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Drink Responsibly: On Morality and Perversion

When my daughter was two and a half years old, I asked our pediatrician how to go about potty training. While I felt my child was ready for this next developmental task, I also dreaded the fact of imposing my will on her body and its processes. The pediatrician assured me there was an array of popular "baby-led" techniques that were gentle and respectful of a child's budding agency, but no matter what I read, I simply couldn't shake the sense that for toileting (as it's now often called) to work, I needed to make my toddler understand there was a right thing (using the potty) versus a wrong thing (using her diaper) and the success of "training" depended on her mastery of this distinction. Not only did the sensibilities of modern parenting chafe against the crude economy of toileting but I found the rhetoric of "baby-led" quite unconvincing. My daughter had no interest in the potty; it was *I* who did because the preschool we applied to had *required* it, and it felt dishonest to pretend I wasn't forcing her to do something she didn't want to do.

In 1925, the Hungarian psychoanalyst Sandor Ferenczi coined the term "sphincter-morality" to describe what happens to children when their

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"instinct to evacuate" confronts "the earliest social demands" (267). Based on his observation of patients, Ferenczi observed that a "severe sphincter-morality is set up which can only be contravened at the cost of bitter self-reproaches and punishment by conscience" because the "establishment of control over the sphincters requires constant vigilance and attention to sensations of tension, and strict adherence to an explicit code of behavior based on the subjective assessment of tension states [. . .]. [T]he primordial moral code is quite severe because of its physiological nature" (qtd. in Brickman 87). In fact, Ferenczi continues, "it is by no means improbable that this, as yet semi-physiological, morality forms the essential groundwork of later purely mental morality" (267).

In a series of lectures on morality from 1963, Theodor Adorno begins by observing that the "resistance we feel towards the word 'morality' nowadays" (13) "is based on the fact that we all chafe at the narrow limitations imposed by prevailing ideas and existing circumstances and resent the assumption that these in some sense already embody the good life" (10). Adorno opens *Problems of Moral Philosophy* by tracing our widespread "resistance" toward morality to Nietzsche's hugely influential rebuke; Nietzsche showed that the "concept of morality has been severely compromised by the fact that, consciously or unconsciously, it carries around a lot of baggage in the shape of 'ascetic ideals.' Furthermore, it is not really possible to find any justification, or at least any profoundly rational justification for these ideals; they are no more than a front behind which all sorts of more or less murky interests lie entrenched" (Adorno 13). While Adorno treats our distaste for morality as a distinct historical phenomenon that owes its popularity to Nietzsche's influential critique (1887), Ferenczi's linking of morality to the "bitter self-reproaches" involved in learning anal-urethral control suggests that our resistance is not a historical phenomenon but something we struggle with since the ordinary oppressions of early childhood. The differing interpretations are less important than what they have in common, which is an indictment of the brutal and self-recriminating process through which a moral "conscience" is acquired.

Indeed, it is precisely because of their sensitivity to the violence through which morality develops that both Ferenczi and Adorno are left wondering about the alternatives to moral self-consciousness. Is all morality "sphincter-morality"? And if so, what kind of behavioral norms can possibly replace it? While Ferenczi is clear that the patient's moralistic harshness should *not* be indulged by a therapist—he writes, in a footnote, that "nothing is farther from the psycho-analyst's intention than to play the part of

omnipotent dictator or to indulge sadistic severity" (266)—Adorno resists the impulse to soften morality's commands by encouraging people "to be yourself and to be identical with yourself" (14). While Adorno is sympathetic to those who no longer wish to "equate the moral with a restricted, narrow and superseded ascetic ideal," he emphatically insists that current "attempts to replace the term 'morality' with 'ethics' are equally problematic since relying on one's subjective 'personality' as the 'yardstick of behavior'" merely sidesteps the tension between "individual interests [. . .] and some sort of objective norms binding mankind as a whole." Going so far as to call ethics "the bad conscience of conscience" (15), Adorno's scorn for replacing morality with a retreat into "personal" sensibilities prefigures contemporary debates about the role of morality in sexual life.

Perhaps nowhere is this debate more clearly exemplified than in contemporary queer theory, where the field's early and constitutive opposition to norms has given way to a more complicated reflection on the relationship between ethics and sexuality. As Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth Wilson have famously observed (in the pages of this journal), the radical clout of queer theory derives in no small part from its spirited and robust eschewal of norms as fundamentally inimical to liberated sexuality (12). This field-wide "common sense" has meant that while other fields have tried to salvage a definition of norms beyond Nietzsche's damning indictment,[1] queer theory has remained caught in spirals of "oppositionality (against, against, against) that form the infrastructure of the repressive hypothesis." Assessing this situation from the perspective of #MeToo and the increased violence against women of color, Amia Srinivasan is part of a new generation of scholarship that insists we put pressure on the sacred antinomy between sexuality and normativity[2] by noting that "if our primary commitment is to protecting sexuality from the disciplinary power of norms, we are left unable to cultivate any kind of responsibility for 'what we want, why we want it, and what it is we want to want'" (100).

As I read it, Srinivasan's question—"where does speaking about morality end and moralizing begin?" (100)—isn't only about how queer theory's wholesale rejection of norms leaves it unable to conceptualize responsibility but, more urgently, how the entrenched hostility to morality/moralizing keeps us stuck in the stale impasse of norms = repression.[3] At once contributing to and prefiguring these debates, Judith Butler's seminal book *Giving an Account of Oneself* offers an origin story for responsibility that aims to "pose the question of moral philosophy [. . .] within a contemporary social frame" (3). Picking up where Ferenczi and Adorno

leave off, Butler frames their own engagement as an attempt to ascertain whether all morality is indeed "sphincter-morality" and, if so, whether moral responsibility is fundamentally coercive. "Is there a theorization of responsibility beyond bad conscience?," Butler asks, or is all of morality the by-product of violent self-abnegation (*Giving* 100)? Although Butler disputes the oft-repeated idea that this book represents a sudden "ethical turn" in their thought,[4] they do affirm that *Giving an Account of Oneself* marks an important departure from "a more negative understanding of normativity to a more positive one" ("Recognition" 49).[5] In Butler's own assessment of this shift, what changes in *Giving an Account* is the organizing conviction—so foundational to earlier work—that responsibility can only develop through punishment and "bitter self-reproaches" (Ferenczi 267). Butler associates this "negative" view with Nietzsche's influential critique and acknowledges that in previous work, "I perhaps too quickly accepted this punitive scene of inauguration for the subject" (*Giving* 15). As Butler explains it, the problem with Nietzsche's account of moral formation is its reliance on blame as the principal mechanism for the acquisition of responsibility.

> *I start to give an account [. . .] because someone has asked me to, and that someone has power delegated from an established system of justice. I have been addressed, even perhaps had an act attributed to me, and a certain threat of punishment backs up this interrogation. And so, in fearful response, I offer myself as an "I" and try to reconstruct my deeds, showing that the deed attributed to me was or was not, in fact, among them. I am either owning up to myself as the cause of such an action, qualifying my causative contribution, or defending myself against the attribution, perhaps locating the cause elsewhere. These are the parameters within which my account of myself takes place. [. . .] [W]e become morally accountable as a consequence of fear and terror. (11)*

While Butler admits to having uncritically accepted Nietzsche's narrative, one aim of *Giving an Account* is to show that Nietzsche was wrong and that blame is not the only source of moral consciousness. Indeed, as Butler now sees it, the problem with Nietzsche is that he "assumes that aggression is more primary than generosity and that concerns for justice emerge from a revenge ethic. He fails to consider the interlocutory scene in which one is asked what one has done, or a situation in which one tries to make plain, to one who is waiting to know, what one has done, and for what reason" (14). The problem with this account is that it is predicated exclusively on

law and punishment and is therefore unable to imagine alternative contexts of accountability and address. Think, for example, of the ordinary process through which individuals come to be narrative subjects in the world: no one is born knowing how to speak and reflect on themselves, but babies learn this in the course of ordinary development. This may seem like an obvious point, but as Butler reminds us, it has major consequences for our conceptualization of the subject because it means that there is a scene of address *prior to*, and distinct from, "juridical" mediation, a source of ethical feeling that is not founded on guilt and reprobation alone. "After all," Butler writes, "no one survives without being addressed; no one survives to tell his or her story without first being inaugurated into language by being called upon, offered some stories, brought into the discursive world of the story" (63). In other words, Nietzsche's "juridical" sequence completely ignores how the early communication between adults and infants is *also* a significant interlocutory scene, and one that potentially engenders "positive," *non*-oppressive reactions in the developing child.

Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, and specifically the work of French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche (1924–2012), Butler challenges the popular Nietzschean account by offering a counterhistory of subject formation. A former student of Jacques Lacan's whose work is now enjoying a major revival,[6] Laplanche offers a crucial resource for Butler's endeavor because his return to the primary setting of mother-infant interaction offers a refreshingly sanguine "scene of address" that displaces the juridical and overly negative (Nietzschean) one. In fact, not only does Laplanche demand a return to the early exchanges between mother and infant, but his unique interpretation of what *transpires* in these exchanges—"seduction," "translation," the development of "enlarged sexuality"—represents a broader conceptualization of the infant's affective repertoire than the Nietzschean story typically allows. This expansion is especially crucial for Butler because if it can be shown that self-blame is not the *only* or inevitable response to being addressed, then it means accountability can emerge from feelings other than hatred and shame, which would in turn render morality a positive (and not only violent) experience.

In the context of Butler's oeuvre, *Giving an Account of Oneself* lays the groundwork for a post-Nietzschean paradigm of ethical life[7] that will be central to subsequent interventions.[8] It also represents one of the field's most robust attempts to bring morality and the poststructuralist antipathy toward norms into more harmonious relation, making it one of the few texts to insist on the value of morality for queer-oriented thought. In an effort to

engage with this complex and provocative allegory of psychic ontogeny, I focus on the place of sexuality in Butler's scene of address and, specifically, whether the shift from a negative (juridical) paradigm to a positive (mother-infant) one includes, or precludes, an account of radical sexuality. To this end, I take up the book's reformulation of the process through which responsibility develops in order to assess its underlying psychological assumptions. I introduce "metapsychology" as a new dimension of analysis that zeroes in on the underlying psychological assumptions that shape theoretical formulations. A word introduced by Freud but rarely taken up outside clinical circles, *metapsychology* refers to "the aggregate of a priori principles that must be in place at the outset for the initiation of analytic interpretation as such,"[9] and its unique value lies in providing an interpretive plane for debating the theoretical meanings of clinical ideas (Johnston 11). For present purposes, metapsychological analysis offers a lens through which to evaluate what Butler's more positive account of responsibility means for the development and operation of sexuality.

In what follows, I will argue that whereas Butler interprets the scene of infant-adult address in terms of relationality, empathy, and responsiveness, my own reading suggests that this interpretation risks obscuring the signal importance of "seduction" to Laplanche's thought and, in doing so, misses the powerful dynamics of sexuality in the formation of consciousness. As Laplanche will repeatedly show, "seduction is not a relation that is contingent, pathological (even though it can be) and episodic. It is grounded in a situation from which no human being is exempt: the 'fundamental anthropological situation,' as I call it. This fundamental anthropological situation is the adult-*infans* relation" (*Freud* 102). The centrality of seduction is of such special importance here because it names a process of adult-infant communication wherein ordinary childcare is structurally indissociable from the development of "enlarged" sexuality. By putting sexuality *into* the adult-infant exchange, the "scene of address" is complicated in crucial and provocative ways insofar as it demonstrates that the emergence of ethical responsiveness is inextricable from a process that generates an excessive, deviant, and nonresponsive sexuality. This is not to say, as some queer critics do, that sexuality is fundamentally opposed to responsibility and its norms,[10] but rather that any reconfiguration of subject formation must be able to show that our flawed, fraught, problematic desires are not a failure of responsiveness, but exemplary expressions of it. In what follows, I will show that Butler's attempt to secure the subject's primary responsibility via adult-infant interaction minimizes, if not fundamentally misreads, the

psychological effects of adult "seduction." To wit, although Butler is right to counter Nietzsche's juridical address with the capacious dynamics of adult-infant communication, the idea that parental "address" is naturally conducive to responsibility categorically misconstrues the implications of seduction for the development of sexuality.

To further particularize the indissociability of morality and sexuality, I draw on contemporary discourses of perversion—a discourse that tracks closely with the changing fortunes of morality in critical theory. That is, much in the same way that morality has been the object of constructionist scorn, so too has perversion come to represent everything that's wrong with psychoanalytic theory. Among Anglophone clinicians over the past twenty years, a growing consensus has argued that perversion is a problematic diagnostic concept. Far from representing an objective pathology with a clear or definitive mental disturbance, perversion may be nothing more than a moralizing instrument of state power, one that camouflages prejudice in the language of pseudo-psychology. As Dany Nobus has argued, the "definition of perversion as an aberration of the sexual instinct, in which the reproductive purpose of the human sexual function is literally perverted," poses considerable problems for any objective assessment of perversion because it defines, a priori, sexuality as necessarily oriented toward reproduction, thereby relegating everything that *deviates* from that standard as automatically perverse (6). This emphasis on sexual deviation is not only endemic to the word *perversion* itself—etymologically, "to pervert" (from the Latin *pervertere*) meant "to turn around," "to turn upside down"—but emblematic of the ways that the diagnosis of perversion is used to sustain a narrow view of human sexuality. For this reason, Nobus writes that

> *what we are encountering here is the intervention of a sociocultural standard of ethico-legal acceptability, which has (often implicitly) confounded all of the purportedly value-free taxonomies of sexual perversion, whether sexological, psychiatric, or psychoanalytic. No matter how hard scholars have tried to avoid discussing perversion with reference to moral principles, they have generally failed to live up to the expectations of an "objective" and "neutral" science. (8)*

For much of the field, perversion became exemplary of how prejudice could masquerade as psychoanalytic theory, and efforts were made to depathologize perversion such that by 1980, the DSM-III decided to substitute "paraphilia" for "perversion" because "the latter was believed to have too many

pejorative moral connotations (American Psychiatric Association, 1980)" (Nobus 10).

And yet, in spite of this problematic genealogy, perversion has made a quiet comeback in psychoanalytic theory in recent years. Not unlike the way morality has reemerged as a necessary philosophical subject among critical theorists, perversion has reappeared in the work of contemporary clinicians who believe the complexity of sexuality is undermined by the expulsion of perversion from psychoanalytic nosology. For these thinkers, *perversion* names a unique psycho-sexual disturbance that has more to do with object relations than reproductive norms, and we lose a vital resource for describing impaired sexual relations if we are required to dismiss every negative representation of sexuality as necessarily discriminatory and pathologizing. According to Sergio Benvenuto, the Italian psychoanalyst whose recent book *What Are Perversions*? tackles this problem directly:

> *[W]e ought to consider perverse any act which brings the subject sexual enjoyment while the other subject is involved only as an* instrument *to that enjoyment, and when the first subject does not consider the enjoyment, especially sexual, of this other subject as an end to his act.*

By this criteria, "even a very trivial act—like having sex with a prostitute—can be considered perverse: one does not frequent prostitutes to give them sexual pleasure" (2). Unique to this view is the idea that it isn't really using the other as an *object* that makes an act perverse, but rather, using the other as a *subject* whose subjectivity is then destroyed. In other words, perversion is not simply a failure to see the other *as an other* but a choice to use their *subjectivity* as a basis for one's own enjoyment only. "It is not," Benvenuto writes, "the desired anatomical object that makes the perversion, but what I would call the lack of *care for the other as the subject of desire and enjoyment*" (10). In this framing, not only is sexual enjoyment central to the definition of perversion but so is ethics, and Benvenuto is clear that psychology suffers from our timid avoidance of sexuality's ethics.

Psychoanalysis has always occupied a central presence in Butler's thought, but in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, metapsychological speculation moves to the foreground as the book works to articulate a coherent and persuasive alternative to Nietzsche's damning account. Butler locates the source of the problem in the story Nietzsche tells about how responsibility forms, specifically, his idea that a moral conscience only develops through the individual's encounter—and painful internalization—of

society's continual recrimination. Characterizing Nietzsche's interpretation as negative, punitive, and overly "juridical," Butler looks to a different interlocutory scene—between the mother and the infant—in order to identify more positive aspects of the developing subject's emotional experience. In particular, Butler zeroes in on those subtle negotiations between infants and their adult caregivers that occur *prior* to the Nietzschean sequence of blame-internalization-guilt. Butler writes: "If I give an account, and give it to you, then my narrative depends upon a structure of address. But if I can address you, I must first have been addressed, brought into the structure of address as a possibility of language before I was able to find my own way to make use of it" (*Giving* 53). In other words, this whole time we have followed Nietzsche in assuming that the individual's first encounter with responsibility occurs via the cruel accusations of an external Law, thereby ignoring the complexity of the emotional relationship that precedes it. Drawing on Laplanche, Butler describes an infant who is first and foremost a recipient of the adult's address. Born into the world a helpless creature who has no skills to survive independently, the infant depends on the adult for care and self-organization. As a dependent infant, the baby learns everything it needs to know through the adult's ways of addressing it; as Butler reminds us, "[N]o one survives to tell his or her story without first being inaugurated into language by being called upon, offered some stories, brought into the discursive world of the story" (63). This barrage of communication—what Laplanche calls "enigmatic messages" ("Short" 99)—shapes the infant's subsequent engagement with the outside world to such a degree that "one can make the general claim that primary impressions are not just *received* by an ego, but are formative of it. The ego does not come into being without a prior encounter, a primary relation, a set of inaugural impressions from elsewhere" (Butler, *Giving* 58).

Treating this early scene of address as the implicit—but neglected—context for all future interlocutory exchanges, Butler extrapolates from here to observe that if the baby forms its ego *in relation* to the adult-other, it must mean that the baby is primordially open and receptive to the outside world. Moreover, this primary openness *precedes* every other emotional response, meaning that there is "a sociality at the basis of the 'I' and its finitude from which one cannot—and ought not to—escape" (*Giving* 75). To draw out just how radical this notion is, we might recall that the traditional (Nietzschean) story of subject formation treats the external world as a locus of violent subjection that hampers the emergence of authentic individual desire. Butler's own earlier work ascribed to this view, as when they claimed, in *The*

Psychic Life of Power, that "[t]he desire to persist in one's own being requires submitting to a world of others that is fundamentally not one's own [. . .]. If such terms institute a primary subordination or, indeed, a primary violence, then a subject emerges against itself in order, paradoxically, to be for itself" (28). Indeed, since it is precisely this view of subject formation that Butler later concedes is too "punitive" (*Giving* 15), it is worth emphasizing that part of what's so significant about Butler's revision is the new idea that sociality attests to our primary responsiveness and not *just* our "primary subordination." That is, contrary to the familiar story in which responsibility emerges out of internalized violence, Butler now suggests that seeing it this way overlooks how a capacious and responsive *relationality* precedes all subsequent encounters with the external world.

To particularize what Butler means by *relationality* in this context, we can focus on the Laplanchian scene at the center of this account, an event he sometimes refers to as the "fundamental anthropological situation." According to Laplanche, the infant's helplessness (*Hilflosigkeit*) necessitates her interaction with adults in the outside world—for food, sleep, temperature control, and so on—and in the process of endeavoring to meet these rudimentary needs, the adult invariably transmits "enigmatic messages" as well. Laplanche defines "enigmatic messages" as those signifiers that are addressed to a specific subject (the child) but are not transparent or available for comprehension. "The message," Laplanche clarifies, "can be verbal or non-verbal, more or less structured, even have a minimal reference to a structure [. . .]. I therefore understand the category of the message [as] [. . .] comprising the language of gestures and all other kinds of expression of psychical activity" ("Short" 92). These "messages" form the basis of the child's developing unconscious because when the process of trying to "translate" them fails, they are repressed and transformed into unconscious material. More will be said about the specific dynamics of this encounter later, but for now it's important to point out that Butler treats the adult's communications as a kind of "primary address" that precedes—both in time and in structure—the "juridical" address that occurs later (*Giving* 97). As Butler explains, "[T]he *primat* or impress of the Other is primary, inaugurative, and there is no formation of a 'me' outside of this originally passive impingement and the responsiveness formed in the crucible of that passivity." This sequence of "passive impingement and the responsiveness" that ensues represents an alternative to the Nietzschean scenario because it locates responsibility in the infant's necessary and inevitable *response* to the adult world. As Annika Thiem has written of Butler's reformulation: "[W]e

become responsible not because actions can be attributed to us and we can be held accountable for them but because we are addressed by others in ways that demand that we respond, and respond well" (145). In contrast to Levinas, who argues that ethics emerges as an interpersonal "commandment," Butler uses Laplanche to claim that the mere fact of *being addressed* and feeling compelled *to respond* attests to our primary ethicality.

In Butler's interpretation of the Laplanchian scene, "[T]he adult world delivers messages that are overwhelmingly enigmatic for children, producing a sense of helplessness and instigating a desire for mastery. But these messages are not simply imprinted. They are registered, taken up by the drive, and enter into the subsequent forms that the drive assumes" (*Giving* 99). What Laplanche calls the infant's process of "translation," Butler describes in terms of the infant's primary sociality because rather than ignoring or rejecting the adult's overwhelming address, the infant repurposes the "enigmatic messages" in productive and meaningful ways. "Can we say that the experience of being imposed upon from the start, against one's will, heightens a sense of responsibility?" (99), Butler asks, and then arrives at the conclusion (via Foucault) that "this passivity becomes the condition of a certain practice of giving an account of oneself, suggesting that one can become accountable only through yielding to another's word, another's demand" (126). Taken together, this series of claims conduces to a schema in which the infant's psychological response to the adult's address is taken to represent a primordial sociality at the heart of the subject. Using infant-adult interaction as a kind of *ur*-address that precedes all subsequent encounters, Butler replaces the recriminating address with the enigmatic one in order to establish a developmental account in which blame is not the only engine of ethical accountability since what propels the infant to respond to the adult isn't accusation per se, but its own endogenous susceptibility to the address of others.

Butler does not spend any time explaining their decision to ground a new ethical paradigm in the peculiar situation of the adult-infant relationship, but I would like to suggest that part of what makes this discursive shift intelligible is the broader "relational turn" occurring in psychoanalytic circles around the time *Giving an Account of Oneself* was published. Variously called the "relational turn," the "intersubjectivist turn," or the new "two-person psychology," the field of psychoanalysis underwent a series of major transformations beginning in the 1960s (with attachment theory) that culminated in what is often called the "relational revolution" of the 1980s (see Kuchuck). Informed by feminist theory, the deconstructive

practices of Jacques Derrida and Hans-Georg Gadamer, and new studies in infancy, Anglophone psychoanalysis undertook a systematic revision of its core formulations that sought to replace traditional Freudian drive theory with a new concern for the attachment patterns of early childhood. Drawing on the emergent field of infant research—where trained observers videotaped mother-infant interactions and then studied them in microscopic detail—a new generation of clinicians were demonstrating that babies were social from birth and not, as Freud has argued, "autistic" (see also Mahler). In what became a watershed text from this era, the infant researcher Daniel Stern boldly claimed that "the most important point is that a primary intersubjectivity starts from the beginning" (xxii). Not only did this view challenge the primacy of the drives in developmental accounts but it contravened the traditional Freudian assumption that object relations are not operative at birth.[11] Taken together, these metapsychological changes effected a major shift in the orientation of clinical theory and practice from one that was focused on conflict, fantasies, and defenses to one that was interested in attachment, relationality, and interpersonal trauma.

Butler is not only acutely aware of these developments but actively engaged with them since by the time *Giving an Account of Oneself* is published, they have already participated in ongoing debates about this new paradigm of relationality, particularly with respect to their presumptive dyadic structure (see Butler, "Longing"). Therefore, although *Giving an Account* is not making a clinical argument, one way of understanding its philosophical project is as upgrading the metapsychological underpinning of critical theory from one that is largely congruent with Freud/Lacan to one that integrates precepts of the new relational landscape. To this end, we might consider how Butler's claims about the infant's primary sociality extend arguments made by the Relationalist critique of Freud; that is, even as Nietzsche's negative-juridical account of morality is the explicit target of Butler's rebuttal, Freud's presumptions of sovereign individuality need to be refuted as well. Sounding a little like Winnicott, who criticized Freud for taking the Oedipal subject for granted (by ignoring the maternal relationship that preceded it), Butler writes a decade later in *Senses of the Subject* that "when we speak about subject formation, we invariably presume a threshold of susceptibility or impressionability that may be said to precede the formation of a conscious and deliberate 'I'" (1). This is why a new ethical paradigm that seeks to forego its reliance on internalized guilt must understand how the failure to feel responsible for others is actually a *defense* against the primary "susceptibility" and "impressionability" that

constitutes our childhood. This means the task for ethics is not to choose between the mechanisms of internalized blame, on the one hand, and the rejection of morality, on the other, but to arrive at the feeling of responsibility by accepting the (inescapable) fact of our relational origins.

And yet, although Butler calls for a theorization of morality that "affirms relationality not only as a descriptive or historical fact of our formation, but also as an ongoing normative dimension of our social and political lives, one in which we are compelled to take stock of our interdependence" (*Precarious* 27), they are also reluctant to classify their new paradigm as "relational" per se. Early in *Precarious Life*, Butler suggests, "[I]t won't even do to say that I am promoting a relational view of the self over an autonomous one or trying to redescribe autonomy in terms of relationality. Despite my affinity for the term relationality, we may need other language to approach the issue that concerns us, a way of thinking about how we are not only constituted by our relations but also dispossessed by them as well" (24). As an avowed poststructuralist who, among other things, radicalized feminist theory by deconstructing identitarian categories (see *Gender Trouble*), it is perhaps unsurprising to hear Butler resist "the term relationality," especially since "promoting a relational view of the self over an autonomous one" often loses sight of how *dis*possessing relationality can be.[12] So how to preserve the tension between relationality as a force that binds us to other people but that must nevertheless be understood as dispossessing us as well? I think Butler is right to look for an answer to this problematic in Laplanche's "new foundations for psychoanalysis"[13] since few psychoanalytic thinkers are as concerned as Laplanche is with developing a model of subjectivity that does not succumb to the gravitational pull of self-centeredness. Indeed, Laplanche's heuristic for these competing tendencies is "Copernicus" and "Ptolemy," who each represent different approaches to the discovery of "enlarged" sexuality. Rejecting the common trope of Freud as the victim of later misreadings (as in Lacan's castigation of ego psychology as betraying Freud's radical vision), Laplanche instead contends that "if Freud is his own Copernicus, he is also his own Ptolemy" ("Unfinished" 60). Determined to sustain the radicalism of sexuality's "decentering" as against Freudian theory's constant "self-centering and self-begetting," Laplanche establishes sexuality as the essence of Freud's radical discovery and then meticulously reads Freud's entire oeuvre in order to identify the specific moments when Freud either moves *toward* or *away* from this essential discovery. According to Laplanche, the radical innovation of psychoanalysis—the true equivalent to the Copernican breakthrough—is the discovery that *we revolve around*

other people and *not* the other way around. But what, Laplanche asks, secures this Copernican discovery against the immense pressure to accede to Ptolemaic self-centeredness?

In many ways, the questions posed by Butler and Laplanche are congruent: how can we affirm relationality without losing sight of dispossession? What preserves other-centeredness without transforming into an identity? A closer look at the dynamics of address in Butler's interlocutory framework will show how the absence of "seduction" as a distinctive type of adult-infant relationality inadvertently transforms the dynamics of address into just another modality of social construction. Specifically, while Butler's use of Laplanche affirms the central importance of infant-adult communication, the focus on primary "susceptibility" and "impressionability" belies the peculiar dynamic of "seduction" whereby a child, with no genetic sexual predisposition, becomes a sexual being *as a result of* being addressed. As Laplanche sees it, the thing we continually avoid having to admit is that the child isn't merely shaped and imprinted by the adult—bequeathing a trace of otherness at the core the self—but *seduced* by the adult, drawn into wanting things the adult wants. As Laplanche emphatically declares, "[I]t is the adult who brings the breast, and not the milk, into the foreground—and does so due to her own desire, conscious and above all unconscious. For the breast is not only an organ for feeding children but a sexual organ, something which is *utterly overlooked by Freud and has been since Freud*. Not a single text, not even a single remark of Freud's takes account of the fact that the female breast is excitable, not only in feeding, but simply in the woman's sexual life" ("Unfinished" 78). According to Laplanche, we already know the adult is responsible for meeting the infant's rudimentary needs, but what we repeatedly refuse to acknowledge is that in the process of meeting those elementary needs, the adult's own sexuality is provoked so that whatever food is provided to the child is laced, as it were, with the adult's desire. What's more, since the infant is driven to make sense of these "enigmatic messages"—a drive Laplanche elsewhere calls the "urge to translate"[14]—her urge to make meaning is structurally indissociable from whatever "individual" desire ensues. That is, not only is our language infiltrated by the language of an other—a point Lacan made with unparalleled force—but also, because we're cared for by sexual adults, we grow up wanting things we're not supposed to.

Looking closely at the scene of address, we see that Butler highlights the infant's natural responsiveness as evidence that we are bound to the other by more than just negative recrimination and that this feeling

provides the starting point of a positive relationship to ethics. But to get here, Butler needs to isolate the infant's translational process—of working to decode the "enigmatic messages"—from the dynamic of "seduction" that transpires between the adult and the child. To specify, in Butler's scene it is as though the infant's responsiveness is a feature of their inner nature that's separable from the parent's desire, such that it becomes possible to say that there is an instinctive response "to someone else who is there to be addressed and whose address is there to be received" (*Giving* 22). In other words, where Nietzsche goes wrong is in presuming that "aggression is more primary than generosity" when, in fact, there are "other interlocutory conditions in which one is asked to give an account of oneself" (13, 14) that hinge not on the infant's terror but on her innate empathy and relatedness instead. Since the infant actively responds to the parental address, Butler is able to show that responsiveness does not need terror to get activated, an ingenious alternative to the Nietzchean drama of punishment and internalized guilt.

But what about the fact that this interlocution is not just an ordinary address, but structured as a seduction in which the adult's sexualized communication unconsciously entices the infant in ways a developing mind can't adequately metabolize or contain? After all, seduction is meant to denote more than just generalized social construction insofar as it describes the unique and asymmetrical encounter between a developing/nonsexual mind and a developed/sexual one. If we fail to treat the adult-infant address as firmly rooted in the specificity of seduction, we risk equating the regulatory role of seduction with the impact of the external world *in general*. Such a move is evident in Butler's later work, as when they write:

> *I am affected not just by this one other or a set of others, but by a world in which humans, institutions, and organic and inorganic processes all impress themselves upon this me who is, at the outset, susceptible in ways that are radically involuntary [. . .]. I am not only already in the hands of* someone *else before I start to work with my own hands, but I am also, as it were, in the "hands" of institutions, discourses, environments, including technologies and life processes, handled by an organic and inorganic object field that exceeds the human. In this sense, "I" am nowhere and nothing without the nonhuman. (*Senses *7)*[15]

As this paragraph conveys, the person who addresses me goes from being "*someone* else" to the entire "object field" of "institutions, discourses, environments," as though there is no meaningful difference between an adult's

"hands" and the "'hands' of institutions, discourses, environments." Indeed, if the difference between human and nonhuman forces appears suddenly inconsequential, it is because the drama of seduction has been abandoned and a landscape of abstract ideological forces has taken its place.

Without negating the immense impact of the entire "organic and inorganic object field" on our psyches, it is nevertheless important to point out that seduction is not just another word for the Symbolic order, but names a particular relationship in which the infant develops sexuality by virtue of encountering adult sexuality.[16] That is, seduction is an *interpsychic* event occurring, as Laplanche often emphasizes, *between* the adult and the child. Why does this matter? Why can't seduction just become interchangeable with ideology in general? One possible answer is that sexuality is a psychic structure that requires the mediation of another complex psychic structure *in order to* develop. The most recent findings in neurobiology and affect regulation confirm this, consistently demonstrating that the adult's role in regulating the infant's mental states becomes the primary pathway for the necessary psychic capacities to emerge.[17] This is not to minimize the effect of nonhuman processes on mental development, but to observe that the assimilation of seduction into ideology inevitably turns "impressionability" into a general quality of relating, devoid of its sexual connotations. Although we are, without a doubt, impressionable, what the inescapability of seduction teaches us is that this impressionability is never isolatable from sexuality, so that we can't trace responsibility to impressionability without finding that sexuality is *already* there.

Now, if the adult's address to the child is seductive, we are forced to consider that responsiveness may not automatically lead to responsibility because our pull to the other is never innocent of sexuality. This means that the problem isn't only, as Butler so powerfully reminds us, that we cannot escape the relational context of our formation except through disavowal and denial (*Notes* 8) but also that there is no moment of infantile responsiveness that *precedes* sexuality's effects. The recent discourse of perversion will help illuminate this issue. Returning to Benvenuto's claim that perverse sexuality isn't about the inappropriate use of particular objects, but the enjoyment derived from denying the other subject's subjectivity, we might consider how perversion is one possible defense against the overwhelming anxiety the mother's otherness provokes. After all, there is no infant that can pass through the earliest developmental stages without total dependence on the mother for care. And as we also know, there is no mother who can take care of her infant without also transmitting her own sexual messages

(Laplanche, *Freud*). Putting these two things together allows us to consider that perversion may indeed be an attempt to manage, and eventually defeat, the otherness which comes at me from the mother, a strategy for taking pleasure in the temporary reversal of that painful early dynamic. As such, while perversion is almost always viewed as a response to the Oedipal complex,[18] it seems important to consider that the source of perversion actually predates the Oedipal drama; insofar as every infant is seduced into development via parental care, it seems more likely that perversion represents one strategy (among many) for managing the effects of being bombarded by the other's sexuality. By becoming an adult whose sexual enjoyment derives from a denial of the other person's subjectivity and otherness, the pervert avenges what was done to him during those early years of infantile seduction. As such, if perversion continues to appear in our consulting rooms, it is because the very *structure* of development provokes the child's sexuality.

So long as there are infants who need caretaking and adults who take care of them, there's no escaping seduction or perversion. Although Butler wants the adult-infant address to conduce neatly to responsibility, that's only possible by disclaiming the seductive dimension of their asymmetrical exchange. Not only does the adult address *not* produce responsibility, but it might be said to cultivate perverse sexuality instead. After all, in spite of how positive the adult's address seems compared to Nietzsche's scene of terrorizing blame, there is nothing straightforward or pastoral about what transpires when the infant is confronted by care that's laced with overwhelming sexuality. Butler wants the adult-infant interaction to inspire responsibility as though the infant's impressionability is naturally conducive to morality that's not shame based and nondefensive. But it seems considerably more likely that seduction is provocative in ways the infant will try desperately to manage and control. Like the PSA instructing us to "drink responsibly," the tension at the heart of adult-infant care is that we want to nourish babies who will *not* grow into sexual adults. Or we want the act of caretaking to generate *only* positive results. But the infant is not any more capable of drinking responsibly than we adults are capable of responsible feeding. The question is, what do we do?

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Notes

1 I am referring here to critical theory in the tradition of the Frankfurt school, and in particular, the branch of theory that follows Habermas, Axel Honneth, and Nancy Fraser in their analysis of society, rather than those interested in ideology, subjectivity and sexuality.

2 I discuss this development in queer theory as its "self-critical" turn and specifically address the question of consent and normativity in my chapter on Henry James in *Homo Psyche: On Queer Theory and Erotophobia*. See also Fischel.

3 As Andrea Long Chu writes in a response to Srinivasan that distills the debate facing queer critics today: "It's really fucking hard to figure out a way to tell people to change their desires that isn't moralistic, and that isn't actually about doing the *same kind of thing* to desire that supposedly queer politics was supposed to be against in the first place. Queers are very, very bad at talking about desires that they are not supposed to have, especially considering that they are people who have, by definition, desires that they are not supposed to have."

4 In "Ethical Ambivalence," an essay that was part of an edited collection called *The Turn to Ethics*, Butler writes of their resistance to the idea of a "turn/return" to ethics. "I do not have much to say about why there is a return to ethics, if there is one, in recent years, except to say that I have for the most part resisted this return, and that what I have to offer is something like a map of this resistance and its partial overcoming which I hope will be useful for more than biographical purposes. I've worried that the return to ethics has constituted an escape from politics, and I've also worried that it has meant a certain heightening of moralism and this has made me cry out, as Nietzsche cried out about Hegel, "Bad air! Bad air" (15).

5 In a recent dialogue with Axel Honneth, Butler tells Honneth that they move toward a "more robust moral account of recognition in my later work," which they reformulate to mean that, "I moved from a negative understanding of normativity to a more positive one, or rather I developed a double vision that sought to account for both the positive and the negative senses of that term" ("Recognition" 49).

6 In the Anglophone world, Laplanche is primarily known as the author of *The Language of Psycho-analysis*, which he cowrote with J. B. Pontalis. With the exception of Butler, Leo Bersani, and Teresa de Lauretis, Laplanche does not appear in theoretical writing on psychoanalysis. My recent book, *Homo Psyche*, offers a thorough engagement with Laplanche through the lens of queer theory. In the clinical field, one can attribute the lack of familiarity with Laplanche to a host of reasons, including the lack of translated material and a general hostility to French thinkers. In the last decade, Laplanche has been translated and this has enabled a major surge of interest in his work. For a more detailed account of this history, see my *Exigent Psychoanalysis*.

7 This is clear in all subsequent work, but perhaps especially in *Precarious Life*, where Butler reiterates (but otherwise has no need to prove) the idea that "the structure of address is important for understanding how moral authority is introduced and sustained if we accept not just that we address others when we speak, but that in some way we come to exist, as it were, in the moment of being addressed, and something about our existence proves precarious when that address fails" (130).

8 Examples of the subsequent work include *Precarious Life* (2004), *Frames of War* (2009), *Senses of the Subject* (2015), *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015), and *The Force of Nonviolence* (2020).

9 According to Laplanche and Pontalis, *metapsychology* is a term invented by Freud to refer to the study of psychology in its "most theoretical dimension" (249). They write, "[I]t is impossible to overlook the similarity of the terms 'metapsychology' and 'metaphysics,' and indeed Freud very likely intended to draw this analogy, for we know from his own admission how strong his philosophical vocation was" (249). In clinical discourse, metapsychology has a rather vexed history, with some wanting it to mean a separate sphere of analysis and others equating all metapsychology with Freudian ideas. I discuss the genealogy of this term in clinical psychoanalysis in my chapter on metapsychology in *Exigent Psychoanalysis*.

10 Perhaps the thinkers most typically identified with this position are those architects of the "antisocial thesis," Lee Edelman and Leo Bersani. Edelman offers his own careful engagement with this position in *Sex, or the Unbearable* (with Lauren Berlant).

11 It is important to point out here that many Freudian scholars reject this characterization of Freud's work and argue that Freud is not as indifferent to early object relations as his critics make him out to be. For present purposes, I'm interested less in the merits of this argument than the fact that Stern's view (as popularized and polemicized by the architect of the Relational movement, Stephen Mitchell) remains a popular and nearly unchallenged trope within clinical discourse.

12 Butler's concern for the "dispossessing" qualities of relationality are the subject of their debate with the psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin in "Longing for Recognition."

13 Laplanche repeatedly referred to his own work as constituting "new foundations for psychoanalysis." It is also the title of one of his books.

14 Laplanche sometimes writes this as a "drive to translate" but his foremost contemporary translator, Jonathan House, translates this as an "urge to translate," which is meant to relay how this need emerges at a visceral level. I explain this in greater detail in the "The Wise Baby and the Original Hermeneut."

15 With respect to the question of human vs. nonhuman, Butler writes that "by insisting on a 'common' corporeal vulnerability, I may seem to be positing a new basis for humanism. That might be true, but I am prone to consider this differently," namely, that "we perform the recognition by making the claim, and that is surely a very good ethical reason to make the claim. We make the claim, however, precisely because it is not taken for granted, precisely

because it is not, in every instance, honored" (*Senses* 43).

16 The language quickly resembles descriptions of Lacan's Symbolic order, as when Butler writes,

> *One is called a name or addressed as "you" prior to any sense of individuation, and that calling, especially as it is repeated and rehearsed in different ways, starts to form a subject who calls itself by those same terms, learning how to shift the "you" to an "I" or to a gendered third person, a "he" or a "she." There is always disturbance in that shift, which is why self-reference, enabled by the scene of address, can and does take on meanings that exceed the aims of those who introduced the terms of discourse through address.* (Senses *12)*

17 The emergence of "regulation theory" has been hailed as a major breakthrough in affect theory and describes the complex role of regulation in sustaining and enabling the infant's psychological development. See Schore.

18 In clinical theory, perversion is typically considered a response to events that transpire in the Oedipal complex, such as the child's requirement to acknowledge a rival and accept intergenerational difference and its own failure to seduce the mother. For a recent synthesis of these ideas as they have developed over time, see Shoshani and Shoshani.

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