tolerance, and an effort to understand—these flow precisely from the awareness that both interlocutors struggle with comparable incoherencies. The catch of course is that Butler's own account is very accessible and coherent, a situation that appears to trouble her as the account wears on, page after page. So we find that the dead-pan beginning, with its short sentences and simple syntax, gives way to notes about slips of the typing finger and a noticeably lyrical style in the midst of the second, long chapter on psychoanalysis. But she never explicitly mentions that she is aware of the question posed to her own account; instead, that troubling matter is shunted off into an extraordinary examination of Foucault's interviews towards the end of his life. Here Butler notes the inconsistencies, the lack of connections and prevarications when Foucault is asked to give an account of himself (pp. 111-138; she focuses on the interview, "How Much Does It Cost for Reason to Tell the Truth?" published in *Foucault Live* from 1989). But that is not a shortcoming on his part, engaged in discussion as he is; it is of the very nature of ethical engagement.

In making this argument, Butler wishes to counter at least two positions. The one comes from Nietzsche, for whom the awareness of oneself—which for Butler implies giving an account—comes from a violence suffered, a punishment inflicted, an allegation or an accusation made, to which one must respond. Butler of course disagrees, arguing that an account, partial and halting as it is, need not arise from violence. That point leads to her second counter-move: she seeks to negate ethical violence, which follows when one believes that one's own position is inviolable, true, and clear, thereby enabling one to judge others who do not measure up. This strategy is Butler's response to the perennial problem of ethics: the tension between universal precept and particular situation. For Butler, when the universal seeks to force itself upon the particular, rather than—in similar dialogic

fashion—relating to, negotiating with, and altering in light of the particular, then it engages in the violence of imposed indifference.

Negotiation, relation, dialogue, mutuality—these are, in the end, the keys to Butler's ethics, which may be seen as a reconditioned Hegelian dialectic. They produce a modesty of ethical accounts, seek to negate the violence of imposed absolutes and universals, and become the workings of the subject, democracy, justice, patience, responsibility, agency, hope, politics and the very definition of what it means to be human. Much obviously hangs on of the frail task of ethics. Above all, ethics is the relation between a self and an other, I and you, "whether conjured or existing" (p. 21; she is keen to distance herself from those, like Levinas and Laplanche, who prioritise the "Other"—see pp. 84-101), which is the particular shape that the relation of the self and its social context must take. Neither conditions the other in terms of absolute cause, for they are semi-autonomous. They need each other but do not cause each other.

If one grants the (problematic) premises of ethics—self, other, and the relations between them—Butler's account is one of the most persuasive and thought-provoking, not the least gain being an extraordinary unpicking of the inconsistencies in Levinas' Zionism (pp. 90-96). But those premises are, for me at least, the issue. Ethics for Butler involves the betterment of society, the greasing of social relations so that the creaking, rusty parts may run more smoothly. And who does not want justice, tolerance, responsibility, understanding, and democracy, even if it does rely on the idea of conscious and relatively free agents? Ethics is the stuff of interpersonal relations, social interaction, and a political desire to change the world—gradually and patiently—for the better. But this version of ethics is really one of reform, a counsel against revolution, for that would be, according to Butler, the violent imposition of an absolute moral code and indifferent universal.

In the end, Butler comes quite close to Terry Eagleton's deeply theological *Trouble With Strangers* (2009), with its simple and modest virtues of goodness, justice, courage, and responsibility. These values may be a little banal, unexciting even, but they are the stuff of ethics. They are also the stuff of reformers, not revolutionaries. On Butler's part, that moment explicitly comes when she argues that the most difficult ethical response to violence is that one must not respond with violence, exercising patience and restraint rather than suddenly believing you are in the right to seek revenge (pp. 100-101). Ethics seems to take an inevitable theological turn even in Butler.