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Subjectivity and Vulnerability: On the War with Iraq[1]

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When US President George W Bush and UK Prime Minister Tony Blair argued in favour of war with Iraq, they offered a variety of reasons ranging from the now infamous claim that the country possessed weapons of mass destruction to the need to effect regime change. Such arguments were roundly criticized by opponents of the war, because the claims were, even if true, not regarded as legitimate reasons for war or because the factuality of the claims was rejected in the first place. In contrast to such lines of critique this article does not consider whether these claims could be considered accurate or sufficient. Rather, it uses Judith Butler's critique of ethical violence to elucidate the political implications of speaking and acting ethically. In particular, it explores the problematic of subjectivity and vulnerability and suggests that arguments for the war cannot effectively be contested logically; rather we must highlight the way in which they produce what they claim to name.
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Introduction

When US President George W Bush and UK Prime Minister Tony Blair argued in favour of war with Iraq, they offered a variety of reasons ranging from the now infamous claim that the country possessed weapons of mass destruction to the need to effect regime change. Such arguments were roundly criticized by opponents of the war, because the claims were, even if true, not regarded as legitimate reasons for war or because the factuality of the claims was rejected in the first place. In contrast to such lines of critique this article will not consider whether these claims could be considered accurate or sufficient. Rather, it uses Judith Butler's critique of ethical violence to elucidate the political implications of speaking and acting ethically. In particular, it explores the problematic of subjectivity and vulnerability and suggests that arguments for the war cannot effectively be contested logically; rather we must highlight the way in which they produce what they claim to name.

War and Subjectivity

In his address to the nation on the day US troops were sent into Iraq, Bush (2003) highlighted the supposed necessity of the war for the security of the US and the intention to liberate the Iraqi people: 'We will pass through this time of peril and carry on the work of peace. We will defend our freedom. We will bring freedom to others and we will prevail.' US Secretary of State Colin Powell had explained in September 2002 that the administration 'would hope that […] rather than [the war] being seen as an assault, it would be seen as a liberation and it would be seen as the beginning of a new era in that part of the world' ('US Policy Towards Iraq', 2002, 17). Blair similarly represented 'regime change' as a worthwhile goal. Although he claimed that regime change was not the justification for the war, as the legal base was UN Resolution 1441, he nevertheless argued that it was 'the reason […] why if we do act we should do so with a clear conscience and strong heart' (2003). Blair's statement opening the debate about the Iraq war in parliament on 18 March 2003 ended with an appeal: 'This is not the time to falter. This is the time for this House […] to give a lead, to show that we will stand up for what we know to be right, to show that we will confront the tyrannies and dictatorships and terrorists who put our way of life at risk, to show at the moment of decision that we have the courage to do the right thing' (2003). These are arguments about why the war with Iraq is legitimate or justified. Thus, if one of the reasons for the war was indeed the desire to liberate Iraqis from oppression, poverty and human rights abuses, then the most obvious counterargument appears to be that the Iraqis' lives and their livelihoods were acutely endangered and in a number of cases destroyed by the war that was to protect them.[2]

Thus, one obvious site of contention is the issue of civilians' deaths. Crudely put, if, as US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld claimed, the 'goal is to free those people' (United States Department of Defense, 2002), then it seems counterproductive if a number of those to be freed end up dead. This line of critique, which makes use of the reasons that were presented in favour of the war, seems to be underlined by those, for example, who seek to count the Iraqi dead.[3] In late 2004, an article in the British medical journal *The Lancet* argued, on the basis of a cluster sample survey, that 100,000 Iraqis have died because of the war (Roberts *et al.*, 2004). The UK government immediately rejected these claims as unfounded (see Wintour and Norton-Taylor, 2004), betraying a worry that this body count might be seen to undermine the legitimacy of the war.

Thus, highlighting the deaths of Iraqi civilians or more generally the misery brought over ordinary Iraqis could be seen as disputing the validity of Bush and Blair's claims within their own terms: the argument is about whether it was right to start this war. However, such critique, which makes use of the tension

between the stated reasons for the war and the alleged outcomes, seems to have been strangely ineffectual. Little seems to have changed in political terms, for example, since the publication of the estimate in *The Lancet*, although it was immediately pointed out that the UK government's rejection of the figure's veracity was supported by a false suggestion, namely that the researchers had extrapolated from evidence that pertained only to Fallujah (Wintour and Norton-Taylor, 2004). In other words, the information that a large number of Iraqis are being killed rather than liberated appears not to have affected the way in which the war is represented and discussed as much as one might have expected, although the swift and fierce rejection of the figure of 100,000 dead by the UK government and detailed reports about Iraqi casualties in the press suggest that the problematic of killing civilians is seen as significant.

The criticism that the war is unable to deliver the positive outcomes promised by Bush and Blair seems to assume that the claims on behalf of the war may be contested logically. Such critique, of which counting the Iraqi dead might be seen to be a part, relies on the significance in political terms of pointing out this failure. It does not, however, question how Bush and Blair's rhetoric produces what it treats as already in existence, namely the 'we' that is to 'pass through this time of peril and carry on the work of peace', that is to 'stand up for what we know is right'. Although this 'we' is only produced as it is spoken of, in their representation it was already there, imperilled by the other who is now to be defeated, enabling the 'we' to live in peace. On a closer look, this turns out to be profoundly problematic.

In response to *The Lancet* article, the UK government rejected the accuracy of the researcher's estimated figure; this immediate and decisive reaction suggests that such a high Iraqi death toll would be seen as problematic, which raises the question whether there might be a lower number that might have been seen as acceptable and that might not have elicited the same kind of response. The reaction, perhaps because it was provoked by the worryingly high figure, treated the matter as one of arithmetic; it rendered 'their' dead as an abstract category. Whatever the precise number, the deaths have been caused by the 'we' asserted in Bush and Blair's rhetoric about the war and this is not disputed; but 'them' and 'us' remain logically separate. In this representation, the 'we' that was asserted as though it already existed before it was spoken of, in the defence of its freedom and in the pursuit of re-establishing its previously existent security, has, admittedly, caused a number of casualties which, however, do not affect this 'we' other than perhaps as a cause of regret. This production of the 'we' in the act of speaking about and implementing the war with Iraq *as if it had already existed* is, however, disturbed by considering more closely the war and the controversy about it.

In his aptly entitled *Generation Kill: Living Dangerously on the Road to Baghdad with the Ultraviolent Marines of Bravo Company* reporter Evan

Wright recounts his and the soldiers' experiences as he travels with the First Reconnaissance Battalion, Bravo Company, of the US Marine Corps for two months during the invasion of Iraq. This account, which Wrights says 'would not have been possible without the bravery of the United States Marine Corps' (Wright, 2005, 447), is arguably an unlikely source of critique and reflection on subjectivity and vulnerability. And yet it raises issues that become interesting when read together with Butler's thoughts. The book mostly portrays the Marines as keen on killing; their unofficial cheer is, according to Wright, 'Get some!' (2005, 14–15) or indeed 'Kill!' (2005, 361). However, Wright also describes episodes in which individual Marines become deeply affected by 'the kill' they have made. On one occasion Marines have to deal with a young shepherd boy who has been riddled with bullets by one of them. Although someone asserts that 'mistakes like this are unavoidable in war', this is forcefully rejected by another soldier: 'We're Recon Marines. Our job is to observe. We don't shoot unarmed children' (Wright 2005, 225). As one Marine says:

> We're Americans […]. We must be sure when we take a shot that we are threatened. You have got to see that these people are just like you. You've got to see past the huts, the camels, the different clothes they wear. They're just people. This family here might lose a son. We shot their camels, too. If you kill one camel, that could be a year's income. We're not here to destroy their way of life (Wright 2005, 230).

While the platoon commander who gave the order that resulted in the fatal injury to the boy cries when he finds that they cannot help him (Wright, 2005, 226), the men in the platoon – who have already killed many civilians on their way to Baghdad – get so upset about this incident that they evade a direct order not to medically assist the boy. Their immediate superior eventually supports them in their insubordination because otherwise the platoon would, in his view, fall apart (Wright, 2005, 227).

The problem, as it is expressed by the Marines, seems to be not so much that killing children is wrong but that 'they' don't do it. It is, in other words, not in tune with their identity to kill children. Of course, this is presumably because they consider killing children to be wrong, but the implication of how they speak about it in Wright's representation is that when they find that they *do* kill children, it challenges their identity, their understanding of who they thought they were.[4] Wright (2005, 373) moreover observes that some Marines experience stress because their 'inner warrior' seems to continuously 'bump against' their nice civilian identity. Thus, the issue is not merely that the incident has offended against what the Marines see as their identity – be it that of American or Recon Marine – but that each Marine holds within himself multiple visions of himself. When one or more of these understandings become

profoundly challenged, the experience could be more than a simple tension between several identities. Apparently, the Marines discover and bring back from war (Wright, 2005, 228) the knowledge that they have acted in ways that they are not able to reconcile with any understanding of themselves that they consciously subscribe to, in ways that therefore indicate that they are not who they thought they were. In other words, what is interesting is that this particular killing apparently affects the Marines' understanding of who they are, and that they realise this. It is not that they have changed, but that they have come to understand that they may never have been who they thought they were. Thus, they can no longer give a confident answer to the question 'who am I?'; they have come to see their own subjectivity as problematic, which would account for the deeply emotional reaction of some of the Marines. These are issues that Judith Butler thinks through in her recent work.

Ethical Violence

In *Giving an Account of Oneself: A Critique of Ethical Violence*, Butler explores how the unavailability of a complete and secure identity relates to ethics. Starting with Theodor Adorno and his warning that having recourse to ethics involves 'a certain kind of repression and violence' (Butler, 2003, 9), she thinks through the question of ethics from the problematic of 'giving an account of oneself'. This is an intriguing place to start because, Butler (2003, 12) argues, '*when the 'I' seeks to give an account of itself, an account which must include the conditions of its own emergence, it must, as a matter of necessity, become a social theorist*'. The 'I', in this view, does not exist before and beyond its relation to the social context: the act of speaking is at the same time the invention of the 'I'. Put differently, no story may be told about the 'I' that is not already a story of its relation to a set of norms.

Butler (2003, 12) aims to set out that this unavailability of the subject as a prior and independent entity does not mean that moral agency is impossible. In fact, Butler (2003, 13) suggests the opposite, namely that

> this dispossession may well be the condition for moral inquiry, the condition under which morality itself emerges. If the 'I' is not at one with the moral norms it negotiates, if it does not find them as the a priori of existence, this means only that the subject must deliberate upon these norms, and that part of deliberation will entail a critical understanding of their social genesis and meaning. In this sense, ethical deliberation is bound up with the operation of critique.

Butler (2003, 17) is concerned to 'show how a theory of subject-formation that acknowledges the limits of self-knowledge can work in the service of a

conception of ethics and, indeed, of responsibility.' She argues, accordingly, that 'It may be that the question of ethics emerges precisely at the limits of our schemes of intelligibility, the site where we ask ourselves what it might mean to continue in a dialogue where no common ground can be assumed, where one is, [as] it were, at the limits of what one knows and still under the demand to offer and receive recognition' (2003, 18). Butler (2003, 33) claims that we must suspend the demand of self-identity and that this may enable us to have patience with others; for 'when we claim to know and present ourselves, we will fail in some ways that are nevertheless essential to who we are, and […] we cannot expect anything different from others'.

In other words, when we ask how we ought to act, how we ought to treat others, we find that our relationality to the social context, to others, means that we do not and cannot know who we are in the first place. This has an impact on living together: 'Indeed, to take responsibility for oneself is to avow the limits of any self-understanding, and to establish this limit not only as a condition for the subject, but as the predicament of the human community itself' (Butler, 2003, 55). In sum, for Butler the unavailability of a complete and secure subject does not make moral agency impossible; it highlights that speaking ethically is violent not merely because it may endorse certain forms of action but because it necessitates a mode of speaking that itself relies on violence. If nothing else, we must invent and represent ourselves as subjects of this mode of speaking and such subjectivity, according to Butler, is not possible. Thus, ethics involves violence not only to others but also to ourselves, a distinction that is, due to our radical relationality, anyway impossible; we are always already inextricably linked to the Other. The 'I', Butler (2004, 23) observes, 'is called into question by its relation to the Other'.

When Blair asserts that the Iraq war is 'the right thing to do', that 'we will stand up for what we know to be right', he speaks to the question of whether we should go to war, while assuming the unproblematic and prior existence of the 'we'. Such arguments take as given that this is the main question; they do not explore the politics that has gone into defining it in the first place. Butler examines the assumptions of speaking in this way. The upshot of Butler's claims is that when we discuss whether we should go to war with Iraq we have already failed to notice that there is no 'we' before we act, that we cannot rely on the security of this 'we' while deliberating what we should do. Butler's argument suggests that it is important to resist the temptation of being drawn into the debate over whether we should wage war in Iraq and instead reflect upon the precariousness of the 'we' and its implications.

In *Precarious Life* Butler (2004, XII) explores the possibility of 'less violent outcomes' in response to September 11, 2001. She is highly critical of justifications of violent self-defence that appeal to a prior violence done to 'us': 'It is always possible to say, 'oh some violence was done to me, and this gives

me full permission to act under the sign of 'self-defence''. Many atrocities are committed under the sign of a 'self defence' that, precisely because it achieves a permanent ethical justification for retaliation, knows no end, and can have no end' (2003, 58). She rejects the notion that violence constitutes just punishment or just revenge. Rather the point is that violence 'delineates a physical vulnerability from which we cannot slip away, which we cannot finally resolve under the name of the subject, but which can provide a way to understand the way in which all of us are already not precisely bounded, not precisely separate, but in our skins, given over, in each other's hands, at each other's mercy' (2003, 58). Thus, it is not possible to find security or an ethics rooted in self-sufficient subjects: 'One insight that injury affords is that there are others out there on whom my life depends, people I do not know and may never know. This fundamental dependency on anonymous others is not a condition that I can will away. No security measure will foreclose this dependency; no violent act of sovereignty will rid the world of this fact' (Butler, 2004, XII). The debate following on from September 11 seems to largely have been about how we should act in the face of a violent other. Butler, in contrast, aims to think through our dependence, in our very existence, on others. We only exist as part of the social context within which we produce ourselves through our actions. Butler (2004, XVII) is keen to underline the precariousness of our life and pursue 'the question of a non-violent ethics, one that is based upon an understanding of how easily human life is annulled.'

Grievable Lives

The unavailability of security in terms of our subjectivity, in terms of our physical presence, does not mean that ethics is impossible; nor is our vulnerability something we should bemoan. On the contrary, Butler (2003, 58) suggests that 'it may be that the very way we respond to injury offers the chance we have to become human.' Thus, the larger question for Butler is one of what it means to be human, not what conditions might have to be met for war or other forms of political violence to count as justified or ethical. Butler (2004, 20) is interested in 'reimagining the possibility of community on the basis of vulnerability and loss.' In order to do so, she starts and ends with the question of the human.

Butler's is not a romantic notion of humanness in which 'becoming human' might correspond to fulfilling a potential. She notes that 'To be human seems to me to mean to be in a predicament that one cannot solve' (2003, 60). The impossibility of securing the self 'against the injuriousness of the other' is radical; 'if one were successful at walling oneself off from injury, one would become inhuman' (2003, 60). Butler is concerned with the political implications

of our actual understandings of what it means to be human and the differential treatment that follows from them. She argues that

> If we assume that everyone who is human goes to war like us, and that this is part of what makes them recognizably human, or that the violence we commit is violence that falls within the realm of the recognizably human, but that the violence others commit is unrecognizable as human activity, then we make use of a limited and limiting cultural frame to understand what it is to be human (2004, 89).

As against such thinking, she sees an opportunity in acknowledging our own vulnerability because 'Mindfulness of this vulnerability can become the basis of claims for non-military political solutions, just as denial of this vulnerability through a fantasy of mastery (an institutionalized fantasy of mastery) can fuel the instruments of war' (2004, 29). Consequently, from Butler's perspective, vulnerability is crucial; it is not an inconvenience to be overcome. She points out that to 'foreclose that vulnerability, to banish it, to make ourselves secure at the expense of every other human consideration is to eradicate one of the most important resources from which we must take our bearings and find our way' (2004, 30). At the same time, she acknowledges that a 'vulnerability must be perceived and recognized in order to come into play in an ethical encounter, and there is no guarantee that this will happen' (2004, 43).

Rejecting what she sees as vain and indeed dangerous attempts to attain security and control in contemporary politics, Butler (2004, 20) offers a different 'question that preoccupies [her] in the light of recent global violence […], Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives?' She renders this question powerfully when she asks: 'What *makes for a grievable life*?' (Butler, 2004, 20). Through the idea of grievability she illustrates that different lives are valued in very different ways in the current conflict. For example, whilst 'Certain lives will be highly protected, and the abrogation of their claims to sanctity will be sufficient to mobilize the forces of war' (Butler, 2004, 32), there are 'no obituaries for the war casualties that the United States inflicts, and there cannot be' (Butler, 2004, 34).

It is indeed much easier to establish how many coalition forces have been killed in Iraq and precisely who they were than it is to discover even the number of Iraqi dead. Details and pictures of the coalition fallen are, for example, posted on the CNN website (www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2003/iraq/forces/casualties/index.html). Each US military casualty occasions a press release. The US Department of Defense also maintains a 'Fallen Warriors' site, which is to 'honour those who died while serving their country in the global war on terrorism' (www.defendamerica.mil/fallen.html). The press releases provide information about each of the fallen; the list however does not. This is

in contrast to the UK practice where all casualties and fatalities are listed on a Ministry of Defence website with links to pictures of and memorials to each of the fallen (www.operations.mod.uk/telic/casualties.htm). Interestingly, Iraq Coalition Casualty Count, which counts coalition military fatalities, links each of the named US casualties to the US Department of Defense press release concerning their death (http://icasualties.org/oif/); thereby it undermines the official reduction of the casualties to a list of names. Looking at the pictures and reading the information about the dead on these sites makes visible, despite the brevity of what is sometimes offered, the uniqueness as a person of each of the coalition dead. In contrast, the casualties inflicted by coalition forces remain not only anonymous but invisible on these sites.

Butler, of course, suggests that there cannot be obituaries to the Iraqi dead. It is interesting, in this context, to reconsider the attempts to count Iraqi casualties; for a closer look suggests that their aim might be more than establishing a number, which might then be used to critique claims about the positive effect the war has for ordinary Iraqis. Iraq Body Count, for example, displays an up-to-date database of civilian deaths caused by the intervention (www.iraqbodycount.net/database/). A detailed rationale is provided for the project, reasoning amongst other things that

> Civilian casualties are the most unacceptable consequence of all wars. Each civilian death is a tragedy and should never be regarded as the 'cost' of achieving our countries' war aims, because it is not we who are paying this price. […] We believe it is a moral and humanitarian duty for each such death to be recorded, publicised, given the weight it deserves and, where possible, investigated to establish whether there are grounds for criminal proceedings (www.iraqbodycount.net/background.htm).

The point is to enable debate based on fuller information about the human cost of war than is available from official sources:

> The Iraq Body Count project aims to promote public understanding, engagement and support for the human dimension in wars by providing a reliable and up-to-date documentation of civilian casualties […]. The duty of 'recorder' falls particularly heavily on the ordinary citizens of those states whose military forces cause the deaths. In the current crisis, this responsibility must be borne predominantly by citizens of the USA and the UK (www.iraqbodycount.net/background.htm).

In order to enable informed debate, the 'project aims to record single-mindedly and on a virtually real-time basis one key and immutable index of the fruits of war: the death toll of innocents. The full extent of this has often gone unnoticed until long after a war has ended, if at all' (www.iraqbodycount.net/background.htm). Although the project thus represents itself as narrowly

conceived, that is, as a counting tool, it is important to note the attitude displayed towards the information the site seeks to provide: 'It is to these all too easily disregarded victims of violence that Iraq Body Count is dedicated, and we are resolute that they, too, shall have their memorials' (www.iraqbodycount.net/background.htm).

In other words, the point of Iraq Body Count is not merely to count the dead but to provide memorials, to highlight the grievability of the lives that have been destroyed. This is evident in the list of 3,029 'named and identified victims of the war on Iraq', civilians 'killed as a result of the US-led military intervention in Iraq up to September 12, 2004'. The list provides the following information: name, age, sex, weapon/other details, place of death, date, and the source of the information. We learn, for example, that Zahraa Husien Khzaieer, a ten-year-old girl, died of gashes in the chest at 'Nassriaa/Baghdad Street' in 2003 and Hashim Kamel Radi, a 22-year-old man, died due to an airstrike on the bus from Baghdad to Nasiriyah in March 2003. The list goes beyond a simple count. It is offered 'in remembrance' and is prefaced with this statement: 'To those who knew and loved them, we add our sorrow and condolences' (www.iraqbodycount.net/names.htm).

Vulnerability and the Iraq War

There has been much debate about whether the war in Iraq could be justified, politically, legally and ethically. One important line of critique has highlighted the tension between the stated desire to liberate the Iraqi people and the inevitability of killing Iraqis at the same time, if war was the chosen course of action. However, the point here has not been to show that the war undermines the goods it claims to defend. Rather, it is significant to address the implications of such debate about whether we should go to – or have gone to – war with Iraq. What was at issue was the 'should' and its implications: What reasons are appropriate and sufficient for justifying war? Are the outcomes of the war in tune with the reasons given for it? I have drawn attention to the way in which the argument that the war was the 'right thing to do' for us produced the 'us' in the first place. In doing so, it asserted a considerable amount of certainty about who we are. In Bush's (2004) words,

> These times demand the kind of courage and confidence that Americans have shown before. Our enemy can only succeed if we lose our will and faith in our own values. And ladies and gentlemen, our will is strong. We know our duty. By keeping our word, and holding firm to our values, this generation will show the world the power of liberty once again.

This apparent certainty about who 'we' are and what 'our' values are allows for the argument that we must violently defend and even spread them.

The 'we' that is asserted must be clearly delineated in order to be prioritised; for Bush and Blair's argument and course of action depend on a differential valuation of life. It is acceptable, in their view, to sacrifice some lives for the greater good, that is, in the pursuit of the preservation of other lives. The idea that a large number of Americans and British will potentially be protected from terrorist attacks or other forms of Iraqi political violence, combined with the notion that many Iraqis will be liberated from oppression, allows, in this way of thinking, for the justification of the actual deaths of Iraqis and coalition soldiers. Crucially, this argument relies not only on an impossible delineation of 'us' from 'them', but also suggests the independent and prior existence of both. However, following Butler's claims, the 'us' that appears to be merely named is actually produced by the very act of speaking and acting in its name.

In contrast to this production of 'us' as separate from 'them', those who seek to highlight the number of casualties in Iraq apparently want to establish the grievability of the lives whose termination the coalition refuses to count. The critique entailed by the body counts can be read into the discourse that treats the 'we' as already existent by interpreting it as a contribution that contests the logic of Bush and Blair's rhetoric in its own terms: the war is then problematic because it is unable to deliver the suggested positive outcomes. It kills too many of those it would free. However, Iraq Body Count, for example, aims to do more than count, more than confront us with the death toll of the war. The project explicitly aims to provide memorials for the dead, thereby fundamentally challenging the differentiation between lives in the 'war on terror'. It apparently intends to subvert the distinction between grievable coalition lives and Iraqi dead, and thus runs counter to Butler's suggestion that there are 'no obituaries for the war casualties that the United States inflicts, and there cannot be' (2004, 34). In doing so, it underlines the unavailability of the 'we' asserted by Bush and Blair as clearly separate. Hashim Kamel Radi was taking the bus, like you and I might, when he was killed. Iraq Body Count undermines the clarity of the distinction between 'us' and 'them', and thus raises the question of whether we may know who 'we' are.

Those who have to fight our wars are at times confronted directly with the grievability of the lives they take. They necessarily find themselves in the quandary between the imperative to protect life (especially when ethical reasons are invoked to justify the war such as liberating the Iraqis) and the necessity of killing. Soldiers fighting war necessarily confront ethico-political questions, for example but not only, about whether they may and should kill particular persons they are confronted with. I discussed earlier an incident described in Wright's *Generation Kill*, the fatal wounding of a shepherd boy by US Marines. Those involved in the shooting, through an encounter with the victim and his family, arguably came to recognise the boy's life as grievable. In other words, they have, as one of them suggested, looked 'past the huts' and

seen a boy whose death will be mourned by those who loved him. This recognition affects not only their view of how they should have treated the boy, and thus disturbs their understanding of their mission in Iraq; it also crucially appeared to undermine their certainty about who they are. They discover some of what Butler discusses as the fundamental problem in ethical reasoning, namely the impossibility of accounting for oneself, of answering the question 'Who am I?'.

Counting the Iraqi dead and offering their names and the circumstances of their deaths as 'memorials' points in the same direction. It is not merely about showing that Iraqis are people just like us, people who will be grieved by those who loved them; they are part of who we are; 'we' do not exist without our relation to others or before 'we' act. Our violence towards others, even in the name of defending ourselves or liberating them, affects who we are because we become who we are when we act. We are vulnerable in the most profound way imaginable not merely because we are physically vulnerable to others but because we may never know just who we are: we will only ever have been in our relation with others. We are vulnerable to others and ourselves because neither they nor we ever exist independently of each other.

This vulnerability is concealed by how war is represented. Soldiers typically are sent to kill on behalf of who we are: to protect 'us' and our values. In Blair's words (2003), our soldiers are to show 'that we will stand up for what we know to be right, to show that we will confront' those 'who put our way of life at risk'. Yet, if we, as a community, send soldiers to kill in particular circumstances, then we, as a community may not be, and may never have been, who we thought we were. What is more, 'we' do not exist before and beyond such actions. It may be the realisation of this – rather than the killing itself – that makes us feel so uncomfortable about killing in war, to the extent that, although we justify it, we do not want to see it.

As I noted earlier, Blair (2003) claimed that this is a time 'to show that we will stand up for what we know to be right, to show that we will confront the tyrannies and dictatorships and terrorists who put our way of life at risk, to show at the moment of decision that we have the courage to do the right thing'. Blair appeared to 'know' the right thing to do; he was producing the 'we' as he was speaking of it. Yet, the need to decide arises not because we are so sure about who we are and what is the right thing to do, but because we are confronted with a question at the limit of intelligibility. We precisely have no clue what to do and every time we try to speak of ourselves we produce a 'we' that never seems to appropriately represent all we are: it is not a 'we' that existed before but one that has come to be produced in our action. The question of whether we should have gone to war with Iraq suggests that the 'we' exists before it is summoned by this question. This false simplicity tempts us to answer either way. In order to intervene critically, however, we must

challenge the question and highlight the ethico-political decisions that have already gone into – and that are at the same time concealed by – posing it. In other words, the question of ethics, of how we should relate to others, is in danger of obscuring the way in which we are always already related to them. Above all, our profound vulnerability comes to be represented as inflicted by others, obscuring that there cannot be a 'we' without others. We are vulnerable not because we might be killed or injured by others but also because this 'we' only comes about through the violent gesture of speaking for ourselves and acting as a 'we'. By acting violently against those we fear might injure us we attempt – in vain – to slip away from our physical vulnerability. What is concealed, therefore, is the impossibility of protecting ourselves by force or indeed by any other means.

Notes

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2 The point here is to think through the implications of producing this problem as the centre of contention and whether it might be valuable to reflect upon questions of war and political violence differently, in a way that is inspired by Butler's work. It is not to contribute to or critique the existing work on the ethics of war and humanitarian intervention. See, for example, Norman (1995), Roberts (1999), Walzer (2000) and Wheeler (2000).

3 For such attempts see for example http://www.iraqbodycount.net/ and http://www.antiwar.com/casualties/. See also Fisk (2005).

4 Note that this is the case despite the fact that they had no intention of killing the boy.

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