

Judith Butler, Meiji University, *Non-violence, Grievability, and the Critique of Individualism*

I am most honored to be here today. I hope to make an argument in favor of the ethics and politics of non-violence today, and I want to suggest that such an argument does not make sense without a commitment to equality. What does non-violence have to do with equality? We can oppose violence, but if some lives are regarded as having a right to be protected from violence while other lives lack that right, then we confront an inequality among the living. This inequality implies that certain lives will be more tenaciously defended than others. If one opposes the violence done to human lives – or indeed, to other living beings – then that presumes that we oppose the injury done to those lives because those lives are valuable, and we oppose the killing or letting die of those lives because those lives are valuable. If they were to be lost as a result of violence, that loss would be registered as a loss, and that means that we regard those lives as worthy of grief. So if we wish to pursue an ethics of non-violence, we must also commit ourselves to a politics of equality. Not just some lives should be safeguarded against injury and death, but all lives.

And yet, in this world, lives are not equally valued; their demand to be protected against injury or death is not always heard or recognized. One reason for this situation is that their lives are not considered worthy of grief, or *grievable*. In other words, there is no public commitment to protecting certain lives from injury or death. The reasons for this are many: racism, xenophobia, homophobia and transphobia, misogyny, and the systemic disregard for the poor and the dispossessed. We live, in a daily way, with knowledge of nameless groups of people abandoned to death, on the borders of countries with closed borders, in the Mediterranean

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Sea, in countries where poverty and the lack of access to food and health care has become both normal and overwhelming. An ethics of non-violence requires that we struggle to bring about a world of greater equality. But also, if we oppose violence, we must understand the new and various forms that violence takes. As a result, an ethical position for non-violence must (a) demonstrate a commitment to substantial equality and (b) most undertake a critique of the contemporary forms of violence. To satisfy the first condition, we must formulate an egalitarian imaginary that would become part of our practice of non-violence, a practice of resistance, both vigilant and hopeful. But we must also understand how violence now works so that we can know how best to oppose it.

In order to develop an ethics and politics of non-violence, we must ask what obligations we have to one another. Why should this life care about the well-being of another life? Why should this life seek to safeguard another's life? My first claim is that individualism does not provide a basis for answering this question, and that we need to conduct a critique of individualism to understand the interdependency of lives. First, this notion of interdependency helps us to understand the equality of lives, and to formulate a notion of equality that does not depend on individualism. Although I refer here to human lives, the argument, I wish to show, is one that applies to the lives of animals and to living processes, the living environment. Secondly, this notion of interdependency helps us understand why enacting or permitting injury or violence against another constitutes an attack on the social relations by which each of are defined.

Hence, it what follows, I will turn first to the problem of individualism in order to foreground the importance of social bonds and interdependency for understanding a non-individualist account of equality. And I will seek to link this idea of interdependency with non-violence. I accept that aggression is a component part of social bonds based on interdependency,

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and that non-violence depends on the ongoing struggle to craft aggression, that is to stage its limited and non-injurious forms. Neither our commitment to equality nor to non-violence makes sense without a critique of individualism as the point of departure for moral and political philosophy. In a world in which the value of lives is unequally distributed, we require a critique of the biopolitical – or necropolitical – distribution of grievability – the idea that the loss of some lives is objectionable, and other lives less so, or not at all. I will return to this concept briefly.

Critique of Individualism: The State of Nature Hypothesis

Some representatives of the history of liberal political thought would have us believe that we emerge into this social and political world from a state of nature. And in that state of nature, we are already, for some reason, individuals, and we are in conflict with one another. We are not given to understand how we became individuated, nor are we told precisely why conflict is the first of our passionate relations rather than dependency or attachment. The Hobbesian view which has been the most influential in shaping our understanding of political contracts tells us that one individual wants what another has, or that both individuals lay claim to the same territory, and that they fight with one another to pursue their selfish aims and to establish their personal right to property, to nature, and to social dominance. Of course, the state of nature was always a fiction, as Rousseau openly conceded, but it has been a powerful fiction, a mode of imagining that becomes possible under conditions of what Marx called political economy. It functions in many ways: it gave us a counterfactual condition by which to assess our contemporary situation; it offered a point of view, in the way that science fiction does, from which to see the specificity and contingency of the political organization of space and time, of passions and interests, in the present. Writing on Rousseau, Jean Starobinski opined that state of

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nature provided an imaginary framework in which there is only one individual in the scene: self-sufficient, without dependency, saturated in self-love yet without any need for another. Indeed, where there are no persons to speak of, there is no problem of equality; but once other living human creatures enter the scene, the problem of equality and conflict immediately emerges. Why is that the case?

Marx criticized that part of the state of nature hypothesis that posits the individual as primary. In the 1844 manuscripts when, with great irony, he ridiculed the notion that in the beginning humans are, like Robinson Crusoe, alone on an island, providing for their own sustenance, living without dependency on others, without systems of labour, and without any common organization of political and economic life. Marx writes “Let us not put ourselves in that fictitious primordial state like a political economist trying to clarify things. It merely pushes the issue into a gray, misty distance... We proceed from a present fact of political economy” (*Writings of the Young Marx*, 288-9). Marx thought he could discard fiction in favor of present fact, but that does not stop him from making use of those very fictions to develop his critique of political economy. They do not represent reality, but if we know how to read such fictions, they yield a commentary on present reality that we otherwise might not achieve. One enters the fiction in order to discern the structure, but also to ask, what can and cannot be figured here, what can be imagined, and through what terms?

For instance, that lonely and sufficient figure of Robinson Crusoe was invariably an adult and a man, the first figure of the “natural man” – the one whose self-sufficiency is eventually interrupted by the demands of social and economic life but not as a consequence of his natural condition. Indeed, when others enter the scene, conflict begins, or so the story goes. So, in the beginning (temporally considered) and most fundamentally (ontologically considered),

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individuals pursue their selfish interests, they clash and fight, but conflict becomes arbitrated only in the midst of a regulated sociality, since each individual would presumably, prior to entering the social contract, seek to pursue and satisfy his wants regardless of its effect on others and without any expectation of resolution, without resolving those competing or clashing desires. The contract thus emerges, according to this fiction, first and foremost as a means of conflict resolution. Each individual must restrict his or desires, put limits on their capacity to consume, to take, and to act, in order to live according to commonly binding laws. For Hobbes, those laws become the “common power” by which human nature is restrained. The state of nature was not exactly an ideal, and Hobbes did not call for “a return” to that state as Rousseau sometimes did, for he imagined that lives would be cut short, that murder would be unrestrained if there were no common government and no binding set of laws to subdue the conflictual character of human nature. The state of nature was, for him, a war, but not a war among states or existing authorities, but the war waged by one sovereign individual against another – a war, we might add, of individuals who regarded themselves as sovereign. For it is unclear whether that sovereignty belongs to an individual conceived of as separate from the state, who transfers his own sovereignty to the state, or if the state is already there as the horizon of this imaginary, since sovereignty emerges as a political theological concept prior to the emergence of subjects who are said to be endowed with sovereignty or to have forfeited their sovereignty to an external power.

Let us be clear: the state of nature differs in Locke, Rousseau, and Hobbes, and even within Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, there are arguably at least five versions.ⁱ The state of nature can postulate a time before society; it can seek to describe foreign civilizations that are assumed to be pre-modern; it can offer a political psychology that accounts for civil strife; it can describe political power dynamics within the 17th century Europe. I am not exactly conducting a

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scholarly review, but I do want to consider how the state of nature becomes the occasion for a certain kind of imagining, if not a fantasy or what Rousseau calls “a pure fiction” one that is centrally concerned with violent conflict and its resolution.

If we understand the state of nature as a fiction or a fantasy (and the two are not the same, as we will discuss), then what set of wishes or desires does it represent or articulate? I suggest that these wishes belong neither simply to the individual nor to an autonomous psychic life, but maintain a critical relation to the social and economic condition upon which they comment. It can function as an inverted picture, a critical commentary, a justification or, indeed, a ruthless critique. What is posited as an origin or an original condition is retrospectively imagined, and so posited as the result of a sequence that begins in the already constituted social world. And yet there is a yearning to posit a foundation, an imaginary origin as a way of account for this world, or perhaps of escaping its pain and alienation. This train of thought could easily lead us down a psychoanalytic path if we were to take seriously the idea that a *fantasy* functions as a *foundation* for human life in its social aspects. This may well be true. My desire is not to replace fantasy with reality, but to learn how to read such a fantasy as yielding key insights into the structure and dynamic of historically constituted organizations of power and violence as they relate to life and to death. Indeed, I myself will not be able to offer a critical rejoinder to this notion of a man without needs at the origin of social life without engaging a fantasy of my own, one that does not start with me, but takes me up into its terms, articulating, as it were, the syntax of the social through a different imaginary.

One rather remarkable feature of this state of nature fantasy, which is regularly invoked as a “foundation”, is that in the beginning, apparently, there is a man and he is an adult and he is on his own, self-sufficient. So let’s take notice that this story begins not at the beginning, but in

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the middle of a history that is *not* about to be told: with the opening moment of the story, with the moment that marks the beginning, gender, for instance, has been already decided.

Independence and dependency have been separated, and masculine and feminine are determined in part in relation to this distribution of dependency. The primary and founding figure of the human is masculine – that comes as no surprise; masculinity is defined by its lack of dependency (and that is not exactly news, but it continues somehow to be quite startling). But what does seem interesting, and it is as true for Hobbes as it is for Marx, the human is from the start an adult.

In other words, *the individual who is introduced to us as the first moment of the human, the outbreak of the human onto the world, is posited as if he were never a child*, was never provided for, never depended upon parents or kinship relations, or social institutions in order to survive and grow and presumably learn. That individual has already been cast as a gender but not by a social assignment, and because he is an individual, and the social form of the individual is masculine in this scene, he is a man. So if we wish to understand this fantasy, we have to ask what version of the human and what version of gender it represents and what occlusions are required for that representation to work? Dependency is, as it were, written out of the picture of the original man; he is somehow and from the start always and already upright, capable, without ever having been supported by others, without having held onto another's body in order to steady himself, without ever having been fed when he could not feed himself, without ever having been wrapped in a blanket for warmth by someone else.ⁱⁱ He sprang, lucky guy, from the imagination of liberal theorists as a full adult, without relations, equipped with anger and desire, sometimes capable of happiness or a self-sufficiency that depended on a natural world preemptively void of other people. Shall we then concede that an annihilation has taken place prior to the scene that is

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narrated, that an annihilation inaugurates the scene: everyone else is excluded, negated, and from the start. Is this perhaps an inaugural violence? It is not a *tabula rasa*, but a slate *wiped clean*. But so too is the pre-history of the so-called state of nature. Since the state of nature is supposed to be, in one of its most influential variants, a pre-history of social and economic life, then the annihilation of alterity constitutes the pre-history of this pre-history, suggesting that we are not only elaborating a fantasy, but giving a history of that very fantasy – arguably a murder that leaves no trace.

The social contract, as many feminist theorists have argued (Carole Pateman among them) is already *a sexual contract*.ⁱⁱⁱ But even before women enter the picture, there is only this individual man. There is somewhere a woman in the scene, but she does not take form as a figure. We cannot even fault the representation of women in the scene, because she is unrepresentable. An expulsion of some sort has taken place, and in its place is erected the adult man. He is assumed to desire women in the course of things, but even this postulated heterosexuality is free of dependency and rests on a cultivated amnesia regarding its formation. He is understood to encounter others first in a conflictual way.

Why bother with this influential Hobbesian fantasy in political theory? First of all, it posits conflict as the basis of social relations, and it establishes the individual as masculine. As a result, if we seek to develop a different understanding of social relations, one that foregrounds interdependency, we must start with a critique of this political imaginary in order to formulate our own. I am not actually going to argue against the primary character of conflictual relations. But I will insist that conflict can be understood as one feature of interdependency, and that a

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counter-vailing trend of interdependency can lead us to understand why both non-violence and radical (or substantive equality) are both possible and obligatory. In a Hobbesian spirit, Freud once asked, why should we *not* assume that enmity and hostility are more fundamental than love? I would not respond by saying that love is more fundamental than hostility. Rather, my view is that the tension between love and hatred is one that characterizes all relations of dependency. Non-violence, considered as an ethics, must reckon with this ambivalence. I do not maintain that there is a calm or pacific region of the soul that we must cultivate, and that that practice alone will subdue aggression and destructiveness. Perhaps peace must be aggressively pursued. Einstein, in fact, argued in favor of a “militant pacifism”, suggesting precisely such an aggressive form of non-violence. If we seek to understand the possibility of *an aggressive non-violence* that emerges in the midst of conflict, that is, in the force field of violence itself, we have to probe more deeply into (a) the social condition of interdependency and (b) its implications for obligations to non-violence.

Dependency and Obligation

Let us then try a different story that helps to imagine equality and non-violence beyond individualism and a primary state of social conflict. It begins this way: every individual emerges in the course of the process of individuation. No one is born an individual; if someone becomes an individual over time, he or she does not escape the fundamental conditions of dependency in the course of that process. That condition cannot be escaped in time. We are, all of us in this room, regardless of our political viewpoints in the present, born into a condition of radical dependency. As we reflect back on that condition as adults, we are perhaps slightly insulted or alarmed, or perhaps dismiss the thought or even come to hate the person who talks to us about such topics. Perhaps someone with a strong sense of individual self-sufficiency will

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indeed be offended by the fact there was a time when one could not feed oneself or could not stand on one's own. But, in fact, I want to suggest, no one actually does stand on one's own; strictly speaking, no one feeds oneself. Disability studies has shown us that in order to move along the street, there must be pavements that allow for movement, especially if one only moves with a chair or with an instrument for support. But the pavement is also an instrument for support, as are the traffic lights, and the curb stops. It is not only those of who are disabled who require support in order to move, to be fed, or indeed, to breathe. All of these basic human capacities are supported in one way or another. No one moves or breathes or finds food who is not supported by a world that provides a environment built for passage, that prepares and distributes food so that it makes its way to our mouths, a world that sustains the environment that makes possible the kind of air that we can breathe without fear of falling ill.

Dependency can be defined partly as a dependency on social and material structures but also on the environment, all of which make life possible. But regardless of our quarrels with psychoanalysis - and everyone has a quarrel, I presume, for that is what psychoanalysis is, a theory and practice with which people quarrel; indeed, there is no psychoanalysis without a quarrel with psychoanalysis – perhaps we can still agree that we do *not* overcome the dependency of infancy when we become adults. That does not mean that the adult is in a dependent condition in the exact same way that the infant is, but only that we are become creatures who constantly imagine a self-sufficiency only to find that image of ourselves undermined repeatedly in the course of life. This is, of course, a Lacanian position, articulated most famously by the mirror stage – the jubilant boy who thinks he stands on his own as he looks in the mirror and yet watching him, we know that the mother, or some obscured object-support (*trotte bébé*), holds him in front of the mirror as he rejoices in his radical self-sufficiency.

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Perhaps we can for the moment agree that the founding conceits of liberal individualism are a kind of mirror-stage, that they take place within an imaginary of this kind. What supports, what dependency, has to be disavowed for the fantasy of self-sufficiency to take hold, for the story to start with a timeless adult masculinity?

The implication of this scene, of course, is that it would seem that masculinity is identified with a phantasmatic self-sufficiency, and femininity is identified with the support she provides, a support regularly disavowed. This picture and story lock us into an economy of gender relations that hardly serves us. Heterosexuality becomes the presumptive frame, and it is derived from the theory of mother and child, which is but one way of imagining the relations of support for the child. The gendered structure of the family is taken for granted, including of course the obscuring of the mother's labour of care and the full absence of the father from the scene of childcare. And if we accept all this as the symbolic structure of things rather than a specific imaginary, we accept the operation of a law that can only be changed in incremental fashion and over a very long time. The theory that describes this fantasy, this asymmetry, and this gendered division of labour, can end up reproducing and validating its terms unless it shows us another way out, unless it asks about the scene prior to, or outside, the scene, the moment, as it were, before the beginning.

So let us move, as it were, from dependency to interdependency, and see how that alters our understanding of vulnerability, conflict, of adulthood, of sociality, the prospects for both non-violence and greater biopolitical equality. I ask this question because at both a political and economic level, the facts of global interdependency are very often, too often, denied. Or they are exploited. Of course, advertisements for corporation celebrate a globalized world, but that idea of corporate expansion captures only one sense of globalization. National sovereignty may be

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waning, and yet new nationalisms insist upon that frame.^{iv} So one reason it is so difficult to convince a government such as my own that global warming is a real threat to the future of the livable world is that their rights to expand production and markets, to exploit nature, their rights to profit, remain centered on augmenting a national wealth and power at the expense of the well-being of all living creatures in the world; perhaps they do not conceive of the possibility that what they do affects all regions of the world, and that what happens in all regions of the world affects the very possibility of the continuation of a livable environment, one on which we all depend. Or perhaps they do know that they are engaging in globally destructive activity, and that that too seems like a national right, a power, a prerogative that should be compromised by nothing and no one. They break contracts and covenants that bind nations together in order to assert the principle that the interests of the nation come first. And the interest of the nation, as we know, is identified with the interests of the wealthy to expand growth and profit regardless of whatever harm to the environment that causes, or whatever inequalities it intensifies, and whatever risk to the lives of populations it poses.

The idea of global obligations that serve all inhabitants of the world, human and animal, is about as far from the neoliberal consecration of individualism as it could be, and yet it is regularly dismissed as naive. Some people ask in more or less incredulous tones, how can you still believe in global obligations? That is surely naïve, they say. But when I ask, do you want to live in a world where no one was arguing for global obligations, they usually say no. So I want to argue that only by avowing this interdependency does it become possible to formulate global obligations, including obligations toward the migrants, the Roma, those who live in precarious situations or indeed those who are subject to occupation and war, those who are subject to institutional and systemic racism, women who are subject to domestic and public violence,

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harassment in the workplace, and gender nonconforming people who are exposed to bodily harm, including incarceration and death. A new idea of equality can only emerge from a more fully imagined interdependency, an imagining that unfolds in practices and institutions, in new forms of civic and political life. Oddly enough, equality imagined in this way would not be an equality among individuals. Of course, it is good that one person is treated as equal to another – I am all in favor of anti-discrimination law; don't get me wrong. But that formulation, as important as it is, does not always tell us by virtue of what set of social inter-relationships political equality becomes thinkable. . We can distinguish among groups, but what binds groups together? We can distinguish among individuals, but what links individuals with one another? When equality is understood as an individual or group right (as it is in the right to equal treatment), it presupposes a subject who is disenfranchised, but it does not immediately tell us what social obligations we bear toward one another, and why inequality fails those obligations. To formulate equality on the basis of the relations that define our enduring social existence, that define us as social living creatures, is to make a social claim, a collective claim on society, if not a claim to the social as the framework within which our imaginings of equality, freedom, and justice take form and make sense. Whatever claims of equality are then formulated, they emerge from the relations *between* people, in the name of those relations and those bonds, but not of an individual subject. Equality is thus a feature of social relations defined, in part, by an increasingly *avowed* interdependency.

How do we understand interdependency? And what role does reciprocal vulnerability play in our understanding of interdependency? To be dependent implies vulnerability: one is vulnerable to the social structure upon which one depends, so if the structure fails, one is exposed to a precarious condition. If that is so, we are not talking about my vulnerability or

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yours, but rather a feature of the relation that binds us to one another and to the larger structures and institutions upon which we depend for the continuation of life. Vulnerability is not exactly the same as dependency. I depend on someone, something or some condition in order to live. But when that person disappears, or that object is withdrawn, or that social institution falls apart, I am vulnerable to being dispossessed, abandoned, or exposed in ways that may well not prove livable. The relational understanding of vulnerability shows that we are not altogether separable from the conditions that make our lives possible. In other words, we are never fully individuated – and that is one of the felicitous aspects of our social lives.

One implication of this view is that the obligations that bind us to one another follow from the condition of interdependency which makes our lives possible. The political organization of life itself requires that interdependency – and the equality it implies - is acknowledged through policy, institution, civil society, and government. If we accept the proposal that there are, or must be, global obligations, that is to say, obligations that are globally shared and ought to be considered binding, they cannot be reduced to obligations that nation-states have toward one another. They would have to be post-national in character, traversing borders and navigating their terms, since populations at the border, or crossing the border, stateless people, refugees, are those included in the larger network of interrelationships implied by global obligations.

I have been arguing that the task as I imagined it is not to overcome dependency in order to achieve self-sufficiency, but to accept interdependency as a condition of equality (and to accept those forms of interdependency that foster an equal recognition of the value of lives). That formulation meets with an immediate and important challenge. After all, there are forms of colonial power that seek to establish the so-called “dependency” of the colonized, and these kinds of arguments seek to make dependency an essential pathological feature of populations

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who have been colonized.^v That deployment of dependency confirms both racism and colonialism; it identifies the cause of a group's subordination into a psycho-social feature of the group itself. The colonizer, as Albert Memmi has argued, then understands himself as the adult in the scene, the one who can bring a colonized population out of their "child-like" dependency into an enlightened adulthood. We find this figure of the colonized as the child in Kant's famous essay, "What is Enlightenment?" But the truth is that the colonizer depends upon the colonized, for when the colonized refuse to remain subordinate, then the colonizer is threatened with the loss of colonial power. On the one hand, it looks good to overcome dependency if one has been made dependent on a colonial structure, or made dependent on an unjust state, or an exploitative marriage. Breaking with those forms of dependency can be part of the process of emancipation, and here is where it matters how we understand the state we wish to achieve in the aftermath of unwanted dependency and exploitation. Do we want to become independent individuals pursuing individual forms of freedom? Or do we want to struggle for greater social equality and freedom? For which version of equality do we struggle? And which version of freedom? If we break the ties of dependency in an effort to overcome exploitation, does that mean that we now value independence, and that we deny social interdependency? Is there a way to be partially individuated without losing sight of our interdependency with one another and the living world? If independence becomes a mode of breaking ties with all forms of interdependency, that would include those by which we are exploited as well as those by which we are sustained. If "independence" returns us to the sovereignty of the individual or even the nation-state then post-sovereign understandings of worldly co-habitation become unthinkable. In such a case, we have returned to a version of self-sufficiency that implies endless conflict. After all, it is only from a renewed and re-valued notion of interdependency among regions and hemispheres that we can

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begin to think about the threat to the environment, the problem of the global slum, systemic racism, the condition of stateless people whose migration is a common global responsibility, even the more thorough overcoming of colonial modes of power, the opposition to violence against women and trans people, the biopolitical abandonment of populations regarded as ungrievable.

The situation of so many populations increasingly subject to unlivable precarity raises for us the question of global obligations. If we ask, why should any of us care about those who suffer at a distance from us, the answer is not to be found in paternalistic justifications, but in the fact that we inhabit the world together in relations of interdependency. Our fates are, as it were, given over to one another.

So we have moved far from the Robinson Crusoe figure with which we began. I have suggested that the embodied subject is defined by its lack of self-sufficiency. And that we should not lament this condition. We are, however, left with another problem: under what conditions does interdependency become a scene of aggression, conflict and violence? How do we understand the destructive potential of this social bond, and how does an ethics and politics of non-violence contend with this destructive potential?

Violence and Non-Violence

Interdependency raises that question of the destructiveness that is a potential part of any living relation, one that can rupture relationality intermittently or permanently, one that is the rupture potentially at work in all social relations. If our ethical and political practices remain restricted to an individual mode of life or decision-making or to a virtue ethics that reflects on who we are as individuals, we risk losing sight of that interdependency that establishes an

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embodied version of equality as well as the possibility of destructiveness as well as the ethical obligations by which it is restrained.

What difference to our thinking would such a framework imply? Most forms of violence are committed to inequality, whether or not that commitment is explicitly thematized. And the way the decision is framed, whether or not to use violence on any given occasion, makes a number of assumptions about those with regard to whom violence is to be waged or not. For instance, it is not possible to comply with an interdiction against violence if the living creature that is not to be killed cannot be named or known. If the person, the group, the population is not considered already living and alive, how is the command not to kill to be understood? It makes sense to assume that only those who are considered living can be effectively named and safeguarded by an interdiction against violence. But a second point is also necessary. If the interdiction against killing rests on the presumption that all lives are valuable, that they bear value as lives, in their status as living beings, then the universality of the claim is only good on the condition that value extends equally to all living beings. This means that we have to think not only about persons, but animals, and not only about living creatures, but living processes, the systems and forms of life.

There is a further point. A life has to be grievable, that is, its loss has to be conceptualizable as a loss, for an interdiction against violence and destruction to include that life among those living beings to be safeguarded from violence. The condition under which some lives are more grievable than other lives means that this condition of equality cannot be met. The consequence is that a prohibition against killing, for instance, applies only to those lives that are grievable, but not to those who are considered ungrievable, those who are considered already lost and never fully alive. In this way, the differential distribution of grievable lives had to be

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addressed if an ethics of non-violence is to work on the assumption of the equal value of lives; the unequal distribution of grievability might be one framework for understanding the differential production of humans and other creatures within a structure of inequality or, indeed, within a structure of violent disavowal. To claim that equality formally extends to all humans is to sidestep the fundamental question of how the human is produced or, rather, who is produced as a recognizable and valuable human, and who is not. For equality to make sense as a concept, it must imply that formal extension to all humans, but even then we make an assumption about who is included within the category of the human, and who is partially included, or fully excluded, who is fully alive or partially dead, who would be grieved if they were lost, and who would not be grieved because they are effectively socially dead. For that reason, we cannot take the human as the ground of our analysis, nor can we take as the starting point the state of nature, considered as a foundation: the human is an historically variable concept differentially articulated in the context of inegalitarian forms of social and political power; the field of the human is constituted through basic exclusions, haunted by the figures that do not count in its tally. In effect, I am asking how the unequal distribution of grievability enters into and distorts our deliberate ways of thinking about violence and nonviolence. One might expect that a consideration of grievability pertains only to those who are dead, but my contention is that grievability is already operative in life, and that it is a characteristic attributed to living creatures, marking their value within a differential scheme of values, and bearing directly on the question of whether or not they are treated equally and in a just way. To be grievable is to be interpellated in such a way that you know your life matters, that the loss of your life would matter, that your body is treated as one that should be able to live and thrive, whose precarity should be minimized, for whom provisions for flourishing should be available. It would not just be

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another person who greets you with this conviction or attitude, but a principle organizing the social organization of health, food, shelter, employment, sexual life, social and civic life.

If we accept the notion that all lives are equally grievable and that the political world ought rightly to be organized in such a way that this principle is affirmed in the organization of economic and institutional life, then we arrive at a different conclusion and perhaps even another way to approach the problem of nonviolence. After all, if a life, from the start, is regarded as grievable, then every effort will be taken to safeguard that life, or to support that life, minimizing the probability of harm and destruction. This is not just an obligation that one subject has toward another: it entails the re-organization of political life, modes of economic distribution, but also: an equal distribution of grievability.

The idea of equal grievability, links to interdependency, and to the question of why and how to practice non-violence of a militant sort. And yet, the social organization of violence and abandonment, crossing the sovereign and bio-political operations of power, constitute the contemporary horizon in which we have to reflect upon the practice of non-violence. If the practice remains restricted to an individual mode of life or decision-making, we lose sight of that interdependency that alone articulates the relation character of equality as well as the possibility of destruction that is constitutive of social relations.

For all of these reasons, I argue that the ethical stand of non-violence has to be linked to a commitment to radical equality. And more specifically, the practice of nonviolence requires an opposition to biopolitical forms of racism and war logics that regularly distinguish between loves worth safeguarding and those that are not – collateral damage, or populations conceived as obstructions to policy and military aims. Further, we have to consider how a tacit war logic

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enters into the biopolitical management of populations: if the migrants come, they will destroy us, or they will destroy culture, or they will destroy Europe or the UK. This conviction then licenses violent destruction – or the slower death-in-life of detention camps - against populations who are phantasmatically construed as pure vessels of destruction. According to that war logic, it is a matter of the lives of refugees or the lives of those who claim the right to be defended against the refugees. In that instance, racist and paranoid version of self-defense authorizes the destruction of another population. Countries such as Japan have defended the ethics and politics of non-violence, especially since the catastrophic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It continues to be imperative to defend that non-violent philosophy and practice, one that is based neither in individualism nor in the prerogatives of state power. In its present form, it emerges from the daily practices of popular movements who know the history of destruction and seek to preserve the life of this earth not only for this country but for all peoples.

There is no way to practice non-violence without first distinguishing violence and non-violence, and this becomes difficult in a world where these very terms are used in strategic ways to support state interests. As we know, violence against protestors is increasingly justified in the name of security, nationalism, and neo-fascism. That violence is disavowed when it is called legitimate force. Conversely, the critique of the state through the exercise of political freedom and expression is often called “violent.” Thus, the state monopolizes its violence by calling its critics violent: we know this from Gramsci and from Benjamin. .

We might despair and conclude that violence and non-violence are relative terms, and that we cannot, within our current world, distinguish in a clear way between the two. But that is not the necessary or desirable conclusion. In my view, we should be wary about those who claim that violence is necessary to curb or check violence – they only add violence to the world.

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To oppose violence in this world requires understanding that violence does not always take the form of the blow. The powers that abandon populations to slow or quick death presume that those who die are not generally considered grievable; their lives will not be missed, and they carry less value than those whose lives are defended and preserved. To oppose those modes of power that realize radical inequality through modes of death-dealing, we have to question what kind of life is eligible to appear as a life worth preserving? And whose loss would not even register as a loss? What demographic imaginary function in ethics, in policy, and politics in which grievable and un-grievable lives are regularly –and fatally – distinguished?

If we operate within a political horizon in which violence cannot even be identified because it takes on new biopolitical forms of abandonment, where lives vanish from the realm of the living before they are even killed, we will not be able to think, to know, and to act in ways that embed the political in the ethical – that understand the claim of relational obligations within the global sphere. In a sense, we have to break open the horizon of this destructive imaginary in which so many inequalities and effacements now take place. We must fight those who are committed to destruction without replicating their destructiveness. That is the task and the bind of a non-violent ethics and politics.

We do not need a new formulation of the state of nature, but we do need an altered state of perception, another imaginary, one that would disorient us from the givens of the political present. Such an imaginary would help us find our way toward an ethical and political life in which aggression and sorrow does not immediately convert into violence, in which we might be able to endure the difficulty and the hostility of the social bonds we never chose. We do not have to love one another to be obligated to building a world in which all lives are sustainable. The right to persist can only be understood as a social right, the subjective instance of a social

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and global obligation we bear toward one another. Interdependent, our persistence is relational, fragile, sometimes conflictual and unbearable, sometimes ecstatic and joyous. Many people say, arguing for non-violence is unrealistic, but perhaps they are too enamored with reality. When I ask, do you want to live in a world in which no one was arguing for non-violence, where no one held out for that impossibility, they always say no. The impossible world is the one that exists beyond the horizon of our present thinking – it is neither the horizon of terrible war nor is it the ideal of a perfect peace. It is the open-ended struggle required to preserve our bonds against all that which is in the world that bears the potential to tear them apart. To subdue destruction is one of the most important affirmations of which we are capable in this world. It is the affirmation of this life, bound with yours, and with the realm of the living.
