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IRONY, EMBODIMENT, AND THE ‘CRITICAL ATTITUDE’: ENGAGING SABA MAHMOOD’S CRITIQUE OF SECULAR MORALITY

Matt Waggoner

At the intersection of feminism, postcolonial studies, and religious studies, this essay engages Saba Mahmood’s critique of universalistic ethics and post-structural feminism. It contrasts Mahmood’s ‘ethical embodiment’ with a concept of ‘ethical irony’, offering examples of the latter from literature (Brecht, Baudelaire) and cultural theory (Carolyn Steedman, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault). Its thesis is that ethical irony signifies modes of critical engagement that are not premised on notions of metaphysical subjectivity or abstract rules, but may nonetheless be cross-culturally translatable. One specific formulation of ethical irony considered concerns the figure of injurable bodies. At once material (bodily) and transcendental (unknown injuries from unknown sources, or the possibility of injury), injurable bodies the irreducibility of ethics to the purely abstract and the purely empirical. Finally, the defence of ethical irony speaks to the viability of upholding what Foucault called the ‘critical attitude’ as a cross-cultural norm.

KEYWORDS ethics; universalism; embodiment; irony; feminism; religion

Avoiding uncritical approaches to identity politics on one hand, and unsupportable confidence in juridical liberalism on the other, writers such as Ernesto Laclau, Jacques Derrida, Gayatri Spivak, Paul Gilroy, and Judith Butler have each pursued possibilities for restaging certain obsolete universalisms as impossible yet necessary political fantasies: humanism (Gilroy and Spivak), cosmopolitanism (Derrida), hospitality (Derrida), cultural translation (Spivak and Butler), planetarity (Spivak), and concrete universalism (Butler). The question that inevitably arises as theory’s relationship to Western Enlightenment is reasserted (although in a complicated way) concerns the applicability of its analyses to non-Western traditions. That is the question explored here, by way of the closely related questions of ethics and critique. Modern ethical theory asks: Once we can longer presume a shared set of truths, norms, or even constitutions of subjectivity, is a cross-cultural ethics conceivable? Are we faced with a choice between either
imposing one tradition's norms on all others (as liberalism arguably does), or, on the other hand, making do with the interests of pure and competing particulars (as one might say of identity politics, but which also extends to political realism in the traditions of Machiavelli and Hobbes)? Moral philosophy has typically only offered solutions of one kind or the other: intentionalistic moralities, such as that of Kant, based on the adherence of an agent's will or intention to some abstract, supposedly universal rule; and behaviouristic or action-based moralities, such as that of Aristotle (and I would add Bentham), that privilege the act itself as habit-forming and acquiring its moral worth not from transcendental rules but from much more immanent conditions, such as the way bodies and subjectivities are shaped by participation in specific communities and conditions of life. Multiculturalism has radically undermined the credibility of universalistic ethics and left ethical theory to debate the options that remain. That debate tends to be split between those who find ways to recuperate the universality of rational argumentation and communicability (Habermas and Rorty), and, on the other hand, those who reject any such recuperation, insisting instead that ethics be defined only in relation to culturally and historically specific conditions for ethical agency. It is this insistence on the local specificity, or immanence, of ethical claims that calls into question the sympathies of the writers already mentioned with the rudimentary aspirations of Western Enlightenment. What each of those authors has pursued is precisely the question, how can we not be consigned merely to the culturally and historically specific? How can we 'restage the universal' through the otherness of possibility, futurity, the incompletion of existing structures of subjection, and the exclusions on which they rely? Opposing the reduction of social and subjective constitutions to what exists empirically, to what is known and knowable, to the givenness of biology or culture, to the immanence of what simply is the case, to nature, open possibilities for conditions of historical determination to remain open to unforeseeable configurations, and that, I will suggest, is the scene of ‘critique’.

The way I engage the question of critique in this paper is by contrasting two ethical orientations; I will refer to them as 'ethical irony' and 'ethical embodiment'. These approaches share the view that liberal constructions of universal ethical norms, or categorical imperatives (Kant), do not hold, and that any ethics worth considering today must take seriously its relationship to historical specificity. But where ethical embodiment denies the ideal of autonomy—the emergence of agency as a result of moral being, achieved when a subject chooses against its nature or circumstances to live according to higher, transcendental principles—ethical irony reformulates autonomy. Ironic engagements with the natural and historical conditions that give rise to subjects, both internally and externally, enable a type of autonomy understood not as an ability to escape those conditions, but to recognise their inescapability while at the same time pointing beyond them. The 'transcendental' to which this kind of autonomy refers is not an abstract, trans-cultural rule, but rather that which is other to what is empirically given, such as that which is in the future (i.e. the merely possible) or that which
exceeds a given framework of speech and comprehension (which Spivak encouraged us to think in terms of subalterneity).

This 'other' that transcends the given need not take an abstract, disembodied form. Anticipating a later discussion of Judith Butler's last book Precarious Life, which explores the vulnerability of bodies as a cross-cultural ethical starting point, we might recall what Adorno after the war called the new categorical imperative; that is, that Auschwitz should never again take place (Adorno 1973). Adorno was deliberately engaging the form of Kant's categorical imperative but restating it in terms of something at once material and transcendental (Kant 1998). Auschwitz dramatised the bare injurability of bodies, and to replace Kant's universal Law with the figure of injurable bodies as a categorical imperative, a new, concretely universal prohibition, is to treat a material instance as a limit concept by saying that unknown injuries to unknown bodies at unknown points in the future should stand for the universal rule of all of our ethical encounters. Adorno's ironic moral dictum stages the contradiction between the material and the transcendental as a tension not to be overcome by relegating ethics to the realms of the purely abstract or the purely empirical. More to the point, it takes the form of an indictment, not only against Kant's abstraction, with which it was possible to ignore violations against actual bodies, but against empiricism's reduction of the good and right only to what exists presently for particular normative communities. Ethical irony falls within an orientation to ethics and the political that disorientingly understands the right thing to do in terms of the impossibility of doing right and escaping wrong. It limits the right to the paradox of what cannot escape the immanence of the conditions that give rise to it but can at least point beyond itself to their limits. The idea it preserves is that a strong model of agency (as radically autonomous) is a fiction, since subjects are always formed and shaped by conditions not of their making, but there is nonetheless more to subjectivity than those conditions and their effects alone. Causal conditions are capable of giving rise to undetermined moments of self-reflection, self-interrogation, openness to the unforeseeable, or what Kant called 'spontaneity'.

Kant thought of spontaneity as non-essential departures from a causal chain, and this possibility was for him indispensable to the imaginability of freedom; spontaneity, I suggest, is what embodiment lacks in its radical refusal of any model of autonomy, even paradoxical, parodic, or ironic models, and in what follows I evaluate the extension of that refusal to a particular debate in cultural theory. Firstly, I consider a series of examples of how literature and feminist ethics have troubled the self-evidence of the emancipatory model, by re-examining the figure of the 'good woman'. My examples include Bertolt Brecht's unsuspecting heroine, the prostitute Shen Teh, in The Good Woman of Szechwan, Charles Baudelaire's affectionately valorised lesbians in The Flowers of Evil, and Carolyn Steedman's mother in Landscape for a Good Woman. Then I track a debate within feminist theory that includes: the important interventions of Chandra Mohanty and contributors to her volume, Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism; Saba Mahmood's critique of secular morality and construction of ethical embodiment in two essays
that analyse the ethics and politics of Muslim women in an Egyptian piety movement; and Judith Butler’s concept of parodic engagement, a species of ethical irony, her recent responses to the critique of the translatability of norms (such as gender equality and women’s emancipation) across cultures, and her considerations of vulnerability and injurability in relation to the problem of ethics. Finally, I extend my engagement with Saba Mahmood by investigating whose work her arguments rely on to a great extent—Michel Foucault. My discussion of Foucault is intended to emphasise his insistence that Kantian ethics are an indispensable starting point for theorising the ironies of moral and political life, and includes a review of Butler’s commentary on Foucault’s relationship to Kant.

The ‘Good Woman’

Brecht tells the story of three gods visiting a Chinese province in search of someone capable of leading a decent life (Brecht 1998). ‘The Good Woman of Szechwan’ recreates a Noahitic covenant scene in which a society’s ability to show itself worthy of being spared judgement depends on whether it can show itself capable of producing goodness in its members. The play’s inversion of the biblical narrative consists of its emphasis not on the heroism and righteousness of Noah, but instead on the corrupt city’s incapacity to nurture good citizens. Brecht’s ‘good woman’ is a prostitute, Shen Teh, Noah’s gendered, moral counter-figure. Although the narrative lends itself to feminist interpretations, Brecht seems more interested in its moral conundrum. Not her goodness but her deception condemns the wrongness of the society in which she must struggle against seemingly anonymous mechanisms of poverty. Only she will accommodate the wandering gods, and for this they reward her with enough money to buy a small tobacco business. But as before, when she resorted to sex as her only asset, society’s injustices compel her to immorality. In order to maintain control of the business, to command respect from friends, family, and patrons, Shen Teh must pose as a fictitious male cousin, Shui Ta.

In addition to the biblical allusion, one detects shades of Baudelaire within this narrative of gods who reiterate their intention not to intervene on behalf of human suffering, and who favour instead those who succeed in this life by piously adhering to its rules. Unaware of Shen Teh’s deception for most of the story, Brecht’s deities consistently affirm her kindness and generosity, while condemning the harsh and unforgiving demeanour of ‘Shui Ta’ (Shen Teh’s alter ego). In the final scene, when ‘Shui Ta’ has been indicted for the disappearance of Shen Teh with the gods posing as her judges, she reveals her duplicity. But the gods, intransigently, insist that society is just fine, since Shen Teh did manage, after all, to succeed in her affairs. Their verdict ignored injustices endured and the complicity they demanded of her. In the epilogue, the chorus concluded by asking audiences:

What’s your answer? Nothing’s been arranged./Should men be better? Should
the world be changed?/Or just the gods? Or ought there to be none?/There’s
only one solution that we know: that you should consider as you go/What sort of measures you would recommend to help good people to a happy end. (Brecht 1998, 107)

Here especially, 'The Good Woman' recalls not only Baudelaire’s routine identifications with prostitutes and criminals in The Flowers of Evil, but also how, in the poems that make up the section titled 'Revolt', Baudelaire chastised God. Compare Brecht’s accusations of the gods’ uncaring indifference with the sufferings of the martyred to the first two stanzas of Baudelaire’s ‘St. Peter’s Denial’:

What, then, has God to say of cursing heresies/Which rise up like a flood at precious angels’ feet?/A self-indulgent tyrant, stuffed with wine and meat/He sleeps to soothing sounds of monstrous blasphemies The sobs of martyred saints and groans of tortured men/No doubt provide the Lord with rapturous symphonies./And yet the heavenly hosts are scarcely even pleased/In spite of all the blood men dedicate to them. (Baudelaire 1993, 265)

Baudelaire continues by questioning Jesus’ dedication to a God who ‘sat and heard’ the nailing of his flesh, and concludes, consistent with his fashion of naming a new hero, 'as for me, I’ll go out satisfied/From this world where the deed and dream do not accord/Would I might wield the sword, and perish by the sword! Peter rejected Jesus . . . he was justified!' (1993, 267). The Good Woman of Szechwan builds on this rhetorical stock of indictment against a divinely authorised social order. Through identification with immoralists, with those despised by God and by biblical writers, and in the case of other poems with Satan himself (whom Baudelaire calls ‘brilliant and wise . . . intimate healer of our anguish’d hearts’), Brecht establishes the narrative terrain that redefines moral failure as the tormented struggle of someone to transcend life’s derangement.

But Brecht’s revolutionary didacticism diverged from Baudelaire who, after brief involvement in the 1848 uprising, resigned to verse. Whereas Baudelaire’s conclusion to ‘St. Peter’s Denial’ suggests that in a world where ‘deed and dream do not accord’ one can only respond by refusing faith in any sort of redemption, Brecht’s language is more evocative of Marxism’s appeal to workers to awake from the slumber of their illusions in order that they might realise their potential to change the world. While this idealism eludes Baudelaire, for Brecht the parody of divine intervention encourages audiences to become agents of their destinies and of the destinies of their cities. Making her own history meant that Shen Teh contested cycles of poverty and disempowerment by seeing through the façade of religious ideology and taking up the agency of self-determination.

How might we reinvest Brecht’s story with Baudelaire’s themes? Recall the place of lesbian figures in The Flowers of Evil, which Jonathan Culler viewed as emphasising ‘above all that men and women do not enter symmetrical sexual relations or find satisfaction together’ (Culler 1993, xvi–xvii). Lesbian love, for Baudelaire, allegorised an experience with which, perhaps more than anything in his poems, he identified. While men look to women as objects of desire, conduits
to get what they want, Baudelaire’s ‘angels’ and ‘martyrs’ emblematisce the objectlessness of desire. They are tormented not just by their ostracism but by their passionate attachment to the intangible, ‘seekers of the infinite’, anguish that Baudelaire’s poems relentlessly dignify. That is to say, Baudelaire’s lesbians problematise proper, masculine norms of desire and agency. Shen Teh’s empowerment in *The Good Woman of Szechwan*, we might say, not only entailed the undermining of religious justifications for social norms and patterns of prosperity. It also required that she trouble the agencies of masculinity intimately connected to economic and political matrices of prestige and power in her society. Shen Teh’s achievement was less to have made history in the Marxist sense than to have parodied the ideology of masculine history-making agency. In doing so, she denatured ‘agency’ through sceptical and instrumental uses of both religion and masculinity. This alternate reading of Brecht’s play sees it not as a propagandistic solicitation to true political consciousness, but as a critique of the terms through which political consciousness and identity are regulated, maintained, and negotiated.

While Brecht’s final scene satirises the deities’ indifference and impotence (he portrays the gods floating on pink luminescent clouds), and ultimately the assumption of the unchanging naturalness of divinely ordered circumstances, greater narrative irony consists in the way Shen Teh troubled the gendered binary of agency (male/female) *by strictly adhering to its rules*. Her situation compelled her not just to deceive, but to deceive by becoming a man. On one hand, it could be said that far from challenging her society’s sexual norms she reiterated them by conforming to the rule that agency must be strictly masculine. On the other hand, her performance of masculine agency proved gender’s performative rather than biological constitution, and that economic success consists not in an inherent aptitude of men but in something socially excluded from women. Our reading of the play brings to light irony’s function as a form of self-reflection within an inescapable predicament. If it ‘transgresses’, it enacts transgression only as a species of obedience, one that manages to gain sight of the fact that the corruption one hopes to transgress pervades one’s attempt to do so.

By emphasising the problem of agencies performed as obedience more than transgression, this reading of Brecht’s ‘good woman’ resonates with Carolyn Steedman’s analysis of similar complexities in *Landscape for a Good Woman*. In the ‘eighties Steedman challenged Cultural Studies’ disinterest in the specificity of women’s political identifications. Her reflection on the political biography of her mother, who became a ‘working class Conservative, the only political form that allowed her to reveal the politics of envy’ (Steedman 1986, 6–7), confronted Left expectations with the anomalous historical trajectories of non-normative subject positions. What did Steedman mean by the politics of envy? She describes her mother as a woman whose life was lived on the borders of the Left’s attempt to articulate a coherent politics of class. That narrative, which Steedman identifies with Richard Hoggart (*The Uses of Literacy*) and Jeremy Seabrook (*Working Class Childhood*),
celebrated an image of the British working class in which (in Seabrook’s words) people who were ‘united against cruel material privations … discovered the possibilities of the human consolations they could offer each other’ (Steedman 1986, 8). This was a ‘fiercely moral’ politics, Steedman observes, condemning envy and material longing as shameful feelings complicit with the ideology of finding contentment in what you have rather than finding it in meaningful collective associations. Steedman’s memories of her mother’s longings do not comply with the psychic structures of the old working class; in fact, they subvert them: ‘she wanted: a New look skirt, a timbered country cottage, to marry a prince’ (Steedman 1986, 9). The lessons of *Landscape for a Good Woman* are that ‘specificity of place and politics has to be reckoned with in making an account of anybody’s life’, and ‘[my mother’s] envy, her sense of the unfairness of things, could not be directly translated into political understanding, and certainly could not be used by the Left to shape an articulated politics of class’ (Steedman 1986, 6). Steedman’s familial biography of a ‘good woman’ portrays incomprehensible longings for what political analysis would suggest was the very source of her mother’s subjection. Her mother’s longings illustrate how subjects often engage their subjection by doing just what they should not according to Western metropolitan, and masculine, norms of political agency; that is, critical engagements with impossible situations sometimes take the form of obedience.

**Western Feminism and Third World Women**

There is a demand placed on cultural criticism to think harder and with more specificity about these ironies of moral and political life. In her constructions of ethical embodiment, in response to feminism’s failure to think historically about the application of its norms to non-Western subjects, Saba Mahmood, to whom I shortly turn, thinks harder than most and exposes contradictions that cannot be ignored. The stakes of Saba Mahmood’s construction of ethical embodiment are best viewed against the backdrop of a conversation that culminated in volumes such as *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Mohanty 1991). In its introduction and first chapter, ‘Under Western Eyes’, Chandra Mohanty articulated the complex conditions for theorising the relation of women in the Third World to feminist concerns. She cited crucial historical shifts from industrial to post-industrial societies, in which former economic divisions between Third World material extraction and First World factory manufacturing gave way to new cartographies of production and labour. With the rise of transnational corporations in the 1970s, factories hunted cheaper labour forces and lessened labour laws in Third World countries, and ex-colonial populations migrated to the industrial metropolises of Europe to fill its swiftly changing labour needs. What resulted were multi-ethnic and multi-racial social formations similar to those in the United States, which required cross-cultural socio-economic analysis to be comprehended.
These conditions prompt other questions as well, which Mohanty articulates and which, as will be shown, Mahmood’s essays reiterate:

Can we assume that third world women’s political struggles are necessarily feminist? How do we/they define feminism? . . . Who produces knowledge about colonized peoples and from what space/location? . . . What are the methods used to locate and chart third world women’s self and agency? (Mohanty 1991, 2–3)

Contributors to the volume largely agreed that customary approaches to representing Third World women rely on a hierarchy of white, Western, progressive and modern contrasted with non-Western, backward, and traditional, and write to show that this mode of representation glosses the category of Third World women as something that corresponds to an unchanging, unitary mass. These representations assign disparate subjects with predictable traits, obscuring material differences among Third World women, as well between First World and Third World women; differences that alter the conditions in which ‘feminism’ becomes relevant in specific social situations.

An important, if largely unstated, theme of Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism that Mahmood’s arguments would later echo is historical specificity. With Steedman, these authors agree that when attempting to comprehend the confrontations of women in non-Western and non-liberal societies with what Western feminists label ‘sexism’ or ‘gender oppression’, the important thing is that ‘specificity of place and politics has to be reckoned with in making an account of anybody’s life’. However, Mohanty’s characterisation of the volume’s shared aims differs in an important respect from Mahmood. In the first place, Mohanty positions the intervention of Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism in relationship to the prospects for a trans-national feminism that, conscious of real differences between women, seeks to understand the ‘systemic’ and thus shared bases of gender oppression globally. Secondly, Mohanty lists herself among the volume’s contributors who remain interested in establishing links between feminism in post-colonial settings and a ‘socialist-feminism’ attentive to the heterogeneity of the experiences and conditions of those to whom its analysis and intervention extends. So this is not a proposal to abandon universal political struggles, or to abandon certain Enlightenment-based understandings about equality and self-determination as the rightful goal of every human life. Its historicism aims not at the relativisation of these humanistic values, which inform its recognition of certain experiences as unjust or oppressive and demanding a struggle against them. Rather, its historicism aims at the terms, definitions, and narratives that support the construction of models for theorising diverse forms of oppression and equally diverse struggles against them—‘Third World’, ‘women’, ‘resistance’, ‘agency’, ‘self’, ‘identity’, ‘nation’, ‘culture’, and so on.

In fact, Mohanty’s approach conflicts with other, more rigorously historicist approaches, when she argues that a shared goal of the volume’s contributions is to imagine ‘political’ rather than biological or cultural bases of community among women who are not only from different societies and cultures, but who also
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occupy different subject positions within those societies and cultures. In her introduction Mohanty emphasises the imaginative basis of these political bonds among women, making reference to two specific arguments. First, Benedict Anderson’s ‘imagined communities’ is useful ‘because it leads us away from essentialist notions of third world feminist struggles’, (Mohanty 1991, 4) permitting an appreciation of how, without absolving them, cultural differences can lend themselves to translatable idioms of political community which transcend the particularity of given cultures. ‘Women with divergent histories and social locations’, she continues, ‘are woven together by the political threads of opposition to forms of domination that are not only pervasive but systemic’ (Mohanty 1991, 4). By virtue of the cross-cultural nature of sexism in its differentiated forms, women from divergent circumstances find points of political commonality, without exaggerating that commonality in essentialist terms. This view takes seriously the way sexism transcends cultural boundaries, and engenders situated struggles that, although different, share certain experiences and goals that become common points of political articulation. Mohanty’s allusions to an anti-essentialist concept of political articulation evoke the New Left, but the volume’s relationship to the New Left is not what we might expect it to be. Mohanty cites ‘communities of resistance’ as another analogy, such as ‘imagined communities’, for the kind of trans-cultural and trans-national political engagements the volume’s contributors point to. This was A. Sivanandan’s phrase and carries the connotation of his conservative Marxist response (in essays like ‘All That Melts into Air is Solid: The Hokum of New Times’) to the way the new, pluralistic Left lost its focus on class as the general modality of global oppression that should unite particular communities of resistance on the basis of their specific experiences of class—race, class—sex subjection (Sivanandan 1990). Mohanty acknowledges, in fact, that ‘while some of the essays call into question notions of “third world” and of “universal sisterhood”, the general weight of the volume falls on its writers’ assertion of belief in international coalitions among third world women in contemporary capitalist societies, particularly on the basis of a socialist-feminist vision’ (Mohanty 1991, 5).

Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism intervened into feminism by insisting as Steedman did that ‘specificity of place and politics has to be reckoned with in making an account of anybody’s life’ (Steedman 1986, 6). Trans-historical definitions of gender do not realistically inform an effort to theorise the politics of non-Western women. But, on the other hand, what remained hardly concealed in that work was the contour of a broad framework—something loosely organised around socialism—which supplied a set of suppositions about what it is that the effort to understand diverse sites of gender oppression contributes to. Roughly, it should contribute to clarification of how non-Western women experience and struggle against specific forms of domination, as well as how women converse and converge to construct broad-based coalitions against gender oppression. Finally, understanding different sites of gender oppression will engage women in understanding its integration with class and race, so that the politics
of non-Western feminism is seen to be intimately related to a kind of global struggle, which can only be conceived in terms of the way seemingly local experiences are structurally related, not empirically or culturally but ‘politically’.

Implicitly, Mohanty’s conception of ‘the political’, her moral valuation of certain experiences as oppressive and her equally moral valuation of the need to conceive of how to struggle against oppression, presuppose a universalistic account of the human. True, Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism is emblematic of a postmodern denial of the legitimacy of grand narratives such as Marxism and liberalism. Nonetheless, what remains as its core concerns are the inherent dignity of humans, the natural validity of their resistance to inequality, and the conceivability of universalistic forms of political community aimed at combating inequality. This is really inseparable from the moral and political architecture of Western Enlightenment. One need not be unsympathetic to the aims of the volume, as Mohanty portrays them, to acknowledge a certain naivety on its part. It is not only that the grand political narratives of Marxism and liberalism presuppose a universal subject, intrinsic rights, and individual autonomy that in fact require historical conditions for their support. It is also (as we learn in one sense from Freud) that one cannot presume that ‘rational’ subjects necessarily want what is in their best interests. In the West as much as anywhere, so-called ‘enlightened’ political struggles are constantly confronted with the fact that those whose situations are diagnosed as subjugated often appear to be ‘passionately attached’ to their subjugation. Although I am not sure this was its implication, what has been called the ‘return of the religious’ seems to allude to Freud’s ‘return of the repressed’ as if to say that the dream of ‘political maturity’ in enlightened societies is, if not disproved, at least complicated by the persistence of seemingly ‘irrational’ commitments to fundamentalist religious beliefs, communities, and identities. It might be said that Mohanty’s presumptions hold true if it can be shown how, although incomprehensible to the traditional Left, certain instances of fundamentalism codify and enact a desire to be free from specific forms of oppression. The ‘return of the religious’ and the rise of religious fundamentalisms would, in that case, place a demand on theory to reinterpret expressions of religious and social conservativism as implicit, unwitting progressivism. One does not have to look far to find this approach in the scholarly literature of the West today. But might we not also say that this sort of interpretation is suggestive of a kind of wishful thinking on the part of the progressive and sympathetic Western scholar, another reflection of the hubris of Enlightenment reason, which purports that all humans are rational and thus, by design, both deserve and want to be autonomous? More to the point, has not the very formulation of the question become possible only on the suppositions bound up with the notion of ‘autonomy’ as a condition of self-determination that is rightful to every human being by nature? What the admission of an Enlightenment core within the critic’s desire to recuperate popular practices as latently resistant suggests is that we cannot, if we are thoroughly historicist, presume any shared languages or values on which to build the kind
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of international–feminist–socialisms that quietly supported the interventions of Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism. Its ultimately modernist narrative is problematic if we instead approach the study of social phenomena and conflict on the basis of a radically historicist postmodernism, which refuses not only grand narratives that define the terms of struggle, but also the commonality of the goals and even the desire for such a struggle in the first place. Once the presumption of a universal definition of the ‘ends’ of human life, such as autonomy, is no longer believed to be legitimate cross-culturally, the drive to interpret the seemingly conservative as subtly progressive becomes another form of cultural imperialism, because it reduces the lives of non-Western subjects to ‘diverse examples’ of what those in the West parochially believe is the ultimate and universal meaning of every human life.

Saba Mahmood and Ethical Embodiment

Like Mohanty, cultural anthropologist and feminist theorist Saba Mahmood engages the politics of feminism in non-liberal settings, particularly in the context of Islamic fundamentalism in Egypt, the site of her fieldwork. Her essays point to the complex interaction between obedience and agency in relation to Muslim women who ‘choose’, if that terms still proves to be useful, to veil. But whereas our considerations of Brecht’s, Baudelaire’s, and Steedman’s good women suggested that ironic obedience is compatible with a redefined notion of autonomy, Mahmood questions Western feminism’s assumption that diverse sites of struggle share, in whatever variety of forms, the common goal of autonomy. She links autonomy insolubly to Kant’s enlightenment conception of the transcendental ego and dismisses it as Eurocentric, and thus cross-culturally untranslatable. Mahmood would like instead to redefine agency as habits and practices that embody a culture’s norms, and she rightly argues that such a definition contradicts Kantian autonomy, premised as it is on the irreducibility of subjects to their natures or circumstances. My response to Mahmood is essentially ambivalent, and is intended to underscore the source of that ambivalence in her argument. I am in complete agreement that Western feminism’s inability to see veiling as anything other than patriarchal domination exposes the persistence of Western cultural presuppositions in normative formulations of feminist politics. I want only to question the risk of a certain kind of cultural and ethical absolutism.

In ‘Ethical Formation and the Politics of Individual Autonomy in Contemporary Egypt’, Mahmood sought to ‘bring questions of ethics to bear upon politics and vice versa’ (Mahmood 2003, 837). Through ethnographic reflections on a women’s Islamic piety movement in Egypt, Mahmood documented participant self-descriptions about their attitudes toward ritual, belief, tradition, and piety. Here, Mahmood challenged the notion of autonomy and its debt to an Enlightenment discourse predicated on the assertion of abstractly constituted subjects whose thoughts and behaviours are unaffected by real conditions of cultural, social, or historical determination. Against liberal
feminist tendencies to interpret religious conservativism as the enactment of a desire for piety, thus of a troubling, but nonetheless self-determined exercise of agency, Mahmood maintained that liberalism projects a Western distinction between desire and social conventions onto non-liberal subjects. On the basis of her fieldwork, the women she worked with did not exhibit this distinction; therefore, she concluded, such a distinction cannot be presumed to be a universal trait of every subject formation. She asked, ‘How does one rethink the question of individual freedom in a context where the distinction between the subject’s own desires and socially prescribed performances cannot be so easily presumed, and where submission to certain forms of (external) authority is a condition for the self to achieve its potentiality?’ (Mahmood 2003, 861). Mahmood is in part challenging Western models of subjectivity that associate agency exclusively with an inner ego, constituted as thought and desire independent of the body, nature, society, and other extrinsic conditions. On such a basis, it is inevitable that Western analysts would regard what appears (according to Mahmood’s ethnographic work) to be the lack of individuation between Muslim egos and Muslim traditions as void of self-hood or agency. From the standpoint of a traditional Enlightenment conception of autonomy, if Muslim selves, in contrast to Western selves, think and desire in seamless accord with the forms of piety, belief, obedience, and social norms that constitute Muslim society, if they do not, borrowing Kant’s language, mature politically into free-thinking, questioning, self-governing subjects, then not even the term ‘agentival’ (which Mahmood seems to borrow from Talal Asad) adequately describes the kind of subjectivity that results. Without thought and desire, where self-hood emerges organically as the repetition of already constituted cultural conditions, and where the ‘potential’ of the self is defined as living out or embodying one’s nature, would it be more appropriate from an orthodox Enlightenment standpoint to speak of the ‘vegetival’ than the ‘agentival’?

Mahmood’s employment of the concept of embodiment implies the realisation of one’s nature or essence through concrete expressions and habits; that is, through the cultivation of the self. Responding to scholarly inattention to aspects of the performance of ritual, Mahmood argued in ‘Ethical Formation’ that the ‘lack of attention paid to the morphology of moral actions, to their precise shape and form, is largely a legacy of humanist ethics, particularly in its Kantian formulation’ (Mahmood 2003, 842). She continued to say that this Kantian legacy sought to displace Aristotelian approaches to ethics ‘in which morality was both realised through, and manifest in, outward behavioural forms’. In this way, Mahmood analyses the possibilities for non-normative agency through the lens of virtue ethics, discussing at length the way Aristotle, in contrast to Plato’s moral idealism (in some ways Kant’s ancestor), reoriented the relation between goodness and good acts. Whereas for Plato right acts required that one first have right ideas, Aristotle, in Nichomachean Ethics, described virtue differently in terms of the way goodness is acquired habitually; one becomes good through the performance of good acts. Mahmood’s language is altogether Aristotelian
at times, as when she speaks of the self achieving its ‘potentiality’ or of the goal of Muslim pietists to pursue virtue and excellence through prescribed habits, attitudes, and behaviours.

An unstated implication appears to be that the self account of Mahmood’s subjects of their religious devotion in quasi-Aristotelian terms (i.e. in terms of virtue, excellence, and embodied practices) is somehow related to the role of Aristotle’s philosophy in the history of Islam. As this connection would be difficult to demonstrate through anthropological methods, the point is not pursued. In any case, the tension or ambivalence that emerges in this essay consists of the way Mahmood wants firstly to define a boundary between Muslim subjectivities and Western subjectivities, because they are formed and shaped in different historical circumstances. Unlike Western forms of agency, there seems not to be sufficient ethnographic evidence to support the assumption that Muslim subjects are constituted as autonomous agents. Muslim agency essentially differs in that its form is tied to the habituation of prescribed norms of the culture rather than to the expectation to question and individuate from society. In short, individualism is a Western model of moral and political agency that does not, in spite of its universalist self-account, translate cross-culturally. But on the other hand, this article also makes it clear that Mahmood wants to salvage the concept of agency for the subjects she observed. She reconstructs ‘agency without agents’, a new definition of agency that rescinds its traditional ties to notions of emancipation, freedom, independence, autonomy—defined instead as the actualisation of the self achieved through the performance of socially, culturally, and religiously prescribed modes of bodily comportment. Readers are left to wonder why the concept of agency is sought to be recovered, at all and how the goal of realising the self through the identity of the subject with its nature differs from the basic project of western Romanticism. Furthermore, while Mahmood’s argument that Muslim desire differs from Western desire is based on the point that these two cultures represent different sets of historical conditions, thus they shape subjects differently, the conclusion that desires differ along cultural lines tends to introduce an ahistorical claim: that there are fixed desires, goals, and subject forms unique to specific cultures. The empiricism of Mahmood’s method lends itself to the same kind of cultural essentialism she has sought to avoid.

In an earlier essay, ‘Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent’ (Mahmood 2001), Mahmood’s attention is focused less on casting Muslim agency in terms of embodiment rather than autonomy, and more on how this argument should trouble the efforts of Western feminism to interpret Muslim women’s agencies or practices as forms of resistance. In the article she opposed an ethnocentric, First World feminist expectation for Muslim women to resist oppression through practices of religion and gender, practices that seem especially to culminate in the symbolism of the veil. She argued persuasively that one has to let the culturally and historically specific material ‘speak back to the normative liberal assumptions about freedom and agency’ (Mahmood 2001, 203) rather than impose Western models of agency onto non-liberal subjects.
Here, Mahmood criticised the tendency to represent agency exclusively as resistance, suggesting that even when post-structural feminism treats agency in post-humanistic terms as performed by the subject rather than expressing its essence, the requirement for parodically performed agencies to be ‘critical’ and to ‘resist oppression’ remains wedded to liberal assumptions about normative desires to avoid pain, to think for oneself, and to determine one’s own course of life. Mahmood followed Talal Asad in noting that attitudes toward pain are not always shared across cultures or even within a given culture (Asad 1993, 2003), and contended that Muslim agencies differ dramatically from Western agencies in that they are more openly mediated by complicity with, if not attachment to, pain and suffering. Rather than equating agency with maximising pleasure and minimising pain—the classic liberal principle of utilitarianism in Mill and Bentham—or ‘as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination’, Mahmood redefined agency as ‘a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create’ (Mahmood 2001, 203). She challenged the assumption still operative in Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism; that is, subjects in all societies want and should be free and autonomous on the model of radical Enlightenment feminism.

The Muslim women she studied, Mahmood observed, understand the goal of teaching and studying Islamic scriptures and performing prescribed social practices as ‘forms of bodily comportment considered germane to the cultivation of the ideal virtuous self’ (Mahmood 2001, 2002) implying, as we have already seen, an organic articulation of Aristotle’s virtue ethics. But Mahmood is careful to make clear that she is not interested in recovering some politically redeemable element within these expressions of Islam by restoring its latent attempt to self-liberate. Following Foucault and Butler, she views subjection as a mode of disciplinary engagement in which relations of subordination play a constitutive role in the emergence of the subject, rather than a merely oppressive or morally reprehensible role. Furthermore, Mahmood argues that the rise of such piety movements in Egypt seems to respond to the influence of Western models of secularisation in the social and political structure of the modern nation-state, to the perception that ‘religious knowledge, as a means to organizing daily life, has become increasingly marginalised under modern structures of secular governance’. Pietists are often critical of the way Islam is increasingly reduced, as in the West, to abstract, disembodied systems of belief without concrete bearing on the practices and routines of daily life. As such, piety movements are far from apolitical, in as much as they offer an alternative to the secular liberal model of citizenship and subjectivity promoted by the state. Mahmood points out that the Egyptian state has recently made attempts to regulate the movement that it views as an obstacle to the expansion of the kind of modern secular sociality it endorses.

If the women’s piety movement exists in tension with the secular state, it is for similar reasons that Mahmood sees a conflict between Western feminism and an appropriately local and historical understanding of the social significance of the movement. Western feminism in its dominant forms shares with secular liberalism
a set of universalistic suppositions about the subject and agency, about the actualisation of autonomy through the extension of basic rights and protections, and about the fulfilment of equal personhood in the free expression of the will, the mind, and of one's desire. What needs attention is the way Mahmood not only criticises liberal feminist failures to comprehend the specificity of Muslim women, but also post-structural feminism's disarticulation of resistance from agency, that is, its nuanced approach to recognising how certain performances of both religion and gender may, apart from the intentions, wills or desires of participants, stage certain limits to domination. Here Mahmood's point is most clear: it is not just that Muslim agency is perhaps more embodied than Western agency, or that Muslim women's engagements with their modes of subjugation often takes the form of complicity with it, but that Muslim agency may not share with Western agency the basic goal of emancipation. The desire to be free may simply not be universal, and freedom may not be something that feminism can assume is either wanted by or rightful for all women. According to Mahmood, even post-structural feminism is guilty, with liberal feminism, of imposing the Western humanistic tradition onto non-Western sites and subjects when it presumes that the imperative of feminism is to analyse and promote conditions for the equality and emancipation of women without acknowledging the parochialism of those aims.

In Mahmood's words, 'although the transcendental liberal subject ... is clearly questioned in [post-structural feminist] analysis (as is the notion of autonomous will), what remains intact is the natural status accorded the desire for resistance to social norms, and the incarceration of the notion of agency to the space of emancipatory politics' (Mahmood 2001, 211). Despite post-structural feminism's critique of the transcendental ego and universalistic conceptions of autonomy as radical independence from external conditions, the normative goal of post-structural feminist theory continues to be liberation and resistance to social norms, thus excluding or failing to comprehend forms of agency directed at the embodiment of those norms, even when the norms seem to be antithetical to the interests of the agent. Again, the debate is not about whether feminism restricts the forms of struggle to a liberal juridical model that presumes the common basis of a universal subject of rights, or about the way First World feminism miscomprehends historical differences among the situations of women in the Third World. Mahmood is criticising feminists like Mohanty and Judith Butler who, notwithstanding their receptivity to the varied and unsuspecting forms that resistance may take in non-normative settings (strategic or parodic obedience, for example), nevertheless cling to the idea that women should be equal and self-determined in the conditions in which they live their lives, and when they are not should be able to find ways, however subtle or plural, to struggle against unfreedom. On the premise of radical historicism these claims represent universalistic ideals that cannot, and should not, inform the analyses of women's lives.

While it could be argued, continued Mahmood, 'that the intent of these women notwithstanding, the actual effects of their practices may be analyzed in terms of their role in reinforcing or undermining structures of male domination ...
[this reading] remains not only encumbered by the binary terms of resistance and subordination, but is also insufficiently attentive to motivations, desires, and goals that are not necessarily captured by those terms’ (Mahmood 2001, 209). The first part of this response to the ‘politics of parody’ (Judith Butler’s thesis in Gender Trouble) identifies its claim that relations of power not only dominate, but also form the conditions of possibility for the emergence of the subject. As Mahmood acknowledges, this argument signals one of the ways in which Butler’s analysis follows Foucault’s thesis that subjection contains the dual character of submission and ‘subjectivation’, of docility and agency. ‘Judith Butler calls this the paradox of subjectivation, insomuch as the very processes and conditions that secure a subject’s subordination are also the means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent’ (Mahmood 2001, 210), writes Mahmood. After offering the example of a virtuoso pianist who subjects herself to rigorous discipline in order to excel at her art (the Aristotelianism of this example is striking), Mahmood suggests that disciplinary agency differs in one important way from Butler’s account of gender’s performativity. While on one hand Butler locates the possibility of resistance to relations of power rather than to the consciousness of an autonomous agent, on the other hand Butler still privileges resistance as the centrepiece of her deconstructive re-description of agency; ‘it is the second that I find more problematic’ (Mahmood 2001, 211). Mahmood poses the question: if a desire to be free and to resist oppression is not innate and universal, how do we analyse different ‘desires, capacities, and virtues that are historically and culturally specific?’ (Mahmood 2001, 211–212). The crux of her thesis is contained in her conclusion that ‘agentival capacity’ is entailed not just in those practices and performances, wills and desires that result in what progressives would call ‘change’, in something other than what already is, ‘but also those that aim toward continuity, stasis, and stability’ (Mahmood 2001, 212).

In its conclusion Mahmood acknowledged that she is often asked what are the ‘implicit politics’ of this essay? On one hand, one might think that Mahmood has simply overextended, if, that is, we are to take seriously what appears parenthetically, that cultural analysis has to take account of historically specific conditions of subject formation, including the relation between bodies, cultures, and habits, in order to understand how agency ‘is organised around self-fashioning and ethical conduct (rather than the transformation of juridical and state institutions)’ (Mahmood 2001, 223). But who among post-structural feminists has not insisted that juridical solutions to the problems of gender and other kinds of oppression fail to take account of both the specificity of women and the way gender is constituted? Butler’s argument seems more nuanced: if liberal autonomy presupposes untenable universalistic supports (the subject of rights, gender binaries, and abstract definitions of self-hood), this does not preclude the possibility of critical engagements with conditions of disempowerment, nor should it. If ethical embodiment is offered in opposition to liberal secular approaches to agency and autonomy, there is no reason why the argument should be incompatible with Butler’s thesis that parodic engagements with relations of power enact
performative resistance to subjection. Like Mahmood, Butler also takes seriously the role and the materiality of the body, and imagines agency without an agent. She denies the complete success of juridical solutions to social problems, and she insists that universals always originate in and retain the contaminating traces of specific social origins. The sticking point that separates Mahmood from Butler is that Mahmood would like to extend agency to include the goal of seamless identity with the conditions that shape subjects, whereas Butler follows a line of Enlightenment thinking, from Kant to Foucault, which assumes even through modes of obedience and subjection that the mark of the subject is self-reflection. Critique does not mean escape, liberation, or emancipation from the conditions that give rise to the subject. Critique often only means modes of participation that, through the particular form of their enactment, dramatise the performed rather than natural status of those conditions. In Mahmood’s case, what gets affirmed are the apparently natural status of those conditions and the lack of necessity for the subject, in the achievement of agency, to be anything other than their organic expression. Before saying more about Butler’s analyses of gender, subjectivation, and performativity, as well as about her responses to the very debate we have been reviewing, I turn briefly to consider the way Michel Foucault, whose construction of ethics Mahmood treats alongside Aristotle as a basic model for ethical embodiment, engaged Kant’s notions of enlightenment, autonomy, and agency through obedience. This engagement of Foucault with Kant, and Butler’s commentary on it, serves to point in the direction of fruitful clarifications and extensions of Mahmood’s thesis.

**Foucault, Butler, and the Defence of the ‘Critical Attitude’**

During the period of research, writing and publication of his *History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault implemented what many recognised as a shift from earlier emphases on the mechanics of domination to the means through which individuals take up relations to the self, not simply as internalised modes of subjection but also as technologies of self-fashioning (Foucault 1978). In keeping with the Ancient Greek milieu that provided Foucault with a model of morality based on habits and techniques more than duty to abstract laws, he spoke of these relations to the self as ethical relations. In this sense, Foucault isolated early Greek thought as a golden age of subjectivity, where sexuality and other supposedly private affairs of the individual were not referred to norms or maxims, but instead to what, in the language of the Greeks, would have been called ‘cultivation’. And on numerous occasions (e.g. throughout the *History of Sexuality*, in lectures, interviews, reviews, and essays), Foucault interpreted the literature of the Greeks as emblematic of a kind of lost freedom-in-self-governing that, in the modern age, was transformed into more explicit forms of social control.

How opposed was Foucault’s concept of ethical formation to the German *Aufklärung* and its tradition of Enlightenment morality? Not greatly, if one considers the influence of Rousseau on Kant’s moral theory, and that French and German Enlightenments were in many ways united against the empiricism of the British
Enlightenment. Foucault on one occasion lamented what he described as the relative immaturity of the French Enlightenment tradition and its impact on twentieth century thought, so that in contrast to a well-developed critique of the relation of reason and technology to power (e.g. in the Frankfurt School), French thought left those questions largely unanswered (Foucault 2002, 191–211). If Foucault’s elevation of ethics, his affinity with Nietzsche’s critique of morality, and his understanding of the constitutions of subjects through relations with power and discipline lend themselves to Hegelian interpretations that focus on issues of embodiment and the ‘realization’ of the self’s potential through practices and habits, I suggest that this Hegelianisation of his work is inconsistent with Foucault’s insistence on the necessity for ‘critique’. I have in mind a lecture presented by Foucault, entitled ‘What is Critique?’, which responds to the essay by Kant entitled ‘An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?’, and recovers from it a definition of critique as ‘a certain way of thinking, speaking and acting, a certain relationship to what exists, to what one knows, to what one does, a relationship to society, to culture, and also a relationship to others that we could call … the critical attitude’ (Foucault 2002, 192). Foucault on this occasion argued against the strong distinction between Kantian critique and Aristotelian virtue: ‘there is something in critique which is akin to virtue. And in a certain way, what I wanted to speak to you about is this critical attitude as virtue in general’ (Foucault 2002, 192).

Taking the form of a manifesto for secular reason, Kant’s ‘What is Enlightenment?’ did not imply the privatisation of religion, but ways of appropriating religious speech and thought and the conditions for expressing them freely in society. Kant illustrated a version of secular agency through the example of a capacity to speak publicly without fear of reprimand about theological dissent from official dogma. Foucault showed that Kant’s concept of autonomy did not stress correct views about the world or emancipation from religious authority, but certain ways of transforming religiously constituted subjectivities into techniques of self-relation and self-governing. In the lecture, and again in response to questions, Foucault argued that one could locate the origins of a ‘critical attitude’ in religious conflicts that took place during the medieval period especially, including the pastoral tradition and mysticism, but culminating, he thought, in the Reformation, when Church authority was not only enabled but potentially disrupted by one’s performance of its systems of participation. Throughout these histories, Foucault suggested the presence of an ‘explosion in the arts of governing … displacement in relation to the religious center’ (Foucault 2002, 192). Secularisation in the early modern era, which Foucault treated synonymously with ‘governmentalization’, was indissociable from the question ‘how not to be governed’, or ‘how not to be governed like that’; that is, ‘the art of not being governed quite so much’. That is, the critical attitude did not presuppose the eradication of governmental effects from oneself, nor mere conformity and submission, but a disposition characterised by ‘facing them head on … as both partner and adversary to the arts of governing, as an act of defiance, as a challenge, as a way of limiting those arts of governing and sizing them up, transforming them,
of finding a way to escape them or, in any case, a way to displace them’ (Foucault 2002, 193). In keeping with Kant, Foucault traced the emergence or preservation of the critical attitude in religious practices linked to the authority of a Church, to its scriptural prescriptions, orthodoxy, dogma, and so on; ‘not wanting to be governed was a certain way of refusing, challenging, limiting (say it as you like) ecclesiastical rule’ (Foucault 2002, 193).

Foucault argued that Kantian Enlightenment preserved a tension in terms of moral theory that provoked Kant’s central theme; that is, of reason’s need to know what it will not grant the possibility of knowing. The context of Kant’s essay was a highly ambiguous appeal to free-thinking and self-determination, which Kant suggested was not incompatible with obedience as long as the laws of a community were rational. But in addition to this classic attempt to mediate individual autonomy and social obedience, Foucault identified in Kant an underlying attempt to ‘desubjugate the subject in the context of power and truth’ (Foucault 2002, 195). In an important way, Kant’s ‘critical attitude’ installed an essential gap between critique and the state in which we could presuppose the realisation of critique. When Kant described his historical moment as an ‘age of Enlightenment’ but not an ‘Enlightened age’, he engineered a distinction between what can be embodied and realised and what remains an unrealisable futurity. It was the difference between them that constituted the conditions for critique. In his lecture, Foucault argued that French thought was faced with the task of recovering a notion of singularity, and the question posed by the singular would no longer simply be, ‘through what hegemonic conditions “has knowledge come to induce effects of domination”?’ The question would instead be, ‘how have power/knowledge relations induced singularities through various historical determinations, as well as “a field of possibles, of openings, indecisions, reversals and possible dislocations”?’ How can these singularities be released within the same strategic fields that produced them, ‘starting with the decision not to be governed?’ (Foucault 2002, 204).

In her review of Foucault’s ‘What is Critique?’, Butler reiterated the connection in his work between notions of self-making and ‘the politics of desubjugation’, which happen ‘simultaneously when a mode of existence is risked that is unsupported by what he calls the regime of truth’ (Butler 2002, 214). Butler summarised the negotiation Foucault achieved within the traditional morality/ethics contrast by saying that the desubjectified subject ‘fashions itself in terms of the norm, comes to inhabit and incorporate the norm, but the norm is not in this sense external to the principle by which the self is formed’ (Butler 2002, 216). As a result, the self-relation does not merely realise an already existing potential defined by the norms and categories of a given society; rather, ‘the relation will be “critical” in the sense that it will not comply with a given category, but rather constitute an interrogatory relation to the field of categorization itself’ (Butler 2002, 217). Foucault did not read Kantian critique as exposing illegitimacy in the field of truth and power because it has recourse to a more fundamental political or moral order (Butler 2002, 219), but by virtue of its inhabitation of the limits of that
order. If power delimits the constitution of the self, the self’s engagement with power through self-governing also exercises certain effects on the limits of the self, effects that include suspension, exposure of the contingency rather than naturalness of specific limits, and so on. It is when subjects risk inhabiting undelimited acts of self-assertion, not resisting authority in a traditional sense but staging the structural limits of their own subjectivities as the visibility of structural incompletions, that the desubjugation of the subject becomes a possibility. ‘Foucault is trying to understand the possibility of desubjugation within rationalization without assuming that there is a source for resistance that is housed in the subject or maintained in some fundamental mode. Where does resistance come from?’ (Butler 2002, 223).

What is especially evident in Butler’s commentary on Foucault’s Kant lecture is that something like a critical attitude does not require, and may never have required even for Kant, the concept of a metaphysical self. The irony of the transcendental ego for Kant was always that it is formed retroactively through what he called, in Critique of Pure Reason, the ‘apperceptive unity of the self’ (Kant 1990, 89–90). That is, the knowing self is not self-constituting but more like a placeholder to which one’s representations are given, and it is the giving of those representations alone that constitutes the experience of consciousness, rather the prior presence of a substantial ego. Moreover, for Kant it was the fact the self is constituted representationally, or, by way of images of an otherness that it cannot know or fully grasp, that established the possibilities for the freedom and moral potential of the self. If the self’s constitution had been immanent rather than transcendental, if, as Hume believed, subjectivity was a product of empirical relations, then the self would neither be capable of undetermined reflection nor of responding in any other way than according to its own interests. An empirical self could not respond morally because of its incapacity to consider and give itself over to the alterity of what exceeds the conditions of its making. Contrary to popular readings, alterity is at the centre of the Kantian transcendental, because what transcends the empirical is other, unknown and unknowable. By grounding agency and morality in alterity, Kantian ethics do not necessarily, as traditional Kantianism did, premise morality on the universality of the will and of the Law. Rather, Kantian ethics may proceed from the subject’s capacity to respond to and remain open to an otherness on which it depends for its experience of a kind of subjectivity ungrounded in anything essential or substantive. Morality is thus a condition of absolute vulnerability, because in order to ‘follow the law’ the moral agent is required to act against its self-interest by exposing itself to the disorienting effects of the other. But it is also through the gesture of a response to the radically other that agency asserts its irreducibility to empirical givenness, and, thus, agency is constituted as a critical endeavour.

Butler’s own relationship to Kant, which she relentlessly understates, is more evident in her most recent book, Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence. I conclude this essay by considering how her reflections in the chapter ‘Violence, Mourning, Politics’ speak to and clarify the issues that have been raised here
in relation to Mahmood’s arguments (Butler 2004, 19–49). This text returns us to the theme introduced at the beginning of this essay, that what Ernesto Laclau called the ‘transcendental horizon of politics’ (Laclau 1996, 50) is ironically situated, like the Kantian object, between the realm of the material and the transcendental. Butler responds to themes made salient after September 11, themes of violence and vulnerability, and of appropriate responses to them. In this chapter she proposes ‘to start, and to end, with the question of the human’ (Butler 2004, 20), not because there is a shared universal basis of humanity but in order to ask how these events remind us of the way the human is constituted both politically (we become socially legible within given conditions of language and citizenship) and by virtue of the vulnerability of our bodies. In each case it is clear that what constitutes us as humans is not a metaphysical core of consciousness or the immanent conditions of our formation, both of which imply self-referential notions of the self (as identical to universal subjectivity, or identical to the culture that produced it). Political structures of the self and the vulnerability of our bodies point instead to the way subjectivity is inseparable from the conditions in which the self takes shape in a de-centred way, by virtue of its exposure to the violence and violation of others. As such, Butler suggests that loss and vulnerability provide opportunities not simply to mourn, but also to reflect on, the precariousness, the instability, of what it means to be human. Her approach, however, is to emphasise the way the essential instability and vulnerability of the human, the fact that humaneness is constituted through this experience of exposure to potential threat or destruction, also implies something about what ethics should consist of. Vulnerability, she writes, brings ‘to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility’ (Butler 2004, 22). This complicates the terrain in which political struggles are realistically waged, when, for example, many struggles are required to take as their starting point the idea that our bodies are our own and not rightfully violable by others; in other words, they make claims of bodily autonomy. Butler responds by saying that such claims are hard to do without—‘I am not suggesting that we cease to make these claims. We have to, we must’—not just reluctantly or strategically but because ‘they are part of any normative aspiration of a movement that seeks to maximize the protection and the freedoms of sexual and gender minorities, of women, and of racial and ethnic minorities’ (Butler 2004, 25–26).

What violence reveals, Butler continues to say, is that on one hand personhood is never quite inseparable from embodiment, while on the other hand it exposes the basic vulnerability of embodiment, that my bodily being is unthinkable apart from the fact that it dispossesses me by situating my existence within primary relations of dependence and vulnerability to others. I cannot be me, not cognitively nor bodily, all on my own, because who I ‘am’ is always haunted and undone by the possibility of losing primary supports (social death) or of injury (physical death). This sort of vulnerability that is at the centre of the constitution of the self is at once material and transcendental because it represents vulnerability to ‘a sudden address from elsewhere that we cannot preempt’ (Butler 2004, 29). Calling this our ‘primary vulnerability’ and our ‘common human
Butler constructs a concept of the human and of humanism on the basis of the way in which we are always given over to the other. As such we concede our dependence on others, our vulnerability to the other, and the demand placed on us to respond to the other’s vulnerability as well. Toward the end of the chapter Butler extends this reflection on a ‘common human vulnerability’ to Chandra Mohanty’s critique of Western feminism and feminist universalism in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, discussed earlier. Butler’s summary of Mohanty’s argument in ‘Under Western Eyes’ emphasises its critique of how the framework of First World feminism misreads the agency of Third World women, reproduces the First World as the site of authentic feminist agency, and, by focusing on the ostensible lack of agency signified by things like veiling, misunderstands the historically specific cultural meanings that might be embodied in such practices, denying culturally specific idioms of agency. The parallels to Mahmood’s arguments should be obvious. Butler continues—and I believe we can read this as a possible response to Mahmood as well—by saying that the possibility for international feminist coalitions, between First World and Third World women, seems possible today once Mohanty’s critique is taken seriously. That is, instead of negating the possibilities for imagining what historically disparate experiences of gender and gender oppression share, how they are alike and allignable, the specificities of cultural differences in the enactment and enabling of gender remains open to coalitional models based on what Butler calls new modes of ‘cultural translation’. Cultural translation, which Butler has invoked on other occasions as well, is here said to be different from assuming that ‘we are all fixed and frozen in our various locations and ‘subject-positions’’ (Butler 2004, 47); in other words, it concedes the singularity of different cultural constitutions of subjects without reifying those differences as essential traits of women from different cultures. The historicity of culture and of the historical determination of subjects leads not to the conclusion that the subject-constitutions of one culture differ essentially and irreconcilably from the subject-constitutions of another culture. The fact that all subject-constitutions are structured in terms of vulnerability, for example, means that there must be certain aspects of social and subjective experience that are ‘concretely universal’ and subject to ‘cultural translation’.

Mahmood’s stance against the translatability of ethical experiences and norms conflates rigorous methodological historicism with the essentialist conclusion that cultural differences correspond to ‘fixed and frozen locations’. But beyond its methodological issues, what is even more apparent is that by reducing ethics to the embodiment of a culture’s norms, and by equating it with upholding the status quo of a culture’s traditions, ethical embodiment stands in opposition to an ethics that takes seriously the role of the other. In fact, it entirely excludes consideration of the other. Its motivation, according to Mahmood, is preservation of the same and the stability and security of what exists within the framework of one’s normative community. This means that ethical embodiment stands in stark contrast to the ethics and politics of alterity, of a radical response to the other predicated on the primary vulnerability of the self to the other and
on the response of the self to the other’s vulnerability. While Mahmood argues for a more thoroughgoing historicism in feminist theory, her conclusions about the uniqueness and incompatibility of Muslim desire with the desire of non-Muslim women reverts to another kind of essentialism. Meanwhile, Butler risks an engagement with universalism by asking how certain aspects of the human experience constitute us according to primary, cross-cultural vulnerabilities, and how this primary vulnerability both de-centres the self and opens up possibilities for culturally translatable ethical responses to others.

Butler’s inquiry into possibilities for cultural translation, and for the translatability of the critical attitude into non-normative idioms, seems to have emerged in part in relation to Gayatri Spivak’s ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’. Butler’s reading of the latter is instructive. She sees a discrimination occurring in Spivak’s essay between juridical universalism and the transversal’s that certain political languages achieve. As Butler notes, Spivak’s critique of a politics centred on the universal subject of rights does just what Marx said it did: occludes ‘the force of global capital and its differential forms of exploitation’ (Butler 2001, 36). It was this occlusion that leads to the illegibility of subalterns within dominant conceptions of agency that Spivak drew attention to with her question, whether or not the subaltern speaks. Butler recalls how Spivak acknowledged that it would be impossible for First World intellectuals not to represent the subaltern. While:

the task of representation will not be easy, especially when it concerns an existence that requires a translation . . . Spivak both counsels and enacts a self-limiting practice of cultural translation . . . as both a theory and practice of political responsibility. (Butler 2001, 36)

‘Translation can have its counter-colonialist possibility’, Butler concurred with Spivak (Butler 2001, 37), since in addition to the immanence of the other in the language of the self it also marks the limits of what a language can handle. To say that every translation is imperfect, or that pure translation is impossible, is to say that the objects of translation remain unexhausted by the terms that translate them, and that dominant terms are themselves altered, ‘displaced and estranged’, by translation. Thus, cultural translation names the task of imagining new languages unstructured by grammars of assimilation. Rather than rewriting difference into the idiom of the self, what occurs in responsible translation is that its object, remaining ungraspable, functions as an outer limit to what the translation can achieve. As a standpoint removed, the other or object of translation not only exceeds but transfigures the subject of translation.

Conclusion

The argument analyzed in this article has been monopolised by arch-conservative critics, like Samuel Huntington and Dinesh D’Souza (D’Souza 2003; Huntington 1993), who insist that conflicts today have only to do with underlying incompatibilities between cultures. This fact, they claim moreover,
justifies pre-emptive measures to ensure the security and safety of ‘us’ against ‘them’. In this Hobbesean world the assertion of incompatible differences and the non-translatability of ethical norms lead us to the despairing place in which, so we are told, one must dominate or be dominated, because it is not in human nature to think or do otherwise. Without undergoing any sort of intellectual amnesia about the contradictions and elisions of universalistic discourses in the West, what theorists like Spivak and Butler attempt is to emphasise how the promises of the liberal tradition are false when claimed to be completed or completable by juridical or institutional means. On the other hand, who would give up prohibitions against cruelty and torture, or of the obligation to ensure that something like Auschwitz never again occurs? These are ‘categorical imperatives’, and without them, if we cannot presume them to be culturally translatable or find bases on which they are linked to something primary and common to humans, we are left in a troublesome situation. What these interrogations of the implications of radical historicism have attempted to point to is the way in which the ideal of critique is itself vulnerable. Critique relies on the ability to see within what exists presently the universality of a silent other, otherness, or ‘it could be otherwise’. When, thinking as empirically and as specifically as possible, such thoughts are excluded tout court as parochialisms. The doctrines of unilateralism, cultural untranslatability, and corresponding justifications for militarisation are then not only enabled geopolitically, but as the general schema for all of our social encounters.

NOTES

1. See also ‘Abel and Cain’, where Baudelaire excoriates Abel, the favoured brother whom Cain killed, for which he was subsequently banished. Baudelaire attributes to Cain, scorned by the biblical narrative, ‘modern progeny’ whose ‘work has just begun’. Its last line—‘Race of Cain, assault the skies/And drag him earthward—bring down God!’ (1993, 269)—evokes the sacrilege of the next poem, ‘Litanies of Satan’.

2. Baudelaire’s pessimistic responses to Hugo’s romantic depictions of the poor and of the working-class movement also support this point of contrast with Brecht. See the set of poems in The Flowers of Evil dedicated to Hugo but countering his optimism, including ‘The Swan’, ‘The Seven Old Men’, and ‘The Little Old Women’.

REFERENCES


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