The Fragility of the Moral Self*

Hille Haker
Harvard Divinity School

Exemplary of both the self's loss of sovereignty and a new paradigm in ethical thought, which could be called "ethics after autonomy," is the dialogue about the self-other relation in current post-structuralist thought. This dialogue seems to occupy a marginal position in contemporary mainstream ethical discourse. I shall argue that this is unfortunate, because reflecting on the self enables us to gain important insights into the basis of morality and thus to broaden our reflections about the subject of morality, to which I shall refer as the "moral self." In this essay, I want to consider two aspects of the moral self. First, what does the constitutive fragility of the self, a fragility that is determined by the impossibility of sovereignty, mean for the concept of the moral self? Second, what are the implications for the moral self of what I shall refer to, following Levinas and Derrida, as the "structure of the adieu," which requires that the ontological perspective (i.e., Heidegger's "being-towards-death"), which is constitutive for the care for oneself, must be transformed into an ethical/moral perspective of caring about the (death of the) other?

The dynamic of self-constitution in the face of the other, through and with the other, is based on a linguistic, or in any case on a discursive act. By way of social appellation and subject-formation, self-constitution is a public, heteronomous process that occurs before any self-definition or self-identity emerges. Foucault and critical theory alike emphasize that existence in this sense is thoroughly *morally* impregnated before any self-reflective assessment takes place, although existence is not *only* this moral relation. Foucault (and Judith Butler, who follows him in this regard) has analyzed this aspect of self-constitution as the impregnation of the self by many and diverse forms of social norms and moral authority. Both Foucault and Butler insist on the paradoxical structure of self-constitution, insofar as the self both desires and actively takes on the very subjectivation against which it defends

*I am grateful to the translator of a former version of this text, William Whitney, and to Gene McGarry of *HTR* for further help.

HTR 97:4 (2004) 359–81

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000756 Published online by Cambridge University Press

itself.[1] To a great extent, the self participates in a socially and psychically mediated discourse that displaces its individuality and its particularity, and that makes any recourse to a "core" of subjectivity (of the self or of the subject) appear to be a myth of subject philosophy. Thus, the subject is bound to a discourse that expels the individuality of the self from the discourse at the very moment of its constitution. Contrary to newer phenomenological approaches, however, this "self" cannot find refuge in the body or in corporeality—there is no unmediated access to an inner self or to a bodily self.[2]

My question, however, goes beyond this first stage of elaborating on the paradoxical structure of self-constitution. For what is at stake for the concept of the ethical/moral self is not only the self in relation to the social and psychic structures that both constrain and enable it, but also the relation of the self to the other as a *currently-concrete* other, and thus the relation of responsibility between the self and the other. To formulate an ethical concept of the self, Foucault considered the relation of ethics and aesthetics, drawing on the ancient Greek concept of "care for the self": Is there a *form* of individual existence, he asked, which is more than a socially derived existence? On the other hand, can ethics be more than a structure of compulsion and social force, or even violence? What is at stake here is not simply the general relation of ethics and aesthetics, but rather, and more radically, the very possibility and condition of what I am calling the moral self. Contrary to Foucault, I refer to the *moral* self, for, as we shall see, it would be an undue reduction to establish a concept of *ethical* existence along the lines of care for the self, as this would relegate the other to the background of this self-relation. Thus, I hold that Foucault's shift was a necessary, though not sufficient, turn in formulating an ethical concept of the self: self-creation is no substitute for a practical self, but rather one specific feature of it. Thus, an understanding of the self will prove inadequate if it does not take into account the dialectical relation between aesthetics—more specifically, the narrative construction of identity—and the challenge of the socially, culturally, and historically shaped world that the self is part of. It seems that in Foucault's understanding, the relation of the self and the other is so pre-shaped by the concept of the social derivation of the individual and the overriding power of the discourse in self-constitution that the *moral* relation of the self and the other remains vague. I shall return to this post-structuralist concept of the moral self by way of a reading of Judith Butler's latest writings. First, however, I shall review Paul Ricœur's perspective on the self-other relation.

[1]Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997). See also Annika Thiem, "Unbecoming Subjects: Subject Formation and Responsibility in the Context of Judith Butler's Thought" (Ph.D. diss., Tübingen, 2004).

[2]Elisabeth List, *Grenzen der Verfügbarkeit: Die Technik, das Subjekt, und das Lebendige* (Vienna: Passagen-Verlag, 2001). For an approach more suited to the new phenomenological understanding of the self and corporeality, see Bernard Waldenfels, *Das leibliche Selbst: Vorlesungen zur Phänomenologie des Leibes* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000756 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Ricœur's Narrative and Ethical Self

In his 1990 book *Soi-même comme un autre*, Ricœur introduced a concept of ethical/moral identity quite distinct from the short-lived concepts of the liberal self and the communitarian self put forward in the 1980s and 1990s.[3] According to Ricœur, the constitution of the self is the formation of a successful identity. This is not, however, to be understood as the unity of one's bio-graphy or life-story—that is, as the successful integration of all events into a unified perspective; rather, personal identity is practical identity, in the sense of a self-related "striving for the good life, with others, in just institutions." This self-related, but nevertheless partly altruistic striving is the reflective will, which is inherent in the structure of personhood and any practical concept of the self. The will for the good is, as a reflective striving, always oriented towards the success of one's personal life in relation to and with the other, as it is articulated in the *narrative* of one's life, one's bio-graphy. Self-esteem, care for the other, and a sense of justice are the three ethical dimensions within this teleological perspective on the ethical self. Ricœur's ethical self is, therefore, not identical with the subject of care for the self in the Foucauldian sense, although the two share a close relation to aesthetic existence.

For Ricœur, a concept of ethical identity in the teleological sense would indeed be sufficient, were there not a rift within the good life itself: the problem—and the enigma—of evil. In the face of evil, the "original wound" that is inherent in free will, the necessity of transcending the teleological perspective arises, in the shape of the demand to recognize the deontologically established inhibition of morality:

> Because there is evil, the aim of the "good life" has to be submitted to the test of moral obligation, which might be described in the following terms: "Act solely in accordance with the maxim by which you can wish at the same time that what *ought not to be*, namely evil, will indeed *not exist*."[4]

Morality, says Ricœur, demands overcoming factual asymmetry, which is the signature of power relations, in favor of normative symmetry. Morality leads to the institutionalization of prohibitions, which are meant to bring normative symmetry and factual symmetry closer together. Instead of insisting on a separation between the spheres of ethical and moral existence (as is the case in Kantian and neo-Kantian attempts to subordinate ethics to morality), Ricœur describes their dialectic and their interdependence. Considered from an ethical perspective, his concept of ethical/moral identity, which emerges from the interrelation between care for the self and an interest in living together with others in just institutions, constrained by the recognition of mutual respect, seems to be a promising approach, since it takes

[3]Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another* (trans. Kathleen Blamey; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). For a delineation of these and other concepts of ethical/moral identity, see Hille Haker, *Moralische Identität: Literarische Lebensgeschichten als Medium ethischer Reflexion, mit einer Interpretation der* Jahrestage *von Uwe Johnson* (Tübingen: Francke, 1999).

[4]Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 218.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000756 Published online by Cambridge University Press

seriously the relation of the ethical and moral spheres *within* the concept of practical identity.[5] Considered from an aesthetic perspective, however, Ricœur's concept might be questioned, because it does not take seriously enough the constructive nature of narrative identity as an inherent dimension of practical identity.

Unlike, for example, Alasdair MacIntyre, who has also proposed a concept of narrative identity, Ricœur is much less concerned with restoring, or only postulating, a unified identity. For Ricœur, literary narratives in particular become a medium for both *exploring* and *jeopardizing* that unity. In this respect, the fictions of the early twentieth century are extreme forms of "identity laboratories," works of art about loss of identity, the impossibility of a unified identity, loss of sovereignty, rupture, and the accentuation of discord over concord. But even the most radical literary versions of a fragmented, derivative, or imaginative identity—Ricœur cites Joyce, Musil, and Kafka—do not and cannot dismiss the underlying (teleological) concept of narrative identity, which is of pivotal relevance for practical identity. Thus, Ricœur argues for a modified concept of mimesis that recognizes a dialectical relationship between fiction and reality, for which he introduces the term "crossed reference." Ricœur's ethics is to be understood as addressing the tension of the "crossed reference" of fiction and reality, narration and experience, *within* practical identity. As much as Ricœur acknowledges the loss of the unified self in (modern) literature, however, the question remains as to whether he does justice to the radical nature of the actual non-sovereignty of the self in his concept of ethical and moral identity, and whether he does not ignore the necessity of going beyond teleology and the concept of the unified self in search of a reference point for identity.

Over the last few years, the question of narrativity has become more urgent in ethical theory. One striking example of this tendency is the recent work of Judith Butler, who has indicated the limits of a concept of narrative identity and even the dangers it poses for an ethics of nonviolence.[6] Since Butler's approach is close to my own, I shall analyze it in some detail.

Butler's Critique of Ethical Violence

In her Adorno Lectures, presented in 2002 at Frankfurt University, Butler elaborates on concepts of the self, offering some valuable reflections on narrativity and identity:[7]

[5]For a more comprehensive reflection, see Haker, *Moralische Identität*; and Christoph Mandry, *Ethische Identität und christlicher Glaube: Theologische Ethik im Spannungsfeld von Theologie und Philosophie* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald Verlag, 2002).

[6]Butler does not engage Ricœur's concept of ethics, which is incomprehensible in view of the proximity of her concerns to those addressed in his works *Time and Narrative* (trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer; 3 vols.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984–1988) and *Oneself as Another*.

[7]Judith Butler, *Kritik der ethischen Gewalt* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003) 8. Parts of these lectures were published in English as *Giving an Account of Oneself: A Critique of Ethical Violence* (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 2003). The two texts, however, do not correspond precisely. I am grateful to Judith Butler for providing me with the English manuscript of her Adorno lectures, quotations from which I cite as "translation: English manuscript, J.B."

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000756 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> Wenn ich, wie ich das tue und tun muss, die Frage stelle: „Was soll ich tun?," dann muss zunächst einmal ein „Ich" entstanden sein, das sich zum Gegenstand seines eigenen Denkens nehmen kann . . . beziehe ich mich dann nicht immer schon auf eine soziale Welt, in der ganz bestimmte Arten von Optionen möglich sind und andere nicht?[8]

The tension between the self as an agent who must suspend her non-sovereignty in order to act and the recognition of the social derivation of the self is itself based on the possibility of self-reflection. According to Butler, Adorno and Foucault are both concerned to address the capacity of the self—despite all of the social normativity directed at it—to be more than just the product of adaptation to social norms and normalization. Both presuppose the loss of subject sovereignty. While Adorno insists on the necessity of reflecting on social conditions and the historicity of social norms,[9] Foucault is more interested in the self-relation of the socially constituted self. Moral agency, he claims, requires the "unity of an ethical life"—although this is not something a self could claim to "have" by way of being an agent. Instead, it is an open question, a challenge resulting in the self-reflective relation of the self and social norms.[10] This is the point at which Butler begins her inquiry: The normative force of the "social" is, in light of the process of self-constitution, based both on a struggle for recognition and on relationships based on recognition. The self, seeking and granting recognition, does so as a socially formed, non-sovereign "self" who does not herself determine the background constraints of social recognition. And yet, it is "diese Desorientierung der Perspektive meines Lebens, dieses Moment einer Indifferenz in der Gesellschaftlichkeit, das mein Leben stützt."[11]

Here, Butler departs from both inclusive and exclusive versions of the relation of ethics and morality. Agreeing with Foucault that human agency is related to the "unity of the ethical life," she considers both the teleological perspective and the temporality of the self-relation. It is in these two aspects that the coincidence of narrative identity and ethical identity is to be found. Butler uses the expression "to give an account of oneself" for this inherent relation between being responsible for one's actions and narration, the life-story. But in this dependence on narration, the rift within the self is revealed in its most radical way. At the root of the moral self, which is dependent on the concept of an agent who is accountable for her actions, the self must concede that the account of herself is not the account of *her self*. The agent is sub-jected to norms that she has not chosen but that nevertheless constrain

[8]Butler, *Kritik*, 8. "When I, as I do and must do, raise the question: 'What ought I to do?,' an 'I' must have first come into being, taking itself as the object of its reflection . . . do I not then refer to a social world, in which certain options are possible, and others are not?" (my translation).

[9]See Theodor W. Adorno, *Probleme der Moralphilosophie (1963)* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996).

[10]Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure* (vol. 2 of *The History of Sexuality*; trans. Robert Hurley; London: Penguin, 1990–1992). Compare Butler, *Kritik*, 27.

[11]Butler, *Kritik*, 48. "But it is, paradoxically, this interruption, this disorientation of the perspective of my life, this instance of an indifference in sociality, that sustains my living" (translation: English manuscript, J.B.).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000756 Published online by Cambridge University Press

her actions. She is not transparent to herself. She tells her story in dialogue with another person, and depending on whom she tells it to, when she tells it, and why she tells it, her "story" will turn out differently. All these stories together both tell and conceal *the self*'s story, which is in fact untellable:

> Wenn ich versuche, Rechenschaft von mir selbst zu geben, wenn ich versuche, mich anerkennbar und verständlich zu machen, dann kann ich mit einer narrativen Darstellung meines Lebens beginnen, aber diese Erzählung wird verschoben durch das, was nicht nur mir zugehört. Und bis zu einem gewissen Grad muss ich mich ersetzbar machen, um mich anerkennbar zu machen. Die narrative Autorität des „Ich" muss der Perspektivität und der Zeitlichkeit bestimmter Normen weichen, die die Singularität meiner Geschichte in Frage stellen.[12]

Every story of the self is thus preliminary and, in certain ways, fictitious. It is, as Butler says, too late—although it is equally correct to say, with Walter Benjamin, that it is too early, since the "true story" could only be told on one's deathbed, at the end of the self's future, which before this dead end of life always threatens to transform the momentarily *present* perspective. The authority of the narrator, Benjamin implies, is an authority derived from death: "What is the most wonderful aspect of a storyteller? He appears to be able to narrate his whole life; each narrative is just a fragment of his whole life."[13] Butler denies this authority to the self and, correspondingly, denies the sovereignty of narrative unity. Moral identity is of a provisional nature, and is thus the *rupture* of narrative unity rather than the confirmation of it.

The addressing of the self by the other is essential for the constitution of the self. The other inscribes "herself" into the self, long before the addressed self is able to respond in a self-reflective way. The self is expropriated by this addressing—yet at the same time, I myself can only be myself in and through this "subjectivation." Psychoanalysis revisits these scenes of self-development. More than anything else, it elucidates the *non-sovereignty* of the self as it is actualized in every relation.[14] Psychoanalysis and ethics converge in their reflections on the origins of the self:

[12]Ibid., 49–50. "If I try to give an account of myself, if I try to make myself recognizable and understandable, then I might begin with a narrative account of my life, but this narrative will be disoriented by what is not mine, or what is not mine alone. And I will, to some degree, have to make myself substitutable in order to make myself recognizable. The narrative authority of the 'I' must give way to the perspective and temporality of a set of norms that contest the singularity of my story" (translation: English manuscript, J.B.). Similarly, Butler states in Giving an Account: "When the 'I' seeks to give an account of itself, an account which must include the conditions of its own emergence, it must, as a matter of necessity, become a social theorist. . . . The 'I' is always to some extent dispossessed by the social conditions of its emergence" (12–13).

[13]"Was am Erzähler das Wunderbarste ist: dass er so wirkt als könne er sein ganzes Leben erzählen; alles Erzählte sei nur erst ein Stück seines ganzen Lebens." Walter Benjamin, "Anmerkungen zum *Erzähler*-Aufsatz," in *Gesammelte Schriften* (7 vols.; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980) 2.3:1285.

[14]Here Butler follows Laplanche, who stresses the "delay" of the reaction to the original overpowering of the child by the other (the mother). Compare Butler, *Kritik*, 63–65; and Thiem, "Unbecoming Subjects."

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000756 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> If the inaugural moments of the "I" are those in which I am implicated by the Other, the Other's address, the Other's demand, then there is some convergence between the ethical scene in which my life is, from the start, bound up with others, and the psychoanalytic scene that establishes the intersubjective conditions of my own emergence, individuation, and survivability.[15]

What, however, does this convergence of ethics and psychoanalysis mean? Is the "ethical arena" actually restricted to the "rendered account" required of me, and to that structure which enacts the speech-act of judgment by the other who is addressing me? Butler seeks to escape this reduction of ethics to accountability and the structure of judgment when she urges that—at the very least—the opacity of the self be taken into consideration by (mainstream) ethical reflection:

> Die Struktur der Adressierung liegt dem Fällen von Urteilen über jemanden oder dessen Handlungen zugrunde, sie lässt sich aber nicht auf das Urteil reduzieren; das Urteil neigt ohne Rücksicht auf die in der Struktur der Adressierung implizierte Ethik zur Gewalt.[16]

According to Butler, it is the question "Who are you?" that, precisely because it cannot be answered adequately, guarantees an ethical stance which transcends the common concept of accountability. This stance is rather the *maintenance* of the question of identity, the attempt to escape the (violent) structure of social judgment, which says, "You are this or that, and as such I either approve of you or I condemn you." A nonviolent approach to ethics, then, would attempt to escape this judgmental structure by leaving the question unanswered. The other can be determined to have a particular identity just as much as I can; and just as I must, so must she give an account of her actions—and yet, for the sake of a nonviolent ethics, this determination must be dismissed in favor of a radical indeterminacy of the self and the other alike. The "practice of nonviolence" that morality (as a struggle against violence) demands would accordingly favor the *rupture* of a coherent story over the self's claim to give a coherent account of herself, because any life-narrative could only be the result of an act of power and judgment. This rupture in the coherent life-story of the self would not, however, be the end of the self, but rather the end of the fiction of coherency, of transparency, and of a teleological account of identity.

Thus, in comparison to Ricœur, Butler is more radical in her assault on the unity of narrative and ethical identity. The horizon of the life-story—that is, the unity of different stories, though necessary for individuation and the maintenance of practical selfhood and social relations, the self-concept that cannot and nevertheless must

[15]Butler, *Giving an Account*, 42.

[16]Butler, *Kritik*, 76. The equivalent English passage in Butler's manuscript reads: "I'm preparing to make another such argument about making moral judgments as well, that the structure of address conditions the making of judgments about someone or his actions, but that it is not reducible to the judgment, and that the judgment unbeholden to the ethics implied by the structure of address, tends toward violence."

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000756 Published online by Cambridge University Press

be captured in language, in discourse, in the narrative of the biography—entails violence against the opacity of the self. Narrat*ing* and narrat*ed* self, thus, are not to be brought into convergence: each life-story is at the same time evidence of the impossibility of an "authentic" narrative of the self, and is entangled with the question of fiction as an inherent dimension of the self's story.

What becomes important for the concept of the *moral* self, however, is that from the ethical perspective of "giving an account of oneself," both the narrative and the failure of the narrative are addressed toward the *other*. Here, Butler's line of reasoning, as I have noted, emphasizes the proximity of ethics to psychoanalysis. The self-relation is not to be separated from the relation to the other. Referring to both Jean Laplanche's psychoanalysis and Levinas's ethics of responsibility, Butler holds that the other takes responsibility for the self in his or her existence. This non-neutrality of the relationship between the self and the other cannot be established in any kind of contractual or even discursive responsibility for the other. It is established much earlier, namely in the openness of the self to the impressions she receives in her exposure to the other.

> What might it mean to make an ethic from the region of the unwilled? It might mean that one does not foreclose upon that primary exposure to the Other, that one does not try to transform the unwilled into the willed, but to take the very unbearability of exposure as the sign, the reminder, of a common vulnerability, a common physicality, a common risk.[17]

Ethical responsibility would then be an attitude that, in reflecting upon the necessity of self-exposure, acknowledges and criticizes the inherent violence of self-constitution, the impregnation of the self by social norms in this process, and the inherent violence of any moral identity based on the narrative of the self. Humanity can only be upheld at the price of acknowledging an inherent *in*humanity in selfhood and even in ethics itself. What is pivotal for ethical reflection, then, is to distinguish unavoidable assaults and unavoidable atrocities from those violations that *can* be avoided.[18]

But is this position of acknowledging the violence accompanying self-constitution, and thus the paradoxical structure of sub-jectivation, sufficient for understanding the moral self? And is the "virtue of critique" in the face of unjustifiable violations in social relations sufficient to make the concept of accountability and responsibility workable? Can the convergence of self-interest *and* solicitude that Ricœur posits, which in social ethics is transferred to the concept of justice, be narrowed down in this manner? Is not a richer concept of responsibility needed, one that is closely linked to self-constitution, but nevertheless not identical to it?

[17]Butler, *Giving an Account*, 57–58.

[18]In her recent book *Precarious Life* (London: Verso, 2004), Butler not only analyzes the structure of judgment misusing the difference of the other in the service of an identity policy (construing the burka worn by Afghan women as a sign of their bondage, from which they are to be liberated by Western politicians and by military force, is just one striking example she gives), but also gives vast examples of *avoidable* violations to be met by ethical critique.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000756 Published online by Cambridge University Press

My own attempt to understand the implications of the shift in perspective from the self to the other leads me to differ with both Ricœur and Butler. While the former proposes "solicitude" as a "sense" of the other without, however, taking adequately into account the experience of exposure in the face of the other, the latter develops a view of ethics that still does not address the shift from self-constitution to the concept of responsibility (and not just accountability for one's own actions or even one's life)—a view that recognizes the other not so much as someone who requires a concrete "response," but rather as someone who exercises the power of definition over the self. One could certainly hold that this shift in perspective is implicitly presupposed by Butler, since the self-other relation is reciprocal; but this reciprocity needs to be interpreted in light of an ethical concept of responsibility that goes far beyond mere openness towards the other.

Therefore, I shall re-examine this ethic of responsibility, which proceeds from the non-sovereignty and passivity of the self as constituted by and through the other. While I do not mean to deny the relation of self-constitution to psychic, discursive, and social *development*, I am concerned primarily to elucidate its relation to the moral capacity of a fragile self.

Levinas's Responsible Self and the Death of the Other

Both Ricœur and Butler turn to Levinas as the reference point for their ethical concepts, and this is quite striking, since no one could be more opposed to an ethics grounded in care for the self than Levinas. He is neither concerned with the anxiety of the self for his or her own life (which lies at the base of every ethics of the good life), nor does he share the assumption of symmetry that is manifested as a contractual relationship or as a shared view of the "common good." Furthermore, the status of the social order is secondary in relation to the encounter with the other. In fact, "community" can, in a Levinasian ethics, only be conceived on the basis of the heterogeneity and alterity of the other.

Thus, although Levinas is Ricœur's central interlocutor in *Oneself as Another*, he is usually an adversary. This is true even at points of very close proximity between the two: Levinas does not share Ricœur's assumption that ethics is the spontaneous ethical striving for the good of oneself as well as for the good of the other. For Levinas, the (re)instatement of symmetry where asymmetry is caused by power relations is *not* the decisive moral moment. On the contrary, the self-provoking asymmetry, the asymmetry brought into being by the "face" of the other, is both the *occasion of* and *reason for* morality. Accordingly, unlike Ricœur, Levinas cannot speak of the priority of the ethical over the moral. Rather, he distances himself from an ethics that combines care for the self and care for the other by positing the absolute exteriority and alterity of the other. In this respect, Butler's starting point is actually much closer to Levinas's position than Ricœur's is. For Levinas, the other is beyond any appropriation and expropriation by the self. Levinas not only describes the phenomenological relation of self, other, and world by starting

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000756 Published online by Cambridge University Press

with the other, but also anchors his concept of responsibility in the encounter with the other. In both "Time and the Other" and "Death and Time,"[19] it is apparent that Levinas approaches responsibility from the starting point of the "death of the other," a motif that I shall refer to as the "structure of the adieu," to emphasize the *temporal* nature of the encounter with the other. It is this choice of the death of the other as starting point that explains the transition from mere self-constitution by way of the other to the specific conception of the *moral* self.[20]

The self-centeredness of the human self—*conatus essendi* as the persistence of being or, ethically speaking, Heidegger's *Selbstsorge*—is problematic for Levinas, a solitary identity in a state of "enchainment to itself."[21] As long as the self can take on every "external thing" and every "other" only by means of its own sameness, in the modality of being, the self is sovereign but also alone:

> The subject is alone because it is one. A solitude is necessary in order for there to be a freedom of beginning, the existent's mastery over existing—that is, in brief, in order for there to be an existent. Solitude is thus not only a despair and an abandonment, but also a virility, a pride and a sovereignty.[22]

And yet, the self (in the Levinasian understanding of the term) can only come into temporal existent[23] by transcending this specific self-centered solitude and timelessness, because "solitude is an absence of time."[24] In contrast to subject-philosophy, however, it is not self-reflection that enables the self to transcend itself and reach the other-world. Self-transcendence occurs only and exclusively—and this is Levinas's fundamental conviction—beyond the self and his or her capacity of agency.[25] But what is it that enables the "self" to transcend its solitude at the price of sovereignty?

Loss of self-sovereignty can be understood as an "event" or *Widerfahrnis,*[26] an occurrence that befalls the passive and non-initiating self. For any self, this loss of

[19]I refer, above all, to these two texts, as well as to *Otherwise Than Being, or, Beyond Essence* (trans. Alphonso Lingis; Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), which also may be numbered among the principle works of Levinas. I hold, however, that his approach to the moral self is already expressed in "Time and the Other" and "Death and Time."

[20]For Levinas, of course, the *à-Dieu* also refers to the religious structure or lineage of the relationship to self. In this respect the structure of responsibility is by no means the final word, nor is it even the central word. It is in this existence "by," "for," and "before" God that theology is situated and to be interpreted.

[21]Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other and Additional Essays* (trans. Richard A. Cohen; Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987) 55.

[22]Ibid.

[23]Levinas distinguishes himself from existence philosophy, and hence uses the term "existent" instead of "existence" to designate the temporal identity of a self, transcending the "sameness" of existence.

[24]Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 57.

[25]"In order for there to be an existent in this anonymous existing, it is necessary that a departure from self and a return to self—that is, that the very work of identity—becomes possible. Through its identification the existent is already closed up upon itself; it is a monad and a solitude" (ibid., 52).

[26]I use the German term *Widerfahrnis*, which connotes passivity and non-sovereignty, to denote

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000756 Published online by Cambridge University Press

control is threatening, but it can assume different forms. One form, surely negative, is *suffering*—pain which can be linked to existential self-alienation, and which in its extreme forms is experienced as radical mortality. The *threat* of one's own death is all the self can ever know about death: for death itself, there is neither an "experience" nor a concept; it is pure im-possibility, alterity.[27] If death is anticipated in suffering, it cannot be "taken upon," maintains Levinas, in opposition to Heidegger; it always overpowers.

> Death in Heidegger is an event of freedom, whereas for me the subject seems to reach the limit of the possible in suffering. It finds itself enchained, overwhelmed, and in some way passive. Death is in this sense the limit of idealism.[28]

Suffering is the most extreme form of self-attachment and hence the opposite of responsibility: "The content of suffering merges with the impossibility of detaching oneself from suffering. . . . It is the fact of being directly exposed to being."[29] The impossibility of even caring for oneself in the experience of suffering reduces the sovereign, solitary self to a "state of irresponsibility, the infantile shaking of sobbing."[30]

In addition to suffering, Levinas considers the erotic encounter with another person as another "event" whereby solitude is overcome. Eros, or erotic love, the sensuality of touch and closeness, of the skin of another person, is *Widerfahrnis* that does not jeopardize the self-centered self as suffering does, but still changes his or her "being in the world": "Love is not a possibility, is not due to our initiative, is without reason; it invades and wounds us, and nevertheless the *I* survives in it."[31] In sensual proximity to and with the other—before any intention (in the sense of appropriation) in which a yearning for presence is revealed, a presence which nevertheless cannot be found—the "self" not only experiences the other, but also at the same time experiences the alterity of the other, the non-simultaneity of him- or herself with the other.[32] Still further, the unattainability of the other's presence, the "unavoidable delay" on which a perpetual restlessness, a *desire*, feeds, is at the same time also the experience of the transience of time, an "adieu" to the

---

the specific type of experience Levinas speaks of. Levinas associated the *Widerfahrnis* of suffering with mystery: "The unknown of death signifies that the very relationship with death cannot take place in the light, that the subject is in relationship with what does not come from itself. We could say it is in relationship with mystery" (ibid., 70).

[27]Ibid., 68–71.

[28]Ibid., 71.

[29]Ibid.

[30]Ibid., 72

[31]Ibid., 89.

[32]That is, Levinas seeks a way which is neither an *ap*-propriation (in the sense of a "taking-over") of the other, nor an ecstatic fusion with the Same. The other requires, rather, in order to be the other, a distinction insurmountable by the self. Compare Alain Finkielkraut, *La sagesse de l'amour* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984). In *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas expressly includes speaking as a form of touching.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000756 Published online by Cambridge University Press

experience of the moment. The in-congruence of the self and the other, as experienced in the erotic encounter, is the origin of temporality itself out of negativity: an experiencing of the *non*simultaneity of the self and the other and the *ir*reversibility of the moment—the very opposite of the notion of erotic love as fusion:

> The relationship with the other is absence of the other; not absence pure and simple, not the absence of pure nothingness, but absence in a horizon of the future, an absence that is time. This is the horizon where a personal life can be constituted in the heart of the transcendent event, what I called above the "victory over death."[33]

In the sensory "event," the self initially encounters the face of the other as a kind of "object of the world," as a phenomenon. At the same time, however, the self encounters the face as expression, as an expression of nakedness and vulnerability. The Hebrew word *pānîm* ("face") signifies not only the kernel of individual personhood, but also a surface that is specifically naked in terms of *exposure*, a face that does not lie and can feign nothing. Here Butler and Levinas closely agree: In the relationship of self and other, the self is exposed as a face that is not transparent, but rather impressionable by the other. In and on the face of the other is inscribed the temporality that is constitutive for the structure of the adieu. On the face, time itself is signified *in* nakedness. Death, which has not yet occurred, nevertheless leaves a trace, just as a wrinkle in the skin reminds one of future death. Age is the sign of time, the sign of transience and of mortality. In the closeness of the touch, in the "face-to-face-ness" of the encounter, which never really reaches the other, there is—even worse than this non-presence—the farewell, the adieu, the unavoidable mortality, the future death of the contemporary other. Self-transcendence thus occurs when the self is "touched" by and through the face of the other in an erotic or loving experience.

While Butler concentrates on the "impressionability" of the self by the other, Levinas reverses the perspective. The self "sees" the nakedness of the face of the other, "sees" the nakedness *in* the face of the other. This shift in perspective is, in the end, crucial for the broader development of the structure of responsibility. It is not *one's own* anticipated death (as in Heidegger's *Sein zum Tode*) that is the "event" which turns self-centeredness into responsibility, but the death of the *other*, whereby the self comes *into (moral) existence*—is constituted as *moral self*, in response to and responsible for the other:[34]

[33]Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 90.

[34]In psychoanalysis, at least, there is the understanding of the priority of the death of the other over personal death. Jean Laplanche offers a hint: "I would say that the question of the enigma of death is brought to the subject by the other. That is, it is the other's death that raises the question of death. Not the existentialist question, 'Why should I die?' The question 'Why should I die' is secondary to the question 'Why should the other die?,' 'Why did the other die?,' and so on" (Cathy Caruth, "Interview with Jean Laplanche [23 October 1994]," *Postmodern Culture* 11.2 [2001], http://www.iath.virginia.edu/pmc/text-only/issue.101/11.2caruth.txt). My thanks to Annika Thiem for this reference.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000756 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> Dying, as the dying of the other [*l'autre*], affects my identity as 'I' [*moi*]; it is meaningful in its rupture with the Same, its rupture of my 'I' [*moi*], its rupture of the Same in my 'I' [*moi*].[35]
>
> The love of the other is the emotion of the other's death. It is my receiving the other—and not the anxiety of death awaiting me—that is the reference to death. We encounter death in the face of the other.[36]

Hence, the encounter with the other is an encounter with time, expressed in the vulnerable, mortal face calling for the self's response:

> Someone who expresses himself in his nudity—the face—is one to the point of appealing to me, of placing himself under my responsibility: Henceforth, I have to respond for him. . . . The other individuates me in the responsibility I have for him. The death of the other who dies affects me in my very identity as a responsible "me" [*moi*]; it affects me in my nonsubstantial identity, which is not the simple coherence of various acts of identification, but is made up of an ineffable responsibility.[37]

Not *playful* desiring of the other but rather *caring* love—which, like erotic love, is grounded in the "face-to-face" encounter—is the unexplainable event leading both to the moral concept of the self, by integrating non-sovereignty and the character of *Widerfahrnis*, and to temporality, by way of the structure of the adieu. Caring love or *responsibility* means that the self cherishes a greater care for and concern for the other than for him- or herself. Indeed, if the structure of the adieu is not considered in this encounter, then the concept of responsibility remains vague and even somewhat arbitrary.

In his later writings, Levinas increases the seriousness of responsibility by calling it an *ob*-session of the self by the other or the other's well-being, a sacrifice, a responsibility that no one can undertake in my place.[38] What these terms have in common is a sense of urgency, lest the decisive moment of action be missed—but they also imply a certain violence in their description of the impact on the self. While this terminology has led many to resist his radical reconfiguration of the self-other encounter, Levinas himself was convinced that the encounter with the other must not be regarded as undue, or threatening, or even as a violent intervention into one's freedom and autonomy by the other, but as the "individuation of the

[35]Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time* (trans. Bettina Bergo; Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000) 13. Compare p. 12: "The death of the other who dies affects me in my very identity as a responsible 'me' [*moi*]; it affects me in my nonsubstantial identity, which is not the simple coherence of various acts of identification, but is made up of an ineffable responsibility."

[36]Ibid., 105.

[37]Ibid., 12.

[38]A thorough analysis must examine these hyperbolic rhetorical phrases, which have provided the strongest reasons for the "condemnation" of the Levinasian ethic. This criticism, raised especially from a feminist perspective, is correct but nevertheless fails to acknowledge Levinas's departure from a "mainstream" ethics of autonomy, which was also criticized by feminist ethics unless grounded in a much deeper understanding of *relational* personhood and dependency than libertarians tend to acknowledge. For my critique of Levinas's ethics, see below.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000756 Published online by Cambridge University Press

self" as moral self, who takes on the responsibility for the other to be taken *care* of. He was also convinced that only a radical rupture of the solitarily existing self can turn "existence" into "existent." The shift from mere "being" to "existent" as synonym for the moral self cannot, as we have seen, be logically deduced or even explained; it rests upon an openness of the self to the passive "event" or *Widerfahrnis* of and in the encounter with the other. Its roots lie in the dialectical experience of passively being addressed and actively wishing to respond to the other's request for the self to care about him or her. And since this response cannot be generalized or even transferred to someone else, given the individual and specific nature of the *Widerfahrnis*, the self is *not free* to be or become a moral self. And yet the necessarily *moral* self *is* free to choose whether to assume responsibility by acting according to the need of the other.[39]

Levinas revisited the turning point from *being* to *responsibility* over and over again, although the specific interrelation of this turn with the concept of temporality must be emphasized more strongly than it was by his first readers.[40] Nevertheless, it is important to stress that it is very well possible, as Ricœur reminds us, that the other might indeed ask the self for a response that is undue, threatening, or violent. Levinas ignored this objection at first but finally answered it by introducing the perspective of the "third." He concedes that his perspective on the moral self might lead one to ignore one-sided, unjustified, or violent relations of responsibility. These are rather the result of the asymmetry of (social) *power* than of the asymmetry of responsibility, and thus an ethics of responsibility must take into account equality, reciprocity, and justice. Levinas does not deny that these features are necessary for the construction of a theory of ethics, but he does deny that they can be taken as the starting point, or rather as the occasion of and reason for morality.[41] It is only at this second step, however, that most ethical theories, including that of Ricœur, begin. In light of what Levinas teaches us about the character of *Widerfahrnis*, solicitude, care, and com-passion are not phenomena that originate in a striving towards the good for oneself and for the other, comparable to an innate moral sense; rather, they are already the result of the *Widerfahrnis* of the other addressing the self and asking for a response. The self develops a self-identity only through being addressed by the other, as is shown in developmental psychology, in the Hegelian tradition of the social self (as this is taken up G. H. Mead), and somewhat differently in Butler's analysis of the social self. Levinas, however, is not interested

[39]There is, of course, the danger of misinterpreting the actual "need" of the other and acting paternalistically. Here, the violent structure of the self-other encounter returns, and must be addressed by the "responsible self." I am grateful to Annika Thiem for several discussions on this matter.

[40]For a thorough study of the relation of Levinas and Heidegger from a feminist perspective, see Tina Chanter, *Time, Death, and the Feminine: Levinas with Heidegger* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001).

[41]See Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other* (trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav; New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); and idem, *Die Spur des Anderen: Untersuchungen zur Phänomenologie und Sozialphilosophie* (ed. and trans. Wolfgang Nikolaus Krewani; Freiburg im Breisgau: Alber, 1983) .

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000756 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in this *development* of the self as a self, but starts by considering the experience of the exposition of the self in the "event" of the encounter with the other. With regard to ethical concepts of moral agency, he claims that the "atomic" solitude of a "non-existent," chained-to-itself "self" is wrongly considered the central focus in theories of the *moral* self.

The merit of Levinas is that he has elucidated the dialectic of necessity and freedom with respect to the moral self. But even as we appreciate his tremendous contribution to a better understanding of what it means to be moral, we must note that, from an ethical point of view, his reflections about the other *as* other are strangely ahistorical and abstract. They are developed almost exclusively as a phenomenological concept, without properly taking into consideration the content of ethical theory. This critique is also applicable, perhaps even *particularly* applicable, with regard to the thorough analysis of ethical problems. It is striking that in Levinas's writings, the central category of his ethical approach—the other—remains oddly abstract and faceless (which, curiously, is not the sense communicated by the Hebrew word *pānîm*), while in other contemporary ethical theories, the other has been taken seriously as the "concrete Other," and as such a historically mediated category it has been introduced as complementary to universal respect.[42] Levinas's reflections on the other as an ethical concept are not wide-ranging enough, as evidenced by the underdeveloped role of justice or of institutions in his thought.

A further critique of Levinas's approach addresses not his rejection of the "autonomous self" as a presupposition of moral theory, but the nature of the event (*Widerfahrnis*) that characterizes the moral encounter. Certainly, his understanding of the "event" is valuable to an experiential, even phenomenological analysis of a "self" that is disturbed by an encounter with the other and thereby urged to transform her view of the world. But is the arbitrariness of such an encounter a sufficient basis for the concept of responsibility? Does not the latter require a self who is able to put some distance between herself and her actions, as well as between herself and others? Contrary to Levinas, Foucault and Adorno have shown that responsibility requires a self-reflective self; yet Foucault and Adorno also emphasize that this self is not at all to be identified with the atomic, "free" subject that the ethical tradition of the modern West has stressed. There are historical reasons, however, for the emergence of this "autonomous," unencumbered self, as well as for the rise of liberal concepts of ethics that seek, in the wake of modernity, to strengthen the concept of autonomy over against social (and religious) norms.[43] Today, given the triumph of individual autonomy in contemporary ethics, it is still necessary to answer the question of *which* responses (or obligations) can be justified of the self, and which cannot. For this reason, a normative theory of ethics that takes into

[42]See Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

[43]See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000756 Published online by Cambridge University Press

consideration its own close connection to violent (social) norms is indispensable, and it is the task of a critical ethics to expose this connection. Nevertheless, ethics must have two perspectives: the subjective, partial, and concrete perspective of the agent who is addressed by the other and pledged to respond; and the universal perspective of the "third party," namely the institution of justice. Without the second perspective, we cannot distinguish between the legitimate authority of the other and the threatening, life-taking, violent power of the other over the self, which morality must fight against.

But Levinas also urges us to see the structure of the adieu as an inherent dimension of, indeed as a key to understanding, the excessive, asymmetrical responsibility for the other. Morality and responsibility, then, are deeply rooted in the acknowledgment of temporality and historicity, and, finally, of mortality. Whereas other thinkers, especially religious ethicists, have emphasized mortality or even finitude as the horizon of human existence, it is not abstract finitude as such that matters, according to Levinas. Rather, it is the concrete death of the other (grounded in alterity and linked to infinity) that provokes the urgency of the self's response, and that is the key to the shift from mere "being" to the moral self.

The Alterity of Death and the Ethics of Remembrance

Jacques Derrida is one of the few philosophers who have taken up Levinas's topic of the "death of the other" and the structure of the adieu, in his books *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* and *The Gift of Death*.[44] *Adieu* is Derrida's farewell to Levinas, a final valediction at his funeral on 27 December 1995. Derrida's speech was a public—and later published—act of bidding farewell, but one that nonetheless borders on the intimacy of a long friendship. Derrida devotes this text to the mentor who taught him the threefold meaning of adieu. It may signify a greeting or a farewell, as well as the blessing of a friend at death. But adieu is also for Levinas the *à-Dieu*, and this is the sense in which it is appropriated by Derrida: "for God and before God and before anything else or any relation to the other, in every other adieu." This structure of the adieu underlies every kind of relation and has, according to Derrida, far-reaching consequences: "Every relation to the other would be, before and after anything else, an adieu."[45]

Derrida clearly evokes the moment of transition from the "presence" of a friend to remembrance of the *passed presence*, the past. He re-calls Levinas,[46] but at the same time he inscribes *himself* into the calling, interpreting himself, his own self, by the call. He, Derrida, is (re-)calling the other, but it is nevertheless the "other," Levinas, who speaks at his farewell—in the quotation of his friend. In

[44]Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (trans. David Wills; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); and idem, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* (trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas; Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999).

[45]Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 47.

[46]The German word for such a valediction is *Nachruf*, literally a "calling after" someone.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000756 Published online by Cambridge University Press

this embeddedness of the other in the speaker's words, the structure of the adieu is presented in a rhetorical manner. For if "every relation" is "before and after anything else, an adieu," and if the structure of the adieu establishes the *moral* dimension of the self-other relation not as a Hegelian struggle for recognition, but as the responsibility of the self for the other, then this structure is revealed in its most extreme form on the occasion of the death of the other, the *final* adieu: The living person is the only *possible* subject who can recall the life of the other. He or she is thus the *irreplaceable* bearer of the responsibility to maintain the presence of the dead in (historical) memory. Derrida follows this understanding in his text: He, Derrida, continues to bear a responsibility toward his friend, but the responsibility-as-care for the friend has been replaced by responsibility-as-remembrance. The death of the other reveals the structure of responsibility in its extremest form.

Even as it confers the responsibility to remember the dead, death nevertheless confirms the incapacity of the moral self. In the final adieu, the self may experience the most radical limit of sovereignty and "control" over life. Death is indeed the experience of total impotence, as Levinas claimed, but it is also the event (*Widerfahrnis*) with the potential to individuate the self as moral self. And, as we have seen above, to define the future in which death will occur—and, hence, temporality—in terms of the other is to turn the ethical perspective from self-preservation to care for the other.

Just as, in the encounter with the other, the promise to care is a "protest," a resistance against death, so is mourning itself also a resistance to giving in to mortality, finitude, and death. For the mourner, there is no appeasement, no reconciliation. Nor can she find a soothing balance between recollection, which keeps the dead present, and forgetting, which is necessary for the mourner to continue living. Indeed, as a mourner, she may even *wish* that the wound of loss will not heal, while as an agent, she needs oblivion, the scarring of the wound, to be able to continue to live and act.

But again, considered from an ethical perspective, and especially in view of Levinas's highly rhetorical emphasis on the death of the other and the pervasive structure of the adieu, it is strange that not only the role of the other in history, but also of those who throughout history have died by violence, remains remarkably underdefined in his writings, even though his thinking is deeply rooted in the experience of the Shoah. Levinas does not, however, clarify the status of the traumatizing experiences of the twentieth century's genocides and the Shoah; it is rather an underlying presupposition, a backdrop against which his writings are to be understood.[47] Not only with respect to the concrete other, but also with respect to the structure of the adieu, a historical and political concretization is therefore required, a concretization

[47]Levinas's understanding of the experience of death as the death of the other corresponds to Merleau-Ponty's description of trauma as the impossibility of time. Levinas was surely aware of this connection, but he takes it as ontological description. In trauma, time is abolished. It has congealed into an absolute present—a description that corresponds to the understanding of "being" by Levinas. On a more psychological level, this interrelation of trauma and "being" also sheds some light on Levinas's early essay "Time and the Other," which was so important for him (compare Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* [trans. Colin Smith; New York: Routledge, 2002]).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000756 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that would have to reflect upon the relation of ethics and the (concrete, historical) death of the other. What has been said about the distinction between avoidable and unavoidable violence with regard to the constitution of the self must be repeated here: the distinction between the unavoidable death of the other and the *avoidable*, violent death of the other becomes pivotal for and in ethical judgment.

Responsibility as care and responsibility as memory are both initiated in the *Widerfahrnis*, the passive experience of being touched by another person or being. On the basis of this passivity, however, care and memory are to be seen as reflective responses to the initial experience. Ethical memory is thus neither spontaneous nor neutral.[48] It is, first of all, the normative claim not to forget. Such a claim can only be situated historically. It can only be put forward historically, and it can only be fulfilled at a specific historical time.[49]

Today, we are awash in information streaming from media sources, and we are well informed of the cultural and political histories of moral evil and violated rights that have accompanied our age of globalization and accelerated development. Yet this surplus of information is in danger of becoming meaningless, for it is disconnected from any moral action on the part of the addressees of that information. Current international indifference about the well-publicized genocide in Sudan is but the latest example of such disconnection. Indeed, the risk that those who witness atrocities as bystanders will *forget* is higher than the risk that the victims of those atrocities will be paralyzed by memory. The literary reconfiguration of historical violence and injustice by means of the "crossed reference" of reality and fiction can alleviate both risks: it can be a reminder of the responsibility borne by those who might be too willing to forget; and it may be a way of articulating the collective memory of those who cannot forget. Narrative may thus become an ethical practice in and of itself, a medium of and for ethical reflection, with respect to responsibility not only as care-for-the-other but also as remembrance. If narrative is necessarily retrospective rather than prospective, given its specific relation to time, then ethical reflection that is grounded in narrative is relevant not only to the general concept of ethics and morality, but even more so to an ethics of remembrance.[50]

Nelly Sachs is one of the few poets who preserved the memory of the victims of the Shoah in their writing after 1945. Sachs, a Jew, escaped to Sweden in 1940. In a cycle of poems titled "Epitaphs—Written into the Air," she remembers persons she knew before they were murdered. Within that cycle, the "Chor der Tröster" is a striking example of mnemosynic ethical practice within literature. (For the text and an English translation of the poem, see pp. 378–79, below.)

[48]Here I follow Burkhard Liebsch, *Geschichte als Antwort und Versprechen* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Alber, 1999); and idem, *Trauer und Geschichte* (ed. idem and Jörn Rüsen; Köln: Böhlau, 2001).

[49]For an interpretation of Walter Benjamin's theory of memory and its consequences for an ethics of memory, see Haker, *Moralische Identität*.

[50]See, for example, Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000756 Published online by Cambridge University Press

It is not by chance that Sachs places such emphasis on the question, "Who of us may comfort?"[51] Perhaps this question, especially if it is posed with regard to the theological significance of the Shoah, results in the questioning—and collapse—of theodicy. In *lyric* speech, all that remains is the poet who echoes religious tradition. The poem evokes the cherub, which in Jewish-Christian tradition is a figure that protects God against enemies and honors him; in the poem, however, the cherub is protecting the dead, receiving the "lightnings of sorrow." In this metaphor, the poem describes what historical memory is—or, rather, could be—through the figure of the poet: a flowerless gardener, a singer without healing power. The poem cannot heal, it can only mourn. It watches the cherub and keeps present his actions. In the biblical context, the cherub is a mediator between heaven and earth, and has, for example, the task of guarding the entrance to paradise in Genesis; cherubs also function as God's divine chariot in the book of Ezekiel. Nelly Sachs's cherub, however, is not God's guard, but rather another "angel of history," along with that of Walter Benjamin: an angel grinding the lightnings of sorrow with his wings, without any apparent purpose, transforming the lightnings of sorrow but yet leaving open the cleft between past and future, "like the edges of a wound, which must remain open, that may not yet heal."

If poetry or literature as a whole (as well as other forms of artistic expression, especially visual art, dance, or music) may be reminders of the death of the other, and thereby reminders of the specific responsibility to remember historical violence and injustice, then ethical reflection should strive to use these kinds of aesthetic practices as models for moral practice. In the "crossed reference" of aesthetics and ethics, it might be possible for the moral self to endure the tension by which it is torn apart: on the one hand, the moral self faces its own indifference towards the other, which stems from melancholy and a reluctance to take action; on the other hand, it faces the inexplicable ambiguity of responsibility as both care and memory, which always runs the risk of *violating* either the other in his or her otherness or the self in his or her autonomy. While this tension and ambiguity of moral agency is *articulated* in literary works, it can only be *addressed* in the self-reflectivity of the moral self.

Therefore, the role of narrative goes far beyond being a constitutive part of self-identity. The self—who is indeed, as Butler and Ricœur claimed, dependent on the narratives of others, as well as on self-narratives, to develop or uphold an identity over time—is likewise dependent on narrative as a *moral* self, questioning moral convictions and visions of the "other" from the point of view of the self as sameness. It is also dependent on narrative (and on literary reflection as a part of

[51]I thank Ria van den Brandt for her interpretation of the complete text and many further comments. See her "Nimègue: la trace de la blessure et le chérubin dans le "Chœur des consolateurs" de Nelly Sachs," in *La trace: Entre absence et présence, actes du colloque international de Metz* (ed. Pierre-Marie Beaude, Jacques Fantino, Marie-Anne Vannier, and Erik Borgman; Paris: Cerf, 2004).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000756 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Chor der Tröster

Gärtner sind wir, blumenlos gewordene
Kein Heilkraut lässt sich pflanzen
Von Gestern nach Morgen
Der Salbei hat abgeblüht in den Wiegen—
Rosmarin seinen Duft im Angesicht der neuen Toten verloren—
Selbst der Wermut war bitter nur für gestern.
Die Blüten der Trostes sind zu kurz entsprossen
Reichen nicht für die Qual einer Kinderträne.

Neuer Same wird vielleicht
Im Herzen eines nächtlichen Sängers gezogen.
Wer von uns darf trösten?
In der Tiefe des Hohlwegs
Zwischen Gestern und Morgen
Steht der Cherub
Mahlt mit seinen Flügeln die Blitze der Trauer
Seine Hände aber halten die Felsen auseinander
Von Gestern und Morgen
Wie die Ränder einer Wunde
Die offenbleiben soll
Die noch nicht heilen darf.

Nicht einschlafen lassen die Blitze der Trauer
Das Feld des Vergessens.

Wer von uns darf trösten?

Gärtner sind wir, blumenlos gewordene
Und stehen auf einem Stern, der strahlt
Und weinen.

.

German text of "Chor der Tröster," from *Fahrt ins Staublose: Gedichte* by Nelly Sachs. Reprinted by permission of Suhrkamp Verlag.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000756 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Chorus of Comforters

We are gardeners who have no flowers.
No herb may be transplanted
from yesterday to tomorrow.
The sage has faded in the cradles—
Rosemary lost its scent facing the new dead—
Even wormwood was only bitter yesterday.
The blossoms of comfort are too small
Not enough for the torment of a child's tear.

New seed may perhaps be gathered
In the heart of a nocturnal singer.
Which of us may comfort?
In the depths of the defile
Between yesterday and tomorrow
The cherub stands
Grinding the lightnings of sorrow with his wings
But his hands hold apart the rocks
Of yesterday and tomorrow
Like the edges of a wound
Which must remain open
That may not yet heal.

The lightnings of sorrow do not allow
The field of forgetting to fall asleep.

Which of us may comfort?

We are gardeners who have no flowers
And stand upon a shining star
And weep.

"Chorus of Comforters" from *The Seeker and Other Poems* by Nelly Sachs, translated by Ruth and Matthew Mead and Michael Hamburger. Translation copyright © 1970 by Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, LLC.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000756 Published online by Cambridge University Press

narratives and works of art) in order to explore the possibilities of agency, as well as its limits. Finally, the self is dependent on narrative in order to question ethical theory that is insensitive to concrete situations, moral conflicts, and the "fragility of goodness," to borrow Martha Nussbaum's term.[52] Thus, what is expressed through the medium of narrative is the impossibility of overcoming the tension between speaking and keeping silent, between agency and non-agency (by way of passivity or suffering), between being oneself *and* another, between fragility and sovereignty, between forgetting and memory, and finally between life and death. In contrast to Aristotelian, teleological narratives of events (as in historical novels) or of individual lives (as in the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman*), several other forms of narrative have emerged in the last century, and the deeply self-reflexive narratives of modern and postmodern literature have become the rule rather than the exception. Such narratives are deeply grounded in the (particularly *modern*) acknowledgment that representation of "reality" is possible only by way of construction, and that a simple concept of mimesis is not sufficient. The most intriguing works of art are those that challenge and question a view of the world that the reader, spectator, or auditor might have held before entering the "world" of a narrative or of a specific aesthetic perspective, which displaces "reality" just a little bit, and thereby raising it to consciousness.[53] Certainly, in the globalized world of the twenty-first century, literature's role will be Aristotelian insofar as it preserves particular perspectives on individual lives, histories, cultures, and languages alike, all of which are ways of mediating the encounter of the self and the other. At the same time, however, literature will also be a means for exploring the abyss of the self and human existence, the exposition, nudity, and alterity of human life itself. The role of narrative or "story-telling" must be reconsidered outside the framework of teleology and metaphors of the "unity of life."

Perhaps the role of narrative will prove to be more modest than I have suggested; nevertheless, narrative is much more relevant for ethical reflection than has been claimed in discussions of the ethics and aesthetics of the good life. Especially at a time when our information surplus threatens to disconnect the awareness of violence and injustice from moral action, the relation of historical reality and literary imagination becomes urgent. In *telling* and bearing witness to those wounds that correspond with historical events and not just with mortality abstractly conceived—wounds that *have been* and *are now being* unjustly inflicted on the self and on the other—stories rebel against the passage of time, against forgetting, and against death. Furthermore, narrative and morality may be *united* in their rebellion against (moral) indifference:

[52]See Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); and eadem, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon, 1995). For a more comprehensive study of the relation, see Haker, *Moralische Identität*, and eadem, "Ban graven images: Literatur als Medium ethischer Reflexion," in *Literatur ohne Moral: Literaturwissenschaften und Ethik im Gespräch* (ed. Christoph Mandry; Muenster: LIT, 2003) 67–83.

[53]Franz Kafka, for example, was a master of such displacement.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000756 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Insofar as literature is aroused by injustice as well as by the need to remember the dead—and especially insofar as it is aroused by unjust deaths—literature will keep open the wound of death. Likewise, in being moral, the self will accept responsibility for others, striving to remain critically aware of the ethical violence inherent within the agency of moral judgment.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816004000756 Published online by Cambridge University Press