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Judith Butler. *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind*. London and New York: Verso, 2020.

In *The Force of Nonviolence*, philosopher Judith Butler addresses nonviolence particularly in the context of social and political movements in the United States. Nonviolence, for her, becomes less a tactical or moral question than a matter of general ethical and political orientation, especially as resistance to violence. She argues that this requires taking a hard look at what passes for

violence in our societies and at which arguably violent practices escape that label, notably those that ostensibly maintain peace and order. “Violence,” Butler contends, never simply exists but always comes already interpreted, and the power to define whose actions count as violent and whose do not may be at the core of political rule.

At the root of a nonviolent orientation must be, according to Butler, a commitment to interdependency: Any political imaginary that conceives persons as principally individuals is at best incomplete. Interdependency makes arguments in favor of “self-defense,” an often-named exemption to nonviolent commitments. This is profoundly complicated, for where does this “self” begin and end? Must it not—and does it not frequently—include “my” family, country, people, even values and traditions? Isn’t most violence committed in presumed “self-defense”?

Ultimately, Butler argues, an argument from self-defense relies on making a (racist) distinction between those lives I am willing to defend—that are part of my “self” and that I would mourn if they were lost—and those lives that do not matter to me (or to our polity) in the same way. A nonviolent stance, she continues, must resist such a distinction between “grievable” and “ungrievable” lives, and instead embody a radically egalitarian commitment to equal “grievability.”

Although there is a lot in this book, the idea of grievability—whose lives, when lost, *register* as a loss?—is likely to be the main takeaway for many readers. In a sense, it embeds the idea of individual worth or right to life in both a relational rather than individualistic view of creaturely existence. That is, my death is conceived less as a violation of my rights than as a loss to those with whom I am bound up and in a biopolitical view of power (power as the regulation of life and the production and disciplining of certain kinds of life). The context of police violence and the deaths of refugees on Europe’s borders may both have been at the forefront of Butler’s mind while writing this volume, but it is not hard to imagine the idea of grievability shedding light on analyses of the coronavirus pandemic or other contemporary political debates.

The Force of Nonviolence is a timely publication that seeks to address both a need for philosophically rigorous work on nonviolence in conversation with poststructuralist thinking (a first, as far as I am aware)

and for politically engaged scholars to take up and speak to contemporary issues in social movements. That said, it is not immediately clear for whom the book is intended. On the one hand, its economical 200-odd pages and relative lack of rigorous academic argument suggest it is intended for a general audience. On the other hand, readers not already familiar with poststructuralist philosophy and psychoanalysis will likely have a hard time following what precisely is going on.

For example, towards the end of the book there is a detailed reading of the death drive in Sigmund Freud, ending with the suggestion that “manic” refusal of reality might better animate protest movements than nonviolent self-restraint, for the superego is “pure culture of the death drive.” The result is that both academic and general audiences may come away a little unsatisfied, which ultimately limits what this book could be. Readers may further be disappointed that Butler does not engage with existing literature on nonviolence by authors such as Gene Sharp, Erica Chenoweth, or Maria Stephan. A discussion of Peter Gelderloos’s *How Nonviolence Protects the State*, which argues that a commitment to nonviolence is racist, as it denies oppressed peoples the right to assert their lives as worth defending, might have been especially fruitful.

Despite these weaknesses, readers will find much to engage with in this work, including those who come to nonviolence from a particularly Christian perspective. For the “force of nonviolence” noted in the book’s title is ultimately named in terms that almost sound theological: Butler argues there is a “higher law” than that of violence, which is not “discoverable” but “seeks to compel and persuade in the direction of nonviolence” (181). “The institutional life of violence will not be brought down by a prohibition, but only by a counter-institutional ethos and practice” (61), an “egalitarian imaginary that apprehends the interdependency of lives. Unrealistic and useless, yes, but it is possibly a way of bringing another reality into being” (203).

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