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Giving an Account of Oneself

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this addition cannot be fully narrated at the moment in which it provides the perspectival anchor for the narration in question.

My account of myself is partial, haunted by that for which I can devise no definitive story. I cannot explain exactly why I have emerged in this way, and my efforts at narrative reconstruction are always undergoing revision. There is that in me and of me for which I can give no account. But does this mean that I am not, in the moral sense, accountable for who I am and for what I do? If I find that, despite my best efforts, a certain opacity persists and I cannot make myself fully accountable to you, is this ethical failure? Or is it a failure that gives rise to another ethical disposition in the place of a full and satisfying notion of narrative accountability? Is there in this affirmation of partial transparency a possibility for acknowledging a relationality that binds me more deeply to language and to you than I previously knew? And is the relationality that conditions and blinds this "self" not, precisely, an indispensable resource for ethics?

T W O

Against Ethical Violence

While I can't believe in a selfhood which is any other than generated by language over time, I can still lack conviction if I speak of myself in the necessarily settled language of a sociologised subject. This self-describing "I" produces an unease which can't be mollified by any theory of its constructed nature. . . . What purports to be "I" speaks back to me, and I can't quite believe what I hear it say.

—Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves*

An ability to affirm what is contingent and incoherent in oneself may allow one to affirm others who may or may not "mirror" one's own constitution. There is, after all, always the tacit operation of the mirror in Hegel's concept of reciprocal recognition, since I must somehow see that the other is like me, and see that the other is making the same recognition of our likeness. There is lots of light in the Hegelian room, and the mirrors have the happy coincidence of usually being windows, as well.¹ This view of recognition does not encounter an exteriority that resists a bad infinity of recursive mimesis. There is no opacity that shadows these windows or dims that light. In consequence, we might consider a certain post-Hegelian reading of the scene of recognition in which precisely my own opacity to myself occasions my capacity to confer a certain kind of recognition on others. It would be, perhaps, an ethics based on our shared, invariable, and partial blindness about ourselves. The recognition that one is, at every turn, not quite the same as how one presents

oneself in the available discourse might imply, in turn, a certain patience with others that would suspend the demand that they be self-same at every moment. Suspending the demand for self-identity or, more particularly, for complete coherence seems to me to counter a certain ethical violence, which demands that we manifest and maintain self-identity at all times and require that others do the same. For subjects who invariably live within a temporal horizon, this is a difficult, if not impossible, norm to satisfy. The capacity of a subject to recognize and become recognized is occasioned by a normative discourse whose temporality is not the same as a first-person perspective. This temporality of discourse disorients one's own. Thus, it follows that one can give and take recognition only on the condition that one becomes disoriented from oneself by something which is not oneself, that one undergoes a de-centering and "fails" to achieve self-identity.

Can a new sense of ethics emerge from such inevitable ethical failure? I suggest that it can, and that it would be spawned by a certain willingness to acknowledge the limits of acknowledgment itself. When we claim to know and to present ourselves, we will fail in some ways that are nevertheless essential to who we are. We cannot reasonably expect anything different from others in return. To acknowledge one's own opacity or that of another does not transform opacity into transparency. To know the limits of acknowledgment is to know even this fact in a limited way; as a result, it is to experience the very limits of knowing. This can, by the way, constitute a disposition of humility and generosity alike: I will need to be forgiven for what I cannot have fully known, and I will be under a similar obligation to offer forgiveness to others, who are also constituted in partial opacity to themselves.

If the identity we say we are cannot possibly capture us and marks immediately an excess and opacity that falls outside the categories of identity, then any effort "to give an account of oneself" will have to fail in order to approach being true. As we ask to know the other,

or ask that the other say, finally or definitively, who he or she is, it will be important not to expect an answer that will ever satisfy. By not pursuing satisfaction and by letting the question remain open, even enduring, we let the other live, since life might be understood as precisely that which exceeds any account we may try to give of it. If letting the other live is part of any ethical definition of recognition, then this version of recognition will be based less on knowledge than on an apprehension of epistemic limits.

In a sense, the ethical stance consists, as Cavarero suggests, in asking the question "Who are you?" and continuing to ask it without any expectation of a full or final answer. The other to whom I pose this question will not be captured by any answer that might arrive to satisfy it. So if there is, in the question, a desire for recognition, this desire will be under an obligation to keep itself alive as desire and not to resolve itself. "Oh, now I know who you are": at this moment, I cease to address you, or to be addressed by you. Lacan infamously cautioned, "do not cede upon your desire."² This is an ambiguous claim, since he does not say that your desire should or must be satisfied. He says only that desire should not be stopped. Indeed, sometimes satisfaction is the very means by which one cedes upon desire, the means by which one turns against it, arranging for its quick death.

Hegel was the one who linked desire to recognition, providing the formulation that was recast by Hyppolite as the desire to desire. And it was in the context of Hyppolite's seminar that Lacan was exposed to this formulation. Although Lacan would argue that misrecognition is a necessary byproduct of desire, it may be that an account of recognition, in all its errancy, can still work in relation to the problem of desire. To revise recognition as an ethical project, we will need to see it as, in principle, unsatisfiable. For Hegel, it is important to remember, the desire to be, the desire to persist in one's own being—a doctrine first articulated by Spinoza in his *Ethics*—is fulfilled only through the desire *to be recognized*.³ But if recognition works

to capture or arrest desire, then what has happened to the desire to be and to persist in one's own being? Spinoza marks for us the desire to live, to persist, upon which any theory of recognition is built. And because the terms by which recognition operates may seek to fix and capture us, they run the risk of arresting desire, and of putting an end to life. As a result, it is important for ethical philosophy to consider that any theory of recognition will have to give an account of the desire for recognition, remembering that desire sets the limits and the conditions for the operation of recognition itself. Indeed, a certain desire to persist, we might say, following Spinoza, underwrites recognition, so that forms of recognition or, indeed, forms of judgment that seek to relinquish or destroy the desire to persist, the desire for life itself, undercut the very preconditions of recognition.

Limits of Judgment

I can't help but dream about a criticism that would try not to judge but to bring an *oeuvre*, a book, a sentence, an idea to life. . . . It would multiply not judgments but signs of life.

—Michel Foucault, "The Masked Philosopher"

Recognition cannot be reduced to making and delivering judgments about others. Indisputably, there are ethical and legal situations where such judgments must be made. We should not, however, conclude that the legal determination of guilt or innocence is the same as social recognition. In fact, recognition sometimes obligates us to suspend judgment in order to apprehend the other. We sometimes rely on judgments of guilt or innocence to summarize another's life, confusing the ethical posture with the one that judges.⁴ To what extent is the scene of recognition presupposed by the act of judgment? And does recognition provide a broader framework within which moral judgment itself might be assessed? Is it still possible to ask the question "What is the value of moral judgment?" And can we ask this in a way that recalls Nietzsche's question "What is the

value of morality?" When Nietzsche posed this question, he also implicitly accorded value to the question he posed. That question presupposes that if there is a value to morality, we find it outside of morality itself, an extra-moral value by which we gauge morality, thus asserting that morality does not exhaustively comprise the field of values.

The scene of moral judgment, when it is a judgment of persons for being as they are, invariably establishes a clear moral distance between the one who judges and the one who is judged. If you consider, however, Simone de Beauvoir's question "Must we burn Sade?" matters become more complicated. It may be that only through an experience of the other under conditions of suspended judgment do we finally become capable of an ethical reflection on the humanity of the other, even when that other has sought to annihilate humanity.⁵ Although I am certainly not arguing that we ought never to make judgments—they are urgently necessary for political, legal, and personal life alike—I think that it is important, in rethinking the cultural terms of ethics, to remember that not all ethical relations are reducible to acts of judgment and that the very capacity to judge presupposes a prior relation between those who judge and those who are judged. The capacity to make and justify moral judgments does not exhaust the sphere of ethics and is not coextensive with ethical obligation or ethical relationality. Moreover, judgment, as important as it is, cannot qualify as a theory of recognition; indeed, we may well judge another without recognizing him or her at all.

Prior to judging an other, we must be in some relation to him or her. This relation will ground and inform the ethical judgments we finally do make. We will, in some way, have to ask the question "Who are you?" If we forget that we are related to those we condemn, even those we *must* condemn, then we lose the chance to be ethically educated or "addressed" by a consideration of who they are and what their personhood says about the range of human possibility that exists, even to prepare ourselves for or against such possibilities.