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Vulnerability and the Human in Judith Butler's and Adriana Cavarero's Feminist Thought: A Politics of Philosophy Point of View

Tuija Pulkkinen
Gender Studies, University of Helsinki, FI
tuija.pulkkinen@helsinki.fi

In this article I explore the use of the term *vulnerability* in the work of two leading feminist theorists, Adriana Cavarero and Judith Butler. Approaching their work with the 'politics of philosophy' method I show how Cavarero's and Butler's usage of the term *vulnerability* in relation to other terms in their texts testifies for differences in their relation to the academic tradition of philosophy. I argue that Cavarero's usage of the term shows that she engages with the basic questions of the phenomenological-existential tradition of Husserl and Heidegger through the notion of the human, while arguing for the view of singular human existent as vulnerable and relational. In contrast, Butler's usage of the term *vulnerability* expresses distancing from the basic questions of the same tradition of the abstracted and transcendentalized human. Instead, Butler's systematic connecting of vulnerability to social norms and infrastructures which are contingent and historically changing points towards the antifoundational challenge that she presents in relation to this particular tradition of philosophy.

Introduction

As a word and as a concept, *vulnerability* has spread through feminist theory texts in recent years and, as is the fate of popular concepts, it is inevitably used in many different meanings and for many different purposes. No doubt, however, Judith Butler and Adriana Cavarero are among the most cited theorists within feminist discussions that involve the concept of vulnerability. In my contribution to this special issue I will concentrate on the work of these two authors, and will look closely at their respective mobilization of this term and the work it does in their texts. I will concentrate on the use of this specific concept, as a specific word and term, and I will do it with a particular approach I have developed towards the study of intellectual fields, which I call the 'politics of philosophy' approach (Pulkkinen 2018). When

studying the intellectual field of feminist thought, my politics of philosophy approach begins with the premise that a plurality of philosophical traditions is currently alive in the intellectual field of contemporary feminist theory and that many contemporary theorists link their work with particular philosophical traditions. The approach involves a specific methodology of paying attention to the use of concepts: that is, to the exact use of words while attending to them as involving complicated operations of thought. Instead of focusing only on explicit arguments in the texts, with this approach I pay attention to how the authors use, and do not use, specific concepts, and how they use these concepts in specific ways with respect to other concepts, and how this use in itself creates agonistics[1] in between texts by different authors. My interest particularly lies within the agonistics that are created through the ways that contemporary feminist authors use charged key concepts in a manner that creates links to divergent lines of thought within the textual tradition of philosophy.

Since Adriana Cavarero and Judith Butler both mobilize the concept *vulnerability* in their feminist theorizing, several commentators who study their thought have seen this as a point of connection between the two (Guaraldo 2012; Söderbäck 2018). In contrast, with the politics of philosophy approach, I focus on the differences, instead of emphasizing the similarities. I argue that Cavarero's and Butler's divergent use of the concept *vulnerability* reveals crucial differences in their respective politics of philosophy. I align my argumentation here with a recent article in which I looked at Butler's and Cavarero's usage of two other interesting concepts, *appearing* and *plurality* (Pulkkinen 2018).

When looking at how Butler and Cavarero use the concepts *appearing* and *plurality,* I argued that each of the authors' politics of philosophy is evident in how they use these two terms. My interest was drawn to these particular terms since both belong to exceptionally philosophically charged concepts within the phenomenological tradition of philosophy, particularly in Hannah Arendt's work. The concepts *appearing* and *plurality* set in place Arendt's relationship with some of the central issues in the phenomenological tradition, which have to do with the condition of the human as a species. I argued that Cavarero adheres to Arendt's usage of these terms, asking her feminist questions in a discernibly existential, human singularity frame of the Heideggerian version of phenomenological tradition. Butler also *uses* these concepts actively, making it appear as if she is connecting with Arendt and Cavarero, and yet she also actively changes the meaning with which these key concepts are used. I argue that the effect is a discharging of their phenomenological- existential intensity, as a philosophy-political move (Pulkkinen 2018).

In the present contribution I focus on the concept *vulnerability,* and I argue that also in terms of the use of this concept it is evident that Cavarero's and Butler's politics of philosophy differ crucially with respect to the tradition of the phenomenological-existential tradition. It is also evident that their relationship to Hannah Arendt's texts plays a significant role in this difference. While Cavarero attaches to Arendt's phenomenological-existential tradition, making her feminist philosophical-political move within it, I see Butler as engaging in a different philosophy-political move towards a post-phenomenological approach. Most importantly, Butler's approach includes a rejection of the focus on the foundational, transcendentally understood human subject within this tradition. Their divergent use of the term *vulnerability,* I argue, provides evidence for this.

Both Butler and Cavarero engage with their work in political feminist interventions as well as in interventions within theory discussions, and *vulnerability* serves as a crucial concept in

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[1] By using the term *agonistics,* I draw inspiration from both Bonnie Honig (1992), who uses it to characterize politics as contestation within a field; and from Chantal Mouffe (2013), who emphasizes emotions and passions in the tensions within an agonistic field.

both kinds of interventions. As a concept in their texts, *vulnerability* appears in close relation to the concepts *precariousness* and *precarity*; and it is also associated with *violence,* with *the body,* and with *relationality.* Relationality, in particular, is the terrain in which Cavarero's and Butler's theory interventions are most commonly seen to converge. Both theorize against individualistic political ontology, that is, both cast doubt on the traditions of political thought in which individual agency is thought of as primary and without any constitutive dependence on what is prior to it. It is exactly because of this constitutionally anti-individualistic ontology that Cavarero and Butler are often seen to be close to each other as feminist thinkers, despite their evident differences in some other issues of feminist theory, most importantly the issue of sexual difference, which is a crucially positive notion for Cavarero, whereas for Butler, it is not.

In the introduction to her book, *Inclinations* (2016), Cavarero emphasizes the closeness of her views to Butler's exactly in terms of *vulnerability* and *relationality.* She makes the point that for both Butler and herself vulnerability is connected to more than the fragility of individuals. Rather, for both of them, it is connected to relationality. Even more importantly, for both of them, she writes, relationality not only refers to the fact that individuals have relations with each other, but it is a much more profound matter of thinking in a non-individualistic manner, and as such, it is an ontological issue. As she phrases it, for both Butler and herself

> vulnerability is not a matter of correcting individualistic ontology by inserting the category of relation to it [...] It is rather to rethink relation itself as originary and constitutive, as an essential dimension of the human ... (Cavarero 2016, 13).

I will return to this quote later in order to argue that, in spite of this crucial similarity in their approach in correcting individualistic ontology through engagement with vulnerability, they differ profoundly in how each of them conceives of it, and I argue that this is related to differences in their politics of philosophy.

Hannah Arendt's work provides a focal point that unites Cavarero and Butler, in that they both engage with her work when dealing with vulnerability. However, I argue again that they engage in very different aspects of it: while Cavarero works in close attachment with Arendt's philosophical orientation within the classical issues of phenomenology – that is, in asking questions concerning the 'human condition' – Butler is instead primarily interested in Arendt as a thinker of politics and agency, and her questions derive from challenges she poses to Arendt in terms of the vulnerability of agency.

I will first engage with Cavarero's work and her use of the concept vulnerability. I will then look more closely at Butler's use of this concept, and in the third part, I will sum up the difference of the philosophical stakes within these two usages while also trying to think through the implications in terms of feminist interventions concerning issues of injustices. Conceptual politics and the politics of philosophy, I argue, make a difference in terms of how questions are asked and which questions are asked, and consequently they matter for feminist and other political scenes involved.

Adriana Cavarero: The Human Vulnerability of Singular Bodily Existents

Adriana Cavarero is rarely, actually hardly ever, explicit about her attachment to the existential tradition of phenomenological philosophy.[2] However, I suggest that this attachment is discernible in all of her work, and in particular through her intimate engagement with

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2 One exception is in an interview with Elisabetta Bertolino (2008) in which she says she 'would be most happy to be considered as phenomenologist, in the sense that Arendt speaks as a phenomenologist' and 'not a

Hannah Arendt's thought. I will describe how I see this attachment playing out in her work in elaborating on the foundational role of the notion of human in this context, after having first had a look at Cavarero's use of the term *vulnerability.*

How and most importantly, in the proximity of which other terms, does Cavarero use the term *vulnerability*? In her latest book, *Inclinations* (Cavarero 2016) we typically find the term *vulnerability* being used in the following kinds of combinations:[3] 'originary paradigm of *human vulnerability*,' 'the state of *vulnerability common to all humans*,' and 'the *mother …* partakes in the same state of *vulnerability* that is openly exhibited by the *newborn*.'

Vulnerability as a word is most commonly connected to *the human,* always appearing close to that word, and it is also referred to in connection with the mother-child relationship.

Cavarero also explicitly discusses the term *vulnerability* in *Inclinations* (2016, 158–164). This is with reference to Lévinas's chain of synonyms for *face*: that is, *nakedness, poverty,* and *exposition.* Cavarero links vulnerability to the Latin term *vulnus,* with reference to skin in two different dimensions. First, with reference to wounded skin and wound, and thus violence, war, warrior, armed conflict, and violent death, which brings along a semantic chain of: wound, to wound, to inflict a wound on the surface of the body as exposed. And second, with reference to naked skin, and smooth skin, which leads us to human body in nakedness, hairless skin, and baby's velvet skin. Cavarero mobilizes the second one of these etymologies against the first one, and writes:

> the warrior indeed gives way to a new emblematic figure of *vulnerability* as *the human's essential condition*: if imagined in terms of the total nakedness of the exposed skin – *without hair* as in the case of children and, often, of the elderly as well – the vulnerable by definition becomes, in fact, the defenceless (Cavarero 2016, 159).

Again, she refers to 'the human's essential condition,' and we can sense here an allusion to the human as a hairless, naked animal. Equally strongly present is a reference to feminist issues of care, to children and to the elderly, when she writes:

> When vulnerability is pure nakedness, when it is the defenseless who incarnates the meaning of *vulnus*, the violence that inflicts a wound, slips to the background and allows the emergence of a tender and defenseless skin that inspires caresses. Mothers and nurses, who are used to handling infants, know very well what it is like (Cavarero 2016, 159–160).

This move is characteristic of Cavarero's feminist interventionist project, which involves replacing male figures by female figures as figuring the universal symbolic. In all of her work, she joins Irigaray in this complicated feminist revolution for cultural change (Braidotti 1995, ix, xii–xv; Cavarero 1995, 1–9; 2000, 49–66; Chanter 1995, 176–177; Irigaray 1985a, 133–146; 1985b, 74–76, 161–3; 1993, 15–22, 45–50, 96; Stone 2007, 124–130). Here, when she

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phenomenologist in the great classical tradition starting with Husserl and continuing with Merleau-Ponty, not the phenomenology in which phenomena are always thought of from the general perspective of the subject, but rather a phenomenology of one's uniqueness and the materiality of singular bodies' (Cavarero with Bertolino 2008, 144). It is interesting that Heidegger, who is the phenomenological thinker of singularity of the subject in this same tradition, and also Arendt's teacher, is not mentioned at all here.

[3] All the emphasis (marked in italics) in all the extracts and quotes from both Cavarero's and Butler's works in this article are mine, and their purpose is to indicate the usage of terms relating specifically to which terms they are linked to through their being placed close to each other in the text.

describes the constitutive condition of the human, it comes to be described in terms of the female figures of mothers and nurses, instead of the male figures of warriors.

In Cavarero's previous book, *Horrorism. Naming Contemporary Violence* (2011), *vulnerability* appears in similar closeness to *the human*: "The uniqueness that characterizes the *ontological status of humans* is also in fact a *constitutive vulnerability*, especially when understood in corporeal terms" (Cavarero 2011, 20).

The phrases *constitutive* and *ontological status of humans* are attached to *vulnerability,* and in a very similar way as elsewhere in her work, the human appears as a strong interest for Cavarero.

In the same book, *Horrorism*, when speaking about contemporary political violence, the ISIS and the cuttings of heads in public decapitations that have been conducted in the name of ISIS, she writes:

> *The human being*, as an incarnated being, is here offended in the *ontological* dignity of being as body, more precisely in its being a *singular* body [...] What is at stake is not the end of *human* life but *the human condition* itself, as incarnated in the *singularity* of the *vulnerable* bodies (Cavarero 2011, 8).

I would like to draw the attention to the phrases 'the human condition itself' and 'singularity' here, and I will return to each of them.

Cavarero is most often read as theorizing our deep dependence on other people, that is, the fundamental basic relationality of a human being. She emphasizes that a human being is exposed at birth as being utterly vulnerable, and that a baby's first relationship with its mother expresses the fundamental relationality of an individual (Cavarero 2000, 19-–8; 2005, 169–172, 178–182; 2016, 100–106, 114-120; Guaraldo 2012, Söderbäck 2018).

Cavarero's great debt to Hannah Arendt is standardly recognized, but I would argue that, beyond Arendt, her very strong investment in the phenomenological tradition of Husserl, and in particular in its Heideggerian existential form, often goes unnoticed. Recognizing this investment clarifies how Cavarero's thought is different from many other contemporary feminist theorists, including Butler, but also all the feminist theorists in Deleuzian inspiration, such as Elizabeth Grosz (Pulkkinen 2017). This is an important point: Cavarero is standardly introduced as a philosopher who, following Arendt, puts forward the theme of natality and thereby, as her Wikipedia article states, shifts attention away from death, 'the central category on which the whole edifice of traditional philosophy has been based.' Yet what is not noted in that observation is that it is a specific part of the philosophical tradition to which this shift of attention relates, and that is the Heideggerian version of Husserl's phenomenology.

Husserl's focus on the universalized transcendental human body-mind, that is, transcendental consciousness as constituting what is, and as the only route to that what is, is in Heidegger's philosophy of existence transferred onto the *singular*ity of the human. This is abstracted to a *existent,* a *being there,* a *Dasein*, an existent between birth and death. It is in this particular philosophical setting where Cavarero's shift from death to birth occurs. Where the consciousness of mortality and the concept of being-toward-death is crucial in Heidegger's philosophical project, Cavarero's focus on birth, following Arendt, turns this around: the consciousness of natality, of having been born, is important. And while the shift produced by Cavarero occurs with respect to this particular tradition, much of her philosophizing also remains close to it, such as asking questions from within that tradition. Therefore, this philosophizing is different from, and contrasts with, those other

shifts which have been done with feminist intentions within contemporary feminist theory, informed by relations to other types of philosophical ambition, which are more post-phenomenological.

Many would say that Cavarero's link to Heidegger is understandable, as she works so much on Arendt, who after all was a disciple of Heidegger. Yet I think it is significant that the closeness to the Husserlian-Heideggerian tradition is strongly present also in Cavarero's other strong influence: Luce Irigaray. When Irigaray works within the philosophical tradition, she also works in a phenomenological environment (Chanter 1995; Heinämaa 2007; Pulkkinen 2017). Irigaray's thought targets the most central element of the modern phenomenological and existential tradition – whether that is understood as consciousness, as the abstracted generalized human, or as a *Dasein*. Irigaray's strong message is that instead of one, this sub-ject/human/consciousness should be conceived of as two, or as at least two. The doctrine of sexual difference in Irigaray's thought does not simply state that women and men are differ-ent; rather, sexual difference is the claim that the transcendental subject is not one but two, and in this context, the masculine and the feminine becomes an ontological claim.

Cavarero clearly places the same philosophical emphasis on sexual difference as does Irigaray. For both Irigaray and Cavarero, sexual difference is linked to the idea that being appears, and is grasped, in a different way by the masculine and the feminine as different morphologies. Hence Cavarero's thought also places a heavy emphasis on the sexed body of the human, as a singular being (Cavarero 1995, 55, 59–60, 68; 2000, 38; 2016, 107–120).

The task of being able to tell what it is that is distinctly human haunts much of the phil-osophical tradition in general (Oliver 2009), but particularly the modern phenomenology and existentialism of the transcendental human. The human is considered to have particular sensory abilities of sight, hearing, touch; as living on the earth in an upright position; speak-ing, using language; using tools, constructing dwellings, and working on its living conditions with tools; humans have little hair; the human is an animal with hands. Both Husserl and Heidegger reflected on all of this a great deal, though often using more abstract terms than *humanity,* such as transcendental consciousness, or *Dasein.*

Cavarero's fidelity to the basic form in which the phenomenological-existential tradition asks philosophical questions appears in multiple ways in her work and in its key concepts: *the human, existent, unveiling, manifesting,* and so on, and the way she shows interest in par-ticular themes, such as the human sensory apparatus. For Cavarero, a shift from eye to ear, from seeing to hearing, is a strong theme, particularly in her book on voice (Cavarero 2011), and again the shift is especially meaningful within her particular tradition of philosophizing. What is present in this mode of questioning is always the question of human conditions; what constitute the conditions particular to the human perspective, such as the five human senses, hands, language, dwelling, work, hairless, and nakedness. The questions are asked about the generalized, omnitemporal human, which is the same in any place and at any time, a human that can be abstracted and conceived of as transcendental. Moreover, as Foucault so sagaciously wrote, the human of this philosophical tradition is a double: both abstract and empirical (Foucault 1970, 318–328). For Husserl and Heidegger it is one, for Irigaray and Cavarero, it is two.

For Cavarero, a crucial theme is the Heideggerian human singularity conceived within Arendtian plurality. She stresses the singularity of the human, and also the uniqueness of each individual, also in bodily terms. Crucially for Cavarero, an individual is also always an already sexed 'who' (Cavarero 2000, 18–21, 43, 60–61; 2005, 173–182; 2011, 8–13; 2016, 101–104, 109; Guaraldo 2012; Söderbäck 2018). When Cavarero writes on Shakespeares's *Romeo and Juliet*: 'Singularity of the human being loved by Juliet is manifested as voice in the balcony scene' (Cavarero 2005, 235), it is easy to see that she speaks of a 'who' instead of a 'what' in

the Arendtian sense (Arendt, 1958, 179–181; Cavarero, 2000, 20, 71–73, 88–89). But she
also links more deeply into the tradition that is interested in the generalized, omnitemporal,
human, in this case, in the human's general singularity. Although names are mentioned here
– Juliet and Romeo – the issue is not the particular properties of these particular individuals,
but instead the general singularity of the human being. This is a philosophical statement.
Cavarero's latest book, *Inclinations*, attests to this as well: the upright position of the gener-
alized human is her preoccupation there as she works to challenge the dominant figure of
masculine uprightness of the human with feminine bending over a child in the act of caring.

In sum, Cavarero's theorizing cannot be understood without taking her investment in a
particular philosophical tradition as seriously as her simultaneous investment in feminism.
Cavarero's philosophical investment in the phenomenological-existential tradition means
that she works with a generalizing impulse, which aims at something omnitemporal, outside
a particular time and place, and that she maintains the centrality of the human, whether this
is the general axiom of sexual difference that the human comes in two bodily forms, two ways
or being constituted in terms of bodily-sensory apparatus; or that the human is in a funda-
mental state of singularity in plurality in Arendt's terms; or that the human is foundationally
in a state of vulnerability and precariousness, which incorporates the fundamental depend-
ency of having been born of a mother, in Cavarero's own terms. All these are axioms about
humans in general. And even when they are about a singular unique human, in Cavarero's
texts this singularity is about the uniqueness of humans as existents in general. Cavarero is
not interested in particular individuals, nor particular groups of individuals in their particu-
larity, nor in particular situations at particular times and places. The questions she asks are
in the generalizing mode, and they concern the human condition. I would underline this as
her distinctive politics of philosophy, which embraces the strong omnitemporal aspect the
philosophical tradition.

Judith Butler: Vulnerability within Changing Social and Political Conditions

When Adriana Cavarero mentions Judith Butler in *Inclinations*, as I quoted earlier, she does
this with a positive note of Butler being close her own views on the issue of anti-individualis-
tic ontology. Cavarero emphasizes that for both of them:

> …vulnerability is not a matter of correcting individualistic ontology by inserting the
> category of relation to it. […] It is rather to rethink relation itself as originary and *con-
> stitutive, as an essential dimension of the human* … (Cavarero 2016, 13).

However, do we really find in Butler's texts rethinking of anything as 'originary and consti-
tutive, as an essential dimension of the human?' When I look at how *the human* appears in
Butler's texts, I find this term is mostly in proximity to such other terms as *norms,* and *the
social,* which point to something that changes historically (Pulkkinen 2018). The questions
Butler asks are not concerned with the original, constitutive, or essential dimension of what
is looked at. Instead, *the human* as a term appears in questions that she asks about contem-
porary issues and particular cases. I will return to this as an important dimension of Butler's
politics of philosophy, after looking more closely how she uses the term vulnerability in some
of her more recent work.

A good example is Butler's article in a 2016 edited volume *Vulnerability and Resistance,*
where her main argumentation concerns the relation of resistance to vulnerability: she argues
that they are not to be understood as opposites as often is the case, but that vulnerability,
indeed, is a precondition of resistance. In this article, the term *vulnerability* is constantly con-
nected to the terms *exposed,* as well as *prior, precede,* and *condition,* and it is clear that Butler

is primarily concerned with *the subject* in its mode as agent. The text is related to political action, power, and resistance, as is her book, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015), in which her usage of the term *vulnerability* is very similar.

One example of Butler's use of the term in her *Vulnerability and Resistance* article is:

> So, whatever performative agency might mean, it cannot overcome these *prior* and *constituting* dimensions of *social normativity*. It is here, then, that I would identify both dependency and *vulnerability* as part of the performative account of agency (Butler 2016, 19).

Here, Butler uses the same word, *constituting,* which we encounter in Cavarero's text. However, in Butler's text, it does not appear in connection to human vulnerability and as an ontological omnitemporal quality of the human, as it does in Cavarero. Instead, both *prior* and *constituting* for Butler are connected to *social normativity.* This is a general trend in Butler's texts: when read systematically, any mention of *vulnerability* is always found in close proximity to the terms *norms* and *social.*

In the very same paragraph as the passage cited above, Butler already also connects vulnerability to even more concrete issues, such as infrastructures and economic lives. In her words:

> Thus, the dependency of *human and other creatures* on *infrastructural support* exposes a specific *vulnerability* that we have when we are un*support*ed, when those infrastructural conditions characterizing our *social, political and economic* lives start to decompose, or when we find ourselves radically un*support*ed under conditions of precarity or under explicit conditions of threat (Butler 2016, 19).

In addition to connecting vulnerability here to 'social, political and economic lives' and 'support,' instead of it being treated as an ontological condition of humanness, there is also a delicate, but deliberate detachment from the foundational human perspective present in the phrase 'human and other creatures.' This is yet another indication that Butler is rejecting the frame of the human perspective.

Interestingly, Butler comes closest to asking questions about human vulnerability exactly when she mentions the idea of the dependency of the mother, and she also clearly distinguishes her approach from Cavarero's position:

> My reference to dependency *may well* include dependency on the mother or the primary caretaker, *but* that is not the form of primary dependency that concerns me here. By theorizing the human body as a certain kind of *dependency on infrastructure, understood complexly as environment, social relation, and networks of support and sustenance by which the human itself proves not to be divided from the animal or from the technical world*, we foreground the way in which we are *vulnerable* to *decimated or disappearing infrastructures, economic supports, and predictable and well-compensated labor. Not only* are we then *vulnerable* to one another – an invariable feature of social relations *but in addition*, this very *vulnerability* indicates *a broader condition of dependency and interdependency that **challenge** the dominant ontological understanding of the embodied subject* (Butler 2016, 21).

Here Butler distinguishes herself explicitly ('challenge') from that orientation in philosophy which concentrates on the particularity of the human ('dominant ontological understanding of the embodied subject'), as opposed to animals and things, by emphasizing the

non-existence of such a separation, and redirecting the interest from the generally human to
social relations, again very pointedly.[4]

Butler also explicitly argues against the approach to vulnerability as being primarily an exis-
tential condition, bringing the term *existential* into challenging contact with the vocabulary
of the social:

> In my view, *as much as* 'vulnerability' can be affirmed as an *existential condition*, since
> we are all subject to accidents, illness, and attack that can expunge our lives quite
> quickly, *it is also* a *socially induced condition*, which accounts for the disproportionate
> exposure to suffering, especially among those broadly called the precariat for whom
> access to shelter, food, and medical care is often quite drastically limited (Butler 2016,
> 25).

There is a body of work in Butler exegetical literature which refers to Butler's 'ethical turn.' As
shown in *Butler and Ethics*, edited by Moya Lloyd (2015), the ethical issue debated most con-
cerns Butler's connection to Levinas, and by implication a closer relationship to the humanist
tradition of general human mortality, which some argue Butler is approaching with an eth-
ics of vulnerability (see also Mills 2007 and Honig 2013, 43–46). Some authors also argue
directly that Butler's work is deeply and increasingly connected to phenomenological exis-
tentialism (Coole 2008). Like most authors in Lloyd's collection, who do not finally see such a
turn towards existential ethics in Butler's work, I am also skeptical about that interpretation.
I would rather pay attention to the remarkable continuity that is a characteristic of Butler's
thought: the constant questioning of a foundational universalizing of the transcendental
human perspective orientation of phenomenology, an approach which characterizes her rela-
tion to the tradition of philosophy more broadly, and which also most strikingly differentiates
her from so many other contemporary thinkers.

From this point of view, it is remarkable that in the collection of Butler's earlier essays on
phenomenological thinkers published as *The Senses of Subject* (2015), the term *vulnerability*
is not present. Butler speaks of 'dependence' and 'relationality', but not 'vulnerability' when
she theorizes subject formation from the angle characteristic to her: arguing both through
philosophy and psychoanalysis, emphasizing the non-sovereignty of the 'I,' and the fact that
the 'I' is already affected before it can say 'I' (Butler 2015, 2).

In contrast, *vulnerability* is present in *Precarious Life* (2004), in which death, injury, and
violence dominate, and in which the terms *dependency* and *fundamental dependency* also
appear. In *Precarious Life*, Butler gives Levinas's human-in-general some prominence,[5] but
even here, she nevertheless connects the term systematically to the social and the political,
as in the following quote:

> Violence is *surely* a touch of the worst order, a way *a primary human vulnerability to
> other humans* is exposed in its most terrifying way, a way in which we are given over,
> without control, to the will of another, a way in which life itself can be expunged by
> the willful action of another. …. in a way, we all live with this particular vulnerability,
> *a vulnerability to the other that is part of bodily life*, a *vulnerability* to a sudden address
> from elsewhere that we cannot preempt. This *vulnerability*, *however*, becomes highly

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[4] Sanna Karhu (2017) has recently insightfully analyzed Butler's emphasis on social norms, connecting it simulta-
neously to the potential of Butler's thought for critical animal studies.

[5] She begins the book declaring that she will start and end with the question of the human, but not because there
is a human condition that is universally shared, which she says 'is surely not yet the case' (Butler, 2004a, 20).

exacerbated under certain *social and political conditions*, especially those in which vio-
lence is a way of life and the means to secure self-defence are limited (Butler 2004a,
28–29).

As the representative quotations above indicate, 'vulnerability', when connected to 'the
human' in its generality in Butler's texts, is systematically presented with a correction ('but,'
'however'), a detachment, a disconnection of some kind. This disconnection from the aim of
defining the human condition, whether vulnerability or something else, is further empha-
sized by how she engages with the term *human* in general in connection to other concepts
in her texts. To draw this out even more clearly, I will provide two representative quotes from
Undoing Gender (2004), in which Butler uses the word *human.* When attention is paid to
other terms that appear in its proximity, it is particularly the term *norms* that sticks out. This
chapter is about transgender, and both quotes are from the same chapter:

> When we ask, what are the conditions of intelligibility by which *the human* emerges,
> by which the human is recognized, by which some subject becomes the subject of
> human love, we are asking about conditions of intelligibility composed of *norms*, of
> practices, that have become presuppositional, without which we cannot think the
> *human* at all (Butler 2004b, 57).

> When Brenda looks at the mirror, and sees something nameless, freakish, something
> between *the norms*, is she not at that moment *in question as a human*, is she not the
> spectre of the freak against which and through which *the norm* installs itself? (Butler
> 2004b, 69).

In *Undoing Gender,* a central question is 'who counts as the human, whose lives count as lives,
which are the limits of "the person," "life," and who has no entitlement to occupy the place
of the who?' (Butler 2004b, 17, 58, 191). In *Precarious Life*, Butler works with the notion of
the 'normatively human,' her examples being the prisoners of Guantanamo Bay, who do not
'count as human' (Butler 2004a, xiv–xv, 20). Butler focuses in *the human* through the terms
such as *regulations, social norms,* and *normalization.* She is concerned with the human as a
status, which includes the status of less human, and not human; and her question becomes
'will I be regarded, am I counted, am I recognised … as human?'

  All this first appears to approach the themes of the universal human of phenomenological-
existential philosophy; the life between birth and death of a singular 'who' and its vulnerabil-
ity. Yet Butler does this in a decisively Foucauldian anti-foundational mode: this is the human
of specific times and places and as a changing norm. Also in *Notes Towards the Performative
Theory of Assembly* (2015), where Butler concentrates on unequal demographic distribution
of vulnerability and precarity, it is clear that instead of focusing on the common existential
ground of the human condition, that is, mortality, Butler turns her attention to differences
and shifts in politics and norms, which lead to different conditions of mortality for different
populations (Pulkkinen 2018). More precisely, she decisively refuses to ask the question of
the human in an omnitemporal, general mode. In *Undoing Gender,* she also addresses this
issue explicitly:

> This means that local conceptions of what is *'human'* or, indeed, of *what the basic con-
> ditions and needs of human life are*, must be subjected to reinterpretation, since there
> are *historical and cultural circumstances* in which *'the human'* is defined differently, or

resignified, and its basic needs and, hence, basic entitlements are also defined differ-
ently (Butler 2004b, 223).

'The human' is also consistently in quotation marks in Butler's text here, which further under-
lines what she states: what constitutes 'the human' differs and changes according to histori-
cal and cultural circumstances; it is not considered to be the ontological perspective of the
philosophical subject.

   Butler's usage of the term *vulnerability* therefore points to same direction as her usage of
the phenomenological terminology of *appearance* and *plurality,* which I analysed before, and
makes me suggest that a key difference in Cavarero's and Butler's politics of philosophy is
captured through questions concerning *the human.* The phenomenological-existential tradi-
tion of philosophy asks the characteristic foundational question, 'what is a human being?' or
'what is the human condition?' Butler, in contrast, highlights what she considers to be the
present norms that define what is considered as human. Instead of asking a foundational
question 'what is the human?' Butler asks: 'who is considered human? how does the human
function as a norm at the moment?' It is also important to note that, in my view, Butler is not
simply ignoring the philosophical dimension of the project of modern phenomenology as a
philosophy of the transcendental human subject. Rather, I would see it as Butler's own philo-
sophical project to deliberately trouble the foundational idea of the abstracted human being.
She actively refuses the foundational questions concerning the human *in abstracto.* Instead,
she concentrates on the constant change of norms, laws, regulations, and practices which
define humanity in the here and now, and she does this, I would argue, with interventionist
intentions. I consider this to be a crucial philosophical-political choice (see also Pulkkinen
2010, 29).

Conclusion

We have seen that the two feminist theorists Butler and Cavarero engage in very different
forms of politics of philosophy with their usage of the term *vulnerability.* How does that
translate into politics concerning intervention into injustices which is at the heart of feminist
theorizing?

   The analysis has shown that Cavarero uses the term *vulnerability* in proximity to the vocab-
ulary of *the human,* and Butler uses it in relation to the vocabulary of *norms.* For Cavarero,
vulnerability is the primordial dependence of everybody who is born of the mother, and this
mother relationship of dependence exemplifies the primary deep dependence of relation-
ships for each human with other humans. For Butler, vulnerability is connected to the two-
fold relationship of a moral agent through norms: while on the one hand, norms constantly
constrain agency, on the other hand, norms also simultaneously condition the very exist-
ence of a moral subject as an agent, as the norms are there prior to the subject and agent of
action. Vulnerability is crucially located within changing conditions of social norms, as is the
subjection process of agency. Both authors join in opposition towards any kind of view of an
individual human as an independent entity, standing on its own, or being detachable from its
relations, whether socially or metaphysically. Yet the questions concerning norms in Butler's
register emphasize the contingency of those norms, including the norms concerning what is
considered to be human, in any present situation.

   Both theorists engage in interventions, yet I would suggest that their interventions are
directed in diverse directions. Cavarero's intervention is directed against the mono-gendered
and male-centered core of the philosophical tradition, whereas Butler's intervention is directed
against multiple kinds of contemporary social norms. In terms of politics of philosophy, their

difference is that while Cavarero's intervention occurs within the phenomenological existential tradition of the human, arguing for the gendered understanding of the transcendental philosophical subject, Butler's intervention is directed at the idea of the generalized human itself, and includes a much more troubled and troubling relationship to this philosophical tradition, questioning its very foundations of setting the scene in terms of a generalized transcendental subject which is conceived in no-time, no-space, in its generality. I would emphasise that Butler's conscious refusal to ask questions in this particular philosophical mode is a philosophical decision. It leads to, or gives a possibility of, asking different types of questions as being the most important ones. Butler often addresses issues of limited perceived humanity, issues of those who are not counted as being fully human: issues such as transvisibility, refugees, prisoners in Guantanamo Bay, or precarity as a means of limiting political agency.

There is also a clear difference in between the injustices the two authors target with their feminist agenda, although no doubt both are relevant. Cavarero engages in the project of changing the symbolic. The wrong that this project identifies is the cultural hegemony of the masculine, which extends to the universalized *human* within the philosophical tradition. The call for intervention to this hegemony is no less urgent today than it was in the 1970s when the second-wave feminists identified it (Pulkkinen 2016). Simultaneously, the plurality of interventions made possible through Butler's politics of philosophy which does not attach to a foundational notion of the human and make a point about its gender, but instead focuses on norms within communities, makes possible a different type of agile and continuously changing interventionist agenda. In terms of feminist gender politics in particular, this orientation has proven its wide scope in Butler's work, which keeps spotting a changing field of injustices and calls for interventions.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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