

Plurality, Dialogue and Response: Addressing Vulnerability

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I: From tolerance to dialogue and generosity

Just before his murder, Pier Paolo Pasolini wrote, prophetically perhaps, that “tolerance is always and purely nominal”:

In fact they tell the tolerated person to do what he wishes, that he has every right to follow his own nature, that the fact that he belongs to a minority does not in the least mean inferiority, etc. But his ‘difference’—or better, his ‘crime of being different’—remains the same both with regard to those who have decided to tolerate him and those who have decided to condemn him. I shall always be eternally, inevitably conscious of this.¹

This remark might raise a number of questions for us.

First, how is the idea of toleration and that of the ‘tolerated person’ linked to differences that are construed as having an ontological ground in some essential aspect of the person? In this case, a ‘natural’ singularity would demand that each person has ‘every right to follow his own nature’, to be true to himself or to his cultural roots. If we speak, as liberals do, of the right of every person to posit their own good, all that is so specified, perhaps, is an ‘elective nature’, which no less determines a fate. How far, then, is it in virtue of the imperatives these claims of ‘nature’ present that what appears as difference demands to be tolerated; because, at some level, the ‘difference’ must be acknowledged as non-repudiable, as that which cannot be changed? Must we tolerate differences in order not to antagonise the violent potential inherent in going against nature? Must we ‘preserve’ what cannot be wished away?

Secondly, are ‘those who have decided to tolerate the same as those who have decided to condemn’, because for both tolerator and condemner it is this non-repudiable

constitutive difference that defines the other's otherness and thus reduces him to a fixed set of characteristics or a 'point of view'? There is a reciprocity, it seems, between a strong identification of the other and the reassurance that one's own identity is fully independent of his, the conviction that insurmountable 'difference' is indeed what separates identities, allows me my specificity, my integrity, independently of the character of others. But the tolerated person who experiences the indifference between condemnation and toleration finds this underwrites an imperative: to be 'eternally, inevitably conscious' of his 'difference', to persist in his 'difference'. Perhaps it is clear that it is better to be tolerated than murdered. Pasolini's comment, however, points both to the way in which a life allegedly set free by tolerance is in fact inhibited by it, and to an internal complicity between toleration and condemnation that ever threatens to issue in a 'senseless act of violence'.

Finally, one might also notice in this comment what it posits of the affective deficit in tolerance, the affinity of tolerance with the studied indifference antithetical to either love or hatred, thus bracketing a significant order of human relationship. As a virtue of justice tolerance belongs in the same sphere of reasoning as condemnation; if to tolerate is to suspend condemnation, it offers no way beyond such suspension; and thus toleration, insofar as it is less a counter-force to, than a restriction upon condemnation would seem prone to relapse into it. Indeed, if the above analysis holds at all, tolerance will be prone to fail in its suspension of condemnation wherever the logic of individuality and difference that benefits the 'tolerant' is compromised; wherever the confidence that difference is rooted in a 'nature' cannot be maintained; and wherever the sense of ontological separation between individuals is diminished.

Slavoj Žižek supports these lines of thought when he posits a speculative identity between multi-cultural tolerance and those excessive outbreaks of racist violence which seem to mark only hatred of otherness, but which point rather, he suggests, to the difficulty of adequately symbolising difference. He writes:

the all-encompassing nature of the post-political Concrete Universal which accounts for everybody at the level of symbolic inclusion, this multiculturalist vision-and practice of 'unity in difference' ('all equal, all different'), leaves open, as the only way to mark the Difference, the proto-sublimatory gesture of elevating a contingent Other (of race, sex, religion...) into the 'absolute Otherness' of the impossible Thing, the ultimate threat to our identity—this Thing which must be annihilated if we are to survive. Therein lies the properly Hegelian paradox: the final arrival of the truly rational 'concrete universality'—the abolition of antagonisms, the 'mature' universe of the negotiated coexistence of different groups—coincides with its radical opposite, with thoroughly contingent outbursts of violence.²

How is such violence to be explained? Žižek relates the ways in which 'senseless' violence is recounted and accounted for to a theme touched on in the above remarks, that of the essentialist basis for tolerance which carries over into the demand that even the racist be 'understood', as if his actions could be justified at a certain level of

intelligibility even where they must be condemned as ‘senseless’ for the purposes of social regulation. When the racist, Zizek writes,

is really pressed for the reasons for his violence, and if he is capable of minimal theoretical reflection, he will suddenly start to talk like social workers, sociologists and social psychologists, quoting diminished social mobility, rising insecurity, the disintegration of paternal authority, the lack of maternal love in his early childhood... In short he will provide the more or less precise psycho-social account of his acts so dear to enlightened liberals eager to understand ‘violent’ youth as tragic victims of their social and familial conditions.³

The wider problem posed here lies in the absolute disjunction between the form of theoretical understanding available to register the meaning of the ‘act of senseless violence’ and any practical ability to alter those actions. Self-knowledge bears no power here to change the racist’s behaviour but merely predicts it. The sanguine acceptance of this difficulty reflects the conviction that violence as a response to difference is the natural stance, which is more or less successfully repressed by ‘civilized’ attitudes of tolerance but will sometimes nonetheless ‘break through’. The belief that tolerance deflects violence is casually confirmed by its occasional ‘senseless’ outbreak. The more radical thesis, however, advanced by Zizek, would be that the attitude of tolerance is itself responsible for generating such violence because its way of symbolizing differences as a function of ontologically distinct ‘natures’ is inadequate to the experience and demand of difference.

When the ‘tolerated’ complain that it is not enough to be tolerated for their particular identities; or, equally, when the ‘unemployed black lesbian single mother’ feels that the measures invented to redress the particular injustices she suffers under the prevailing social system reduce her to a neatly defined social statistic, addressing neither her nor the injustice she embodies, the question is raised of what response could be adequate to a claim for recognition that exceeds the particularity of identity but cannot extend to ‘everybody’. If the response of toleration is experienced as a radical reduction and undoing of political subjectivity, what order of response might better mark the claims of plurality, or of the self in an order of becoming not being, or, indeed, of the self in dynamic relation with otherness, not merely tolerant co-existence with it?

The suggestion to be pursued here will be that toleration of ‘plural identities’ risks being bound up with the impotence of reflection precisely because it seeks to leave identities intact (to respect them as multiple perspectives) and assumes that to every act corresponds a perspective—a point of view—that generates it. Liberal pluralism would be ‘responsible’ for the ‘senseless violence’ which erupts within it because it is unable to address a set of vulnerabilities which appear at all the sites where self-hood is constituted in relation to otherness, or where subjectivities emerge through processes of interaction, through dynamic performances of gesture, interpellation and response. Of course, under liberalism, violence against others different from oneself is precisely

not to be tolerated—it is supposed to define a limit to tolerance. But the question is how is this limit to be drawn within the form of ‘understanding’ bound up with toleration? In other words, how can the gesture of condemnation ever be vindicated against a background of presupposed equality of perspectives? How can condemnation of intolerance itself appear as other than an intolerant gesture of violence? This regulatory social mechanism intervenes on the side of maintaining the equality of liberty to be free from interference, but is thus entirely unable to engage at any level with a certain constitutive ‘interference’ perpetually composing and de-composing identities. What I shall be looking for in what follows is the chance of doing justice to that order of constitutive interference, of finding ways of responding to it.

In what follows, then, I want first to outline two very different attempts to move beyond the ethics of tolerance—very different that is, in the direction in which they develop very similar premises. I then shall go on to suggest that rethinking the problem of how to ‘address vulnerability’ in all the senses in which such vulnerability goes unacknowledged within liberal patterns of reflection, will also lead us to reconsider the ways in which we locate the plurality that a political justice must engage.

One of the paths offered out of the particularistic impasses of liberal toleration is suggested by the ideal of universal reason. Richly developed in the work of Jürgen Habermas the possibility that an entire public might engage in critical dialogue on questions of common concern promises the elevation of politics beyond the negotiations and bargaining of interest groups which follow from the liberal inability to critically engage with plurality. The ethics of discourse, that is, of ‘dialogue’ under strong normative constraints requires that ‘each’ perspective must be submitted to the judgement of a pre-figured universal (‘all’) to determine its acceptability as a principle of collective conduct. As in liberalism the other is imagined as an ‘individual’ with his own point of view; the assumption made, however, is that such points of view can be brought into rational reconciliation with one another through critical reflection. Thus the attitude towards the other is less that of toleration than of respect for the faculty of reason as an attribute in common.

By contrast, a word much used in recent rethinking of the ethics of politics is ‘generosity’.⁴ Whereas tolerance aims to foster the space of indifference to others that is the condition of peaceful co-existence, and does so, I have insinuated, on the basis of certain assumptions about how identity can be known and rendered secure, generosity demands a relation to the other that is based on a limit to knowledge and on the assumption of both the ongoing indeterminacy of identity and its inter-dependency with ‘otherness’. It is suggested by Judith Butler, to give the example I shall discuss here, that if one is able to affirm what is contingent, incoherent and heteronomous in identity, then one is able to affirm the differences within oneself as in others. In the context of this demand of generosity, the political question she is raising is that of the “cost of articulating a coherent identity position by producing, excluding and repudiating a domain of abjected spectres that threaten the arbitrarily closed domain of subject positions.”⁵ This corresponds, I take Pasolini to be suggesting, to the experience

of ‘criminality’ accompanying ‘being tolerated’. Generosity here is not the primarily cognitive stance of knowing and accepting the others difference (which would be identical with tolerance) but stands for the performative attempt to engage the ‘untruth’ of identity, its openness to transformation, its heterogeneity, its receptivity and permeability. Whereas to enlarge our tolerance for others is often conceived on the model of an expanded imagination of their lives—listening to stories which locate others as particulars in space and time, to enlarge our generosity does not primarily exercise the sort of imagination that permits entry into the perspectives of others. It suggests, rather, the attempt to stage, re-enact, and displace constitutive narratives: to make room not for an identification with others based upon the acknowledgement of differences, but for a re-representation and re-symbolization of experience. This ideally permits the texture of experienced senses of identity and difference to be re-articulated but by no means done away with, for, as Žižek warned, it will continue to be important to find ways of symbolising the many senses of difference.

In the next section I first comment on certain similarities in the starting points of argument in Habermas’ turn against a liberal order based on ‘tolerance’ and that of Butler, and then comment on the significant differences in their conclusions.

II: Addressing vulnerability

Let me begin once again with some thought provoking statements. Habermas writes:

The more the subject becomes individuated, the more he becomes entangled in a densely woven fabric of mutual recognition, that is of reciprocal exposedness and vulnerability. Unless the subject externalize himself by participating in interpersonal relations through language, he is unable to form the inner centre that is his personal identity. This explains the almost constitutional insecurity and chronic fragility of personal identity—an insecurity that is antecedent to cruder threats to the integrity of life and limb.⁶

Judith Butler writes:

Perhaps only by risking the incoherence of identity is connection (with others) possible.⁷

The questions that are raised for me by these two remarks might be summarized in the following way; What ethical and political risks does our co-existence and inter-dependency with others in communities of speech and recognition imply? How are we dependent on linguistic interaction and acknowledgement within symbolic orders in ways that open us out to the risk of exploitation, violation, to the loss or destruction of

‘ourselves’? And how might such vulnerability be ‘addressed’?

The phrase ‘addressing vulnerability’ expresses a certain ambiguity in the thought that our vulnerability before others is something that may demand both recognition and redress. What we seek to redress by legal and political means in establishing the terms of co-existence in plural societies are those aspects of our vulnerability in which we can be protected. Yet if we only address the sources of social vulnerability by redressing them, by finding ways of interacting which protect those aspects of ourselves exposed to violation and exploitation, then perhaps we risk refusing a form of interaction for which our vulnerability serves as a channel (and this is the issue that Butler’s remark would raise, against the assumption in a position like Habermas’ that our ‘vulnerability’ is something we must obviously redress). It is a problem that takes on significant complexity in the light of a certain Hegelian ‘linguistic turn’ which renders our subjectivities a function of communicative interaction and symbolic mediation; of recognition and mis-recognition, and thus of response. Although this ‘turn’ is developed very differently in Butler’s and Habermas’ work, there are theses significantly in common between them with regard to a thematic of the dependency of subjectivity upon recognition mediated by linguistic interaction which, to use Althusser’s phrase, ‘hails’ the ‘I’ into being. But whereas for Butler this scene of accountability reverberates with the dissymmetrical and uneven play of power, and evokes primarily a ‘misrecognition’ in my turning toward the one who calls —as if to anyone, ‘hey you’—so that she looks for the potential for resistance in this constitutive interpellation,⁸ Habermas has a more optimistic version of the ways in which this scene empowers us, tantamount to repressing knowledge of the persistence of the vulnerability he specifies.

The remark I have cited from Habermas claims our dependency upon ‘external’ agencies of recognition for the very existence of our inner sense of self. In his work, however, acknowledgement of our radical vulnerability before the ‘others’ who name and recognize us, thereby lending us our own powers of language, informs an ideal of communication. This is modelled as the respectful and discursive dialogue between mature individual ‘points of view’, who seek a rational reconciliation with one another. In respectful communication the boundaries of each self are preserved and the ‘inner centre’ of personal identity is allowed to flourish. Our vulnerability within language is redressed by our participation in a pattern of interaction that subjects each to the same standards, and thus enacts a procedural justice which can promise to avert violence because each has his say.

However, against the highly plausible assumption that the proper way of ‘addressing’ linguistic vulnerability is by ‘redressing’ the dangers it poses, one might set the politics implicit in that phrase I cite from Butler—“perhaps only by risking the incoherence of identity is connection (with others) possible.” The remark might stand as a motif for her arguments in *Excitable Speech* and *The Psychic Life of Power*. In these works, Butler describes as very real the hurts and damage incurred through what she calls our ‘primary linguistic vulnerability’; there is injury occasioned at the level of linguistic interaction, which is bound up with our need of recognition by others and of ourselves

by ourselves in the terms a symbolic order lends to us, needs which 'compel us to social existence', ongoing needs that we never transcend. But notwithstanding all this, such vulnerability in 'social existence' is not properly addressed by seeking to overcome it, or by 'stabilizing' in a logic of exchange, the dependencies that compose it. Rather, what demands to be de-stabilized further are the terms of recognition that imagine—even if only as ideal—our transcendence of a dependency on language and its terms of recognition that render us ever vulnerable.

The thought I shall pursue here is that Butler thereby resists two possibilities which, I would suggest, shape the most conventional ways of thinking about plurality in contemporary political theory and share a weighty ambivalence. In multicultural liberalism plurality is 'naturalized' as a property of individual identities, whereas in discourse ethics, it is treated as an achievement of properly exercised discursive interaction, thus as an achievement of subjectivization. But for both liberalism and discourse ethics plurality is a fundamental social truth; the plurality of individuals is, on the one hand, that which must be preserved against the assimilative effect of the social order and, on the other hand, is that which threatens the peace of the social order, by introducing the potential for conflict. If our identities can be imagined to be independent of language, to exist as 'natural' categories reflecting the truth of our being—our race, sex, or sexuality or even as a distinction of singularity inherent to mankind—then this allows one way in which we can overcome our vulnerability before the social power of naming, by claiming that 'who we are' precedes such terms. Liberalism, I suggested at the outset, draws upon this type of ontology—and resolves the problem of conflict by demanding toleration of differences. Plurality is thereby treated as the primary fact to which tolerance must respond both in facilitating its flourishing and in avoiding conflict. But as my unfolding of the commentary by Pasolini on the experience of being 'tolerated' aimed to show, this liberal response allows only the narrowest of spaces for the social expression of a sense of self. Moreover, it reduces social conflict at the price of isolating the 'tolerated' as ready victims of 'senseless' violence.

If with Habermas, however, we affirm our irreducible dependency on linguistically and thus socially mediated recognition, we may still suppose it possible to secure within language a position of autonomy with respect to the terms of interpellation. In Habermas' discourse ethics, the projection of an 'ideal speech community' provides an ideal horizon of agreement in the moral dimension, and of recognition in the ethical dimension.⁹ The framework of Habermas' politics derives from the perceived imperative of preserving the individual against the assimilative forces of the social, whilst maintaining the individual in his or her dependency upon the social and the network of recognition it implies. The first concern—that the individual risks being assimilated by the social—is met by projecting an ideal community which maintains the subject in relations of 'reciprocal recognition' without reducing these to the assimilative potential of actual community. The second issue—of finding a virtuous form of social 'inclusion'—is met by lending recognition a form that guarantees that each 'perspective' is taken into account whilst also being required to take account of all the others within

a universalistic frame. The theme of the ‘reciprocal stabilization’ of identities thus corresponds to the thought that universalism and individualism are ‘flipsides’ of one another.¹⁰ The degree of individuation—the capacity to form an ‘inner core’ of personal identity—is directly linked to the moral achievement of a community in making it ‘safe’ to be oneself. However, this in turn requires that individuals adopt the universalistic perspective that ensures the safety of individuality by considering from the perspective of each what the full implications of any action would be. Habermas might be read, then, as addressing the liberal demand that the individual be preserved from the assimilative power of the social, whilst giving a better account than liberalism of how conflict may be rationally overcome through mutual recognition, rather than merely ‘contained’ by the principle of mutual tolerance.

Habermas’s development of liberalism supposes that the plurality of individuals is honoured and preserved by mutually respectful interaction. His model takes argumentative communication as the paradigm of ‘reciprocal’ intersubjectivity because within it autonomy is expressed and affirmed in a mode that reconciles individual and community. However, that model fails to recognize how intersubjectivity thought on these terms actively displaces other forms of community and communication; other possibilities of response. In Habermas’ picture, the individuation of the ego is linked to its capacity to raise and answer “criticizable validity claims”; it is differentiated in relation to others through the ‘idealising suppositions of a universal form of life’.¹¹ The ‘vertical’ interpretation of our relations to others ‘under’ the overarching form of universality leads him to suppose that the more abstract our agreements, “the more diverse the disagreements with which we can nonviolently live.”¹² But this is to assume a straightforward relationship between violence and disagreement at the price of re-introducing another kind of ‘violence’ that passes unremarked. The violence in question might be put in terms of the bracketing of certain orders of response to the other in the name of deferring to the legalistic relation in which the Habermasian schema requires individuals to stand.

The point I am seeking to make here refers back to the questions raised in the last section about the varieties of claims for recognition, and the way in which the possibilities of establishing rewarding senses of potentiality in identity as well as ‘connection’ with others are bound up with structures of response capable of marking individuality as singular, but also of rearticulating the terms of engagement within which alone ‘self’ and ‘others’ appear. It is not enough here either to preserve the spaces of indifference in which it is imagined plural identities might flourish as liberalism does, nor to project an ‘ideal’ order of communication in which the place of differences is just as fully privatized. But our question still stands of what order of response might better mark the claims of plurality, or of the self in an order of becoming not being, or, indeed, of the self in dynamic relation with otherness, not merely tolerant co-existence with it? What I want to begin to argue is that Butler’s notion that we might value an ‘incoherence of identity’ as that which permits connection with others, ought to break down the assumption that ‘plurality’ is a function of the coherent identities

of individuals, that singularity exists as a possession of each subject. Going beyond anything that is as yet explicitly a theme of Butler's work, however, I shall also suggest we might try to think about how singularity might appear out of the diverse possibilities of response—in other words, to situate plurality within the linguistic interaction upon which both Habermas and Butler agree the self is dependent, and to insist both upon the variety and the performative potential of such interactions. What is the response we seek from the other, the other before whom we are vulnerable as members of a community of recognition, of mis-recognition or of the failure to recognize otherness? And how do the varieties of response constitute our many senses of self and of 'connection' with others? How might plurality be located in such potentiality of response, thus in emergent singularity, rather than being regarded as the 'property' of each individual?

To briefly pursue this direction I turn now to another set of thought-provoking remarks, this time from Alphonso Lingis, with the aim of extending and revising Butler's contribution to this political debate.

III Singularity and Response

In *Dangerous Emotions*, Lingis contests the ideal of conversation inherent to discourse ethics of a 'moral and altruistic' exchange; rather, in a good conversation, there can be nothing less satisfying than finding ourselves 'respected' in a way that leaves our identities completely intact. Nor is it recognition of ourselves that is sought in the encounter with others: "How eccentric of Hegel!" he remarks,

to have imagined that when we go to encounter others, it is recognition we demand, recognition of the ego, confirmation, attestation, certification of our identity!—Is it not instead the others who demand that we identify ourselves?¹³

Here Lingis echoes some of Butler's concerns about the logic of recognition but also displaces its focus. The demand that we 'identify ourselves' is linked to a language of justification, legitimation and the 'universal humanity' which judges on these terms.¹⁴ Lingis' point is not, however, that we should seek to insert a logic of misrecognition both into our social identification and into our constitutive desire to be recognized, but rather that this is no model at all for the encounter which presents singularity.

The best experience of a conversation, he suggests, does not aim at a 'good' or affirm our identity but rather leaves us unable to recognize ourselves in what we have said; leaves us transformed through the manner in which we have found ourselves exposed. A conversation which engages us profoundly is an undergoing of turbulent experience in its

own right—we enter “a black hole of intensity.”¹⁵ Communication is thus imagined as an amoral experience in which individual identity is violated or risked:

To communicate effectively with those who fascinate us is to break through their integrity, their natures, their independence, their autonomy—to wound them. Communication through these breaches in our psychophysical integrity turns into a vortex, heedless of the consequences. Communication is not itself a ‘good’. It excludes any concern for the time to come. It excludes any concern for our interests. Thus we are drawn to all who face what happens, what is, and who suffer.¹⁶

If we think in terms of the morality which ordinarily accompanies the sense that we respect the other by respecting their inviolate interiority, then our vulnerability before others and of others before ourselves that this passage celebrates must seem merely dangerous, an emotional vortex that constraint should redress. There are, however, strong Nietzschean as well as Levinasian resonances in this passage, suggesting the possibility of developing along both aesthetic and ethical lines the thought of ‘exposure’ to the other in a manner critical of such founding tenets of morality. For either of these figures—Nietzsche or Levinas—it would be possible to argue that ‘singularity’ whether of self or other can only appear in such a vortex of communication, which perpetually accompanies our most ‘everyday’ interactions, but also reverberates in heightened moments of aesthetic or ethical significance. Thus if there is to be a singular self at all, it must be ‘exposed’ to that otherness which ‘presents’ the finitude in which it begins and ends; the hazards of quasi-mimetic responsiveness—the Dionysian for Nietzsche, raw ‘sensibility’ for Levinas—must be undergone if there is to be a singularity to risk at all. In answer to the moralist’s assumption that the boundaries of identity belong to the individual and are thus given in advance as his ‘property’, it might be remarked that what is at stake in this image of communication as ‘violation’ is also a contestation of that metaphysics.

Such communication can be conceived primarily as gestural. On Lingis’ Nietzschean account, it precedes a common grasp of meanings, appearing rather through a ‘primary movement of sensibility’ like the infectious nature of laughter. It requires fluidity in the boundaries of identities on both sides, without implying that identity is thus detached from its singular history or that identities merge into one. And as such, it makes a specific claim on the other’s response. Without posing a demand for recognition, singularity makes a demand to recognition. “To enter into contact with another” Lingis writes,

is not to conceptually grasp his or her identity and respect his or her boundaries and inner space... We catch up the tone of the one who addresses us, his or her voice resounds in our own... To answer the frenetic tone of a young person with the stentorian tone of officious and sedentary life is, before we refuse to really

understand what we are being told, to refuse his tone; it is to refuse him.¹⁷

There is generosity in this relation, and the response which ‘does not refuse him’ is recognition. But it is recognition of the other’s singular ‘tone’, a tone which makes no demand for recognition on its own behalf. The other’s tone elicits recognition in appropriate gestural response, manifest at the level of the body. The voice of the singular other must ‘resound in one’s own’. Lingis’ phrasing of the issue touches on how the appropriateness of the response to another cannot be ‘neutral’—rather it implicates the one responding—requires him or her to enter into a corresponding emotional and physical state.¹⁸ This makes us vulnerable and exposed partners to conversation in a sense that Habermas barely anticipates, since the very theory of communication he uses has already transcended this unaccountable moment by the time it turns around to claim recognition as the gesture each seeks from the other. And where the other ‘refuses’ such a tone, the injury done is less through misrecognition, unlike the cases that interest Butler, than through misaddress, the refusal to present to the other the sense one has of his singularity. The singularity of the face is not that of the particular instance of a coded meaning, and its interruption is not linked to a structure of reiterability. When Lingis writes that,

what faces is what the meaning one might give to this surface cannot contain, an excess over and above the forms and their coded significance. The facing is an exclamatory act that interrupts the exchange of messages picked up from others and passed on to others ...¹⁹

the point of interruption is not structured by the tension between determinate meaning and its excess. The face is in excess of codes of meaning, but what it demands is response at the level of sensibility, at the level of a sense of the other precisely as vulnerable.

Inasmuch as I sense the gestures and appeals of the other, not simply formulating the forms required by the profession, the social status, the age group, the etiquette, the circulation of information and messages, but faltering, hesitating and offended by what is said, I sense in him an imperative other than that with which I understand the laws and codes of the social field.²⁰

This imperative, I am suggesting is that of the address apt to a singular being. Perhaps, then, when we think of that vulnerability in speech which a politics must address, it is the gesture of saving faces which must occupy us, insofar as within the space of ‘the political’ we seek to address ourselves to a ‘face’, to redress the sense of the obliteration of singularity, its silencing within a certain order of language. A face may be addressed in dialogue, but it is dialogue opened out onto its gestural sense and sensibility, drawn through the surface of speech towards the undercurrent of voices.

Is it too absurd to suggest that something of this model needs to inform the images of interaction proper to political life as well as private conversations? That it is something like this order of recognition which would have satisfied Pasolini better than being 'tolerated'—an engagement with the singularity of the other which does not suppose in advance that such singularity is a function of an ontological 'difference' that the encounter must respect, nor an inviolable border it is simply impermissible to cross? Or, that this is a part of what Žižek is pointing to when he charts the varieties of popular political movement that generate symbolic dislocations, by metaphorically lifting the claims of particularity into claims of universality, by staging what universality might become rather than imagining its horizon to be always-already ideally encompassing thus allowing space for singularity to appear? Is what is properly sought, even politically, not always cool respect for 'difference' but allowing the voice of the other to 'resound' in our own response—a way of admitting that our own identities are not ontologically secured, that if 'others' are to touch us, affect us, live with us in relations of mutual openness and vulnerability—we cannot defend ourselves from the outset against them? And is the kind of community which would make this possible, perhaps, what we should be calling for?²¹

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Notes

1. Lutheran Letters, quoted in Michael Warner, "The Mass Public and the Mass Subject," *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1992) 383-4.
2. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999) 202.
3. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* 202.
4. As, to give just a few examples, in Julia Kristeva's treatment of the 'stranger'; in William Connolly's approach to 'secularity'; in Iris Marion Young's or Drucilla Cornell's treatment of 'difference'; and, as I will discuss here, in the recent work of Judith Butler.
5. Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997) 149.

6. Jurgen Habermas, *Moral consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1990) 199 (Italics mine).
7. Butler, *Psychic Life* 149.
8. See Butler's detailed evocation and discussion of this scene in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 1997), especially the introduction.
9. Jurgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992) 186.
10. Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking* 186.
11. Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking* 186-7.
12. Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking* 140.
13. Alphonso Lingis, *Dangerous Emotions* (California: U of California P, 2000) 87.
14. Lingis, *Dangerous Emotions* 86.
15. Lingis, *Dangerous Emotions* 91.
16. Lingis, *Dangerous Emotions* 101.
17. Lingis, *Dangerous Emotions* 100.
18. Here we should note that the 'quasi-mimetic response' does not attempt to imitate the other. The representative of 'officious and sedentary life' will only render himself more absurd and obnoxious if he attempts to talk like the hip young thing his 'singularity' plainly belies his being. It is important to notice here first how the 'weightiness' of identity is to be acknowledged on both sides, less as a function of a 'nature' than a singular history and mode of bearing oneself, and second, how the response apt to this weightiness attends to the 'otherness' of the other, even as it 'presents singularity' in a bodily and affective register.—This note responds to a question posed by David Wood.
19. Alphonso Lingis, *The Community of Those Who have Nothing in Common* (Bloomington: U of Indiana P, 1994) 66-67.
20. Lingis, *The Community of Those Who have Nothing in Common* 29-30.
21. Here I have in mind the wonderful treatment of community in Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Inoperative Community*, and perhaps especially this remark: "Speech—including silence—is not a means of communication but communication itself, an exposure (similar to the way the Inuit Eskimos sing by making their own cries resonate in the open mouth of a partner). The speaking mouth does not transmit, does not inform, does not effect any bond; it is—perhaps—though taken at its limit, as with the kiss—the beating of a singular site against other singular sites... Community is made up of the interruption of singularities, or of the suspensions that singular beings are..." Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor (Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 1991) 30-31.

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