

**Abstract for the International Association of Women Philosophers (IAPh)
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**Accountability or Attestation? An Assessment of Butler’s Ethical
Subject with the Help of Ricoeur**

In *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005) Judith Butler investigates the possibility of ethics starting from a poststructuralist subject position. Whereas in earlier works, with concepts such as “performativity,” Butler put the ethical and critical capacities of the subject into perspective, works such as *Giving an Account of Oneself, Precarious Life* (2004) and to some extent *Antigone’s Claim* (2000), give the impression of a “turn” to ethics.

In the paper I will evaluate the notion of the ethical subject that Butler uses in these works by confronting it with Ricoeur’s ethical self, as developed in *Oneself as Another* (1992). In the first part, I will describe the features of Butler’s “turn to ethics” and will demonstrate that for her ethics is not a separate sphere, apart from politics, but is located within the political sphere. As a consequence, Butler’s ethical work is consistent with the earlier notions of performativity (*Bodies That Matter* 1993) and social existence (*The Psychic Life of Power* 1997). In the second part of the paper, I will concentrate upon her subject notion, especially in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, and confront it with Ricoeur’s ethical self. Ricoeur’s phenomenological hermeneutics is not often considered in feminist theory. I will show that his conception of the ethical self as *ipse* can help to elucidate and evaluate Butler’s ethical subject.

In *Giving an Account of Oneself* Judith Butler develops an ethics of accountability. Whereas in earlier works she reflected upon the performative process in which the subject comes into existence (1993) and upon its social existence (1997), in her recent works she explicitly speaks of ethical subjectivity and responsibility. She asks whether a theory of subject-formation that acknowledges the limits of self-knowledge can work in the service of a conception of ethics: “Does the postulation of a subject who is not self-grounding, that is, whose conditions of emergence can never be fully accounted for, undermine the possibility of responsibility and, in particular, of giving an account of

oneself?” (2005: 19).

Butler shows the close connection between ethics and politics, responsibility and critique, which implies that her “ethical turn” is in line with her earlier works. Giving an account of oneself takes place within power relationships. The ethical demand gives rise to the political account, she claims in discussing Foucault’s notion of *parrhesia* (telling the truth about oneself). Ethics is not credible unless it becomes critique. But what does that imply for ethical subjectivity?

For Butler the ethical subject comes into existence in a response to someone else’s query or attribution, and its account takes the form of a narrative. She does not consider the narrative as reflection *after* the deed, but claims that it constitutes “the prerequisite condition for any account of moral agency we might give” (2005: 12). Therefore, narrative capacity constitutes a precondition for giving an account of oneself and assuming responsibility for one’s actions. In a dialogue with Nietzsche’s and Foucault’s account of morality, she develops her notion of ethical subjectivity into one that implies a creative impulse, but is not a self-berating psychic agency. It is “neither fully determined, nor radically free” (2005: 19).

For Ricoeur ethical subjectivity includes narrativity as well. Personal identity is narrative for him, and narrative identity forms the mediator between *idem* and *ipse*, between sameness and selfhood. *Idem* identity is the permanency of fingerprints, or one’s genetic code, and on the psychological level of one’s character, while *ipse* identity refers to the willed and sustained constancy of the promise that one holds on to even if everything around oneself, including one’s inclinations, have changed (1992: 124). For Ricoeur *ipse* expresses a self-constancy that can only be inscribed in the dimension of “who?”, and that has nothing to do with the permanence of time that characterizes *idem*, or character.

Narrative identity combines *idem* and *ipse* for Ricoeur: it implies a dialectic between self constancy and the relative non-constancy of the promise. But the ethical subject is developed by him as *ipse*, rather than as constant *idem*. It is the attesting self that is ethical, the self that responds to accusation in the form of “It’s me here”. It is not a self same I that for Ricoeur constitutes ethical subjectivity, but the self that trusts in itself to say and act, and that only has a relative self assurance.

In confronting Butler's and Ricoeur's notion of ethical subjectivity, I aim at examining Butler's notion subject. To the extent that her ethical self is characterised by dispossession of itself, it seems to be only *idem* identity. As a self, that constitutes itself in the process of reiterating social norms, it is a what, rather than a who. But in so far as ethics requires risking ourselves, in the divergence of what conditions us and what lies before us, it seems closer to *ipse*.

Both notions of ethical subjectivity give way to different conceptions of ethics: Butler develops an ethics of accountability, Ricoeur an ethics of attestation. In the paper, I will not only reflect upon the relations between both ethics, but also ask which one is more fruitful from a feminist perspective.

dr. Annemie Halsema
Department of Philosophy
VU-University Amsterdam
De Boelelaan 1105
1081 HV Amsterdam
The Netherlands
Email: jm.halsema@ph.vu.nl

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